

## ON-ZONE

*Translated by David Williams*

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Merhan Karimi Nasseri, an Iranian better known as Sir Alfred, lived at Charles de Gaulle Airport from 1998 until 2006, and for much of this time was a kind of tourist attraction. Steven Spielberg's 2004 film *The Terminal* was in part inspired by Nasseri's life story. In contrast to Tom Hanks' character in the film, Alfred spent most of his time reading. "It's like a day at the library," he said.

### I.

A few years ago at Bucharest Airport I spotted a sign saying *Zona fumatore*, which simply means a smoking area, just it sounds way better in Romanian. You see all kinds of zones on your travels: free zones (*zona franca*), no-go zones, duty-free zones, you name it. West Germans used to call East Germany *die Zone*, by which they meant the Soviet Zone. There are time zones, erogenous zones, even Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* revolves around a zone. There's a weight-loss diet called 'The Zone', and then you've also got zoning, in the sense of urban planning. In sci-fi, a zone is usually some sort of dystopia. Hearing the word 'zone', our first association is a clearly defined space, our second, their evanescence. Zones can be erected and dissembled like tents, ephemeral. Last but not least, there's a form of literary life we might call the out of nation zone, best abbreviated as the ON-zone. I know a person who lives in that zone. That person is me.

I write in the language of a small country. I left that small country twenty years ago in an effort to preserve my right to a literary voice, to defend my writings from the constraints of political, national, ethnic, gender, and other ideological projections. Although true, the explanation rings a little phoney, like a line from an intellectual soap opera. Parenthetically, male literary history is full of such lines, but with men being 'geniuses', 'rebels', 'renegades', 'visionaries', intellectual and moral bastions etc., when it comes to intellectual-autobiographical kitsch, they get free passes. People only turn up their noses when it escapes a woman's lips. Even hip memes like 'words without borders' and 'literature without borders' ring pretty phoney, too. The important point here is that having crossed the border, I found myself literally in an out-of-nation zone, the implications of which I only figured out much later.

It could be said that I didn't actually leave my country, but

rather, that splitting into six smaller ones, my country, Yugoslavia, left me. My mother tongue was the only baggage I took with me, the only souvenir my country bequeathed me. My spoken language in everyday situations was easy to switch but I was too old for changing my literary language. In a second language I could have written books with a vocabulary of about five hundred words, which is about how many words million-shipping bestsellers have. Unfortunately, my ambitions lay elsewhere. I don't have any romantic illusions about the irreplaceability of one's mother tongue, nor have I ever understood the coinage's etymology. Perhaps this is because my mother was Bulgarian, and Bulgarian her mother tongue. She spoke flawless Croatian though, better than many Croats. On the off chance I did ever have any romantic yearnings, they were destroyed irrevocably almost two decades ago, when Croatian libraries were euphorically purged of non-Croatian books, meaning books by Serbian writers, Croatian 'traitors', books by 'commies' and 'Yugoslavs', books printed in Cyrillic. Mouths buttoned tight, my fellow writers bore witness to a practice that may have been short-lived, but was no less terrifying for it. The orders for the library cleansings came from the Croatian Ministry of Culture. Indeed, if I ever harboured any linguistic romanticism, it was destroyed forever the day Bosnian Serbs set their mortars on the National Library in Sarajevo. Radovan Karadžić, a Sarajevo psychiatrist and poet—a 'colleague'—led the mission of destruction. Writers ought not forget these things. I haven't. Which is why I repeat them obsessively. For the majority of writers, a mother tongue and national literature are natural homes, for an "unadjusted" minority, they're zones of trauma. For such writers, the translation of their work into foreign languages is a kind of refugee shelter. And so translation is for me. In the euphoria of the Croatian 'bibliocide', my books also ended up on the scrap heap.

After several years of academic and literary wandering, I set up camp in a small and convivial European country. Both my former and my present literary milieu consider me a 'foreigner', each for their own reasons of course. And they're not far wrong: I *am* a 'foreigner', and I have my reasons. The ON-zone is an unusual place to voluntarily live one's literary life. Life in the zone is pretty lonely, yet with the suspect joy of a failed suicide, I live with the consequences of a choice that was my own. I write in a language that has split into three—Croatian, Serbian, and Bosnian—but in spite of concerted efforts to will it apart, remains the same language. It's the language in which war criminals have pled their innocence at the Hague Tribunal for the past twenty years. At some point, the tribunals' tortured translators came up with an appropriate acronym: BCS (Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian). Understandably, the peoples reduced and retarded by their bloody divorce can't stand the fact that their language is now just an acronym. So the Croats call it Croatian, the Bosnians Bosnian, the Serbs Serbian, even the Montenegrins have come up with an original name: they call it Montenegrin.

What sane person would want a literary marriage with an evidently traumatised literary personality like me? No one. Maybe the odd translator. Translators keep me alive in literary

life. Our marriage is a match between two paupers, our symbolic capital on the stock market of world literature entirely negligible. My admiration for translators is immense, even when they translate the names Ilf and Petrov as the names of Siberian cities. Translators are mostly humble folk. Almost invisible on the literary map, they live quiet lives in the author's shadow. My empathy with translators stems, at least in part, from my own position on the literary map; I often feel like I'm invisible too. However, translating, even from a small language, is still considered a profession. But writing in a small language, from a literary 'out-of-nation' zone, now that is not a profession—*that* is a diagnosis.

The platitude about literature knowing no borders isn't one to be believed. Only literatures written in major languages enjoy passport-free travel. Writerly representatives of major literatures travel without papers, a major literature their invisible *lettre de noblesse*. Writers estranged or self-estranged, exiled or self-exiled from their maternal literatures, they tend to travel on dubious passports. A literary customs officer can, at any time, escort them from the literary train under absolutely any pretext. The estranged or self-estranged female writer is such a rare species she's barely worth mentioning.

All these reasons help explain my internal neurosis: as an ON-zone writer I always feel obliged to explain my complicated literary passport to an imagined customs officer. And as is always the case when you get into a conversation with a customs officer on unequal footing, ironic multiplications of misunderstandings soon follow. What does it matter, you might say, whether someone is a Croatian, Belgian, or American writer? "Literature knows no borders," you retort. But it does matter: the difference lies in the reception of the author's position; it's in the way an imagined customs officer flicks through one's passport. And although it would never cross our minds to self-designate so, we readers—we are those customs officers!

Every text is inseparable from its author, and vice versa; it's just that different authors get different treatment. The difference is whether a text travels together with a male or female author, whether the author belongs to a major or minor literature, writes in a major or minor language; whether a text accompanies a famous or anonymous author, whether the author is young or old, Mongolian or English, Surinamese or Italian, an Arab woman or an American man, a homosexual or a heterosexual... All of these things alter the meaning of a text, help or hinder its circulation.

Let's imagine for a moment that someone sends me and a fellow writer—let's call him Dexter—to the North Pole to each write an essay about our trip. Let's also imagine a coincidence: Dexter and I return from our trip with exactly the **same** text. Dexter's position doesn't require translation, it's a universal one—Dexter is a representative of Anglo-American letters, the dominant literature of our time. My position will be translated as Balkan, post-Yugoslav, Croatian, and, of course, female. All told, a particular and specific one. My description of the white expanse will be quickly imbued with projected, i.e. invented,

content. Customs officers will ask Dexter whether in the white expanse he encountered the metaphysical; astounded that I don't live at 'home', they'll ask me why I live in Amsterdam, how it is that I, of all people, got sent to the North Pole, and while they're at it, they'll inquire how I feel about the development of Croatian eco-feminism. Not bothering to read his work first, they'll maintain that Dexter is a great writer, and me, not bothering to read my work first either, they'll declare a kind of literary tourist guide—to the Balkan region, of course; where else?

To be fair, how my text about the North Pole will be received in my former literary community is also a question worth asking. As my encounter with the metaphysical? God no. Croats will ask me how the Croatian diaspora is getting on up there, how I—a Croatian woman—managed to cope in the frozen north, and whether I plunged a Croatian flag into the ice. Actually, in all likelihood my text won't even be published. With appropriate fanfare they'll publish Dexter's. It'll be called "How a great American writer warmed us to the North Pole."

That literature knows no borders is just a platitude. But it's one we need to believe in. Both originals and their translations exist in literature. The life of a translation is inseparable from the relatively stable life of its original, yet the life of a translation is often much more interesting and dramatic. Translations—poor, good, mangled, congenial—have rich lives. A reader's energy is interwoven in this life; in it are the mass of books that expand, enlighten, and entertain us, that 'save our lives'; the books whose pages are imbued with our own experiences, our lives, convictions, the times in which we live, all kinds of things.

Many things can be deduced from a translation; and let us not forget, readers are also translators. *The Wizard of Oz*, for example, was my favourite children's book. Much later I found out that the book had traveled from the Russian to Yugoslavia and the rest of the East European world, and that it wasn't written by a certain A. Volkov (who had 'adapted' it), but by the American writer Frank L. Baum. The first time I went to Moscow (way back in 1975) I couldn't shake the feeling that I had turned up in a monochrome Oz, and that I, like Toto, just needed pull to the curtain to reveal a deceit masked by the special effects of totalitarianism. Baum's innocent arrow pierced the heart of a totalitarian regime in a way the arrows of Soviet dissident literature never could.

Every translation is a miracle of communication, a game of Chinese Whispers, where the word at the start of the chain is inseparable from that which exits the mouth of whomever is at the end. Every translation is not only a multiplication of misunderstandings, but also a multiplication of meanings. Our lungs full, we need to give wind to the journey of texts, to keep a watch out for the eccentrics who send messages in bottles, and the equally eccentric who search for bottles carrying messages; we need to participate in the orgy of communication, even when it seems to those of us sending messages that communication is buried by the din, and thus senseless. Because somewhere on a distant shore a recipient awaits our message. To paraphrase Borges, he or she exists to misunderstand it and transform it into something else.

## 2.

According to data from the International Organisation for Migration, the number of migrants has increased from 150 million in 2000 to an

estimated 214 million today, meaning that migrants make up 3.1 percent of the world's population. Migrant numbers vary drastically from country to country: in Qatar, 87 per cent of the population are migrants; in the UAE, 70 per cent; Jordan, 46 per cent; in Singapore, 41 per cent. As a percentage, Nigeria, Romania, India, and Indonesia have the lowest numbers of migrants. Women make up 49 percent of the migrant population. Among the migrant population, 27.5 million are categorised as displaced persons, and 15.4 million as refugees. If all migrants were settled in a single state, it would be the fifth most populous in the world, after China, India, the US, and Indonesia, but ahead of Brazil. It's a fair assumption that in this imagined migrant state, there would be at least a negligible percentage of writers, half of whom would be women.

Writers who have either chosen to live in the ON-zone, or been forced to seek its shelter, need more oxygen than that provided by translations into foreign languages alone. For a full-blooded literary life, such writers need, *inter alia*, an imaginary library—a context in which their work might be located. Because more often than not, such work floats free in a kind of limbo. The construction of a context—of a literary and theoretical platform, a theoretical raft that might accommodate the dislocated and de-territorialised; the transnational and a-national; cross-cultural and transcultural writers; cosmopolitans, neo-nomads, and literary vagabonds; those who write in 'adopted' languages, in newly-acquired languages, in multiple languages, in mother tongues in non-maternal habitats; all those who have voluntarily undergone the process of dispatiation<sup>1</sup>—much work on the construction of such a context remains.

In *Writing Outside the Nation*,<sup>2</sup> some ten years ago Azade Seyhan attempted to construct a theoretical framework for interpreting literary works written in exile (those of the Turkish diaspora in Germany, for example), works condemned to invisibility within both the cultural context of a writer's host country (although written in German) and that of his or her abandoned homeland. This theoretical framework was transnational literature. In the intervening years, several new books have appeared,<sup>3</sup> and the literary practice of transnational literature has become increasingly rich and diverse. There are ever more young authors writing in the languages of their host countries: some emigrated with their parents, and speak their mother tongue barely or not at all; others (for cultural and pragmatic, or literary and aesthetic reasons) have consciously exchanged their mother tongues for the language of their hosts. Some write in the language of their host countries while retaining the mental blueprint of their mother tongue, giving rise to surprising linguistic melanges; others create defamiliarising effects by mixing the vocabulary of two or sometimes multiple languages. Changes are taking place not only within individual texts, but also in their reception. The phenomenon of literary distancing is one I myself have experienced. Although I still write in the same language, I can't seem to follow contemporary Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian literature with the ease I once did. I get hung up on things local readers wouldn't bat an eyelid at. I sense the undertones and nuances differently to how they do, and it makes me wonder about the 'chemical reaction' that takes place

<sup>1</sup> "By dispatiation I mean the process of distancing oneself more from one's own native or primary culture than from one's own national identity, even if, as we have seen, in many cases the two tend to coincide." Arianna Dagnino, "Transnational Writers and Transcultural Literature in the Age of Global Modernity," *Transnational Literature*, 4.2 (May 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to Seyhan's book, worth recommending are the edited collection *Transnationalism and Resistance: Experience and Experiment in Women's Writing*, edited by Adele Parker and Stephenie Young (Rodopi, 2013), and the collections, *The Creolization of Theory* (Duke UP, 2011), and *Minor Transnationalism* (Duke UP, 2005), edited by Françoise Lionnet, and Shu-mei Shih respectively.

inside the recipient of a text (in this case, me) when cultural habitat, language, and addressee have all changed. My relationship towards the canonic literary values of the 'region' has also changed. Texts I once embraced wholeheartedly now seem laughably weak. My own literary modus changed in the very moment I was invited to write a column for a Dutch newspaper. That was in 1992. I was temporarily in America, war raged in my 'homeland', and the addressee of my columns was—a Dutch reader.

I don't know whether it's harder to articulate the ON-zone or to live it. Cultural mediators rarely take into account contemporary cultural practice, in which, at least in Europe, 'direct producers' co-locate with a sizable cultural bureaucracy—from national institutions and ministries of culture, to European cultural institutions and cultural managers, to the manifold NGOs active in the sector. The cultural bureaucracy is primarily engaged in the protection and promotion of national cultures, in enabling cultural exchange. The bureaucracy writes and adheres to policy that suits its own ends, creating its own cultural platforms, and rarely seeking the opinion of 'direct producers'. Let's be frank with each other; in the cultural food chain, 'direct producers' have become completely irrelevant. What's important is that cultural stuff happens, and that it is managed: publishers are important, not writers; galleries and curators are important, not artists; literary festivals are important (events that prove something is happening), not the writers who participate.

Almost every European host country treats its transnational writers the same way it treats its emigrants. The civilised European milieu builds its emigrants residential neighborhoods, here and there making an effort to adapt the urban architecture to the hypothetical tastes of future residents, discrete 'orientalisation' a favourite. Many stand in line to offer a warm welcome. Designers such as the Dutch Cindy van den Bremen, for example, design their new Muslim countrywomen modern *hijabs*—so they've got something to wear when they play soccer, tennis, or take a dip at the pool.

The hosts do all kinds of things that they're ever so proud of, it is never occurring to them that maybe they do so not to pull emigrants out of the ghetto, but rather to subtly keep them there, in the ghetto of their identities and cultures, whatever either might mean to them; to draw an invisible line between *us* and *them*, and thus render many social spheres inaccessible. It is for this very same reason that the publishing industry loves 'exotic' authors, so long as supply and demand are balanced. Many such authors fall over themselves to ingratiate themselves with publishers—what else can they do? And anyway, why wouldn't they?

Does transnational literature have its readers? And if it does, who are they? Publishers have long since pandered to the hypothetical tastes of the majority of consumers, and the majority's tastes will inevitably reject many books as being culturally incomprehensible. If the trend of 'cultural comprehensibility'—the standardisation of literary taste—continues (and there's no reason why it won't), then every conversation about transnational literature is but idle chatter about a literary utopia. And anyway, how do we establish what is authentic, and what a product of market compromise? Our literary tastes, the tastes of literary consumers, have in time also become standardised, self-adjusting to the products offered by the culture industry. Let's not forget: the mass culture industry takes great care in rearing its consumers. In

this respect, transculturality has also been transformed into a commercial trump card. In and of itself, the term bears a positive inflection, but its incorporation in a literary work needn't be any guarantee of literary quality, which is how it is increasingly deployed in the literary marketplace. Today that marketplace offers a rich vein of such books, almost all well-regarded, and their authors, protected by voguish theoretical terms—hybridity, transnationality, transculturality, postcolonialism, ethnic and gender identities—take out the moral and aesthetic sweepstakes. Here, literary kitsch is shaded by a smoke screen of ostensible political correctness, heady cocktails mixing East and West, Amsterdam Sufis and American housewives, Saharan Bedouins and Austrian feminists, the *burqa* and Prada, the turban and Armani.

And where are my readers? Who's going to support me and my little homespun enterprise? In the neoliberal system, of which literature is certainly part and parcel, my shop is doomed to close. And what happens then (as I noted at the beginning) with my right to defend my texts from the constraints of political, national, ethnic, and other ideological projections? My freedom has been eaten by democracy—that's not actually a bad way to put it. There are, in any case, any number of parks in which I can offer speeches to the birds. What is the quality of a freedom where newspapers are slowly disappearing because they're not able, so the claim goes, to make a profit; when departments for many literatures are closing, because there aren't any students (i.e. no profit!); when publishers unceremoniously dump their unprofitable writers, irrespective of whether those writers have won major international awards; when the Greeks have to flog the family silver (one of Apollo's temples in Athens is rumoured to be going under the hammer); when the Dutch are fine about closing one of the oldest departments for astrophysics in the world (in Utrecht), because it turns out that studying the sun is—unprofitable.

“Things are just a whisker better for you, because like it or not, at least you've got a kind of marketing angle. But me, I'm completely invisible, even within my own national literature,” a Dutch writer friend of mine *kvetches*. And I mumble to myself, Christ, my *brand* really is a goodie—being “a Croatian writer who lives in Amsterdam” is just the sexiest thing ever. But I understand what my Amsterdam acquaintance is going on about. And really, how does one decide between two professional humiliations—between humiliating invisibility in one's 'own' literary milieu, and humiliating visibility in a 'foreign' one? The latter visibility inevitably based on details such as the incongruence between one's place of birth and one's place of residence, the colour of one's skin, or an abandoned homeland that has just suffered a *coup d'état*. My Dutch acquaintance isn't far from the truth. Within the context of contemporary Dutch literature, or any other literature, where there is no longer any context; where there is no longer literature; where it is no longer of any importance whatsoever whether anyone reads a book so long as they're buying them; where it is no longer of any importance whatsoever what people read, as long as they're reading; where the author is forced into the role of salesperson, promoter, and interpreter of his or her own work; only in such

a deeply anti-literary and anti-intellectual context, I am forced to feel lucky to be noticed as a “Croatian writer who lives in Amsterdam,” and what’s more, to be envied for it.

By now it should be obvious, the little pothole I overlooked when I abandoned my ‘national’ literature is the sinkhole of the market. Times have certainly changed since I exited the ‘national’ zone and entered my ON-zone. What was then a gesture of resistance is today barely understood by anyone. (Today, at least in Europe, recidivist nationalisms and neo-fascisms are dismissed as temporary, isolated phenomena.) Of course, not all changes are immediately apparent: the cultural landscape remains the same, we’re still surrounded by the things that were once and are still evidence of our *raison d’être*. We’re still surrounded by bookshops, although in recent years we’ve noticed that the selection of books has petrified, that the same books by the same authors stand displayed in the same spots for years on end, as if bookshops are but a front, camouflage for a parallel purpose. The officer in charge has done everything he should have, just forgotten to periodically swap the selection of books, make things look convincing. Libraries are still around too, although there are less of them: some shut with tears and a wail, others with a slam, and then there are those that refuse to go down without a fight, and so people organise petitions. Literary theorists, critics, the professoriate, readers, they’re all still here; sure, there aren’t many of them, but still enough to make being a writer somewhat sensical. Publishers, editors, agents, they’re all still in the room, though more and more often it occurs to us that they’re not the same people anymore. It’s as if no one really knows whether they’re dead, or if it’s us who’re dead, just no one’s gotten around to telling us. We’ve missed the boat on heaps of stuff. It’s like we’ve turned up at a party, invitation safely in hand, but for some reason it’s the dress code all wrong.

Literary life in the ON-zone seems to have lost any real sense. The ethical imperatives that once drove writers, intellectuals, and artists to ‘dispatriation’ have in the meantime lost their value in the marketplace of ideas. The most frequent reasons for artistic and intellectual protest—fascism, nationalism, xenophobia, religious fundamentalism, political dictatorship, human rights violations, and the like—have been perverted by the voraciousness of the market, stripped of any ideological impetus and imbued with marketing clout, pathologising even the most untainted ‘struggle for freedom’, and transforming it into a struggle for commercial prestige.<sup>4</sup>

For this reason it’s completely irrelevant whether tomorrow I leave my ON-zone and return ‘home’, whether I set up shop somewhere else, or whether I stay where I am. For the first time I can see that my zone is just a ragged tent erected between the giant tower blocks of a new corporate culture. Although my books and the recognition they have received serve to confirm my professional status, they offer me no protection from the feeling that I’ve lost my ‘profession’, not to mention my right to a ‘profession’. I’m not alone, there are many like me. Many of us, without having noticed, have become homeless: for a quick buck, others, more powerful, have set the wrecking ball on our house.

Let’s horse around for a moment—let’s take the global success of E.L. James’s *50 Shades of Grey* seriously (you can’t *not* take those millions of copies sold seriously!), and baldly assert that the novel is

<sup>4</sup> In May 2013, the nationalist Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) launched its election campaign wearing a new ‘party’ dress. In place of the usual checkerboard coat of arms, gingerbread hearts, circle dances, and similar down-home kitsch, these Croatian rednecks came out with minimalist posters bearing Jean Paul Sartre’s “It is right to rebel!” slogan— poor old Sartre the ideological plume of Croatian conservatives!



the symbolic crown of today's corporate culture. And if we read the novel as exemplary of corporate culture—financial power as the only currency; the anonymous commutability of the surrounding class of 'oppressed' chauffeurs, secretaries and cooks who serve Christian and Anastasia; sado-masochism as the organising principle of interpersonal relations in all domains, including sex; brutality, vulgarity, violence, materialism; people being either masters or slaves— there's no chance of us missing a particular detail. At one point Christian gives Anastasia an 'independent' (naturally!) publishing house as a little present. And thus, in this symbolic setting, my literary fate (and the fates of many of my brothers and sisters of the pen) depends entirely on the symbolic pairing of Anastasia and Christian. In this kind of setting, indentured by the principle of *publish* or *perish*, I belong to the servant class and can only count on employment as Anastasia and Christian's shoe-shine girl. And so it is my spit that softens their shoes, my tongue that licks them clean, my hair that makes them gleam.

Lamenting the death of the golden era of critical theory, Terry Eagleton memorably observes: "It seemed that God was not a structuralist." But it seems that God was not a writer either, certainly not a serious one. He slapped his bestseller together in seven days. And this all gets me thinking—if I've already bet my lot in life on literary values and lost—maybe I should bet my few remaining chips on their future. Because who knows, perhaps tomorrow, on my every flight of fancy, a translucent book, letters shimmering like plankton, will appear in the air before me; a liquid book into which I'll dive as if into a welcoming sea, surfacing with texts translucent and alive like a shoal of sardines. Perhaps tomorrow books will appear whose letters will converge in the air like swarms of gnats, with every stroke of my finger a coherent cluster of words forming. It's not so bad, I think, and imagine how in the very heart of defeat a new text is being born.