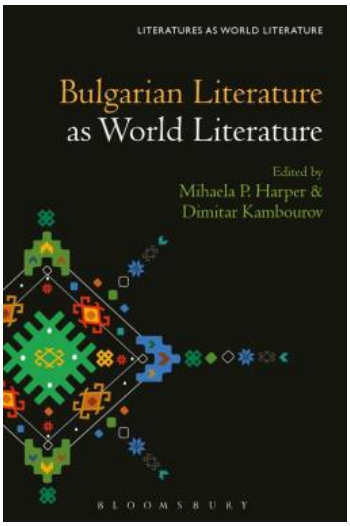

Book review:

***Bulgarian Literature as World Literature*, Edited by Mihaela P. Harper and Dimitar Kambourov, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, iv + 283 pp. ISBN: HB: 978-1-5013-4810-5; ePDF: 978-1-5013-4812-9; eBook: 978-1-5013-4811-2.** [*Българската литература като световна литература*. Под редакцията на Михаела П. Харпър и Димитър Камбуров]

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Bulgarian Literature as World Literature is a welcome addition to the Bloomsbury series Literatures as World Literature under the general editorship of Thomas Beebee. The volume provides the general reader with a generous profile of a literature that remains little-known abroad. In fact, one of the avowed aims of the volume is to make Bulgarian literature more visible to the outside world.

In a Foreword, Maria Torodova, professor of history at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, sketches a brief historical perspective of how Bulgaria has considered itself and how it has been considered by others, and how the materials in the volume to follow relate to these views. Her impression is that they illustrate what she sees as an attitude shared among scholars writing on matters Bulgarian, especially when it comes to the country's history and culture, viz. that they "tread the fine line between defensiveness and push-back". Todorova's foreword is followed by an Introduction proper by the volume's editors. Michaela Harper locates the origins of the volume in her sharing the idea of it with Georgi Gospodinov and Albena Hranova, and following up on it a few years later, spurred by her contribution to *Crime Fiction as World Literature*, another volume in the

series Literatures as World Literature. Dimitar Kambourov, who eventually joined forces with her at first had doubts about the enterprise, wondering whether world literature was not "intended to overcome occidentalism in the literary canon, while preserving the driver's seat for European classics and contemporary Western literary production, and still enlivening the western literary stagnation of the post-creative writing epoch?". Still, he recalls that a "taste for world literature" had already been instilled in Bulgaria through the translation policy of the socialist state which focused, next to on works from Russian and other Central- and East-European socialist states, also on Western canonical classics and works from the so-called Third World. Especially the latter two categories served as what David Damrosch, in *What Is World Literature?* (2003), sees as one of the definitions or functions of "world literature," viz. to serve as a window on the world. And, Kambourov notes, "The exodus of millions of Bulgarians to the West and the shifting self-perception of the nation as the Third World within the First World have also had their cultural and literary repercussions."

Drawing upon a number of contributors from around the world but mainly from Bulgaria itself, with the majority of them from the University of Sofia, Harper and Kambourov's ambition with *Bulgarian Literature as World Literature* is to "offer to an English-speaking reader this unique edited collection on Bulgarian literature from its genesis to the present". This ambition is given concrete shape in the four parts in which the rest of the volume is divided: Histories: In Search of a National Profile of World Literature, Geographies: Bulgarian Literature as Un/common Ground within and without, Economies: Bulgarian Literature and the Global Market, Genetics: Bulgarian Literature's Heredities, Affinities, and Prospects. Each of these parts comprises 5 or 6 chapters dealing with aspects of the more general topic covered. The majority of these chapters are more scholarly, others have a more essayistic character. Among the latter counts that by Emiliya Dvoryanova, who reflects on the ordering of her library, with separate walls and bookcases for "world literature" in the canonical sense of the world, Bulgarian literature, and "global" literature or "the well-known literature from the time period when the world transformed from a world into a globe: its context is the globe". This is also the literature that is moving from finding its way into the bookcase to being weeded out again. The difference between "world" and "global" literature for Dvoryanova is that the former, while speaking to the world, is rooted in a particular language while the latter "wants to be global, a misleading attempt that erases and transforms the inceptive meaning of its birth from the womb of the languages (the peoples). There is no longer world literature, the library space has been used up." In the more essayistic vein I would also situate Amelia Licheva's reply to her question whether Bulgarian Literature has a place within world literature? Looking at a

number of Bulgarian works from the perspective of what she finds characterizes a number of works in English, German, French and other languages commonly considered "world literature" she arrives rather predictably at the conclusion that the Bulgarian works in question fit the desired category. Angela Rodel's interesting chapter on translating Bulgarian literature, in her case among other works *The Physics of Sorrow* of Georgi Gospodinov, probably the best-known contemporary Bulgarian author abroad, focuses on the many roles a translator into English from a small literature such as Bulgarian has to fulfil: talent scout, grant writer, editor, collaborator/consultant, literary agent, marketer, and cultural ambassador. Georgi Gospodinov himself, taking his cue from a report on Bulgaria in *The Economist* of 2010, reflects on "Writing from the Saddest Place in the World", "this empty space between Istanbul, Vienna, and Budapest". His motive for writing is linked to his personal memories and to the situation of his country: "I write because I am afraid. Sadness and fear are reasonable motives for writing. And what I think literature can do today, Bulgarian literature included, is to have the courage to stand on the losing side. I find this to be an important feature of European literature, one that we inherited from Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, Stefan Zweig, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf … Let's remember that the best part about literature is that it avoids easy explanations of the world. Literature is not afraid to speak of life's weak points, of sin, sorrow, guilt, and transience." And, he concludes, "Maybe if you are a Bulgarian writer, your fears (and sorrows) are one or two more than they are for others, in places that are less sad. But this would also turn into literature sooner or later. Which is not a bad end." Toward the end of the volume there is a brief note by Jean-Luc Nancy on *The Physics of Sorrow*, followed by a reaction from Cory Stockwell. Julia Kristeva offers two perspectives on Blaga Dimitrova. Kristeva herself features as one of the authors Yana Hashamova discusses in "Diaspora Writers and Readers", specifically in a comparison with Kapka Kassabova, and she also makes an appearance in the chapter by Miglena Nikolchina discussed further on.

With Hashamova's article we have broached the more scholarly category of chapters that make up the majority of *Bulgarian Literature as World Literature*. These again can be divided into survey articles covering a particular period, phenomenon, or category of writers, and others that focus on a single or at best a very few authors. The former category is far larger than the latter.

First, then, the survey chapters. Diana Atanassova impresses upon us that Old Bulgarian literature, roughly as of the ninth century and until the Ottoman period, is a religious literature reflecting Christian ideology and the corresponding worldview. If medieval Bulgarian literature sees itself as a "world" literature that "world" has to be understood as the Christian world. Raymond

Detrez focuses on Bulgarian literature from the seventeenth through the early nineteenth centuries, the period antedating Bulgarian independence from the Ottoman Empire and Bulgarian literature's "development into a national literature in the narrow sense of this term". During this pre-national period Bulgarian literature is part of a "polylinguistic literary system" in a "multiethnic Orthodox Christian community". For the Ottoman state dividing lines ran along religious lines rather than ethnic ones. Detrez defines all Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire as constituting a "Romaic" community using various languages, Bulgarian being one of them. Literature in Bulgarian in this period no longer used Old Bulgarian, which by this time had developed into a language serving purely religious purposes, but demotic Bulgarian. The "high" language shared by the Romaic community was Greek; educated Bulgarians would have considered texts in Greek to also form part of "their," i.e. "Romaic" literature. "Of course", Detrez admits, "pre-national Bulgarian literature can still be studied diachronically in the context of Bulgarian literature as a whole. However, Bulgarian literature in the pre-national era did not develop within the framework of a nation, but within that of a religious community", and "Considering, then, Bulgarian literature as one of the many budding 'national literatures' that all together constitute "world literature" engenders the risk of missing the very essence of this literature – its belonging to the literary legacy of a particular multiethnic and multilingual Romaic 'world' in its own right, occupying an admittedly modest, but unique place in world civilization." Marie Vrinat-Nikolov continues from where Detrez left off. Contrary to the traditional approach positing "one nation, one literature, one language", and "a national, monolingual, and masculine canon", she adopts a "transnational perspective" that "takes the Bulgarian territories of the Ottoman Empire not as a closed, almost 'national' entity – a nonsense – but as a multilingual, multi-confessional, and multicultural ensemble characterized by an impressive circulation of people, ideas, texts and languages". Milena Kirova focuses on the period from Bulgaria's independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878 to the First World War. This period, she claims, is marked first by euphoria at being liberated from the Ottomans and then followed by dejection and despair with the new Bulgarian government. In the literature of the period this took the form of on the one hand nostalgia for the period of the Bulgarian Revival leading to independence, and on the other hand revulsion toward present day realities, a dual attitude she sees persevering into the present. Central in this is the opposition between Ivan Vazov and Pencho Slaveykov. Vazov stresses Bulgaria's heroic past in *Epic of the Forgotten* (1884), a cycle of 12 odes, and *Under the Yoke* (1889), which Kirova says "is considered the first world class novel in Bulgarian literature", Slaveykov was the leading figure of the "Thought" circle, initiating Bulgarian Modernism and

striving to "Europeanize" Bulgarian literature. This period also saw the introduction of Symbolism in Bulgaria as well as of modern drama through the influence of Henrik Ibsen. Kirova also draws attention to the emergence of a number of women authors, among whom Dora Gabe, who is discussed more in detail in a later chapter.

Boyko Penchev, taking his cue from Bourdieu, as do several other contributors, concentrates on the autonomization of the Bulgarian literary field via the opposition – a recurring item in many chapters – between Vazov and Slaveykov, or more generally the "nativists" to the "modernizers". For Penchev, "In the last 150 years, the shifts between two imperatives – that of 'catching up' to Europe and that of getting 'back to the native roots of Bulgarianness'– have formed the internal dynamics of Bulgarian literature." Bilyana Kourtasheva starts from Slaveykov's pseudo-anthology *On the Isle of the Blessed*, published in 1910, to discuss anthologies of/in Bulgarian literature. In her conclusion she laments the absence of women writers from most instances of the genre. Ani Burova looks at the various ways a number of contemporary Bulgarian novels by Ancho Kaloyanov, Vladimir Zarev, Georgi Gospodinov, Vladislav Todorov, Alek Popov and Stefan Kisyov "tell" Bulgaria's recent past. She compares how these authors handle the recent past to how other Central- and East European novelists such as for instance the Polish Olga Tokarczuk, but also a number of Czech writers, deal with the same topic, as well as Bulgarian émigré writers such as Ilija Trojanow, Kapka Kassabova, Rouja Lazarova and Miroslav Penkov, all of whom write in languages other than Bulgarian.

Todor Hristov traces how a succession of Bulgarian authors have dealt with travel focused on Chicago, from Aleko Konstantinov who visited the Chicago World Exhibition in 1893 and who had also visited the Paris World Exhibition of 1889, over Shefket Chapadzhiev in the final third of the twentieth century, to Georgi Danailov at the turn of the twenty-first century; on Japan, the pavilion of which at the Chicago Exhibition Konstantinov had described and which is the subject of a 1984 travelogue by Marko Semov; and on 1920s France in the work of Konstantin Konstantinov. Bulgarian travelogues, Hristov posits, construed Bulgaria "as an empty signifier of otherness, as a dull background against which Bulgarians could see the utopia of progress, as a heterotopia that, as if through a dark glass, returned to the West the inverted image of what it is not". The peculiar condition of Bulgaria that emerges from these travelogues is perhaps best captured in Aleko Konstantinov's famous phrase: "We are Europeans but not quite". Alexander Kiossev claims that over the last two decades the condition of Bulgarian literature has changed fundamentally in that, like other literatures, it has been subjected to "the globalization of the national literary field".

Previously, Bulgarian literature "self-colonized" itself in that it represented the Bulgarian nation, and itself, as backward and belated with respect to the "civilized world", and particularly "Europe". Now, however, we have arrived at "the end of self-colonization". Instead of inscribing themselves in a national or even European field, contemporary Bulgarian writers aim for the world, Kiossev claims. As examples he cites Lyudmila Filipova, imitating best-selling historical thriller authors Umberto Eco or Dan Brown, and Nikolay Penchev, applying the same recipe to the Bulgarian past. Science fiction thrives, with authors such as Vladimir Poleganov and Haralambi Markov, both of them writing (also) in English. These literary fields bear little relation to one another and to "traditional" or "high" Bulgarian literature – the latter, in fact, is in decline, Kiossev finds, except for authors such as the already mentioned Georgi Gospodinov, Alek Popov and Vladislav Todorov who resolutely draw the "world" literature card and who moreover play off against the commercial and popular genre authors also already mentioned. The Bulgarian literary field has been de-homogenized and writers have gone "global" in their frame of reference instead of being anchored in any vision of nation. The same thing applies to the publishing industry in Bulgaria, partially at least steered by the fact that Bulgarian literature does not bring in enough money to support a thriving publishing industry focused on Bulgarian literature. The result of all this for Kiossev is a complete loss of a Bulgarian literary "nomos" à la Bourdieu. Dimitar Kambourov concentrates on the remarkable phenomenon that over the last decade or so there has been a notable influx into Bulgaria of novels by Bulgarians writing in languages other than Bulgarian and being translated into Bulgarian. This is the case with works by Ilija Trejanow, Dimitré Dinev, Kapka Kassabova, Rouja Lazarova, Miroslav Penkov and Nicolai Grozni. Kambourov then discusses in detail *Street Without a Name* by Kassabova and *Mausoleum* by Lazarova, *The World Is Big and Salvation Lurks around the Corner* by Trojanow and *Angel Tongues* by Dinev, all with respect to how they deal with Bulgaria's recent communist past. Next to with communism these novels also deal with family matters having to do with migration and they look for healing solutions to the problems thus highlighted. Kambourov inscribes the various attitudes transpiring into mythical and structural patterns, and refers to a number of other émigré writers bearing out his analysis to finally arrive at Gospodinov's *The Physics of Sorrow* as "the ultimate formula for Bulgarian literature as world literature while simultaneously defying and subverting it from within".

As mentioned before, a number of chapters of Bulgarian Literature as World Literature focus on a single author, although they sometimes use her/him to make a larger point with respect to Bulgarian literature in general, a particular period, or a particular genre. Vassil Vidinsky, Maria

Kalinova and Kamelia Spassova discuss the avant-garde writer Kiril Krastev, his role in editing the Futurist little magazine *Crescendo* (1922) and the radical "Manifesto of the Fellowship Fighting Against Poets", and what they call his openness to "the cosmopolitan project of world literature". The Bulgarian émigré author Miroslav Penkov's English-language story collection *East of the West* is the subject of Mihaela Harper's chapter. Harper sees Penkov's stories as poised between the global and the local, unable to achieve resolution in their glocal aporia. Darin Tenev, like a good number of the other contributors, takes Slaveykov as subject, more specifically the change the poet made to the end of a poem he wrote about Michelangelo and his statue of Moses from its first to its second published version. Tenev relates this change to Slaveykov's changed relation to Vazov's earlier poem on the same subject, and to his changed ambitions for Bulgarian literature, leading it from localism to Europeanization, from socio-political concerns with the nation to an aesthetic universality. Miglena Nikolchina looks at Bulgarian women's literature, and more specifically poetry by "the two 'first' women-poets Dora Gabe (1886-1983) and Elisaveta Bagryana (1893-1991)", from the intersection between what she calls the masculine chronology of events, schools, styles, and the struggles of femininity to be heard in this lineage, and what she calls, after Julia Kristeva, "monumental" women's time, the time of "eternal femininity".

Bulgarian Literature as World Literature concludes with an Afterword by Galin Tihanov in which he reflects on the use of the term "minor literatures" with respect to Bulgarian literature. Tihanov takes care to specify that he does not mean "minor" in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari in their *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure* or *Mille Plateaux*, but rather in the sense of small, backward, unimportant, lagging behind developments in "major" European literatures. Bulgarian literature, Tihanov argues, only caught up with the -isms defining European literature with the advent of symbolism, the avant-gardes, and socialist realism, all of them determined by changing political, social, cultural and literary circumstances. With the passing of the age of -isms, arguably toward the end of the twentieth century, we enter the age of ""World literature" that "takes away the right of national cultures to determine the value of their literary production, which now becomes the subject of intense, multilateral, and never quite transparent bargaining in the process of circulation." In the process, it creates and reveals "new sets of inequalities. But we need to begin to acknowledge that, in the same breath, it renders the opposition between center and periphery less meaningful, as it moves away from the idea of a shared (Western) canon that underpins this distinction in the first place. Rather, we are witnessing a new regime of relevance where difference – drawn not least from what we used to see as zones of cultural marginality – is commodified and homogenized into a single,

globally marketable cultural product …, we are in the grip of "a new constant", in which major and minor, canonical and marginal are at the mercy of the market, fuelling its insatiable appetite for domesticated novelty and controllable originality."

The volume is on the whole well-written and carefully edited – I noticed only one obvious error: on p. 17 the dates for Simeon I the Great are given as (893-827); the later date should obviously be 927.

As I said at the start of my review, *Bulgarian Literature as World Literature* is a welcome addition to the series in which it features. It should be mentioned though that throughout the volume there is quite a lot of repetition, with the same writers – Vazov, Pencho Slaveykov, Georgi Gospodinov, Kassabova, Miroslav Penkov, Trojanow – trotted out again and again. There is also a quite heavy emphasis on the more recent literary production. Perhaps this is inevitable given that Bulgarian literature really only fully comes into "its own" after independence at the end of the nineteenth century. Maybe this is also not a bad thing for a volume that, as I intimated earlier, is meant as an introduction to a literature that still remains relatively unknown abroad. In this sense it may even serve as a timely eye-opener to the newcomer to Bulgarian literature.