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Review of *Translating the Literatures of Small European Nations*

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Chitnis, Rajendra, and Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen, Rhian Atkin, and Zoran Milutinović, editors. *Translating the Literatures of Small European Nations*. Liverpool UP, 2020.

Translating the Literatures of Small European Nations is an edited volume that brings together a wide range of scholarship on the translation of literatures written in languages that are disadvantaged in contemporary literary flows. The majority of literary production flows from the Anglophone centre, [sometimes referred to as the “Greenwich Meridian of Literature” (1)], to the periphery, on which most non-English language literatures find themselves. In their introduction, the editors note a significant trade imbalance between the centre and the periphery with almost 50% of translations in the world being made from English, but only 6% going into English (2). The authors of the thirteen essays in this volume present a variety of strategies that translators and publishers of literatures on the periphery have employed in the past and are employing now to gain visibility (or reduce their invisibility) on the world literary scene.

Although these essays cover topics as diverse as the literatures and countries they represent, some recurrent motifs unite these underdogs in their struggle for visibility. Throughout the volume, the authors grapple with defining and labelling their respective literatures. In the introduction they are described as belonging to “nations in cultural, economic, and geographic peripheries” (2), elsewhere as literatures written in less commonly spoken languages, literatures from less familiar traditions, or underrepresented literatures. This dancing around a variety of terms captures the difficulty in discussing, let alone being, one of these literatures, and highlights the tension between being small yet striving for relevance, appeal, and serious consideration. Smaller literatures must always be discussed sensitively and aimed at striking a delicate balance that does not marginalize them and push them further to the periphery. Fortunately, this book does an excellent job of presenting these literatures not as victims, but as “active, imaginative, practical, and astute” (4).

A common thread throughout small-nation literatures is that translation has been and continues to be much more than a means of reaching a larger audience than their home audience. In his essay, Rajendra Chitnis points out that the favourable international reception of Jaroslav Hašek’s *The Good Soldier Švejk* forced a critical re-evaluation of the piece in the Czech Republic, and a subsequent acceptance and adoption of the national image presented in the book (80). Similarly, Paschalis Nikolaou argues that the Greek poet C.P. Cavafy’s international status and the imitations of his work spurred a re-evaluation of his poetry at home (180). In both cases, translation became a means of legitimizing a work or an author not only on the international literary scene, but also on the domestic one.

On the national level, the translation of literature has been used by small nations for over a century as part of a broader strategy of cultural diplomacy. Both Rajendra Chitnis and Ondřej Vimr talk about the Czechoslovak government’s attempts at creating a particular image of the country in the eyes of the UK, France, and USA during the interwar period. Irwin Wolters describes a similar attempt at national image projection by the Dutch government in the post-war period with the establishment of the Foundation for the Promotion and Translation of Dutch Literary Works and its *Bibliotheca Neerlandica* project.

Using cultural diplomacy through translation as a springboard, Ondřej Vimr challenges the generally accepted theory that most translation is demand-driven and produced upon request of a target culture which needs to fill some gap in its own literary production. Vimr makes a strong case for the importance of supply-driven translation for smaller literatures. While the demand-driven model assumes that the target culture is aware of other source cultures and can therefore pick and choose works for translation based on its own gaps, when it comes to small-nation literatures, this assumption falls short. Oftentimes, the countries themselves, let alone their literatures, are hardly known in the target culture, therefore the target culture does not even recognize that there is anything to be demanded. Supply-driven translation seeks to overcome this problem. A number of the essays in this volume highlight the role that various government institutions play in promoting their country's literature in translation and serving as suppliers of translations to target cultures. To name a few, there is The Foundation in the Netherlands, The Instituto Ramón Llull for the promotion of the Catalan language and culture abroad, and five different agencies in Slovenia, but some variant of this type of institution can be found in almost all European nations.

In the institution-supported supply-driven model, translators often serve as experts for selecting translations, and some well-connected translators can end up as gatekeepers of their source literature. Richard M. Mansell gives a great example of this type of translator as gatekeeper practice by describing the efforts of Peter Bush, who has served as a link between Catalan literature and the English language market by publishing 16 works in translation since 2007 (132-134). Zoran Milutinović goes even further and argues that a translator as gatekeeper can affect the socio-political agenda of a country by lending a voice, and therefore legitimacy, to one side of a conflict, or alternately, suppressing the other side by choosing not to translate the work of its supporters (28-30).

Besides the recurrent themes of the difficulty in labelling small-nation literatures, cultural diplomacy, supply-driven translation, and translators as gatekeepers, this book also introduces several niche strategies for the promotion of lesser-known literatures. These include: the long-tail approach, described by Richard M. Mansell, where the translator is a key promoter to target culture publishers as well as readers (142); media convergence described by Paulina Drewniak in her discussion of transmedia franchises, in which “stories unfold across multiple media platforms” (210) thus attracting non-traditional audiences to the text (211); and translanguaging, described by Josianne Mamo as writers producing heterolingual texts and attracting a multilingual readership (229).

As these various approaches demonstrate, *Translating the Literatures of Small European Nations* makes a compelling argument that small-nation literatures are astute and imaginative not only in their content, but also in their ability to find ways of reaching audiences outside their own borders. The cultural hegemony of the centre may be difficult to overcome, but these small European nations are making inroads, and little by little, their voices are gaining prominence on the international literary scene. The very fact that a book such as this one can be written about them proves that their efforts have not gone unnoticed.

Bibliography

Chitnis, Rajendra, et al., editors. *Translating the Literatures of Small European Nations*. Liverpool UP, 2020.