

Formal Analysis in Research on Small/Minor Literatures: Two Cases Compared

JON MATHIEU¹

Abstract: This article compares two studies on small/minor literatures: one by Fabienne Gilbertz on Luxembourgish in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg and one by Clà Riatsch on Rhaeto-Romanic in the Swiss Confederation. The design and the argument of the article are based on two methodological considerations. First, both studies take a fairly comprehensive view of their literatures, thereby taking advantage of the benefits that studying small/minor literatures has over studying major literatures. Knowledge of a significant percentage of texts from personal reading and experience can be important for many questions. Second, the two studies differ in their emphasis of contextual and textual components. Gilbertz's focus is on the sociolinguistic context, Riatsch focuses on formal literary analysis. The juxtaposition of the two cases aims to examine the effects of the chosen method on the assessment of the epigonism and repetitiveness or creativity of the respective literature. These are key judgments in the area. In this way, the article addresses a topic that is particularly problematic in postcolonial studies – the role of formal text analysis and aesthetics.

Keywords: small/minor literatures; sociolinguistic context; formal analysis; Luxembourgish; Rhaeto-Romanic; stereotyping

1. Introduction

One methodological advantage in the study of small/minor literatures is the obvious fact that they are easier to survey than major literatures. Knowledge of a significant percentage of texts from personal reading and experience can be important for many questions. However, current research on small/minor literatures only partially utilises this advantage. In edited volumes and special journal issues, researchers typically focus on individual texts or genres that

¹ Jon Mathieu, Professor Emeritus of History, University of Lucerne, Switzerland, jon.mathieu@bluewin.ch

seem interesting for certain reasons. To connect these to the respective literature as a whole, one must then put forward a fair number of hypotheses.²

In this paper I will single out and compare two works on small/minor literatures in Europe that have adopted a *systematic* approach. They are by Fabienne Gilbertz and Clà Riatsch and deal with the literatures in Luxembourgish in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg and in the Rhaeto-Romanic language in the Swiss Confederation. Both cases are characterised by intensive language contact and migration. In the first case, the author's focus is on sociolinguistics, in the second on formal literary analysis. The juxtaposition of the two cases aims to examine the effects of the chosen method on the assessment of the epigonism and repetitiveness or creativity of the respective literature. These are key judgments in the area. In this way, the article addresses a topic that is particularly problematic in postcolonial studies – the role of formal text analysis and aesthetics (Boehmer 2010).

Why Luxembourgish and Rhaeto-Romanic literatures? Comparisons or juxtapositions of this kind are often constructions that cannot be easily justified on the basis of the material alone. Here, it can be argued that there is a certain lack of really systematic research in this field. Judging by a browse through recent publications on small/minor literatures, comprehensiveness is not among the current priorities. Both selected studies belong to this comprehensive genre and are monographs of considerable length. Their time frame is quite similar. They deal primarily with the second half of the 20th century and have an eye both for the older history and for the present time. However, of particular interest, and decisive for the choice, is not their similarity, but their disparity. The two authors differ in their emphasis on contextual and textual components. This bifurcation forms the lead question of the present article that concerns the relationship between the method used and the general literary evaluation.

As a rule, I use the double designation 'small/minor' to refer to the literatures examined here. 'Small' is usually considered a more neutral term, while 'minor' tends to connote the dependency on a majority. There are reasons to emphasise one or the other in specific contexts, but on a general level I prefer an open approach with the dual term. Definitions in this area are both easy

² One example is the prominent branch of research relating to the 1975 study by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure* (Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, 1986). Recent contributions in this productive field include the critical collections *Contested Communities: Small, Minority and Minor Literatures in Europe*, edited in 2023 by Kate Averis, Margaret Littler and Godela Weiss-Sussex, and *The Aesthetic Agency of Minor Literature*, edited as special issue of a journal in 2024 by Núria Codina Solà and Peter Vermeulen.

and difficult to provide. On the one hand, the terms are self-explanatory: 'small' refers primarily to quantitative relationships (number of speakers, readers, authors; number of texts that have accumulated in a literature since a certain point in time, etc.); 'minor' touches more on power relations and prestige and their associative environment (unimportant, insignificant, etc.). On the other hand, the terms have a complex and difficult history in a long struggle for scholarly and public recognition. In an earlier phase, the reference was primarily on 'national literatures', while more recently, the relationship to 'world literature' has been at the forefront (Glesener 2012 and 2015; Tihanov 2014; Domínguez 2020). In such situations, it seems advisable to take a step back and make the struggle of interpretations itself the subject of enquiry (Bourdieu 2016). For the following investigation, we will therefore let the literary scholars presented speak for themselves.

Both scholars classify the literature they examine as 'small'. Gilbertz explicitly rejects the 'minor' approach in the tradition of Deleuze and Guattari (1975/1986) and instead draws on other theoretical approaches. Riatsch sometimes also speaks of 'regional literature' and allows the terms 'minority literature' or 'marginal literature' (*Minderheitenliteratur, Randliteratur*), but does not give them much weight. He develops his perspectives predominantly from the case study itself. Further statements on these classification issues are provided in the following sections on the two cases.

2. Luxembourgish Literature: Sociolinguistics

The Grand Duchy of Luxembourg is a small state between France, Belgium and Germany. Luxembourgish can be understood as a variety of the German and Dutch language area and is spoken by around 400,000 people. For a large part of the population, standard German is the language of literacy, while Luxembourgish is used by most for oral communication. In the second half of the 20th century, it experienced increased cultural appreciation and was elevated to the status of national language in 1984 (alongside the two official languages German and French) as a symbol of national identity. Despite its lack of prestige as a 'dialect', Luxembourgish began its career as a literary language already in the early 19th century.

In 2019, Fabienne Gilbertz published a thorough and detailed dissertation on this 'small' literature. Her main focus is on the professionalisation of the literary scene in the 1960s and 1970s. To this end, she examines a number of sociolinguistic contextual phenomena in detail: the general historical situation and development in the Grand Duchy in the post-war period, literary journals and theatre as media and places of professionalisation, the joint events of

authors, literary collectives and artists' unions. Finally, Gilbertz shifts to the personal level and presents Roger Manderscheid (1933–2010), who is considered a key figure of the awakening during her period of investigation. Known as a 'nest fouler' and a creative, German-language author, he changed the language of his literary work in the 1980s. His trilogy of novels written in Luxembourgish (*schacko klak, de papagei um käschtebam, fier a flam*, 1988–1991) made him popular across the country (Gilbertz 2019).

The theoretical embedding is as carefully presented as the literary context. Gilbertz rejects the concept of minor literature developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1975/1986) for the Luxembourg situation. Instead, she first describes the prevailing discourse and then presents a theoretical way out. The discourse is strongly influenced by the topos of literary belatedness. This is not only brought from the literary centres to the small literatures, but often articulated by them. 'The topoi of belatedness, passivity and epigonism determine the self-description of many Luxembourgish authors and creative artists, who compare their works with the products of the great literary systems of Germany and France.' In research, however, this idea is controversial and has also been criticised. Gilbertz supports this criticism. The belatedness thesis, she thinks, is based on the assumption that all literatures develop analogously to one another. This disregards the historical and social peculiarities of individual literatures and must be rejected (Gilbertz 2019: 37, 39).³

According to Gilbertz, the polysystem theory, which the Israeli literary and cultural theorist Itamar Even-Zohar has been developing since the early 1970s and updating in various versions, offers a way out. She bases her argument on two collections of texts from this work in progress (Even-Zohar 1990 and 2010). As the term suggests, a polysystem consists of several interdependent, partially overlapping subsystems, for example the subsystems 'economy', 'politics', and 'culture'. The 'culture' subsystem includes, among other things, the 'literature' subsystem. These (sub)systems are conceived as open, dynamic, and heterogeneous. Emphasis is placed on complex interactions, for example between standard languages and non-standard varieties. According to Gilbertz, the polysystem theory is thus a plea for the examination of peripheral cultural phenomena. Value judgments are excluded from the outset when constructing the objects of investigation (Gilbertz 2019: 49–51).

Contact and exchange phenomena play an important role in the transformation of systems. 'Interference' is defined as the cases in which transferred elements become active and integral components of a target system and function independently of the source systems. According to Gilbertz, this

³ My translation of the quote.

allows the relationships between two literary systems to be described without resorting to the topoi of the epigone or the belated. In the target system, the transferred element does not necessarily have to have the same function as in the source system. What counts in the concept of interference is the new function, not the temporal comparison between the systems (Gilbertz 2019: 61–70; Gilbertz 2019b). However, polysystem theory does not provide any tools for analysing individual actors. Therefore, Gilbertz draws on the theory of *postures littéraires*, which Jérôme Meizoz has been developing since 2007, following Pierre Bourdieu's field theory. This concept combines text and context, individuality and collectivity (Gilbertz 2019: 77–89).

During the period under investigation, the discussion about tradition and innovation was sparked by *Heimat* (homeland) literature, which had been cultivated primarily since the interwar period. According to Gilbertz, this genre in Luxembourg had clear anti-modernist, but not racist, traits. The fact that it was more widespread in the German-speaking part of the country than in the French-speaking part can be explained by the Francophilia among the educated elites. In the 1960s, a time of change, *Heimat* literature came under fire from a new generation. Authors such as the aforementioned Roger Manderscheid described it as outdated and obsolete. Gilbertz points out that this diagnosis was based on the modern literature of the large neighbouring countries and not on the entire production of their systems, in which *Heimat* literature also played an important role. Against the background of polysystem theory, it could also be argued 'that the presence and functions of the *Heimat* discourse in the Luxembourg literary system are not necessarily aligned with the position of the discourse in other literary systems, but are determined above all by the specific needs of the Luxembourg literary system.' Within this system, functions such as entertainment, the cultivation of tradition and the creation of identity should be considered (Gilbertz 2019: 115–127).

3. Rhaeto-Romanic Literature: Formal Analysis

Like the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, the Swiss Confederation is also located on the border of different language areas: French in the west, Italian in the south, German in the north and east. In the mountainous canton of Graubünden and its diaspora, there is also the neo-Latin Rhaeto-Romanic or Romansh, which is used by around 50,000 people. All of them speak other idioms as well, most of them Swiss German. In the 16th century, Rhaeto-Romanic became the biblical and written language, but it has been in decline since the 19th century. A cultural movement is committed to its preservation and achieved a considerable symbolic success in 1938 with its recognition as

the fourth Swiss national language (but not an administrative language). One reason for this was the threat posed by fascist Italy, which aspired to annex neo-Latin regions in the Alps (Mathieu 1988). The lively literature of Raetoromania was and is part of the cultural movement and is significantly influenced by the recessive situation of this small language.

In 2015, the literary scholar Clà Riatsch published a monograph based on many preliminary studies: *Pathos und Parodie. Inversionslagen in der bündner-romanischen Literatur* (Pathos and Parody: Inversions in Rhaeto-Romanic Literature). The main title refers to the tension between high and low practices of communication, which the study explores in this small/minority literature. The respect-seeking, pathetic text and the disrespectful parody, the linguistic registers of above and below, the sublime and the grotesque distortion, are explored in their interlocking relationship on the basis of selected topics and authors. The study also focuses on the overlapping of these traditions and inventories of images in individual texts, the contrasting self-parody or self-irony, and the sudden collapse of genres and discourses of ideas. The 'inversions' mentioned in the subtitle refer to the reversals and incisions on both the text-internal level and the external historical-cultural level. In contrast to Russian formalism in the specific version of Mikhail Bakhtin, for example, the study not only identifies the text-internal sequence from pathos to parody, but also a culturally and historically motivated sequence from parody to pathos, which is linked to the aforementioned threat situation (Riatsch 2015).

The main focus of the study is on the literary use of the small/minor language. Sociolinguistic contextual information is not lacking, but is kept in the background and also serves as extra-textual reference points. The first chapters present the problem, including a range of general phenomena, among them the manifold transformations of *Heimat* literary traditions. Most chapters then deal with individual authors and works. The selection is based, among other things, on their degree of popularity and their chronological and regional location (for example, Cla Biert from eastern and Leo Tuor from western Graubünden).⁴ The starting point is the list of defects with which the literature in the Rhaeto-Romanic language is generally characterised – against the background of the great European literatures. Three historical, typological and aesthetic generalisations are frequently encountered: belatedness, pattern dependency (epigonism, repetitiveness) and secondariness. It is said

⁴ Key texts of the two authors are: Cla Biert, *La müdada*, Thusis: Roth (*Die Wende*. Roman, Zurich: Benziger 1984, German translation by Silvia Lieberherr); Leon Tuor, *Giacumbert Nau*, Chur: Octopus 1988 (*Giacumbert Nau. Hirt auf der Greina*, Chur: Octopus, German translation by Peter Egloff).

that Rhaeto-Romanic literature has missed the connection to modernity, is uncreative in form and content, awkwardly ideological, overly pedagogical and thus aesthetically unsatisfactory. Riatsch's aim is not only to discuss these implicit or explicit accusations in general terms, but to examine them in individual texts and lines of tradition (Riatsch 2015: 6).

In doing so, he can draw on his academic experience, documented in a number of publications on individual authors and two systematic studies that in principle cover the entire corpus of Rhaeto-Romanic literature from Graubünden. In *Literatur und Kleinsprache* (Literature and Small Language), Riatsch and Lucia Walther have examined countless texts since the mid-19th century for stylistic and text-immanent aspects, intertextual aspects, and aspects of literary sociology and history (Riatsch/Walther 1993). In *Mehrsprachigkeit und Sprachmischung* (Multilingualism and Language Mixture), he has addressed the literary processing of the omnipresent language contact, including the problem of translation (Riatsch 1998). The repertoire of methods stems from the general discussion of literary theory in Europe and encompasses a wide range of areas of formal analysis (metrics, stylistics, intertextuality, genre theory, pluridiscursivity, narratology, etc.). The most frequently referenced authors are Mikhail Bakhtin for the theory of the novel and Gérard Genette for general terminology. The formal analyses sometimes move at a truly micro level, for example when Riatsch guides his readers sentence by sentence through the varying narrative points of view of a text or when he dissects the quotation marks used by the authors for their exact degree of distancing from 'other' uses of language.

What answers does *Pathos und Parodie* provide to the aforementioned generalising criticism of this minor literature? Riatsch summarises:

The readings of individual texts and text groups attempted here have shown that newer Rhaeto-Romanic literature does not simply depend on patterns of *Heimat* literature and realism, but reflects on these patterns, its own themes, forms and procedures in a variety of ways, subverts them and presents them in a (self-)parodic way. In many cases, this reflection extends from the literary-aesthetic to the linguistic-cultural context and deals (more or less explicitly) with the special prerequisites, conditions and possibilities of a regional literature in a small language. (Riatsch 2015: 248).⁵

The ambivalences of the literature emerge from the contrastive examination of the serious, ironic and satirical registers. Transtextuality, metalinguistic reflection and metafictionality are striking in this corpus.

⁵ My translation of the quote.

Individually and in their interplay, they show that Rhaeto-Romanic literature does not simply endlessly reproduce obsolete patterns, but reflects on its own linguistic, textual and cultural specifications and conditions in a very diverse way and implements this reflection in an artistically skilful manner. In doing so, it has long since taken the famous step into modernity and postmodernity, even if this may have happened out of a chronic state of emergency and under the sign of the precariousness. (Riatsch 2015: 262).

The precariousness refers, among other things, to the fact that a developed, distanced literary criticism does not exist in this small group of authors and readers. Other framework conditions would be required for this. Academic criticism based on modern literary studies is only rudimentary as well. Riatsch warns against inflated expectations. What is certain is that literary assessments must refer to individual texts and groups of texts. The stubbornly held idea that there is a correct, universally valid interpretation is obsolete. In reality, scientific methods are not recipes for good interpretations, but reservoirs of hypotheses. Good interpretations must not only be accurate and verifiable, but also interesting for certain research questions. They create differentiated ideas of the complexity and multilayered nature of a text and thus change the way it is perceived. However, they can only set aesthetic standards to a limited extent and do not provide instructions on how to produce good literature (Riatsch/Walther 1993: 650–666).

4. Conclusion: Method and Arguments

Taken together, the small/minor literatures in Europe and beyond are certainly not a marginal topic, but an important one that is relevant to many people. Although no one knows exactly how extensive the territorial or migrant literature of this kind is, the existing minority lists suggest that the phenomenon is quantitatively significant (Domínguez/Di Rosario/Ciastellardi 2018: 293–301). The juxtaposition of the works of Fabienne Gilbertz on Luxembourgish and Clà Riatsch on Rhaeto-Romanic, outlined in this article, is revealing in several respects: (1) The generalisations made about the literatures examined sound similar; they are often described as belated, derivative, and secondary. (2) The attitudes of the two authors are also comparable: they are reserved in their response to these judgments and develop critical counter-discourses. (3) However, they do so in very different ways, with different methods and arguments:

Gilbertz looks at the sociolinguistic context of Luxembourgish literature, particularly the professionalisation of the business in the 1960s and 1970s. In her view, the aforementioned accusations disregard the peculiarities of the individual literatures. The reasoning is primarily on a theoretical level. When elements are adopted from a source system, it is the new position of this element in the target system that counts, not the temporal comparison between the two systems. To put it bluntly: the relationship between major and minor literatures is not empirically examined, but theoretically excluded. A direct discussion with the critics is therefore only possible to a limited degree. Riatsch, on the other hand, examines the literary treatment of the Rhaeto-Romanic language using formal methods that were not developed specifically for minor literatures but claim general validity. These methods allow him to examine individual texts and groups of texts with increased distance and precision. This shows their complexity and diversity more clearly. On the basis of this heightened perception, he can reject the generalisations contained in the above-mentioned accusations and put them into perspective when looking at the individual cases.

This approach has considerable critical force in revealing the limitations of generalised assessments. The accusation of stereotyping that critics level at small/minor literatures falls back on them, at least in part. They have not looked closely, but have fallen for sweeping prejudices. Perhaps they have been blinded by the one-sided mythology of progress as staged by various avant-gardes, by high public art prizes, by extraordinary sales figures or by the celebrity cults associated with them. This can be only partially blamed on them, because much of the larger literary business takes place through organisations and institutional channels. In this context, cultural-political preconceptions are more widespread than in small-scale operations.⁶ For future research on small/minority literatures, it could therefore be important to make greater use of formal methods (again) and thus take a look behind the clichés. On the other hand, it would be possible to join forces with critical studies on the formation of the literary canon (see for example Guillory 1991, Rippl/Winko 2013). Here, the aforementioned framework conditions and processes of conventionalisation of the mainstream literary establishment are addressed most directly.

⁶ Bourdieu's analyses of the '*champ littéraire*' refer to modern French history and place a great deal of emphasis on the institutional autonomisation and differentiation of the field 'on a large scale' with the corresponding dispositions and aesthetics; however, the effects of this development on the overall assessment of major versus minor literatures are not considered in his model (Bourdieu 1998; Bourdieu 2016: 189–276).

References

- Averis, K., Littler, M., Weiss–Sussex, G. 2023. *Contested Communities. Small, Minority and Minor Literatures in Europe*. Cambridge: Legenda.
- Boehmer, E. 2010. A postcolonial aesthetic. Repeating upon the present. – J. Wilson, C. Sandru, S. Lawson Welsh, eds., *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*. London: Routledge, 170–181.
- Bourdieu, P. 1998. *Les règles de l'art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*. Paris: Seuil.
- Bourdieu, P. 2016. *Microcosmes. Théorie des champs*. Paris: Raisons d'agir.
- Codina Solà, N., Vermeulen, P. 2024. Introduction: The Aesthetic Agency of Minor Literature. – *Interventions*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2024.2314275> (with four contributions to the Special Issue).
- Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. 1975. *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineur*. Paris: Minuit (Kafka: *Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. by D. Polan. 1986. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
- Domínguez, C., Di Rosario, G., Ciastellardi, M. 2018. On Writing a Comparative Literary History: Delocalizing Minor Literatures in European Languages in the Age of 'Big Data'. – *Arcadia. International Journal of Literary Culture*, 53 (2), 278–307. <https://doi.org/10.1515/arcadia-2018-0028>
- Domínguez, C. 2020. Estudios literarios comparados y minorización: por una literatura comparada pequeña. – A. Abuín González, F. Cabo Aseguinolaza, A. Casas, eds., *Textualidades (inter)literarias. Lugares de lectura y nuevas perspectivas teórico-críticas*. Madrid: Iberoamericana, 173–213. <https://doi.org/10.31819/9783968690612-006>
- Even-Zohar, I. 1990. Polysystem Studies. – *Poetics Today*, 11 (1), 1–44.
- Even-Zohar, I. 2010. *Papers in Culture Research*. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University.
- Gilbertz, F. 2019. *Wortproduzenten. Literarische und ökonomische Professionalisierung im Luxemburger Literatursystem der 1960er und 1970er Jahre*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter.
- Gilbertz, F. 2019. Interferenz statt Verspätung – die Polysystemtheorie als BeschreibungsmodeLL für 'kleine' Literaturen. – *Interlitteraria*, 24 (1), 220–235 (quoted 2019b). <https://doi.org/10.12697/IL.2019.24.1.16>
- Glesener, J. E. 2012. On Small Literatures and their Location in World Literature: A Case Study on Luxembourgish Literature. – *Interlitteraria*, 17, 75–92. <https://doi.org/10.12697/IL.2012.17.07>
- Glesener, J. E. 2015. The Periodical as a Strategy of Recognition for Small Literatures. – *Interlitteraria*, Suppl. 1, 159–175.
- Guillory, J. 1993. *Cultural Capital. The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226310015.001.0001>
- Mathieu, J. 1988. Die Organisation der Vielfalt: Sprachwandel und Kulturbewegungen in Graubünden seit dem Ancien Régime. – *Bündner Monatsblatt*, no. 3, 153–170.
- Riatsch, C. 1998. *Mehrsprachigkeit und Sprachmischung in der neueren bündnerromanischen Literatur*. Chur: Bündner Monatsblatt.

- Riatsch, C. 2015. *Pathos und Parodie. Inversionslagen in der bündnerromanischen Literatur*. Aachen: Shaker.
- Riatsch, C., Walther, L. 1993. *Literatur und Kleinsprache. Studien zur bündnerromanischen Literatur seit 1860*. Disentis: Desertina.
- Rippl, G., Winko, S., eds. 2013. *Handbuch Kanon und Wertung. Theorien, Instanzen, Geschichte*. Stuttgart: Metzler. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-476-05306-0>
- Tihanov, G. 2014. Do 'Minor Literatures' Still Exist? The Fortunes of a Concept in the Changing Frameworks of Literary History. – Vladimir Biti, ed., *Re-Examining the National-Philological Legacy: Quest for a New Paradigm?* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 169–190. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401210324_009