

On the Small and the Contrary

by Lisa Pearson

In Prague, before the Velvet Revolution, one of the *samizdat* copies of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in circulation was a mimeographed typewritten manuscript, no different in its physical form than a thick stack of Communist-era restaurant menus listing the various permutations of pork, beef, and *knedliky* (concrete slabs of potato dumpling). Unbound, with nothing to signal that it was a published much less revered work of literature, Kundera's book existed in the most utilitarian and urgent of forms. Someone had re-typed the entire work—not from the Czech original but from a smuggled English translation—and mimeographed it, risking identification by typewriter keys, by the traces on the machine itself, or by the fact of missing ink and spirits.

Here was a book that did not look like a book and furthermore was cloaked in a foreign language. Its status was not a book to be placed as a treasured object on the bookshelf; rather, it was a collection of pages, printed in soft, purple type, meant to read, to be truly consumed and devoured, and then to be given away. While this particular work of beauty and nuance by an exiled writer was far more subversive than any blatantly political tract, the physical form of the book, the fact of its translation, and the necessity of its dissemination also profoundly affected both the act of reading and one's role as reader: Kundera's words in this "book" challenged a whole gamut of accepted truths. Holding on to it was not a only dangerous act—a punishable offense if you were caught by the authorities—but also a selfish one. By passing it on, you shared the risk as well as gave a gift: each reader became a publisher, albeit very much through the looking glass.

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Siglio is not a political publishing house, but it is committed to various kinds of subversions. This *samizdat* copy of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* serves as something of a totem for Siglio: as an act of resistance to the literal, the authoritarian and the facile, as the result of undeterred ambition to share a work of art that might otherwise remain unseen and unread, and as a testament to the "book" as refuge,

dissent, beacon, and nexus. The subversion—in the works Siglio publishes and in the ways it publishes them, in the content and in the form of those books—begins by looking askew at the accepted paradigms, locating their absurdities and constraints, and then imagining other possibilities. Thus, the invisible is rendered visible, unexpected connections are revealed, categories dissolved, and a space is opened for contradiction, heterodoxy, ambiguity, as well as wonder.

This is what "Siglio" means: **sig** • **li** • **o**, *n.* **1.** an inverse to a boundary. **2.** a small, unauthorized marvel as opposed to an ecclesiastically recognized miracle. **3.** the tongue-like organ of a bee. **4.** *Obs.* a perverse taxonomy, **e.g.** a *wunderkammer*. **5.** *Archaic.* The third rung on the Medieval Ladder of Awe: **a.** *Delecta* **b.** *Canmena* **c.** *Siglio* **d.** *Mirabilis* **e.** *Elatoria* **f.** *Inefiblio* **g.** *Agis*.

And this: Siglio publishes uncommon books that live at the intersection of art and literature. These

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are hybrid, interdisciplinary works that are often unwieldy, expansive, uncontainable, and inimitable. They challenge the reader to engage in multiple, diverse, and perhaps unfamiliar modes of reading. They upset the categories by which books are shelved and reviewed—and thus distributed and sold. They are not necessarily the books that larger publishing houses have rejected; rather, they are the books those publishing houses may never imagine. Together, they are (and will be) a rigorously eclectic and dynamic constellation of works that—rather than stake out a specific territorial subject or aesthetic stance—are connected by their way of seeing the world through the looking glass.

How does one possibly get books like these into the world? We collaborate with artists and writers—

in realizing their vision in the physical object of the book, in communicating (marketing) the work well, in other words, in creating a life for the work. We do not underestimate the curiosity, intelligence and daring of the reading public, or the knowledge and passion of booksellers and reviewers. We trust the immense appeal of a beautiful and unusual book. We cultivate and locate audiences for each book rather than selecting and tailoring a book for an intended audience. And we take nothing for granted: every stage of the process—from editorial to production, from marketing to distribution—is not only rigorous but highly individualized for each book. Perhaps we can only do this because Siglio is so small, or perhaps Siglio is so small because this is how we publish books.

The argument is not whether publishing ventures like Siglio *should* exist (how can one argue for the hegemony of dominant editorial interests and the homogeneity of the marketplace in a pluralistic, democratic society?). It's obviously not whether we *can* exist—there is a long history of contrarian and visionary publishing that, given human nature and a means of dissemination, virtually no circumstance will abate. It's not even whether our presence inflects the culture at-large: yes, of course, it does, and yes, of course, it doesn't. (We do not have power to wield, rather our influence percolates unpredictably here and there, and thus is neither easily measured nor controlled.) Perhaps the argument is an existential one: how do *we* redefine the world by our engagement with it—through the books we publish and by extension through the artists and writers whose works we champion, and the conversations and relationships those books generate? The argument is simply answered one book at a time.

Lisa Pearson is the founder and publisher of Siglio Press. This essay was originally published in *American Book Review*, "The Micropress Issue," August 2010.