

Creating a Canon of Contemporary Eastern European Literature in the US: An Editor's Perspective

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A description of the history, philosophy, and challenges facing the literary series Writings from an Unbound Europe (Northwestern University Press) by the general editor of the series.

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Fiction from eastern Europe. These words conjure up an immediate image in the mind of those few Americans that read literature in translation. We imagine first of all a long novel, dense, melancholy, and philosophical, probably focusing on the horrors of communism. Humor, if there is any, will be of the black variety, served up with heavy doses of alcohol and cigarette smoke. Stereotypes of this sort are hard to dispel, particularly when the number of titles available from a given region is limited. Of course, in this regard, eastern Europe in the American imagination does not differ enormously from other parts of the world: Latin American fiction, for example, is firmly identified with Magic Realism, and any novel from the Arab world that does not provide insight into “the Islamic mind” is apt to be rejected out of hand.

One reason for the difficulty of modifying literary/cultural stereotypes in the Anglophone world is the relative rarity of fiction in translation. Whereas translations make up more than 20% of titles in such major European languages as Italian and Spanish, and probably constitute an even larger percentage in smaller book markets, in the UK and US (the two countries that publish by far the greatest number of new book titles per year) the percentage of titles in translation is tiny: approximately 3% in the US, and perhaps a bit higher in Britain. In the “good old days,” some

twenty-five or thirty years ago, the big prestigious New York publishing firms that traditionally served as tastemakers for the American reading public (Knopf and Farrar Straus & Giroux, for example) would, despite the relative unpopularity of translated fiction, nevertheless put out a few titles every year.¹ Such firms, however, if they have not disappeared entirely, have pretty much succumbed to market pressures and can no longer afford to publish “prestige” books by less well-known foreign authors. Instead, translated fiction is published almost exclusively by small independent or quasi-independent houses that can keep their costs low and can sell primarily through the internet and the few remaining independent bookstores in the US. The most successful of them, Dalkey Archive Press (University of Illinois), Open Letter Books (University of Rochester), and Northwestern University Press also survive on subsidies from universities. However, because such subsidization is always dependent on the health of the overall university budget and the willingness of the university’s leadership to support an enterprise not directly related to immediate educational activities, patronage of this type is inherently unreliable.

As the only even somewhat comprehensive collection of contemporary literary work from eastern Europe currently published in English, the series *Writings from an Unbound Europe* at Northwestern University Press has attempted to break down stereotypes of what eastern European literature should be, recognizing that writers from the formerly communist countries of eastern and central Europe produce work in many different styles and genres. Although we do not automatically refuse to publish novels that reflect stereotypical eastern European concerns (after all, communism was a reality for eastern Europeans for many years, so it would be strange if reflections about life under this system played no part in fiction from the region), we have more often sought to bring out novels written in a wide variety of styles and on a wide variety of topics, many having nothing at all to do with life under communism. Indeed, our only criterion is literary value.

The series began in the early 1990s, just as I arrived at Northwestern University. At that same time, Jonathan Brent, who had been director of the press for a number of years, was leaving Northwestern and the press discovered that under his leadership it had published a number of literary titles from central Europe (mostly Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland). This being the period just after the end of communism, there was a fair amount of interest in eastern Europe, and I was asked to take leadership of this publishing enterprise. I insisted that the series should be expanded to cover writing from any and all of the former communist countries of eastern, central, and southeastern Europe, and I constituted an editorial

board that could provide expertise on many countries (Clare Cavanagh for Poland and Russia; Michael Heim for the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania; Roman Koropeckyj for Ukraine and Poland; and Ilya Kutik for Russia and Ukraine). With their assistance, I set out to identify the best fiction (and sometimes poetry) that I could find from this part of the world. Since our first publication in 1993, we have brought out more than fifty titles from nearly every country in eastern, central, and southeastern Europe (with the exceptions of Latvia, Moldova, and Belarus). In general, we have preferred living and younger writers, although we have on occasion published work posthumously (indeed, our all-time bestseller, *Death and the Dervish* by the Bosnian writer Meša Selimović [1910–1982] was originally published in 1966).

Nevertheless, the titles I am most proud of tend to be those that represent the first publication of a given author into English, and even more so when the book does not conform to the stereotypes of eastern European fiction. In this regard, three recent titles that I fancy in particular are the Macedonian Goce Smilevski's novel *Conversation with Spinoza*, the Bosnian writer Muharem Bazdulj's *The Second Book*, and *All This Belongs to Me* by the Czech writer Petra Hůlová. Smilevski's novel brings the thinker Spinoza, his inner life, into conversation with the outer, all-too-real facts of his life and his day – from his connection to the Jewish community of Amsterdam, his excommunication in 1656, and the emergence of his philosophical system to his troubling feelings for his fourteen-year-old Latin teacher Clara Maria van den Eenden and later his disciple Johannes Casarius. From this conversation there emerges a compelling and complex portrait of the life of an idea – and of a man that tries to live that idea. Bazdulj's short story collection, influenced by innovators Danilo Kiš, Milan Kundera, and Jorge Luis Borges, employs a light touch, a daring anti-nationalist tone, and the kind of ambition that inspires nothing less than a rewriting of Bosnian and Yugoslav history. Finally, and perhaps most breathtakingly, there is Hůlová's novel, set entirely in Mongolia, which from its first sentence blows away the ideas we have come to hold regarding eastern European fiction: "Here at home when a *shooroo* hits, plastic bags go chasing each other round and round the *ger*."²

At the beginning, we tended to acquire most of our titles from other publishers. Thus, our first two books, by the Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić, had originally been published in England in difficult-to-find hardback editions. These initial titles, however, already signaled a willingness to go against stereotypes of eastern European literature because both of them (*In the Jaws of Life* and *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*) are light-hearted and meta-literary. Rather quickly, however, we moved from republish-

ing the work of other presses to commissioning our own titles. Given that we had little money available to pay for authorial rights or translations, this has always been a tricky business. We are helped, however, by the fact that most people involved in translation and reading translated literature in the US and UK are involved one way or the other in the academic world.

This starts, of course, with me. As opposed to my counterparts working for publishing houses in countries like Slovenia, I do not receive any salary from Northwestern University Press.³ Instead, my salary is paid by the university, which considers my work for the press to be part of my expected university service, which includes teaching, research, and a variety of other activities. As a result, I am not dependent on my books making a profit or even breaking even. Rather, the question the university asks is whether my books produce enough prestige for Northwestern University Press to justify the losses they generate.⁴ Prestige, of course, is notoriously difficult to measure, but a reasonable proxy for it is whether the books we publish are reviewed by leading journals, whether they are considered for translation prizes, whether they are used and known by colleagues in the field, and more generally whether publishing in a given area yields name recognition. Thus, the fact that Northwestern University Press authors Imre Kertész and Herta Müller won Nobel Prizes (even though neither is published in my series) has helped keep us afloat.

The same sort of economics rules the work of the translators, without whom we could not survive. Most of them are either faculty members or graduate students at American universities that, for one reason or another, have fallen in love with the work of a given author and decide that they are willing to do the necessary labor to see him or her published in English. Regarding acquisition of titles, two methods are possible. In the case of those languages I know well (Russian, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, and Slovenian) and/or the literatures of countries I follow reasonably closely even if I do not know the language particularly well (Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Poland), I tend to know many translators. As a result, when I find a novel I would like to publish, I can usually find someone willing to translate it for me. When it comes to countries I know little or nothing about, I am dependent either on my editorial board or, more frequently, on individual translators that know about the series and approach me to ask whether we would like to publish a given work that they either are intending to translate or have already translated.

Given that I need to convince the press board of the quality of each book we propose to publish, it can be a challenge if we do not have a translation available for an outside reviewer to read (each book we select must receive a positive review from someone not on the series board before it

will be approved for publication). We get around this problem by asking the few academics working in fields like Hungarian to provide reviews before the translation is finished. Even more important, given that I will not publish anything that I do not personally like, it is crucial that I can read at least a good portion of the work in advance of its acceptance. However, there is usually a translation available in some language that I can read.

Perhaps the most elaborate and complicated situation we faced, and one that can give an idea of how complex this process can be, was with the publication of a novel by the Estonian novelist Jaan Kross (1920–2007). In this instance, I was approached by the translator Eric Dickens and asked whether we might be interested in publishing Kross's novel *Vastutulelaev* (Sailing against the Wind), which tells the story of Bernhard Schmidt, the inventor of astronomical telescopes, born an Estonian. The novel has varied settings: the Philippines during a total eclipse, the island of Naissaar, where Schmidt was born, and 1920s and 1930s Germany under hideous inflation, plus some love interest, and also some technical matters to do with telescopes and lens grinding. As it turned out, there was a French translation, which I read and liked and we were able to find a reviewer that was also able to read the French. Given that Dickens has already published a number of novels translated from Estonian and that he has an excellent reputation, the press board was willing to accept the novel for publication without having read any portion of it. Because Dickens, unlike most of our translators, does not have an academic appointment and must make a living as a translator, he needed to receive a grant from the Estonian government before he could embark on the project. He has now received it and is working on the translation, which we expect to bring out next year.

Ultimately, the most satisfying and most humbling part of my editorial responsibilities is the recognition that the series *Writings from an Unbound Europe* is the de facto creator of the future world canon of authors from eastern, central, and southeastern Europe. This perhaps may sound megalomaniacal, but it is not far from the truth. After all, for the foreseeable future English will remain the world's second language. This means that, if authors in "minor literatures" are to escape the confines of national literature, they will need to be available in English. French and German are also important, to be sure, but it is far more likely that someone in, say, Spain, Norway, or Russia will read an Albanian author in English than in French or German. Moreover, *Writings from an Unbound Europe* is the only series in English that is specifically concerned with literature from this broad region.⁵ Some other excellent outlets, including the aforementioned Dalkey Archive Press and Open Letter Books, as well as numerous tiny independent operations that specialize in work from a single country and

may only release one book or so a year, publish contemporary literature from eastern Europe. In the end, however, *Writings from an Unbound Europe* plays a disproportionate canonizing role. It is one we take seriously, and we hope that we will be able to keep going, despite the increasingly difficult financial situation of publishing in the United States.

NOTES

¹ In the area of eastern European literature, the most famous such series was Penguin's "The Other Europe" series, which published such important figures as Danilo Kiš and Tadeusz Borowski, among others.

² Petra Hůlová, *All This Belongs to Me*. Trans. Alex Zucker. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009, 3. A *ger* is a felt-lined tent (a yurt), and a *shooroo* is a desert wind.

³ I do receive 1% of net sales of the books in my series, which amounts to \$300 in a good year.

⁴ This paper is not the venue for a comprehensive discussion of university press finances, but I should note here that, like the vast majority of university presses (the only exceptions to this rule are thought to be the very biggest university presses: Chicago, Harvard, Oxford, and Cambridge), Northwestern loses money on every book it publishes. In this regard, then, the books in my series are no different from others. Generally, what we hope is that each book generates sufficient sales to cover at least its fixed costs (printing, binding, and distribution) and some portion of its editorial costs. In the case of my series, the books are published in editions of 250 hardbacks, which are sold to libraries, and 750 to 1,000 paperbacks for general sale, these days mostly on-line either directly through the press or through middlemen such as Amazon.com.

⁵ There are a couple of series that have focused on creating a canon of older fiction from eastern Europe, perhaps the most ambitious of which is at CEU Press.