

Maja Gorčeva

Asymmetries of Translation

If we consider the literary translations from Bulgarian as a case of a “small” literature from the periphery stocked in the centre, we presume that the presence/absence of Bulgarian literature in the centres of linguistic and cultural hegemony could be traced and consequently assessed by quantifiable (statistical) measures¹. Considering the issues of translation against the context of “the market” would necessitate making conclusions based on market data, though translation and market are disparate categories. “Translation” is of the same paradigmatic order as concepts like creation and hermeneutics, “language work”, “interpretation of text”, while we would think about the market mainly in terms of performance factors. A distinct paradigmatic order comprises the institutions which would facilitate the marketing of the translated work in a non-market fashion. They form a separate entity, and the logic behind their conduct is neither market-oriented nor purely aesthetic. The metaphoric ambiguity in bringing together literary texts and market, as well as the “sociologisation” of the (thinking of) literary field underlies a principal shift in the topics of the theory of interpretation: while the classic hermeneutic approach from George Steiner to Henry Meschonnic aims at an intimate understanding of the work, the analyses of André Lefevere² or Lawrence Venuti³ from the 1990s focus on unmasking the political stakes and uncovering the “manipulation” of the source text and its meaning conducted through translation⁴.

¹ Any study or review on translation in the case of Bulgaria cannot but be aware of the conclusions from the research conducted within the project *Translation and transition. Bulgarian literature in translation (1989-2010): data, observations, recommendations*, completed by the team of Ani Burova, Biljana Kurtaševa, Vera Trajanova, Nadežda Radulova, Neva Mičeva, Svetlana Ilieva, and Jana Genova, and commissioned by Next Page Foundation. The research was summarised in a small book published online in January 2011 (Burova *et al.* 2011).

² Lefevere 1992; Bassnet, Lefevere 1998.

³ Venuti 1998.

⁴ Translation of a text is considered in terms of relationships of “power” and “authority”. Lawrence Venuti, based on his experience from an American environment, lists examples of how the translation “homogenises” the language of the source text in compliance with the target culture’s normative idea of fluency, or “smooth style”, as the Bulgarian publishers would say it in English. This

As for the market success of translations, we could rely on a probably still unchallenged assumption from translational theory: that there are no common denominators to explain the practice of translation *in toto*, but only separate and unique cases. From such a standpoint we often observe that the linguistic fabric of a literary work, as well as its accompanying interpretations in the source culture, has formed complex asymmetric interconnections not only with the recipient language and the individual style of the translator, but also with exterior factors like reception, editorial policy, institutional interests, etc.

In the first part of this article we are going to discuss a number of individual cases, within each of which the translated text and its marketing are engaged in ambiguous relationship, and within which unequivocal reaction on behalf of the market or the institutions is certainly precluded.

The “small” culture acts like a hegemon for the incoming translated works: it filters both pieces from other “small” cultures and world-renowned works. Nevertheless, the Bulgarian literary stage is void of debates to analyse the reception of both established works, like *The Man without Qualities* by Robert Musil⁵, and notorious “hits”. According to a first hypothesis, this could be due to the lack of translational criticism in Bulgaria. Alternatively, it could be hypothesised that the sheer number of translated books hinders any fast and, consequently, short-lived opinion, necessitating ample time for assimilation. Indeed, after the first response of “operative” criticism to the mentioned translation in 2009, today we encounter Musil’s name in scholarly reports, in seminar discussions, and in a way it’s becoming mainstream.

We would add that, although “small” cultures translate famous authors from the “big” cultures with preference, in the Bulgarian case this in no way results in subsequent reception or affects the Bulgarian writers’ individual styles⁶.

Translated authors who are native Bulgarians but write in a different language meet somewhat reserved critical reception. In fact some of them enjoy a best-selling status (and presumably readers’ interest) both in the source culture and in Bulgarian translation. We

way hegemony and the homogeneity of the language of translation become completely compatible, as does the hegemonising purport of translation in both a “big” and a “small” language. With regard of this, Venuti considers a translation to be the instrument for counteraction, through the heterogeneity brought by a foreign literary work, which, despite translation, should preserve those language and cultural characteristics which distinguish it from the target culture. Thus translation, even if vulnerable to the homogenising drive, presents a sole opportunity to counteract the hegemony, and not least from inside the hegemonic culture.

⁵ Musil 2009.

⁶ There are ubiquitous examples for the above-stated, while relatively few authors become paragons. For example, the unusually fruitful intellectual technique of Robert Escarpit in *Le Littérateur* (1958, translated in Bulgarian in 1985) is without any influence, although the book is known and referred to; it is more the same with his book for children *Les contes de la Saint-Ginglin* (1973; translated in 1982: *Prikazki ot Kukovden*).

could list as examples Miroslav Penkov⁷ and Dimitré Dinev⁸. An enjoyer of early fame, and of a place in Bulgarian literary periodicals, is Ilija Trojanov (a German writer, translated in English). The reception by readers and critics of political emigrants from the recent past (Stefan Popov, Cvetan Marangozov) is still in an initial phase.

One of the most appreciated Bulgarian names on the world literary market is that of the children's author Dimiter Inkiow (1932-2006), who nevertheless should definitely be considered a German writer. In Bulgaria he is known as one of the voices of Radio Free Europe. From his numerous books for children (more than a hundred, published in more than thirty languages), there are about ten translated in Bulgarian. The lack of lasting interest and eminent presence in children's reading could be succinctly explained with the short-lived models of the juvenile. However, the substitution of children's books by cartoon characters could hardly be perceived as a sign of change; in all probability it's a matter of shortchanging the idea of children's book. Moreover, to return to Inkiow, the author has devised the Bulgarian edition of one of his books, to be published by 5 Stars, as a convenient tool to study either English or German, by printing it as a bilingual text, where the Bulgarian text closely follows the English or German sentence, disregarding the expectations of an engaging style.

The critical response to translations from Bulgarian writers to different cultures – both “big” and “small” ones – is missing, although precisely this type of discussion would contribute for negotiating common, intercultural, criteria of selection. Leaving aside the number of copies and other aspects of reception, we should mention that the translated authors are far from few and that among them there are people belonging to different generations, yet probably most numerous are the contemporary authors who gained recognition at the end of the communist regime and in the first decade after its demise⁹. What is missing, however, is an understanding why these authors are published and how they are received; how translating their books affects the perception of Bulgarian literature and culture abroad; whether these translations create general images of that literature and culture or only images of individual styles¹⁰.

⁷ The book *East of the West* appeared in English in 2011 and in Bulgarian and other languages the next year.

⁸ His novel *Angels' Tongues* was published in German in 2003 and in Bulgarian in 2006.

⁹ We will refrain from giving examples since the authors are numerous and the contexts in which they are translated are diverse.

¹⁰ Let us recollect L. Venuti's idea that “[...] the translation projects can effect a change in a domestic representation of a foreign culture, not simply when they revise the canons of the most influential cultural constituency, but when another constituency in a different social situation produces and responds to the translations” (Venuti 1998: 73). Even if this change, to be brought about solely by the means of the literary text and translation, seems utopian, the author cites examples of such from the hegemonic-homogenising American milieu (related to presenting Japanese literary works): after changes in the team that selects and translates, the new one adhering to different understanding of style and addressing a different group of readers.

Below are two recent examples of the same lack of communication. Even if we appreciate the success of Vladislav Todorov as a fiction writer, literary critic, and scriptwriter, he is nevertheless confined to the “non-Bulgarian” and does not assume a role of a moderator between the Bulgarian and the foreign. The success of Georgi Gospodinov in translation is sporadically noticed, but not discussed sufficiently in the press, which would have allowed the literary circles in Bulgaria to interrelate “our” and “their” criteria.

One of the pronounced asymmetries from a Bulgarian point of view relates to how the national literary canon is constructed and to what kind of works are singled out for translation. Although Ivan Vazov’s novel *Under the Yoke* is a fundamental part of the canon, the decades after it was published brought about enough literary works that were fundamentally different in genre and topics, to weaken the genealogical link. Yet, it is this particular novel that resurfaces, together with the overall idea of a national history recurrently devoted to harrowing escapes from “the yoke”. The enduring stereotypes, however helpful for quick identification of our otherness in/by a foreign culture, help relegate the Bulgarian to the periphery assigned for national exoticism, for which there is no way to properly align with the topics of “the big”. Certainly, many translated Bulgarian authors have disregarded the safe topics of depicting our Balkan life. Yet the lack of “critical argument” to counter the receptive inertia and confidence nurtured by the existing notion of “Bulgarianness” works covertly to tighten the grip. In this respect the asymmetry in the criteria for both a quality text and national representation primarily comes from the lack of hierarchy of the criteria for selection in the source country, i.e. in Bulgarian culture¹¹. This notwithstanding, among the works translated, for example, for a French environment (where the Bulgarian literature is extensively represented), there are such that are far from the stereotypes of the canon: the novel-grotesque *Heart in a Cardboard Box* by Konstantin Konstantinov and Svetoslav Minkov¹², and works by Jordan Radičkov – not only his short stories, but also *We, the Sparrows*¹³, a book which conceivably could transcend a national children’s reading. On the other hand, the case of Emilian Stanev, disappointed by what he deemed a complete lack of interest towards the translation of his novel *Antichrist*, points out how futile could be a reception based on tested native criteria. Besides, there are translations of works undisputed from both (so to say) stereotyping and non-stereotyping views on Bulgarian literature, for example of works by the novelist Vera Mutafčieva and by poets like Konstantin Pavlov and Nikolaj Kăncev; yet again what is lacking is critical discussion, corroborated by statistical data about the readers’ interest. Are Bulgarian works truly not read, or the niche where they would fit cannot be found? In that respect the young Bulgarian authors should take the opportunity to break loose from the vi-

¹¹ This condition results from the general lack of hierarchy of values, to be embraced by the literary community in Bulgaria: a problem pointed at in the study *Translation and Transition*, which notes the “uniquely unstructured and, unfortunately, socially and media-invisible literary field” (Burova *et al.* 2011: 26). Insofar as such an understanding is made public, there is obviously a willingness to change; yet the institutionalisation of such a change seems to remain beyond reach.

¹² Minkov, Konstantinov 1993.

¹³ Raditchkov 1997.

cious circle of the national: of devotion to heroics and to rustic idyll, or to endless wrestling with complexes; to promote a different idea of the national. Their success, however, is uncertain, as the transformation has to be communicated to foreign language cultures that have at their disposal a plethora of older and contemporary authors, both native and translated (and this is valid whatever, “big” or “small”, is the target culture)¹⁴.

One of the constitutive elements of a literary canon is the list of authors (accompanied by a set of topics and motives endowed with canonical supremacy); yet, with regard to translating Bulgarian literature to foreign languages, such a list has neither been put together nor discussed in critical reviews. A personality that draws national consensus and that we consider worth translating is, for example, Ilija Beškov, an artist and essayist. The reasons for his nation-wide renown as well as our grounds for singling him out lie in his presence in two artistic fields, literature and drawing, in his living in two epochs, during both of which he remained an outsider to the political establishment, and in his constant devotion to the theme of Bulgarian(ness), addressed both with love and anguish. Still another reason is the accessibility of the essay as a literary genre. Alongside with the 1994 two-volume edition of his works in Bulgarian¹⁵, an edition in English, French and Italian was under preparation, as stated in the compiler’s introduction. This editorial accomplishment, as well as the fact that the translations never materialised in print, could prompt us to debate on the “convertible” images the national could produce; images which, by the way, are demanded in order to unite the inner literary field. With this in mind, the potential of Atanas Dalev’s *Fragments* and Konstantin Pavlov’s *Notes* is worth considering.

In her study on the translation and reception of the Bulgarian literature in the German language environment, *Life in Translation*, Ljubka Lipčeva-Prandževa asks: “Is there a template for creating, editing, promoting, and reading, which would transform the actuality of a presence into the visibility of a genuine participant in the literary communication?”¹⁶. In her book we are able to discern two typical situations which, surprisingly, ensure perfect resonance for the Bulgarian(ness): the first is the ample discussion of Panajot Hitov’s *Travel in the Balkan* in the sociological celebration of the “primitive rebels” in Eric Hobsbawm, while the second is the translation of Blaga Dimitrova’s fictional travelogue *The Last Judgment* (1968) about the Vietnam War, which finds itself in the centre of the event, but succeeds in seeing it as an existential drama¹⁷.

¹⁴ These considerations may perfectly apply to the Italian translations of Bulgarian literature. I hope that in a near future both Italian and Bulgarian scholars will also focus on the choice, translations, reception and importance of the literary works published by the meritorious activity of the publisher Voland (Rome, cf. <http://www.voland.it/voland/index.aspx>) [Note of the editor of the Forum – Giovanna Brogi Bercoff].

¹⁵ Beškov 1994.

¹⁶ Lipčeva-Prandževa 2010: 292.

¹⁷ There is, however, a third sort of situation: the systematic building of an editorial and translation team of experts on Bulgarian literature in the context of the foreign policy (and ideologi-

The term “untranslatability” has long ago transcended the boundaries of linguistic inaccessibility and idioms and refers to the inability of a foreign language to go beyond its/ the preconceptions for the “small” (or to the inability of the “big” to grasp the difference of the “small”?). The non-reading then comes to be a symptom of the untranslatability of the culture of the “small”. The communication is impeded not by the idiomatic language, but by the lack of a common language, and that lacking language is the common language of the global terms, or the “language” of a narrative recognisable by genre. The paradigm of translation, which many, like the translation theoretician François Ost, see as the paradigm of the contemporary world with its communication networks, does not come true, not merely because of the supposed difference between “big” and “small” or because of the missing intellectual lobbyists and institutional support, but because of the lost potential to tackle “big” problems, of the lost potential of these “big” topics to initiate discussions.

This discord, or lack of common language, dominates the relationship between the mutually incompatible literature and market. One should not attempt to offer recipes how to bridge the gap between them, since there are enough examples of authors most vehemently opposing the market which have become its darlings. On the market of literary value the least market-oriented works often command the greatest success. Moreover, the success of authors like Blaga Dimitrova and Vera Mutafčieva could be explained by their topics and unusual genres, attributable solely to writers’ invention and talent. Nowadays authors can rely neither on the stereotype of national uniqueness, as in the times of the idylls of Petko Todorov¹⁸, nor on the topic of the communist regime, one reiterated to excess¹⁹. The success of the films *Zift*²⁰ and *The Colour of the Chameleon*²¹, based on Vladislav Todorov’s novels *Zift: Socialist Noir* (*Dzift*, 2006) and *Zinkograph* (*Cinkograf*, 2010) respectively, demonstrated that, apart from their topics, the works of art depend upon a striking aesthetic vision, professionalism, and absurdist excess, in other words – talent.

To refer again to François Ost – the translation theoretician whose study we rely upon, – in his overview of the translation in the 20th century, he outlines the purely “aes-

cal) priorities of former East Germany, whose editorial archive contains a list of expertly selected, translated, and illustrated literary works. Cf. Lipčeva-Prandževa 2010: 223.

¹⁸ The best-seller of Miroslav Penkov, *East of the West*, appears to contradict this scepticism. Yet, Penkov’s models of the Bulgarian are strongly unconvincing to Bulgarian critics.

¹⁹ Incidentally, there are still no translations of works which present the sharpest Bulgarian descriptions of those times, like *The Monitored Man* by Veselin Branev (2007) or *Genesis II* by Dimiter Bočev (1997), and, if we go back in time even further, the short novel *The Japanese and the Stream* by Zlatomir Zlatanov (1992).

²⁰ *Dzift* (2008): director: Javor Gärdev; screenplay: Vladislav Todorov; cast: Zahari Baharov, Tanja Ilieva, Vladimir Penev, etc. Special Jury Award for best director, Moscow International Film Festival, 2008.

²¹ *Cvetät na hameleona* (2012): director: Emil Hristov; screenplay: Vl. Todorov; cast: Ruši Videnliev, Irena Milenkova, Rusi Čanev, etc. Best feature film, Golden Rose Film Festival, Varna [Bulgaria] 2012; screened at the Toronto Film Festival, 2012.

thetic" vision as dominant; but in fact this "vision" is traceable only in [translations of] works of finest artistic quality. To favour the aesthetic criterion requires attentive reading of the source text, instead of adapting it to the average level of readers' demand. Outside these texts lies the ocean of mass products, including translations of TV shows and best-selling novels, in other words the literature dreamed up by the market, where "in a world of rapid McDonaldization the translation follows the standards of communicative success"²². This divide between the purely literary quality of translation and the mass consumption of translated texts is the same that divides the cultural field in the "hegemonic" culture and which the "small" ones address. Which side of the divide their texts will be destined for? Repeated translations guarantee presence (as do the European programs for support of translations)²³, but it still lacks the accents and the specificity capable of ensuring (true) success. Clearly, the institutions themselves are unable to boost perception of artistic quality and consequently to spearhead a change of popular mass beliefs. And today the translation and communication theories are still modelled by the high-standard literature.

Rather, this situation at the "market of values" redefines the problem of how a "small" culture could be able to reach the cultural centre; and the problem turns primarily to be a matter of self-questioning, whether the particular "small" culture has the potential to showcase its aesthetic value. If such is the case, the success has not to have statistically measurable market counterpart.

The situation described above has still another dimension, which once again refers to the standing of a "small" culture (and literature). A "small" literature can also take the role of a cultural centre and indeed takes it, receiving translations in order to gain enrichment. This particular merit of translations to enhance the recipient culture and language is extensively studied by the Israeli polysystem theory. Within Bulgarian criticism, it is an idea that has long ago become familiar thanks to Atanas Dalčev. Taking the role of a "hegemon", one that it doubtlessly takes in the confines of its own language, a "small" culture will inevitably promote a more engaged discussion on the general problems of translation's historical tra-

²² Here is the complete reference: "Au plan littéraire, le désenchantement du monde ne pousse plus à concevoir les œuvres comme porteuses d'un *logos* universel, ni d'une révélation religieuse, ni d'une mission culturelle cosmopolitique. L'époque est marquée par une vision *esthétique*, au sens de la troisième critique kantienne: on ne présuppose plus un fondement transcendant du sens, on appréhende les œuvres comme des éclats éphémères et partiels d'une vérité brisée, voire absente. Ce qui conduit la théorie traductive à prendre généralement partie pour le texte-source au détriment du texte-cible. Mais ce sont là des options réservées à la traduction littéraire de qualité et aux théories qui leur font écho. Quant à la traduction de masse, celle des séries télévisées et des romans de grande consommation, elle tend à se niveler et à s'aligner sur les standards de l'efficacité communicative, dans un monde en voie de *mcdonaldisation* rapide" (Ost 2009: 123).

²³ In the epilogue of his book François Ost justifies their extension by the argument that translations carry a heuristic capability to unburden the language from the stereotypes and clichés. "Questioning the self-evident, it [the translation] becomes a unique school for precision and creativity" (Ost 2009: 374).

ditions and of the translator's responsibility. Together with the observations on translation, a specific approach, far more sensitive to the source text, would emerge, an approach which would counteract and redefine the fascinating facility of the "big" languages to mould the individual author and his or her work according to the receptive canon of the "big" culture (a facility that contradicts the theoretical wish of François Ost and the displayed "freedom" of the "small" in Dalčev's translations of poetry). To promote such an approach would undeniably indicate the response of an equal in the polemic on translation, thought of as a paradigm of our multilingual present; and a step closer to the participation of the "small" in the "big" debates.

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Abstract

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Asymmetries of Translation

Given the incompatibility between aesthetic and economic approaches to literary translation, the A. perceives a lack of creative initiative in the international socialisation of Bulgarian literature within its literary field (and especially in the subfield of criticism). Together with a probable inability to (re)integrate ethnically Bulgarian emigré writers, this gives Bulgarian literature a “repellent capacity”. Pointing at non-mainstream developments in both literature and translation may offer a way out: Gorčeva recommends abundant analytical and not self-exoticising self-representation. She also stresses that not only interliterary ‘export’ but also ‘import’ forges a literature’s status, and suggests that “small” literatures can take part in interliterary communication as equals in so far as they have the opportunity to keep on translating not in an assimilative but in a foreignising manner.

Keywords

Minor Literatures; Interliterary Communication; Exoticising.