

PETRA

plateforme européenne pour la traduction littéraire
european platform for literary translation
europäische plattform für literaturübersetzung
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Out of Nation Zone

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I'll say it upfront: my respect for translators is immense, even when they translate the names Ilf and Petrov as the name of a city in Siberia, which is what one of the translators did. Translators are generally a humble lot. Almost invisible on the literary map, they live quiet lives in the author's shadow. My empathy with translators stems in part from my own position on the literary map; I, too, often feel like I am invisible. I write in the language of a small country. I left that small country to preserve my right to a literary voice and defend my writings from the constraints of national, ethnic and ideological projections. Although it's true, it rings romantically hollow, that I know. Platitudes about literature not recognising borders also ring romantically hollow.

The small country, by the way, split into six smaller ones. My mother tongue was the only baggage I took with me; I didn't have any other to hand. I don't have romantic illusions about the irreplaceability of one's mother tongue. I settled in a new country, small and convivial. My former and my present literary milieu consider me a "foreigner," each for their own reasons, and they are not entirely wrong: I am a "foreigner", for my own reasons. I've chosen to live my literary life in an unusual space, in a literary *out of nation* zone. Life in the zone is pretty lonely, yet given how small it is, it's surprisingly spacious. With the suspect joy of a failed suicide, I accept the consequences of a choice that was my own. I write in a language officially split into three languages—Croatian, Serbian, and Bosnian—but in spite of concerted efforts to will it apart, it remains a single language. In this same language war criminals, Serbian and Croatian, tirelessly plead their innocence at the Hague Tribunal. The tribunals' weary translators have come up with an appropriate acronym: BCS (Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian). What sane person would want a literary marriage with someone like me?! Translators. They keep me alive in literary life. Our

marriage is a match between two paupers, our mutual symbolic capital in the playroom of world literature completely negligible. In any case, translating from a small language is still considered a profession. Writing in a small language, from a literary *out of nation* zone—now that, *that* is a diagnosis.

The platitude about literature not recognising borders isn't one to be believed. Literatures written in major languages don't recognise borders, they enjoy passport-free travel. Put a little better: writers travel, each on his or her own, but major literatures—those written in major languages—stand behind them, trustworthy literary guarantors. Small literatures travel proudly waving their national passports. Better put: small literatures travel collectively, there is no other guarantee of their existence. Writers estranged, or self-estranged, from their maternal literatures always travel alone, on dubious passports, of course. A literary customs officer can escort you from the literary train under absolutely any pretext.

This explains my personal neurosis, my unpleasant grumbling, from which, as it happens, other writers from “the zone” are also less than immune. As an *out of nation* writer I constantly feel obliged to explain my complicated literary passport to this imagined customs officer. And this is where the ironic multiplication of misunderstandings begins, always the case when you get into a conversation on unequal footing with a customs officer. What does it matter, you might ask, whether someone is a Croatian, Belgian, or American writer? Literature doesn't recognise borders, you retort. It matters—the difference is in the translation of the author's position, it's in the way our imagined customs officer assesses the author and his or her work. And we, readers, we too are customs officers, although this kind of self-designation never crosses our minds.

Let us imagine for a moment that I and my (in this case imaginary) fellow writer John head to the North Pole to each write an essay about it. Let us also imagine a coincidence: John and I return from our trip with exactly the **same** essay. John's position doesn't require translation, it's a universal one, simply by virtue of the fact the John is a man, and English or American. My position, on the other hand, will be translated as east European, post-communist, Balkan, post-Yugoslav, Croatian, and female, all told: a particular one. My description of the white expanse will be quickly imbued with projected, i.e. invented, content. Customs officers will ask John whether in the white expanse he encountered the metaphysical; they'll ask me whether I encountered any of my countrymen, and my thoughts on the development of Croatian eco-feminism. Maybe they'll ask why I live in Amsterdam, having assumed that I must live in Croatia. They consider John a great writer. I am inevitably

considered a kind of literary tourist guide, to the Balkans naturally. Which of the two is better is a matter for the eye of the beholder.

The platitude about literature not recognising borders is one we need to believe. Irrespective of my confusing experience, it is one I firmly believe in. A literary original and its translated copies share a co-existence. The life of literary copies is inseparable from the stable life of the original, and often one more interesting and more dramatic. Translations—poor, good, crippled, or far superior to the original—enjoy a rich life. The reader's energy is interwoven in this life; in it are the heaving shelves of books that expand, enlighten, and entertain us, that "save our lives"; in it are the books whose pages we have injected with our own experiences, our lives, convictions, the times in which we live, all kinds of things.

The reality is that many things can be deduced from a translation—let us not forget, readers are also translators. *The Wizard of Oz* was my favourite children's book. Much later I found out that the book had travelled from the Russian to Yugoslavia and the rest of the east European world, and that it wasn't written by a certain A. Volkov (who had "adapted" it—a nice way of saying he censored it), but by the American writer Frank L. Baum. The first time I went to Moscow (way back in 1975) I couldn't shake the feeling that I had turned up in a monochrome Oz, and that like Toto, I just needed pull to the curtain to reveal the deceit masked by the special effects of totalitarianism. Baum's innocent arrow had pierced the heart of a totalitarian regime. The arrows fired from Soviet dissident literature were nowhere near as effective. A. Volkov knew this as well as anyone, hence his laboured efforts at "adaptation."

My second favourite book was Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, which I read in the only available translation at the time. Much later a Croatian writer translated the book anew. The two variants of the translation are two Croatian languages. I had adopted the "wrong" variant, my nephew and niece the "right" one. We speak the same language, but the emotional colouring is different. I love the clumsy and mistranslated verse of my book, they struggle with the aseptic verse of theirs. In comparing the two translations one can make out the parallel story of the disintegration of a country, of human stupidity, of violence against language, and lots more besides, a story more affective and plausible than official history.

Every translation is a miracle of communication, a game of Chinese Whispers, where the word that comes out of the mouth of whomever was at the head of the chain is inseparable from whomever is at the end. Every translation is not only a multiplication of misunderstandings, but concomitantly, a multiplication of meaning. Our lungs full, we need to give wind to the journey of texts, calm stormy seas for the

eccentrics who send messages in bottles and the equally eccentric who search for bottles with messages; we need to hold a firm course in the orgy of communication, even when it seems to us, the senders of messages, that communication is deaf and senseless. Because somewhere on distant shores a recipient awaits our message. He or she, to paraphrase Borges, exists to enrich our text, to misunderstand it and change it into something else. In this respect, at this text draws to a close I refute its beginning. Zones and borders are susceptible to change, as are great and small. In the same way that identities, centre and periphery are constantly in motion, literature is a constant negotiation of meaning; the translator a negotiator, a translation his or her negotiation. In this space resides the strange beauty of our risky work—as writers, translators, and readers.

Translated by David Williams