Title: Kundera and Ionesco on the Unmistakable Awareness of Being Minor[1]

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Abstract: Deleuze and Guattari's 1975 text, *Kafka, pour une littérature mineure*, posited a theory concerning some groups of literary texts including those of Franz Kafka. Their theory was nevertheless highly connected to their own historical and geographical context in France, and much less so with that of Kafka who had himself previously attempted to theorize small literatures. By looking at the context of Kafka and of two other writers who might be considered as belonging to minor literary contexts, I argue that theorists of minor literature tend to view minor literature in a positive way when their own cultural context is further from nation-state building. On the other hand, those writers who are writing from inside nation-building contexts tend to emphasize minor literature's limits on literary production. Interestingly, Milan Kundera and Eugene Ionesco who had first-hand experience of nation-building contexts, but then moved to France and wrote in French, take more nuanced views of minor literatures as they are further removed in time and space from their original minor contexts.

Keywords: minor literature theory, empire, nation-state, identity, privilege, Kafka

Word count: 6,338

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1. Introduction

The Cold War period saw the subjugation under the Soviet political sphere of several nation-states that had in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries gained their political autonomy from multinational empires such as the Hapsburg and Ottoman Empires. The brief political autonomy that some of these nation-states enjoyed was also sometimes accompanied by nationalist sentiment against ethnic minority groups particularly during the growing economic hardships prior to the Second World War.

In this article, I focus on the theory of minor literature popularized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their 1975 book, *Kafka, pour une littérature mineure*, where they took a positive view of this term that they loosely based on the writings of Franz Kafka. Kafka, himself had written about literature of small nations in a diary entry from 1911 and had also taken a mostly positive view of those literatures. Nevertheless, two creators who first wrote in minor languages and then wrote in French, Eugène Ionesco and Milan Kundera, describe less favorably the condition of Romanian and Czech literature in several of their writings. Together they shed a critical light on Kafka's "literature of small nations." Contrary to Kafka's optimism about this literature, Ionesco and Kundera's texts reveal their convictions that the literature of small nations is plagued by the concern that nation-building politics brings to bear upon artistic productions. This is partly because they write after Kafka when, under the weight of economic pressures, many small nations experienced nationalist violence. Ionesco and Kundera do point to a common characteristic of literature from small nations: it is aware of its being from a small nation.

Ionesco and Kundera advocate freedom from the political context both for the creation and appreciation of artistic productions but acknowledge the difficulty of such an enterprise particularly in the Cold War. The theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari writing from France in the Cold War period, like Kafka, wrote in a major language, and like Kafka, they highlighted the strengths of minor literature. I argue that writers view minor literature more positively the further they are from the early stages of nation-state building.

This study examines the contexts in which Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari, Ionesco, and Kundera wrote about minor literature. It focuses on less-studied texts such as Ionesco's 1934 critical essay, *Nu*, and his 1955 text on Romanian literature, as well as Kundera's critical essays *l'Art du roman* (1986)*, les Testaments trahis* (1993)*,* and *le Rideau* (2005).

The choice of these texts was geographically and historically motivated. The city of Prague is geographically significant because Kafka theorized what would later be called minor literature partly based on his

observations there, and later Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka* also based some of its arguments on the situation of Kafka in Prague, with Milan Kundera offering a different reading of Kafka's situation. Historically, Ionesco's Bucharest exhibited some comparable historical elements to Prague. It become the capital of regions that had previously belonged to multicultural empires. It witnessed strong national sentiments between the World Wars, followed by the terror of socialist ideology during the Cold War. For these reasons it seemed interesting to limit the texts and not include colonial theorists who nevertheless have dealt with the importance of producing a nation-state.

2. In favor of the literature of small nations: Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari

Franz Kafka was born in the city of Prague in 1883 at a time when the city of Prague was part of a multi-national empire that included most of Central Europe from Trento in what is now Italy, to Krakow in Poland, to Lviv and Czernowitz in present-day Ukraine, to the Transylvanian cities of Cluj and Sibiu in present-day Romania. As a multicultural and multilingual city situated on important trading routes, Prague experienced the coexistence of many cultures. A Jewish quarter had existed since medieval times and it was there that Kafka was born to Jewish parents who spoke German. The city's major languages included German spoken by the ruling Catholic Austrian Hapsburgs and by the nearby German populations to the west, and the Czech language, the traditional language of the Bohemian culture.

As Anne Jamieson has argued, although today Kafka is sometimes referred to as Czech writer, this would be inappropriate in Kafka's historical context (2018, 4). The Czechoslovak republic only gained independence from the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1918, and culturally, Kafka, as a German speaker and writer, can be assimilated as a Czech cultural figure only by flattening the large diversity that remained in European nation-states after their births following the first World War.

This diversity within multinational empires before World War I explains why Kafka in his journal from 1911 can so easily put side by side the example of Jews in Warsaw and that of Czechs in Prague. Both Jews in Warsaw and Czechs in Prague were one of many cultural groups living in their respective cities. Neither group constituted the politically dominant culture in their respective cities. As a German-speaker, Kafka himself would more likely be identified with what was the politically dominant culture of Prague until 1918, the Austro-Hungarian empire, rather than with the subordinate Czech culture.

In his famous journal entry of December 25, 1911 about literature of small nations Kafka draws a character sketch of this literature based on his knowledge of literature created by Jews in Warsaw and Czechs in Prague

from the point of view of someone who is an outsider, that is someone who belongs not to a small nation but to a major culture: German-language culture in Prague but also someone who has also the rich heritage of his Jewish religion. His character sketch points to three main characteristics of literature from small nations which are seen in a favorable light: 1. Liveliness, 2. Less constraint, 3. Popularity (Kafka, 195).

While the overall tone of the entry is optimistic, Kafka also mentions less flattering aspects of this literature. Several times he suggests that there are few talented writers in these literatures with such expressions as “a literature not penetrated by a great talent” (192) and by contrasting it to “one rich in talent” (192) and later to “a literature rich in great talents, such as the German is” (193). When Kafka considers the literary history of these literatures and the ancient texts, he adds in passing the slight “despite the mediocre material” (193). Furthermore, the readers of these literatures, according to Kafka, “lack a sense of context” (194). Moreover, the content of this literature is about “petty themes whose scope is not permitted to exceed the capacity of small enthusiasms” (194). Despite the many unflattering details in this sketch, Kafka concludes that for great literature as well as this literature of small nations there are “good results in both cases” (194). Nevertheless, it is obvious that as a German-language writer, Kafka personally does not identify with this literature of small nations given the distant, haughty tone of some of the descriptions.

Although at times haughty, Kafka’s last statement about the literature of small nations suggests a certain envy of the people in this literary world who are profoundly happy: “It is difficult to readjust when one has felt this useful, happy life in all one’s being” (195). Despite the slights about its mediocrity, Kafka generally praises the literature of small nations and even the small nations themselves. In1911, national movements had not yet succeeded in gaining their political independence and the nation-state was in many cases only a dream when Kafka was writing about literature of small nations.

The philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari published their work on Kafka in 1975, and they had begun collaborating after the May 1968 student riots and co-authored the first volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* in 1972. Cold War tensions in France were complicated by the sympathy of many intellectuals to Marxism and their aversion to capitalism, as is the case with the authors of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Deleuze who decried “state philosophy” in praise of “difference” could not be considered a political supporter of the nation-state. Instead Deleuze’s work often critiqued rationalism and metaphysics which had long been considered untouchable pillars of Western civilization..

In a summary of their argument Deleuze and Guattari write that, “the three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the

collective assemblage of enunciation" (trans. Polan, 18).[2] The notion of minor literature that Deleuze and Guattari refer to in the book subtitle is thus somewhat different from Kafka's three main characteristics of literature of small nations: liveliness, less constraint, and popularity (Kafka, *Diaries* I, 195). Indeed the book *Kafka, pour une litterature mineure* far from being a close-reading of Kafka's work, continues theories, notions, and arguments such as the critique of psychoanalysis and the Oedipus complex, the notion of rhizome, and deterritorialization, that the authors develop in their other works.

Deleuze and Guattari's minor literature therefore differs in several places from Kafka's literature of small nations as scholars have already noted.[3] The first and most often cited difference is related to the fact that Deleuze and Guattari's "minor literature" includes Kafka's own writing as an exemplar, whereas in Kafka's "literature of small nations," he himself was writing from a standpoint outside of it. Kafka, the German-language writer, was observing the literature of Jews in Warsaw and of Czechs in Prague but was not a part of either group.

Another significant but less cited difference concerns small nations. For Kafka in 1911, before the birth of Czechoslovakia and other nation-states, and more significantly before the rise of nationalisms in the 1930s, the liveliness associated with national movements and their pride in their literature was positive even if it meant praising literature that lacked talent. Deleuze and Guattari, on the other hand, writing after the nationalist horrors of World War II, cannot praise the nation-state nor any state. Instead, their minor literature includes any literature that a minor group makes in a major language. They have excluded the "small nation" from their theory and have replaced it with a minority group within a major group:

> This is the problem of immigrants, and especially of their children, the problem of minorities, the problem of minor literature, but also a problem for all of us: how to tear a minor literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path? How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one's own language? (trans. Polan, 19).[4]

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[2] "Les trois caractères de la littérature mineure sont la déterritorialisation de la langue, le branchement de l'individuel sur l'immédiat-politique, l'agencement collectif d'énonciation." (Deleuze and Guattari 1975, 33)

[3] Edmunds 2010 references the debate and refers in turn to Jamison 2003. Edmunds regrets that Kafka's own theory of literature of small nations is in the end eclipsed by Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minor literature.

[4] "Problème des immigrés, et surtout de leurs enfants. Problème des minorités. Problème d'une littérature mineure, mais aussi pour nous tous : comment arracher à sa propre langue une littérature mineure, capable de creuser le langage, et de le faire filer suivant une ligne révolutionnaire sobre ? Comment devenir le nomade et l'immigré et le tzigane de sa propre langue?" (Deleuze and Guattari 35).

Minor literature can therefore apply to a minority group writing in a major language such as French. The exclusion of small nations from Deleuze and Guattari's minor literature reinforces their political agenda against capitalism and state control which sometimes characterized small nations. For Deleuze and Guattari who exclude the reality of the small nation from their theory, minor literature is indeed positive and energetic.[5] Kafka, in his diary entry about the literature of small nations, also saw this literature in a positive light, but he himself was not part of a small nation.

3. Ionesco's no to the small nation's provincialism

When Eugen Ionescu, who later changed his name into French as Eugène Ionesco, was born in 1909. His natal region of Wallachia was part of a small nation-state which in 1861 had freed itself from foreign-imposed princes and joined with the neighboring region of Moldavia. In 1881 this nation-state had been recognized as the Romanian kingdom with Carol I as its king. Ionesco left with his parents to go to France when he was two years old and returned to Romania around the year 1922 (Ionesco and Bonnefoy 23; Le Gall 58). By that time, the regions of Transylvania, the Banat, Bukovina, and Bessarabia had been added to the nation-state which had doubled from its pre-World War I size and population. These regions had previously been part of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires. This nation-state known as Greater Romania [*România Mare*] encompassed the vast majority of Romanian-language speakers but also included about thirty percent minority populations.[6] These minority groups included Hungarians and German-speaking Saxons in Transylvania, as well as significant Jewish communities in Bukovina. As world economic hardships increased from the crash of 1929, political struggles in Romania became more bitter with some parties advocating anti-Hungarian and anti-Jewish measures.

Ionesco's critique of the literature of small nations was largely based on his own experiences and published in 1934 under the title *Nu* which is Romanian for "no." The book, which generated a literary scandal in its day (Cleynen 133*ff*., Teodorescu 268), was the result of the winning entry for best unpublished young writer which Ionesco submitted that year at age twenty five. Historically, 1934 was also a crucial year in Romanian cultural life and politics because ultranationalist political parties had gained supporters among cultural figures the previous year. Notably, in the years 1933-34, a prominent professor of philosophy who also directed a leading newspaper began supporting the fascist activism of the Legion of the Archangel Michael (Clark, 128). He was asked by one of his students, the

[5] Tihanov has provocatively suggested that the distinction major-minor itself is losing currency in the age of globalization and radical educational shifts.
[6] "Romania." *Britannica Academic*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 21 Dec. 2017. academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/Romania/110568.
See also the ground-breaking study of Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania*, 1995.

Jewish Romanian writer Mihail Sebastian, to pen an introduction to the latter's novel which focused on the trials and tribulations of a Jewish Romanian. The philosophy professor, to the horror and surprise of Sebastian, penned an anti-Semitic text justifying the tribulations of Jews. The publication of the novel with the anti-Semitic preface written by a prominent philosopher produced an "unparalleled controversy in Romania" (Idel 2015, 42). When in late 1933, the Romanian prime minister was assassinated by members of the Legion of the Archangel Michael, the government responded by shutting down sympathizing newspapers including that of the ultranationalist philosophy professor.

Ionesco's *Nu* addressed some of the issues related to the polarization of Romanian cultural life in 1934. He had penned literary columns for a publication that already in 1932 veered unexpectedly to ultranationalist politics. Specifically, after several more moderate issues, the publication openly supported and tried to recruit for Legion of the Archangel Michael[7] with its emphasis on ancestral lands, native spirit, and ethnic art, to the outright exclusion of foreign elements. Indeed, while other literary critics in the same publication were advocating the "native spirit [spiritul autohton]" in Romanian literature, Ionesco's articles were in dissonance with them. A witness to this radicalization, Ionesco whose views on art differed with those of the editors and contributors, chose to resign from the publication (Lupas 2014, 80).

Unlike Kafka in 1911, Ionesco in 1934, writing from within the literature and language of a small nation as ultranationalist politics gained ground, is highly critical of the literature of small nations. Whereas Kafka could admire small literature's liveliness despite the lack of talent, Ionesco is more severe in evaluating the quality of the literary output: "We have to stop being indulgent and recognize that 99% of today's cultural activities in Romania are laughable and 1% are readable." (*Nu* 120, my translation).[8] Where Kafka admired small literature's popularity but also the fact the small nation's sized imposed on all its members to know, defend, and support their culture, Ionesco criticizes the blindness that results from upholding one's own culture above more dominant cultures. He mocks the lack of artistic values of those Romanian critics who esteemed the works of local authors such as Văcărescu and Heliade-Rădulescu above those of Goethe (*Nu* 121). For Ionesco, Romanian literature by looking only inward and being fearful of foreign influences cuts itself off from any possible improvement: "Besides, our long verbalizing about ourselves (we have been defining ourselves for 100 years ! for 100 years we are defining ourselves and not really defining ourselves!)

[7]For a richly documented treatment of the Romanian Legionary Movement / Iron Guard and fascist activism, see Roland Clark, *Holy legionary youth: fascist activism in interwar Romania*, 2015.

[8] "și să nu vă fie frică să mărturisiți clar că tot ce se face în cultura noastră este nouăzeci și nouă la sută *rizibil* și unu la sută *lizibil*." (Ionesco 1991)

has proven useless and vain" (*Nu* 150, my translation).[9] Being a small literature for Ionesco in 1934, far from being positive is seen in a negative light, albeit mockingly: "What sad circumstances have distributed to Romania this minor role in culture? I will die without having played a part on the European stage which will be reduced to nothing without my help!" (*Nu,* 57, my translation). Ionesco's recommendation is clear: the literature of small nations needs to open up to major cultures (something that the political situation of 1911 had imposed but which was no longer the case in 1934). Small literatures for Ionesco need to look the major ones for inspiration: "Literature, philosophy, science, etc., are not Romanian but French, German, English, etc. When we create culture, we cannot be Romanian from the beginning but a little bit English, French, etc." (*Nu,* 120, my translation).[10] According to Ionesco, confronting differences (cultural and national) far from dampening original creation, nurtures it.

In the years following the publication of *Nu*, Ionesco was more and more confronted with the politization of literature and the polarization of politics that result in violence against Jews and other national minorities and the violence of World War II. Ionesco gave the metaphor of *rhinocerization*[11] to the increasing violence and dehumanization that will have sway over some of his closest friends, his own father, and many distinguished cultural figures.

In the early years of the Cold War, Ionesco, once he is in France and the Romanian nation-state has come under the Soviet political sphere, writes an article about Romanian literature for a French encyclopedia.[12] This text continues his critique, begun in *Nu,* of nationalism as detrimental to literature but softens the tone of the critique. Like in *Nu*, Ionesco rejects any other goal for literature than for its own sake: this includes nation-building. He praises Titu Maiorescu's *Junimea* group because

> Going beyond the criteria that are exclusively national, political, or moral, this movement allowed numerous talents to blossom and permitted the discovery of poetic vocations which gave Romania a creative boost and gave birth to a real national culture precisely because, and this may seem paradoxical, the exclusively nationalist preoccupations had been overcome. (Ionesco 1998a, 33, my translation)[13]

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[9] "De altfel, lungă noastră vorbire despre noi însine (de o sută de ani ne definim ! de o sută de ani ne definim şi nu ne mai definim !) s-a vădit inutilă, oţioasă." (Ionesco 1991, 150)
[10] "Literatura, filozofia, ştiinţa, etc., nu sunt româneşti, ci franţuzeşti, nemţeşti, englezeşti etc. Cînd facem cultură, nu putem fi români de la început, ci puţin englezi, francezi etc." (Ionesco 1991, 120)
[11] See Ionesco 1998b, 118.
[12] The article appeared in the loose-leaf publication, *l'Encyclopédie Clartés* in 1955. For a nuanced treatment of Ionesco's role promoting Romanian culture for the Romanian delegation to Vichy toward the end of World War II, see Elsky 2018.

The tone becomes softer when Ionesco tries to represent the nationalist argument he is refuting. Romanian culture as a latecomer "felt both the need to know and integrate itself in the flow of universal civilization without however losing its original soul which could not be known before it had found its own unique literary expression."[14] Nevertheless, Ionesco refutes this wariness of small nations to lose their souls by arguing that this wariness maybe precisely what impedes artistic creation:

> Who can say if all this is not a false question: Racine, who took Greek works as his model is essentially an expression of the French genius: *The Cid*, inspired by Spain is not a Spanish work and no Frenchman taking inspiration from the German or English romantic poets ever was afraid of becoming more German or English than French (Ionesco 1998a, 35, my translation)[15]

The small nation's fear, according to Ionesco, has a negative and counterproductive effect on artistic production.

As the terror of the communist revolution increases, by 1967-68, Ionesco's views of the nation-state change. By publishing a unique diary in which he puts side by side passages from the terror of the Romanian nationalist state around 1940 with passages from the Cold War year 1967, he suggests similarities between the two. He often leaves the reader to draw the parallels, but sometimes explicitly draws them himself as when he compares the leaders of nationalist states: Hitler in Germany and Codreanu in Romania, to Cold War era leaders Mao and Castro.[16]

The Cold War seems to have softened Ionesco's critique of the nation-state as he sees similar terror tactics occurring in both the nationalist violence of the 1930s and the terror of the Romanian Communist regime. Nevertheless, as far as literature is concerned, Ionesco claims to not have

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[13] "Allant au-delà du critère exclusivement national, politique ou moral en littérature, ce mouvement permit l'éclosion de nombreux talents, la découverte de vocations poétiques qui donnèrent à la Roumanie un essor créateur, et firent naître véritablement une culture nationale, justement parce que, cela semble paradoxal, les préoccupations exclusivement nationalistes avaient pu être surmontées." (Ionesco 1998a, 33)

[14] "C'est toujours la même dialectique de refus et d'acceptation, le même dialogue dramatique si caractéristique de cette culture roumaine naissante qui sentait, à la fois, le besoin de prendre connaissance, de s'intégrer dans le courant de la civilisation universelle sans pour cela perdre son 'âme originelle' dont on ne pouvait, pourtant, savoir ce qu'elle était avant qu'elle n'ait trouvé son expression littéraire propre." (Ionesco 1998a, 35).

[15] "Qui pourrait dire si tout cela n'était pas un faux problème : Racine, prenant pour modèles les œuvres grecques, est essentiellement une expression du génie français : Le Cid, inspiré par l'Espagne, n'est pas une œuvre espagnole et aucun Français, s'inspirant des poètes romantiques allemands ou des Anglais, n'a jamais craint de devenir plus allemand ou anglais que français." (Ionesco 1998a, 35).

[16] "Les Gardes de fer gagne tout le pays, Délire collectif, adhésions massives enthousiastes, Codréanu, comme Mao, comme Hitler, comme Castro, comme Nasser, est le tyran bien aimé, le tueur adoré, le prophète ou le Messie envoyé par Dieu pour rendre justice, mais surtout pour tuer et pour flageller ses ennemies et ses amis." (Ionesco 1968,184-85)

essential changed his ideas. Literature suffers when enclosed in small national context to the exclusive service of nationalist purposes. This is perhaps the meaning of Ionesco's 1986 preface to the French translation of *Nu*, when he writes, "…what was said then, in its deepest and loftiest affirmations, I have continued to say and to write all throughout my life…" (1986, my translation).[17]

4. The impossibility of a Czech Kafka for Kundera

Milan Kundera's 1986 volume, *The Art of the Novel*, written from France where the author had been living for eleven years after leaving Czechoslovakia, then behind the Iron Curtain in the Soviet sphere, includes a treatment of the novels of Franz Kafka. For Kundera, Kafka's novels, like all novels worthy of the name, are the art form that best explores modern times (Kundera 2010, 15). They try to answer the question: What is human existence and where is the poetry of that existence (Kundera 2010, 193). Quite the opposite of "kitsch" which for Kundera is a type of "non-thinking" favored by the unreflective use of received ideas (2003, 154), Kafka's novels explore modern times with the result that even though Kafka did not live to know Prague in the Cold War, his novels seem prophetic to those in Cold War Prague and reveal to them experiences they lived in a totalitarian state. "How is it possible that in Prague, Kafka's novels merge with real life, while in Paris the same novels are read as the hermetic expression of an author's entirely subjective world? […] There are tendencies in modern history that produce the *Kafkan* in broad social dimensions […]" (Kundera 2003, 106). This resonance in Kafka's novels with the reality of life in Cold War Prague is produced without Kafka having ever experienced a totalitarian state like Cold War Czechoslovakia and Prague in the Soviet sphere.

Kundera suggests that Kafka could write prophetically about life in Cold War Prague not because Kafka was Czech, but because Kafka inherited from a common supranational European history and art form, the novel. With his novels and artistry, Kafka explored some tendencies of human existence that were concentrated in the totalitarian state.

Kundera's *Testaments Betrayed*, written in 1993, after the end of the Cold War, revisits the works of Kafka and critiques several failed understandings of Kafka's art. Kundera, after first critiquing Max Brod's interpretation of his friend Kafka, then critiques the interpretation of Kafka by Kafka's own small nation. In the same way that Max Brod erroneously thought he could interpret his friend's work because he was connected to him through friendship, the small nation thinks it correctly interprets the works of its citizens because they are supposedly its own. Kundera, on the other hand, argues that the works of a novelist like Kafka are not to be

[17] "… ce qui a été dit alors, dans des affirmations plus profondes, plus spirituelles, j'ai continué à le dire et l'écrire tout au cours de ma vie…" (1986, avant-propos).

circumscribed so closely. Rather, they explore human existence in a way not limited by a small nation. The small nation's reading of a novelist as exclusively its own, limits the extent of the novelist's art. Because the small nation is endangered, it uses its artists to consolidate its own identity. Kundera then defines a small nation. Rather than indicating the size of the nation, it indicates its condition: "…they see their existence perpetually threatened or called into question; for their very existence *is* a question (trans. Asher 2001, 190, italics in the original)."[18]

This condition differentiates small nations from other nations. Because a small nation is threatened in its existence, it does not tolerate dissidence and is possessive of its own. Kundera gives the example of Germany or France where a writer can criticize his or her homeland, an act that would be considered treason by a small nation: "When Nietzsche noisily savaged the German character, when Stendhal announced he preferred Italy to his homeland, no German or Frenchman took offense; if a Greek or a Czech dared to say the same thing, his family would curse him as a detestable traitor" (trans. Asher, 2001, 191).[19] In *Testaments Betrayed,* written soon after the Cold War in 1993, Kundera therefore takes a critical look at the disadvantages of the nation-state to its artists and concludes that artists are sacrificed to their small nations which do not recognize how their art goes beyond their confines.

In *The Curtain*, published in 2005 as the European project seemed in danger of shattering into national pieces, Milan Kundera again looks at small nations and offers yet another reading of Kafka's art.[20] What defines the small nation is not so much size as the threat to its existence. Unlike powerful nations, small nations are aware they are small. A writer not identifying with his or her own small nation or wishing to identify with a larger context is therefore perceived as betraying the nation who needs them. Kundera, however, argues that it is precisely the variety and multiplicity of nations that is an essential European characteristic. National and supranational context are therefore mutually dependent and enriching.

Powerful nations, on the other hand, tend to relegate artists from small nations to their local context without seeing the larger character of these artists. Kafka is therefore sometimes referred to as a Czech writer by critics from other countries and is circumscribed in a small national context which obscures the supranational value of his art and his relevance to literature in general when in fact, Kafka, writing in German, from Hapsburg Prague, inherits from the larger European context and his work can hardly be

[18] "…elles voient leur existence perpétuellement menacée ou mise en question ; car leur existence *est* question" (Kundera, 1993, 225 italics in the original).
[19] "Quand Nietzche malmène bruyamment le caractère allemand, quand Stendhal proclame qu'il préfère l'Italie à sa patrie, aucun Allemand, aucun Français ne s'en offense ; si un Grec ou un Tchèque osait dire la même chose, sa famille l'anathématiserait comme un détestable traitre." (Kundera, 1993, 227).
[20] For a treatment of the "supranational" in Kundera, see Slater 2010.

considered minor literature. For Kundera, it is clear that, had Kafka indeed been a Czech writer, he would still be unknown today.

In *The Curtain*, Kundera exposes the negative side of both powerful nations and small nations. The privilege of powerful nations with their major literatures is that they can ignore reality and fashion arbitrary borders such as when Kafka is referred to as a Czech writer. Small nations, on the other hand, are constantly aware of being minor and fearful for their existence. They, too, err in recuperating writers as their own without always understanding them.

In conclusion, Franz Kafka in 1911 showed literature of small nations in a positive light, and Gilles Deleuze with Félix Guattari also advocated what they called minor literature which unlike Kafka's literature of small nations, was based not on observations of small nations but on observations of Kafka the writer. In contrast, Eugéne Ionesco and Milan Kundera who were themselves part of small nations pointed to the negative influence of small nations on their literature. This is partly because they wrote after Kafka when, world economic hardships led many small nations into nationalist violence. Ionesco and Kundera did point to a common characteristic of literature from small nations: its awareness of being from a small nation. Looking at the above theorists, it is when a theorist is further away from the reality of small nations and nation-building, that the notion of literature of small nations or minor literature is seen in the best light.

Kundera and Ionesco who knew firsthand both the contexts of small nations and of larger ones nuanced their positions the further they were from their small nations. Writing around 1934, Ionesco originally condemned the negative effects of national politics upon literature such as when Romanian critics advocated literature with "native spirit." Later, writing from France in 1955 and 1967, Ionesco continued to blame nationalist stances in literature but conceded that larger nations also committed similar transgressions. Likewise, Kundera in 1986 argued for reading the novel in the larger supranational context rather than as part of a national literary history. In *Testaments Betrayed* he pointed to the possessiveness of Czech critics who would lay claim to exclusive interpretations of a writer or artist who lived on their territory. Finally, in *the Curtain*, arguing that both small and large nations tend to exercise their own kinds of provincialism, he suggested that the larger European context and the smaller local contexts enriched and corrected each other. Nevertheless, neither Ionesco nor Kundera denied the existence of small nations or of the local context, but they argued that the local contexts sometimes needed to be surpassed for the good of literary productions and receptions.

And what are "good" literary productions and receptions? Kafka's comments about the literature of small nations lacking talented authors suggests that the content of literary works themselves can be "not so good" while the context of production can be lively and therefore generally

positive. It seems to be this amalgam of bad content in a “good” context that is rejected by both Ionesco and Kundera. For Ionesco, the context alone cannot justify the content, so he voices his disapproval of those who compare minor Romanian writers to Goethe simply because the political context calls for glorifying one’s compatriots. Good literary productions are to be judged on their content and not on the changing political context. Similarly, for Kundera, good literature is simply put, art. He therefore promotes the art of novels which grapple with modern existence, in opposition to “kitsch” which simply conforms to that context.

Today when world economic problems and concern over increasing number of migrants have again stoked populist political movements by trying to focus political debates around local interests, a look at Ionesco’s and Kundera’s critical works on small nations suggests that national and supranational contexts are interdependent and that considering both yields the best results.

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