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Slavic Literatures Across Space and Time

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Time is relative and space is not absolute.
I.P.

First of all, I would like to thank heartily all those people who made this issue possible: our Authors, Reviewers, editorial Team, Friends, and Relatives for their support. Due to these people *Slavic Literatures Across Space and Time* have successfully achieved TranscUlturAl's main goal, that is to contribute to the ongoing dialogue among languages, cultures, and literatures. It is my pleasure that geographically this issue is not limited to North America where the TranscUlturAl "headquarters" is situated. It attracted authors and reviewers from many different countries across the globe including Canada, Ukraine, Russia, Turkey, the USA, Belarus and others.

This special issue is devoted to Slavic literatures. But what is a 'Slavic literature'? The notion may be too broad to describe with a single definition because Slavic culture is not a homogeneous substance but rather a collective term used in order to describe a diverse world of cultures associated with Slavic peoples. Therefore, the term used in the title of this special issue, 'Slavic Literatures', should be understood as an hyperonym that incorporates West Slavic literatures (including Czech, Kashubian, Polish, Slovak, Sorbian, Silesian), East Slavic literatures (including Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian), and South Slavic literatures (including Bosnian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Serbian and Slovenian) as well as the literature created by *émigrés* and diasporas.

Targeting such a broad branch of the world literature, with the only restriction to the lexico-semantic field of the Slavic Literatures, this issue has managed to attract a variety of submissions. It includes five articles, two special contributions, one translation, and one book review. Each submission has not only a scholarly value but also a practical one since no matter how serious or humorous literature is; it is always connected by invisible threads to real life. Literature enables us to look at Slavic history and real life through the prism of the author's perception, and the emotions of the main characters. If it is true that "we are what we eat"[i], then it is in no lesser degree true that *we are what we read,* especially in the

information era.

The five articles of this issue focus on a variety of topics ranging from carnality in the history of Slavic literature and the discourse of silence to the comparative study of modern North American and Russian literatures. In his article entitled *Carnality and Eroticism in the History of Russian Literature: Toward a Genealogy of a Discourse of Silence*, Alexei Lalo explores the traditions of expressing the bodily desire and passion in Russian culture and literature. His essay reveals that many authors prefer to use the politics of *silence* ignoring the topic of carnality and eroticism altogether. Alternatively, other Russian authors have "adhered to *burlesques*, in which an author presents carnality and eroticism in a deliberately ludicrous, grotesque way" (Lalo). Drawing on a number of examples, Lalo concludes that there are three historical prerequisites determining the usage of the politics of avoidance or silence in relation to erotic literature: (1) perceptions of bodily desire and passion by Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions; (2) earliest canonical representations of the topic in Russian literary history; and (3) "profound differences between Western and Russian medical science, sexology and psychopathology."

A different aspect of Russian literature is presented by Sandra Joy Russel. She examines Andrei Bely's (Rus. *Андрей Белый*[1]) novel *Petersburg* (1916) in the context of identity within Russian conscientiousness. Russel remarks that Bely sees Petersburg, the ex-capital of Russia, as a political and cultural nucleus of Russian identity. This compels her to find symbolism not within the geographical borders of the city but across different perspectives and multiple disciplines including mythology, philosophy, and mathematics. The city's geometric space helps connecting the past and the modern and rational West with the intuitive East. "The amalgamation of Western philosophy, the modern novel, and the modern city ignited his examination and creation of Petersburg" (Russel). For Bely the text and the city become interchangeable. Bely's "calculated and mathematical re-creation of St. Petersburg within the text allows it to operate as a public space for the articulation of Russia's political and cultural anxiety"(Russel). Overall, the paper provides an insightful examination of the city, the text, and the question of Russian identity through a deep analysis of Bely's aesthetic and philosophical foundations.

Lai-Tze Fan's article explores South Slavic Oral Epics. The author argues that oral epic has long suffered generalizations from literary critics assuming that oral epic represents

1 Andrei Bely is a pseudonym; the real name of the Russian novelist, poet, and literary critic is Boris Nikolaevich Bugaev.

a verbatim, 'mechanical' memory. However, a more careful analysis indicates that this assumption needs revision. This conclusion supports similar opinion of scholars working on the material of the English language. Alan Dundes, for example, has looked at formulaic features in English proverbs. Jan Brunvand has examined urban legends. Working on the material of a south Slavic oral epic, Lai-Tze Fan shows that a Slavic singer does not merely reproduce an epic but rather reinvents it by inserting events of surrounding reality relevant to this singer. The amalgamation of the existing formula and the singer's personal experience provides tools for the preservation of culture, passing it on to the following generations and gradual accumulation and development of knowledge.

Similarly to Russel's essay, Karen Ryan's article deals with the question of Russian identity. However, unlike Russel's broad approach, Ryan focuses on Russian identity in the diaspora located in the US. She is concerned with how identity is reconfigured by Russian women. For this purpose the author examines the prose of four modern Russian-American novelists: Lara Vapnyar, Sana Krasikov, Anya Ulinich, and Irina Reyn. Drawing from the analysis of female characters, Ryan points out that domesticity, which is associated with a stereotypic Russian woman-nurturer, is in fact limiting. Although a reader may feel nostalgia for Russian culture in their narrative, the four authors, who are also women, reveal criticism of the "tyranny of home". Ryan concludes that "rejection of traditional Russian definitions of women's gender roles may signal successful renegotiation of identity in the diaspora."

Tom Priestly's article deals mostly with the question of translating Slovene poetry into English. Having worked more than 20 years as a professional translator, Priestly shares his own experience as to what works best and how to achieve the best quality of translation especially in poetry, when a translator is "faced with the clash between the demands of form and content." The author concludes that one of the most successful strategies for him is trying to "impersonate" the author. When in doubt it may be a good decision to ask "what would they [the authors] have written if they had had my knowledge of English?". The author describes more in detail his experience regarding translation of poetry by Anna Akhmatova, Francè Prešeren, Janko Messner, Kajetan Kovič. Priestly concludes that while trying to translate poetry by "impersonating" an author of the original text, he was most successful in translating the pieces which were most relevant to him as a translator including his personal acquaintance with the characters' relatives in the poems.

The last contribution on the topic of Slavic literature is Iarolsav Pankovskyi's

translation of a Ukrainian acathistus *Gratitude to God for Everything*. Being an important part of Eastern Orthodox tradition and Ukrainian culture, these religious texts have received very little attention from scholars. It is the author's hope that his translation will encourage scholars and translators to do more translations and explore both structure and meaning of this type of discourse.

This issue also includes two special contributions dealing with translation and cultural studies in the Arabic and Chinese contexts. The first one is entitled *The Other Side of the Coin of Lexical Borrowing from Arabic into English*. The author, Mohammad Ahmad Thawabteh, takes a close look at loan words and other types of lexico-semantic borrowings from Arabic into English. He observes that these translations often have quite different connotation from the SL. They do not merely render the meaning of the source culture's concept, "connotations implied in the SL become 'leftover' in the TL." Extended or narrowed down, "the original shades of meanings have been sacrificed to the receptor culture" (Thawabteh). Illustrating his argument by a number of examples, Thawabteh finally points out that "an attempt to reproduce in TL all the SL linguistic and the cultural features, as faithfully as possible, seems to be questionable" because dictionaries in "their attempts to produce domesticated/foreignized representations of the other language and culture" did not seem to succeed. Although this article does not deal specifically with Slavic culture, it offers an interesting insight into translation studies which may interest scholars across different fields and with different interests.

The other special contribution to this issue is Florent Villard's *Le «SARS» et les maux identitaires chinois Néologismes, métissage et tradition de la traduction*. Written in French, this article shows how modernity and tradition are inseparably bound in Chinese culture which shows itself both in printed and electronic discourse. Chinese identity, however, is not a given constant but rather a shifting one so that the dichotomy of viewing China as either a passive observer of the modern processes in the world or vice a versa as an active initiator of such processes is somewhat inaccurate in both cases.

In addition to articles and special contributions the current issue contains a book review by Margret Grebowicz who discusses a recent book edited by Dorota Glowacka and Joanna Zylinska, *Imaginary Neighbors: Mediating Polish-Jewish Relations after the Holocaust*. The discussion of the book is conducted in the context of modern Polish culture.

Literature remains a unique medium for preserving and developing a human thought. Central to literature is language and its close connection with culture. I truly believe that the

success of the issue comes directly from the commitment of the authors devoted to the topic of their interest. It may be true that this single issue does not revolutionize the world of Slavic literatures but it is also true that *many a little makes a mickle*. Therefore, I hope that it will help to expand knowledge about the topics explored and will motivate those who read these works to move a step further in exploring Slavic literature.

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[i] The origin of this sayings goes back to Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's phrase in *Physiologie du Gout, ou Meditations de Gastronomie Transcendante, 1826:* "Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es" [Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are], which was later transformed Ludwig Feuerbach's "Der Mensch ist, was er ißt" [man is what he eats] and eventually rethought by many scientists and scholars with the advance of nutritional studies. Nowadays, this phrase is widely known in such forms as "We are what we" or "You are what you eat" (http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/you%20are%20what%20you%20eat.html).