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Translation, Censorship, Regime: The Case of Some Italian Writers Translated into Bulgarian

Abstract

During the totalitarian socialist period in recent Bulgarian history many translations of Italian authors gave reasons to recognize the translators' activity as a heroic and complicated game of deceiving the official criteria for "acceptable" foreign infiltration. The period itself is not uniform and includes various phases during which the choices, the languages and the policies in translation from Italian changed subtly. That is why the Bulgarian destiny of authors such as Salvatore Quasimodo, Gianni Rodari or Umberto Eco suffered the consequences of an intransigent publishing system. Even before this period there were significant episodes like the translation of Mario Mariani's short stories. Each case is unique; the present contribution attempts a journey through the difficult years of activity of a brave generation and the conclusions confirm the dissident role of translators within the network of otherwise-thinking intellectuals.

Keywords: translation, socialist realism, censorship, regime, Italian writers, Bulgaria.

As an important means of refreshment and innovation, translation gives to every national literature reasons for improvement and enrichment. Not less than the original texts, the translated ones can be considered as an assault on community or ideology, or moral. The translations of Italian literature in Bulgaria offer a variety of significant issues which confirm the importance of policies and politics even in this apparently distant field of activities.

Censorship is a phenomenon that doesn't occur necessarily in the conditions of a regime and that's why the society's reaction to it reveals a lot about the maturity of the society itself. It is significant that many Italian authors gave reasons to make important conclusions about the reactions of Bulgarian society to censorship thanks to their translations into Bulgarian before and during the totalitarian period in the second half of the XX century.

Let us start with a writer who caused quite a stir in his own country. When in 1919 Mario Mariani (Rome 1884–São Paulo 1951) published in Italy his book of

short stories *Le adolescenti*, things were brought to court. The writer, considered in Italy today the predecessor of Nabokov and *Lolita*, gets a sentence of 15 days in jail and a fine of 100 liras for the scandalous publication along with the publisher Icilio Bianchi and illustrator Renzo Ventura. A prestigious jury of writers was called to determine whether his book was pornography or art. The honor of the work was protected since the jury didn't consider it pornographic, but the court condemned a passage from the short story *Maria Veraldi* and ordered its cancellation. The author didn't agree to mutilate his text, so the edition was confiscated and reissued without the first story of the collection. It was the second edition that was used in 1921 for the translation into Bulgarian. This story gets an unexpected development on Bulgarian territory, because the entire book was seized from sale by an order of the Ministry of Education. Even the catalogue of the publishing house was confiscated since it reproduced Renzo Ventura's spicy illustrations. Bulgarian intellectuals reacted with a surprising intolerance to this kind of measure. The newspaper *Напред* commented this decision with indignation, stating that "We should not reveal ourselves in front of foreign observers who may find us a very backward people, once they become aware that literary matters here in the XX century are solved by the authorities."¹ The aim of all commentaries was to highlight the risk that this misunderstanding might start a dangerous practice. From today's point of view we can define similar concerns about freedom of speech as advanced: let's not forget that the main character in Mariani's story is an 11-year old girl, who is even younger than 12-year old *Lolita*, born in 1955. Nevertheless, the critics objectively keep away from moralistic assessments and claim the right to get the chance to consider the literary qualities of the work as such. So, back in 1921 it was thanks to a translation that the Bulgarian intellectuals demonstrated a high level of intolerance to censorship and readiness to fight for their right to decide personally whether a literary work had the necessary qualities.

This is an indicative story, but for Europe it is not a rare exception² and in this case it is not connected with a regime environment. Far more curious is to observe to what an extent translation was used as a weapon for propagandistic purposes during the communist era in Bulgaria. Italian literature offers interesting material for this kind of research since the early 50s, when the major concern was to publish simple texts.

Simplicity is a great value for the doctrine of socialist realism, but much more impressive is the way literary analysis filtered all kinds of artistic observations through the concept of class struggle. Ideological criticism over these years rarely noticed the quality of translation; it's typical for it to ignore the art and just praise the ideology. Maybe that's one of the main reasons why Plamen Doynov calls the Bulgarian socialist realism "a political-aesthetical doctrine."³

¹ "Напред", 2 авг. 1921, p. 4.

² Y. Milchakov, *Социални полета на литературата*, София 2009, p. 253.

³ P. Doynov, *Българският соцреализъм*, Сиела, 2011, p. 42.

It would be interesting to check which are the few Italian titles in the 50's that managed to break through the official filter and reach Bulgarian readers. The answer is hardly predictable. It was the literature for children.⁴

If there is something in common between the works whose translations we are about to mention in the following lines, it is the social element in their content. Gianni Rodari occupies a place of honor among translated authors not only for the quality and originality of his texts (prose and poetry), not only because he is the only one alive amongst the published authors in this genre in the 50's, but also because of the significant fact that he actually owes his breakthrough to the socialist countries, especially to Bulgaria and the USSR.

Unlike him, Raffaello Giovagnoli's *Spartacus* had been published also before the socialist period in Bulgaria, but after 1944 the new editions presented the book in a different light. In 1961 a comment to the new edition says: "Despite the strength of the writer's imagination and his rich descriptions, in the novel he has failed to provide sufficient explanations of the causes for the uprising and its development. In his further works the author passes to reactionary positions and his works are of no interest to the modern reader."⁵ We should say that it was very common at the time to evaluate an author by a rating scale that uses the opposition terms "progressive" and "reactionary."

Giovagnoli's early biography connects him to leftist beliefs, he appears to be a declared anticlerical and in this respect his position softens over the years, which is the reason for the decline in enthusiasm in the commentary of his later works. The Bulgarian critics constantly take into consideration Karl Marx's high appreciation of the novel whose protagonist Spartacus is called a "true representative of the ancient proletariat." Antonio Gramsci was also among those who perceived the potential of the book to bear new contemporary interpretations. The fact is that the work had a huge success in Russia and was repeatedly published. Two other Italian authors – Edmondo De Amicis and Carlo Collodi – also get a lot of publications in the 50's when it is almost impossible to find an Italian author translated into Bulgarian. We are talking about two authors who write for children, but anyway both of them count on social elements in their most popular works – *Pinocchio* and *Cuore*.

An eminent Italian literary presence in Bulgaria is the figure of Salvatore Quasimodo, a Nobel Prize winner for 1959. But which are the most popular features of Quasimodo's image in Bulgaria before the popularity happened? Family background of a railwayman, Sicily, the war, the "social" turning point – these are in brief the highlights in his biography before he became the subject of a thorough translation and critical attention. Logically connected to a group of eminent predecessors such as Ungaretti and Montale, Quasimodo is associated with the decline of Hermetism and is presented as an intermediate link to the next evolutionary stages of Italian poetry. In the early 60's, here comes the inevitable attention to a new Nobel prize winner, who fortunately had given enough reasons

⁴ D. Karapetkova, *Ботушиа в българската литературна мода*, София 2012, p. 245–253.

⁵ L. Pavlov, *Въстанието на робите в Древния Рим*, [in:] P. Джованьоли, *Спартак*, София 1961, p. 614.

to be defined by Bulgarian critics as “the poet of the Italian resistance.” The loud antifascist sentiment and the pursuit of social leitmotifs are extremely convenient for the safe introduction of Quasimodo on the Bulgarian scene. Both in this and in many other cases, the regime uses an infallible manipulative strategy: to focus on flashy preferred aspects of the author’s image in order to indicate to the audience the proper interpretation.

Much later, when it was no longer a taboo to talk frankly on this subject, the translator Dragomir Petrov himself admitted:

The key to the Quasimodo’s poetry at this time was the distinction between the two periods – the first one aesthetic and decadent, the next one civil and social, in which we naturally emphasized the latter in order to be able to present the first... Ungaretti, Quasimodo, Montale, Luzi have become reference points to restore a Bulgarian tradition interrupted by the regime because they continue the development of certain artistic lines, because they express similar existential reactions, because they represent an attempt of a spiritual defence in a similar social reality – the one of the totalitarian society.⁶

In each and every translation circle there exists a belief that a good translator of poetry should be a poet himself. It would be interesting to check the statistical correctness of such a requirement, but, rightly or wrongly, Dragomir Petrov meets it. In 1967 he published a book of his own poetry, *Wells*, which has been denounced in a review that criticized him as an imitator of foreign traditions. The critic claims that:

Continuous adaptation to an artistic approach and style of a poetic personality may become grounds for a pseudo-individual imitation. This – continues the critic – is not always a conscious process; the author might seek an individual interpretation, but the influence of the eminent model is intrusive and he cannot reject it. Especially if his own talent doesn’t permit him to, especially if the translator lacks the powers for original expression.⁷

The accusation against Petrov is that he imitated the models he translated; models that were not in line with the tendencies of socialist realism. The accusation continues: “Oh no, we’re not talking about a specific imitation. He doesn’t copy any entire passages, but he follows the spirit, the sentiment, the vision, the imaginary.” The critic disapproves of the many foreign names and terms in the Dragomir Petrov’s intellectual poetry and he claims that they make his poetry seem like a suitcase covered with foreign-language labels. He finds that such an approach sounds like outdated exotics.

His irritation is predictable and understandable. He had faced the work of an erudite poetic voice – refined, intellectual, speculative, that contained a variety of echoes and dialogues. According to him, such a poetic spirit was despicable and was the result of a close contact with the foreign decadent models he translated. In the regime atmosphere this was a serious accusation and it forced the translator to a decade of poetic silence.

⁶ D. Petrov, Предговор към: С. Куазимодо, *Животът не е сън*, София 1994, р. 17.

⁷ I. Popivanov, *Плодовете на епигонското лирикоподобие*, „Литературен фронт”, 23.11.1967, р. 2.

Legendary editor Vera Gancheva remembers the creative strategies of the *Popular culture* publishing house, which recalls in a way the suffered experiences of Dragomir Petrov:

...We used to publish books that would cause, to say the least, controversy, but with forewords and afterwords written by Soviet authors. Without denying the work concerned, they skillfully explained how critical it was actually to the so called bourgeois reality.⁸

A significant role of an advanced platform for works by foreign authors was played by the *Newsletter* of the Bulgarian Writers' Union, which was regularly published between 1972 and 1990. For the present study I have interviewed the Executive Secretary of the magazine Andrei Manolov who is an excellent translator from French and here is what he told me:

The so-called *Blue newsletter* contained the translation of passages from prose works, interviews, literary journalism. Poetry was excluded from the range of this newsletter. The published texts weren't supposed to contain any directly ideological references. The newsletter enjoyed huge interest, but only members of the Writers' Union had the right to subscription.

In addition, each of the editors had the opportunity to subscribe 10 other people at his discretion, who might not belong to the Union. The newsletter was generously sponsored by the Union, in the office we had the chance to consult a huge range of literary and non-literary periodicals in various languages. The president of the Union responded promptly to the needs of any reference materials, journals, and other titles that were ordered and delivered immediately for the needs of translation and for the preparation of dossiers of authors of interest. This information came into use during the international writers' meetings when it was necessary that the list of the invited was carefully reviewed. We read out and processed a huge amount of literature and periodicals, and were forbidden to comment outside the information thus learned; we were ordered to destroy all the read out newspapers, which, of course, we didn't obey very strictly. As it was considered classified material, we got extra bonuses of 15 leva to our wages for the so called "secrecy."

The most dangerous texts – those that contained some potential political provocations – were published in the so-called *White Newsletter* that was issued in 17 copies and was accessible only for people of the highest government levels. The copies were numbered; the personal copy for the head of State Todor Zhivkov was sent to him by courier from the Central Committee who came to collect it on a motorcycle. The *White Newsletter* contained texts concerning Bulgaria by authors who were involved in dissident movements. The books had to receive statements from two external reviewers who were required to analyze them from an aesthetical and political point of view in order to decide whether they were suitable for publication or not. Beyond all this, of course, our editorial work came first. We reviewed translations with extreme caution, we did not allow our vigilance to be weakened because of the prestige of the translator, although

⁸ M. Bodakov, *Издател с вътрешно горене*, "Култура", 27.06.2008, p. 14.

we worked with exceptional professionals. This measure assured the extremely high quality of the final text.

On the pages of the *Blue Newsletter* were published many Italian authors and some of them appeared subsequently in separate editions. As it became clear, in this selection artistic criteria counted more than ideological ones, but such pluralism didn't happen without complications. Without any doubt these difficulties didn't concern only translated texts, but were valid also and mainly for the national literary production where the picture was even more complicated.⁹

The translation of *The Name of the Rose* was released in Bulgarian five years after the publication of the book – relatively fast for its size, for the complexity of the methodological issues that it put forward, and the rhythm of book publishing in the 80s. An interesting detail of the story was highlighted in an interview with the Russian translator of the novel, who remembers that her translation was kept in a drawer for a long time because of censorship. The problem arose in the first lines of the book, where the author describes his trip to Prague and at a certain point we can read the sentence: *Sei giorni dopo le truppe sovietiche invadevano la sventurata città.* = *Six days later Soviet troops invaded that unhappy city.* This is why the Russian translation wasn't published until 1989, although it was ready much earlier. As far as it is known, the Bulgarian translation didn't have such problems and appeared long before that. There, however, this same sentence... was missing. The translated text makes a smooth transition to the next passage. The missing sentence appeared only in the second edition in 1993. It couldn't be proved, but it can be assumed that the translator Nikola Ivanov personally got sure that this time his translation got to the readers in its integrity. After the publication there is a short notice written by him. It testifies how impossible it was for Ivanov in the 80s to adopt the approach of the U.S. translator who actively consulted with Eco during translation.

In the conditions of a political regime many unexpected features can be treated as dangerous. During the totalitarian socialist period in recent Bulgarian history many translations of Italian authors gave reasons to recognize the translators' activity as a heroic and complicated game of deceiving the official criteria for "acceptable" foreign infiltration. The period itself wasn't uniform and included various phases in which the choices, the languages and the policies in translation from Italian changed subtly. That's why Bulgarian destiny of authors such as Salvatore Quasimodo, Gianni Rodari, Umberto Eco and many others suffered the consequences of an intransigent publishing system. Each case is individual, but the conclusion confirms the dissident role of translators within the framework of otherwise-thinking intellectuals. Translators as public figures and linguists had to deal with censorship and create ingenious tricks in order to assure the appearance in Bulgarian of their favorite texts. It was not always possible to avoid misinterpretations or errors, but this is not the point. This article tries to offer a brief

⁹ For an interesting point of view about the situation of Bulgarian writers see С. Јуда, *Под знака на НРБ: Българската култура и литература в капана на идеологията*, София 2006.

journey through the difficult years of activity of a brave generation that added a precious patina of important new meanings to the concept of translation and thus helped realizing the future tasks and responsibilities of this silent but vigorous way of influencing culture.

