Against book poisoning: World literature's narratives and the case of the "Dictionary of the Khazars"

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> It is fair to say that today, no consensus exists not only about what World Literature includes but also about what it actually is; in Franco Moretti's words, it "is not an object, it's a problem".
>
> Martin Kern: *Ends and Beginnings of World Literature* (2018, 2)

How does a work of literature of a "small" language continue its existence once it becomes translated into English and once it is placed in the global literary system? Can its assumed position be predicted or constructed by adjusting or manipulating other seemingly unrelated factors – from poetics to politics – and would such actions inevitably result in diachronically conflicted, often irreconcilable interpretations?

André Lefevere's understanding of *translation as rewriting* states that an original is adapted and manipulated so it will correspond to "dominant ideological and poetological currents" (1992, 8). This paper seeks to examine mechanisms of adaptation and/or manipulation which are, according to Lefevere, also present in the works of criticism that follow the translation, and often petrify the position of the translated work within the framework of world literature. If we accept the concept of a system (11) as a viable model for understanding literature and culture and its production regardless of the scale we are dealing with, then the interplay among subsystems is of paramount importance when explaining the shifts in (re)structuring relations between the original literary system and world literature. Lefevere declares literature a "'contrived' system" (12) where human agents, those producing and consuming works of literature, share the time-space continuum with the texts as objects of study contributing to the status of the text in a particular period in time. On the other hand, the cultural system and literature as its constituent are open to the influences from other social systems and the nature of interplay is to be sought for in the "logic of culture" (14). Lefevere explains that the "logic of culture" is determined by "control factors". The internal ones are embodied in professionals, "the critics, reviewers, teachers, translators" (14) who control the texts in terms of poetics or "what literature should be (allowed to be)" (14) and in terms of ideology, or "what society should be (allowed to be)" (14). The external control factor Lefevere presents as "patronage" (15), or the powers embodied in either persons or institutions controlling the ideological aspect of texts while authorizing the professionals in issues regarding poetics. Patronage is a regulatory practice originating from various positions of power; from

individuals to large scale media systems. It operates on the level of ideology, affects primarily distribution, and therefore reception of a particular text. We may presume that to a large extent, the ideology of the patrons would also govern issues of poetics, critical reception as well as the concept, the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of a literary canon as much as the text's inherent ideological aspects, particularly if the text is generated through the practice of rewriting (including translation).

Since our primary interest is the global positioning of a literary work coming from a "small language" through its translation into English, we believe it requires a focus on world literature and an approach in terms of a system as described in Lefevere. From the available corpus of current studies, it is evident that whether world literature is seen as a process or a product, or even a problem, it appears to be heavily influenced by the tensions originating from outside the system, i.e. patronage. Most of the issues raised within the field revolve around the opposing perspectives resulting in dichotomies related to power positioning, whether geopolitical or ideological. If we assume the perspective of a translated work, according to Marko Juvan, "hegemony marks the concept of world literature" since *Weltliteratur*, in its many guises "appears to legitimize Western (male, white, bourgeois, etc.) dominance and reinforce monolingualism (English as a global language), imposing itself on all others as a universal criterion" (2013). The current understanding of world literature is founded on several seminal studies published in the early 2000s by Western scholars, of which David Damrosch's *What is World Literature?* (2003) is considered to be one of the most influential. Its approach is congruent with Franco Moretti's "Conjectures on World Literature" (2000); it maintains the proposition that world literature should only be observed as monolithic (therefore, non-pluralistic and singular), formally determined as an asymmetrical and unequal relationship of the center (West) and periphery ("the rest"). Therefore, to return to our primary concern, in the light of the center/periphery dichotomy – what is the trajectory of a text coming "from a periphery" being adopted into the "broadened multicultural canon"? Its position is inevitably weakened by "rewriting", i.e. translation. Is it necessary for it to be adopted from a *national* literary system, so it would, as a part of world literature, keep "the marks of national origin" (Damrosch 2003, 283)? How does a national literary system translate to world literature? This paradigm appears to disregard the possibility that a work of literature may not originate from any national system, or that it may diachronically belong to several. In the explanation of this process, the study *What is World Literature?* approaches the issues in question only by validating the normalized perspective of the center. It focuses on the processes of "refraction" and "diffusion" whose influence is claimed to increase the further away the text travels from its national boundaries. On the one hand, by becoming a part of world literature, the work is presumed to be grafted onto the cultural space of a foreign culture already defined by the "host culture's national tradition and the present needs of its own writers" (283). This assumption is in accordance with the dichotomy of source and target culture which becomes heavily charged if applied to the global context and poses a conundrum, bringing us back to the initial questions involving the geopolitical and ideological setup of the discipline and its hierarchies: If the "world" is the host, which culture is

the host culture, which *national* tradition the "world" accommodates and who are the writers whose present needs are being taken into account, at which point in history? If the condition for a text to be adopted as world literature is establishing negotiation between only "two different cultures" (283), and the home culture is by default the one marked as local, other, specific, different, which is the culture assumed as the "host one", also perceived as unmarked or universal? Damrosch's study concludes that "[t]he receiving culture can use the foreign material in all sorts of ways", emphasizing didactic functions – positive model to implement and appropriate, negative example of "primitive or decadent" to "root out at home", or "as an image of radical otherness" to serve as a contrast to the features of the "home tradition" (2003, 283). It remains unclear whether the elements in question refer to the poetics of a literary text or to its assumed ideological values, while the nature and the method of the "use" of the "foreign material" remains unexplained and it opens the space for hegemonic approaches in practice.

In order to shift the perspective and observe what is world literature from "the periphery" or "the other", this article suggests that the reception of a contemporary text from a language other than English into world literature and the text itself will be marked by the alignment or by the conflict of at least two patronages, in Lefevere's terms (of the source culture and of world literature). The patronage of world literature is by definition the one of the core, which is predominantly English speaking, Western (Eurocentric), white and privileged, perceived as universal and unmarked, labeled in Damrosch's terms as either "classic" or "masterpiece", against the patronage of the *periphery* which is by default non-English, non-Western, non-white and in most cases perceived as non-privileged, at best representing "radical otherness", and labeled as a "window on the world". To analyze the process by which manipulation of the text in Lefevere's terms takes place through the actions of professionals other than those producing the primary text or the rewritings of it, we suggest a case study focused on *narrativity* as defined in social studies by Gloria Somers and Margaret Gibson (1994) and adopted in translation studies by Mona Baker (2005, 2006). As the basis for the case study, we look at a selection of the critical reviews which are presumed to have had greatest influence in the reception in the English-speaking world of the Serbian author Milorad Pavić's novel *Dictionary of the Khazars* (*Hazarski rečnik*, 1984). Specifically, we address the 1998 summer issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* and Damrosch's chapter "The Poisoned Book" in *What is World Literature?* and its revised version under the title "Death in Translation" (Damrosch 2005).

Baker (2005) elaborates on the idea originating from psychology, social studies and communication theory that narratives do not merely represent, but constitute our realities. She considers narratives the underlying stories which we use as a gauge in order to make sense of our existence as well as to direct and explain our actions (Baker 2006, 12). We propose to use features of narrativity as an analytical tool, which would enable us to shed light on the underlying and unstated norm(s) of the historical variant of a "global culture", presumed to be the "host" culture of world literature studies. In the analysis of the articles on *Dictionary of the Khazars*, we consider the

metaphor of the "window of the world" to be the starting point which shaped interpretation and positioned the primary text within the framework of world literature. In this context, the political scientists Molly Patterson and Kristen Renwick Monroe explain narratives can be "the ways in which we construct disparate facts in our own worlds and weave them together cognitively in order to make sense of reality" (1998, 315). However, in order to understand how the process of "weaving" takes place, it is necessary to look at the elaborate model of how narratives function in society. Somers and Gibson define narratives as "*constellations of relationships* (connected parts) embedded in *time and space,* constituted *by causal emplotment*" (1994, 59). In order to access the process of actual "weaving together" of disparate facts which constitute understanding of (a particular) reality, we will use the structure of the elements Somers and Gibson propose to be the base of any narrative. The four features of narrativity are *relationality of parts*, which implies that events can only be intelligible when placed in relation to other events, *causal emplotment*, which describes the act of relating single events to one another and creating a network of relationships, *selective appropriation* of the elements which are to be constitutive of the narrative, according to the narrative's theme, and finally *temporality*, sequencing and positioning of the elements relative to the desired focus of the narrative. Narrativity is the concept through which, according to Somers and Gibson "agency is negotiated, identities are constructed, and social action mediated" (1994, 64). Applying the concept to world literature, we believe that linking the dominant narratives with the controlling factors as historical variants – i.e. pinpointing narratives as elements which determine poetical and ideological aspects of texts and therefore govern the reception – would subsequently facilitate a clearer view on some of the sources of tensions in the domain of world literature.

Dictionary of the Khazars (1984) is a lexicon novel whose storyline is structured as a collection of entries emulating a dictionary or encyclopedia. Entries are accompanied with an index and a manual on how to read the book, emphasizing the author's intention to place the reader and their choices as the main generator of the story. In its form it is an example of paper-based hypertext, where the author, although leaving the choice to the reader, latently indicates the plotline by pointing to the cross-referenced entries. The text of the lexicon is introduced as a (pseudo) translation and an attempt at a reconstruction of a "long-lost 17th century book" structured in three colored parts: "red, green, and yellow, suggesting the three monotheistic religions whose conflicting interpretations of a historical event are the focus of the story" (Aleksić 2009, 86). The actual narrative is structured in several layers of the story which all relate to the "*mythohistorical* event of the 'Khazar polemics'" (86). The primary level contains the debate of the Khazar ruler, the khagan, with the representatives of the three major monotheistic religions, which should result in the Khazar people's converting to the religion of the most convincing emissary. The second layer of the narrative opens into three historical periods in which the set of similar characters is introduced in slightly modified roles as various incarnations of the representatives of opposing forces in the world. The key periods are the 9th century, when the Slavs convert to Christianity and adopt a script designed by Byzantine

monks; the 17th century, the period of great Serbian migrations to the north initiated by the clash of the two empires, the Ottoman and the Habsburg; and the 20th century globalization processes where the story ends at an international congress of historians in Istanbul. According to Aleksić, the layers are "densely permeated by the process of textualizing history" (87), and the plot is tied by repeated confrontation of those who wish to know the divine by reassembling the body of an angel and the forces whose role is to not let it happen. Conflict is the core of the narrative, however, the essence of the conflict and the interpretation of it rely on the process of reading and are in the end determined by the reader: "Whatever we find in this novel, Pavić seems to suggest, is a beast of our own imagination" (91).

The novel was an international success, not only in terms of sales. It was translated into 26 languages and recognized in academic circles. The American *Review of Contemporary Fiction* published a series of essays on Milorad Pavić and his works in 1998. Along with Danilo Kiš whose work was presented in 1994 (Horvath 1994) he remains the only representative of the former Yugoslavia or its successor states to appear in the journal. It needs to be emphasized that the journal's aims and scope stand outside the world literature paradigm, while its goals are presented as a desire "to expose the artificial barriers that exist between and within cultures" and express "a special affinity for the works of foreign writers who may otherwise go unread in the United States" and a desire "to expand readers' notions of what fiction is and what it can do". In the issue presenting Milorad Pavić, four essays are dedicated to the *Dictionary of the Khazars.* The introductory essay by Radmila Jovanović Gorup focuses on Pavić's works in the context of the crisis of knowledge and the postmodern condition. She introduces the center-periphery idea in proposing that the international success of the *Dictionary* in the late 1980s is due to the West European reception: simultaneously responsive to literature from Eastern Europe and unprepared for "such an erudite author coming from what it considered the periphery of Western European civilization" (119). In understanding the "foreignness" of the text, the dichotomy of Western and Eastern Europe persisted as a dominant public narrative supported by the Cold War ideological divisions. Additionally, in geopolitical terms, identification with the Orient in the Occident-Orient dichotomy is considered to be Pavić's strategy through which he achieved estrangement and deliberate othering of the text. Nevertheless, the focus of the analyses in the essays remains on the all-pervasive meta-narrative of postmodern dissipation of traditional values and beliefs, particularly regarding the role of the text and the processes of establishing meaning. Therefore, the initial international success of the *Dictionary* and its author may be interpreted, in terms of relationality, as coinciding with the postmodernist crises in the West. It offered a reader (and a critic) "an absolute book as a means of resolving a mystery of man and the world", as Gorup introduces Andreas Leitner's contribution to the issue of the *Review*, which contrasts two concepts of knowledge, the one "of being", belonging to hard science, heterogeneous and pluralistic, and the other "of becoming" existing in system theories, presenting reality as homogenous and universally connected (1994, 122). Dagmar Burkhart puts an emphasis on intertextuality and the presence and function of historical textual sources which are woven together

in the text as the basis of Pavić's poetics, while Rachel Kilbourn Davis focuses on the role of the reader in the construction of the narrative pointing out that the "dialogic engagement" or the interaction of the reader with the author, not as a means to an end, but an end in itself. Finally, Tomislav Longinović discusses the novel's poetics in context of chaos theories declaring the parallel epistemological position of scientific discovery and literature. This particular instance of the international reception of the *Dictionary* testifies to the dominance of postmodern meta-narrative while the rather encapsulated world of literary system(s) governs the selective appropriation and emplotment in order to firmly focus interpretations of what literature is, and what literature is allowed to do on the text itself. However, the dissonant voices could already be heard in the mid-1990s, announcing a shift in meta-narrative from the postmodernist crisis of values towards the globalization and a geopolitical shift of power, occurring after the disintegration of the Communist Bloc. Although Gorup's effort to include the Balkans in the system of Western cultural values represents a common ground in which postmodern narratives are the shared value in an international context, it should be noted that the cultural values of the West were very differently interpreted within the Western Balkans of the early 1990s, following the revolutions in 1989. Failing to recognize this difference in the approach to postmodernism is probably the most prominent indicator of the meta-narratives dominating the critical reviews of the *Dictionary* to which David Damrosch's article refers (in particular Wachtel 1997). Aleksić (2009) explains that the interpretation of the postmodernist narrative in Yugoslavia was not an abandonment of traditional values, but quite the contrary, "a re-discovery and re-inventions of the traditions and beliefs that were covered by an ideological blanket that, supposedly, obliterated national and religious particularities for the sake of conflict-free cohabitation" (89). The 1980s in Yugoslavia Aleksić describes as a "retrograde movement", and it would be fair to add a fervent one, towards the rediscovery of "traditional European civic values of nationhood, citizenship, respect for the law and private property, and even a rise in religious consciousness that had apparently been undermined by communist ideology," (89–90) which was intended to lead to a reconciliation with the legacy of the Enlightenment, rather than its abolition. The shift towards dichotomies resulting from the negotiation of center and periphery places the *Dictionary* in a very different context. As Sandra Bermann points out, in the "Introduction" to the volume on *Nation, Language and the Ethics of Translation* the world is made of "individual nation-states […] increasingly enmeshed in financial and information networks, where multiple linguistic and national identities can inhabit a single state's borders or exceed them in vast diasporas, where globalization has its serious – and often violent – discontents, and where terrorism and war transform distrust into destruction" (2005, 1). In the "global reach" as she describes it, language and translation carry the weight of the world – "intelligence, negotiation, and the dissemination of information or propaganda […] Global media and information networks provide news and interviews on a minute-to-minute basis to serve multiple linguistic constituencies as well as specific cultural and political purposes" (2). The transformation and the shift of focus to the global perspective and the media discourse had a profound effect on the interna-

tional reception of the *Dictionary.* The shift from text to context enabled the metaphor of the "window on the world" and foregrounded the Occident–Orient dichotomy of the *Dictionary* but it also opened the space for public narratives rather distant in scope and time from the text itself to be "woven into" the interpretations. In his seminal study, Damrosch openly states his intention not to present the *Dictionary* to world literature as a work of value, but rather to revoke its previous and undeserved status, describing it as a "poisoned book" that acquired an international reputation through deception, while the story about the novel is told emphasizing its assumed provincialism and parochial nature manifest in a nationalist destructive code. Damrosch approaches the *Dictionary of the Khazars* by dismissing the narratives of postmodernity as a clever attempt at deception (2003, 266) and instead shifts the focus to the conjecture that the novel contains well-hidden political content (261), includes messages of support for nationalism and war-mongering, written in order to validate the intentions of ultranationalist forces (272) whose aim was to devastate Yugoslavia as a country and to destroy its cultural space during the 1980s and 1990s. In an analysis which ventures at times beyond objective academic discourse, Damrosch suggests it is a "con job" (274) which should be best titled "A Playful Apologia for Ethnic Cleansing" (274), made more palatable to the Western audience by the dazzle of the form and metafictional experimenting. The revised version of this chapter titled "Death in Translation" appeared in 2005 in the edited collection *Nation, Language and the Ethics of Translation.* Both interpretations are permeated by the narratives originating in Western Europe and in particularly Germany, expounded in the public space by global media systems delivering engaged positions on the civil war in Yugoslavia (Mustur 2016). The weakest point of Damrosch's analysis lies in keeping the text of the *Dictionary* in the background while insisting on building a mosaic of context relating to the 1990s geopolitical circumstances – about nationhood, language, conflict and war – and manufacturing links to the text of the novel with the events and persons whose relevance or presence at the time the novel was written (1984) cannot be established. The result is not merely a biased construct; it borders on a vitriolic campaign which is best illustrated by the selective (mis)appropriation of a source of a particularly dubious nature. Rajko Djurić's article "Kultur und Destruktivität am Beispiel Jugoslawien" (Culture and Destructiveness Using the Example of Yugoslavia), published by Rodopi in 1995 in a collection unrelated to literary studies, bears no reference to the *Dictionary*, but rather vaguely (and inaccurately) in a single reference mentions Milorad Pavić in a negative context. Despite being published for a renowned publishing house, Djurić's article is a short piece constructed without necessary scholarship, exhibiting an uncritical approach to the sources as well as to the general matters of language, nation and provincialism. Disregarding its obvious shortcomings, Damrosch uses it as one of the primary sources in his analysis, quoting it three times. The first quote is an allegedly well-known saying in Serbian language which mentions Slobodan Milošević. It is misspelled in both versions of Damrosch's article (2005, 387 and 2003, 268) making everything other than Milošević's name non-transparent and meaningless to wider audiences – it has no relationship to the *Dictionary* or its author and was presumably placed in an article on the *Dictionary*

only for the reason of establishing relationality; linking the text of the novel and the person of a politician whose international reputation is of the worst kind, as an afterthought. The second quote about the assumed Serbian ancestral superiority supposedly promoted by the story about golden forks in Serbian medieval court (Damrosch 2003, 268), Djurić presents as a statement from an interview with Pavić in the weekly low-brow entertainment magazine *Svet.* However, in the text of the interview such statement does not exist (cf. Krdu, 1989). Djurić apparently falsified it by attributing a well-known and often ridiculed myth of the neo-romantic pseudohistorians of the 19th century (Ognjević 2016, 223) to Pavić. Again, used at face value, it is non-transparent and unverifiable for any audience outside Serbia but does establish unwarranted relationality through selective appropriation of the sources. The final citation from Djurić is misquoted by Damrosch, since he attributes the statement: "The Serbs come from the mid-point of the world […]" (2003, 268) to Pavić, when in the source text it is attributed to Milić Stanković, an alleged artist and a local celebrity in the 1990s (under the name "Milić of Mačva") notorious for inventing myths about the national revival (Radić 2003, 177). The statement is another of the pseudomyths which saturated the media scene in the early 1990s, that Djurić uncritically used and David Damrosch misappropriated as a rancorous illustration of the cultural context. Damrosch claims that "[u]nderstanding the cultural subtext of Pavić's Khazars is important for foreign readers, as otherwise we simply don't see the point of much of the book" (2005, 394). Although this is a valid request, the result we observe in the case of the *Dictionary* compels us to question the manner and method of construction as well as the span of the time frame to which the cultural context refers. The approach demonstrated in "Poisoned Book" introduces the idea that a potential reader requires careful ideological guidance, which should offer only a confirmation of the current meta-narrative, a reassertion of what is established as truth in the substructures of the center at the time the text becomes a "window to the world". Placing the *Dictionary* within the thus-generated cultural subtext had devastating effects – it reduced the intricate and complex text of the *Dictionary* into a rather flat and unimaginative web of simplistic mimetic relationships suppressing its most valuable element, the author's intention that the readers construct their own stories, and it foregrounded a series of issues about the degree of relationality of world affairs and world literature which were recently addressed within the discipline.

In a collection published in 2018 and edited by Weigui Fang, *Tensions in World Literature: Between the Local and the Universal*, Mathias Freise introduces an observation that world literature should be considered as a network of relations, the central axis of which is the interaction between the universal and the local (2018, 191). He elaborates on the argument offering four perspectives of world literature, that of the reader, the producer, the text itself and the system as parameters of the possible network, and presents Sartre's idea that "from a qualitative reader's perspective, world literature is not a collection of texts from many countries, but a multi-polar semantic space forming a huge field of semantic gravity through which the reader may move" (95). Maintaining the concept of unity of the discipline, Freise declares that "[w]orld literature is not a plurality, but a field, within which everything is interconnected"

(95). In his account of the producer's perspective, Freise at length criticizes Damrosch's approach to *Dictionary of the Khazars*, where among many inconsistencies, he points out that Damrosch "does not realize that the poisoned copy is not the book itself but a mode of its reading" (200). Weigui Fang's introduction to the collection notes that the discipline of world literature still maintains Damrosch's outline which states that it is "an elliptical refraction of national literatures […] writing that gains in translation […] and not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading; a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our place and time" (4), although different approaches and criticisms grow stronger. In favor of the criticisms, it should be emphasized that grounding the reading as an interaction of national literatures allows for the arbitrary interpretations of host culture and foreignness as well as an uncritical adoption of the principles of geopolitical division posing as cultural subtext, all of which results in the opposite of "detached engagement," as we believe is apparent in the case of the *Dictionary*. Fang does provide a possible alternative in an insight into the work of Gesine Müller (2014) who challenges the concept of world literature as being used for "globalization-affirming discourses" (Fang 2018, 5). Müller's proposition is to

> examine the possibility of "re-mapping" World Literature with a perspective focused on a dynamic and, to use a term coined by Ottmar Ette, "movement-historically" approach to investigate the links and trajectories that interconnect and energize world regions like the Global South, which have been marginalized by most of the recent studies on the topic of World Literature (2018, 3).

Challenging the concepts of unity and inequality of world literature, she exposes and rejects the underlying dichotomy "the west and the rest", which she sees accepted as a given in the treatment of the discipline since the 2000s. Müller (2014) proposes the term *literatures of the world* as a contrasting concept which would be able to operate outside the entity of world literature polarized between a nation and the world. The pluralistic concept of *literatures of the world*, according to Müller, would constitute a third space, which would stand open to invite such literatures without firmly rooted origin for which the currently dominant model does not accommodate, and thus open the field for different perspectives and works which remain unnoticed. Since this is a model stemming from the changing narratives of trans-cultural topography, contributing to the changing concept and face of what is current literary production in Europe and worldwide, we hope it will, too, develop cultural subtexts as alternatives to those of dominant social narratives and radically re-frame the future of what, regardless of its origin, literature is and what it will be allowed to do.

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Narrativity. World literature. Patronage. "Dictionary of the Khazars." Milorad Pavić.

The processes of translation and critical reception of a literary work being adopted as a text of world literature and therefore translated into English, before all other factors, are governed by (social) narratives, as proposed by Somers and Gibson (1994) and Mona Baker (2006). Being a part of a larger system, the narratives in question are perceived as an instrument in "rewriting and manipulation" (Lefevere 1992) establishing an international or global setup of world literature studies. A case study examining the position/interpretation of *The Dictionary of the Khazars* by Milorad Pavić within this framework serves as an illustration of the process.

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