

Translating Culture: Byron's *Manfred* in Bulgarian contexts¹

Around 827, the Venetians stole the remains of St Mark from Alexandria. In order to take these out of the city, they placed the sacred bits and pieces in a basket filled up with salt pork because they knew that Muslims abhor anything porcine. Indeed, the guards at the gates just had a look at what the infidels were carrying, turned up their noses at the unholy load, and let them pass. Once transported to Venice, the relics enabled the Republic to establish its authority, and St Mark became its patron saint. (Lithgow 1614; quoted in Littlewood 1995, 113)²

The story, I believe, brings together the thematic strands of this paper: culture, Byron, and translation. The stratagem of the Venetians illustrates the role of culture, which they employed to outwit the officers when leaving Alexandria; a textbook example of the importance of being familiar with the Other. For Byron, Otherness engendered an emotional attachment, which made him announce: “Venice has always been (next to the East) the greenest island of my imagination,”³ and inspired him to immortalize it, so poet and city remained inextricably bound together. But in order to see how translation comes into the Venetian story, we need to resort to the early Middle Ages, which hold the key to the link between transporting relics and translation, as elucidated by Lawrence Norfolk:

Every church needs an altar, and every altar needs a dead saint. A shortage of the latter in the early 8th century first promoted the practice of cutting up beautified cadavers and distributing their bits and pieces among the unendowed churches. [...] The theological term for such displacements is ‘translation’. [...] Latterly, ‘translation’ has become something that happens to books. (Norfolk 2000, 149)

The author of the short story has raised a significant question with reference to translation as we know it today—the practice to have authors represented by a part rather than the whole body of their writing. Inasmuch as writing is not holographic photography based on the pars-pro-toto principle, translating bits and pieces disfigures the image of the entirety. But the parallel between sanctifying churches and the displacement of books begs the question: to what extent is rendering in another language actually comparable to dislocation, and can we take for granted the ‘translatability’ of texts?

¹ Versions of this discussion are available in Bulgarian in: Костадинова, В. „Байроновият „Манфред“ в български контекст.” *Литературна мисъл*, 2008, 1, с. 161-185; Костадинова, В. „Байрон в български контекст: Следи по пясъка на времето”. Пловдив: Пигмалион, 2009.

² Lithgow, William. 1614. Comments on Italy. In *The Rare Adventures and Painfull Peregrinations*.

³ Letter to Thomas Moore of 17th Nov., 1816.

It is my intention to demonstrate that one of the prerequisites for the popularity of non-synchronic translations is the translatability of contexts and that there is more to translation than knowledge of the languages involved—the cultural and historical background of translators being just as relevant as their linguistic competence.

Ever since the publication of *Manfred* in 1817, the popularity of the dramatic poem matched periods of political unrest, post-revolutionary disappointment, and social crises. People who were dissatisfied with their lives and the world around them could identify with Manfred and his despair. There is an entire scene [Act II, Scene 3] illustrative of human powerlessness, elaborating on the idea that people are toys of incomprehensible and inexplicable forces.⁴ The picture produced fits well with the sentiments prevailing in the aftermath of World War 1 or on the eve of World War 2. To pick an example from the text, Nemesis' tale of what occupied her in the world is applicable to any time of instability and chaos [Act II, Scene 3]. The hints and references may well point to the failed ideals of the French Revolution and the subsequent restoration of the Bourbons, but the level of generalization and abstraction allows readers to transfer the depicted state of affairs to their own circumstances.

Assessing the period immediately before and after the appearance of *Manfred*, we need to consider that following the Napoleonic Wars Britain was less affected by wartime destruction and could focus on industrial progress, while the countries on the Continent were recovering both economically and spiritually (Thompson 1991, 25-32). In Kelsall's phrase, "romanticism [...] is an experience of learning about failure" (1994, 301). But in Britain, literary voices elaborating on "the disappointment of the expectation that rebellion against 'tyranny' would produce freedom and happiness" (Kelsall 1994, 301) did not have the popularity they enjoyed in Germany and France; "the experience of the age" defined in those terms was more of a continental phenomenon. Besides, on the Continent, Romanticism ousted the Enlightenment in importance and paved the way for Symbolism and Modernism. Thus, socio-cultural and historical circumstances made *Manfred* extremely popular in Bulgaria; the poem had nine translations and fourteen editions within the first half of the 20th century.

To a large extent, this interest was provoked by the poem's hero, who happened to meet the "horizon of expectations" of the audience, having gone through what Jauss termed a "second horizontal change" and acquired a "classical character" for twentieth-century readers (Jauss 1982, 25). A peculiarity of art is that it reduces the variety of circumstances to singular occurrences, represents the diversity of people by fictional personalities, and sometimes compresses the universe into a literary work by means of universal human types. *Manfred* is such an all-encompassing

⁴ All references to *Manfred* point to the act and scene. Quotations from Byron's poems are after McGann's *Major Works*, Oxford University Press, 2000.

human type, even if individualised in terms of psychology, ideas and motivation of actions (Vassilev 1942).

What is named universal here is the ambiguity that comes as a consequence of the intentional gaps in the story and in characterising Manfred. The gaps are achieved by the use of fragments and contradictory statements, by postponing explanations that never come, by interrupting the account—these are given different concretisations by different readers. As reception theorists have demonstrated, the very openness of the text allowing for personal input brings it closer to its audiences. The relevant points are to be found in a nutshell in Iser's "Interaction between text and reader" chapter of *The Act of Reading* where he elaborates on the "structures of indeterminacy" which include "gaps", "blanks", "gulfs", "vacancies", and "empty spaces" (Iser 1980, 182). His initial reflections on the relationship between text structure and reception processes are given account of in *The Implied Reader*:

The answers are not given us. They are the gaps in the text. They give the reader the motivation and the opportunity to bring the two poles meaningfully together for himself. (Iser 1978, 34)

The gaps indeed are those very points at which the reader can enter into the text, forming his own connections and conceptions and so creating a configurative meaning of what he is reading. Thanks to the "vacant pages," he can reflect, and through reflection create the motivation through which he can experience the text as a reality. (Iser 1978, 40)

It is because readers are invited to fill in various gaps in connection with the Byronic hero that he translates so well across European cultures. Manfred's charm lies in his ambivalent nature: on the one hand, he is akin to the spirits of the supernatural, in possession of their secrets and knowledge, and more powerful than most of them; on the other hand, he is all too human with his human affection—his Orphic longing to be re-united with her who is dead makes him choose mortality.

In a Foucauldian sense, Manfred's social status and his knowledge are sources of power. His pride and determination in carrying out his will without subjecting himself to the spirits illustrates Weber's definition of power:

By power is meant that opportunity existing within a social relationship which permits one to carry out one's own will even against resistance and regardless of the basis on which this opportunity rests. (Weber 1962, 117)

Thus, as an embodiment of human power, Manfred is appealing to identify with. In times of political and moral cataclysms he is perceived as a personification of courage and strength and an inspiration for living and fighting (Stoyanov 1983, 15-16).⁵ The message *Manfred* seemed to

⁵ It was Ludmil Stoyanov, one of the future translators of *Manfred*, who held a speech at Byron's centenary in 1924 and elaborated on the poet's popularity.

project from the past to the troubled present of twentieth-century Bulgarian intellectuals was about how to retain one's dignity when happiness proved impossible: his Romantic nonconformity to the ideal that man was capable of happiness and had the right to be happy became essential in the context of Bulgarian modernisms. The metaphysics of *Manfred* opposed the beliefs of the Enlightenment and developed into one of the most influential Romantic counter-arguments, with the Byronic hero becoming a highlight of a modern character.

Nevertheless, there were a number of messages lost in translation for its Bulgarian readers. Therefore, I would like to turn to three major versions of *Manfred* in the Bulgarian language and consider some points of departure from the original. These are: Kiril Khristov's translation from the German language in 1920 (he started translating *Manfred* from Russian and parts of it appeared in 1894 but didn't consent to have this reprinted and took up a second translation); Geo Milev's translation from the original, published in 1919; and the translation of Ludmil Stoyanov and Maria Grubeshlieva of 1938. The three men are well established Bulgarian poets of different literary generations and their poetic careers are associated with distinct literary trends and aesthetics. Grubeshlieva is known for her translations as well as for her poems and novels.

Kiril Khristov's individualism kept the link with folklore alive. His was an intricate balance between tradition and modernity. His practice to use translations (rather than the original works) as the source texts for his own translations is indicative of the positivist, essentialist, and somewhat ideologized understanding of literature as a message to get across. The 1920 publication of his *Manfred*, accompanied by a supercilious introduction, stirred up a new debate on translation and provoked Milev's devastating review of 1921.

Geo Milev had some leanings towards the poetry of the Symbolists but his mature works were in the vein of Expressionism. In spite of his modernist attachments and regardless of his professed opinion of Byron as a jewel from the treasury of the past which belonged to the past (Milev 1924), or possibly because of those, Milev's approach to translation meant being true to the spirit of the original in both preserving its contents and following the peculiarities of expression. Unlike Stoyanov and Grubeshlieva's preoccupation with iambic incantations and free interpretations of Byron's figures of speech, Milev's text remained consistently respectful of the author's decisions—if the poet had chosen to use synonyms in Manfred's summoning of the spirits, the translator did his best to do the same; if the poet had opted for the image of a green-haired mermaid [Act I, Scene I], the Bulgarian rendition abided by it; if a change of metre occurred in the original, it did in the translated text as well. Thus, the occasionally strained word forms or sporadically unnatural word order appear as side effects of this loyalty to the source. Translating is a creative process but in Milev's versions of the texts of others his creative impulses did not take over, even if we can trace the links between his poetry and his translations. The image of the

“unrelenting ring”, which became the title of a collection of poems he publishes in 1920, is a telling example: it seems derived from his rendering of “And a spirit of the air / Hath begirt thee with a snare” [Act I, Scene I] into Bulgarian, according to which an unrelenting and harsh fiend enmeshes Manfred with his ring.⁶ To sum up, this translation of *Manfred* focuses on preserving both the contents and means of expression of the original and can serve as an example of the *equivalence of meaning* in translation (Nichev 1986, 124).

In contrast, Stoyanov and Grubeshlieva’s verses are more musical, whereas their meanings seem to be roughly approximate, with phrases and entire lines left out and connotations overlooked. This must have been their overdue tribute to Symbolism, Stoyanov having been part of the circle of Bulgarian Symbolists before switching to realist writing. It is intriguing to observe how the pre-war sensitivity relates to the expressive arsenal of the Symbolists which transpires in the choice of words as well as in the metre and the rhythm of this translation. Although by 1938 even the last stronghold of Bulgarian Symbolism had long been undermined and Stoyanov’s affiliation with the movement invalidated for nearly 15 years, the matter of fact was that symbolism was perceived as a successor of romanticism (Chobanov 1995). It must have been the desire to demonstrate the continuity that tempted the two to subordinate meaning to form and sounding. In Nichev’s terms the translations they offer are samples of *adaptations* (Nichev 1986, 124).

Tracing how the three translations differ on a account of the translators’ aesthetic commitments, the texts will be analysed in terms of what they tell us about chronotopes, about Bulgarian culture in particular and cultural translation in general. Inevitably, translations are marked by their own time and place, and the historical and cultural circumstances of the recipient literature as well as the personal input of the individuals involved come into play there. It happens that translations of the same text may vary due to punctuation diversity in the sources. The following lines from *Manfred* can serve as a relevant example of how a semi-colon changes the meaning of the phrase:

... Now furrowed o’er
With wrinkles, plough’ed by moments, not by years[;]
And hours—all tortured into ages—hours
Which I outlive! ... [Act I, Scene II]⁷

Judging by the Bulgarian versions, the punctuation of Milev’s source must have had no semi-colon, as a result of which he reads “by years and hours” as one phrase and generalises on the immediacy

⁶ All paraphrases and quotations from the Bulgarian versions of *Manfred* are in my translation, V. K.

⁷ The semi-colon after “years” is there in some editions, as in McGann’s, and missing in others, e.g. *The Poetical Works of Byron*, ed. Paul Elmer More, Cambridge edition, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1905.

of fleeting occurrences, while Khristov, on the other hand, highlights Manfred's mysterious experience.

Back to the time of writing the dramatic poem, Byron's use of "philosophy and science" in the opening monologue reflects the new divisions of knowledge emerging in the 18th and early 19th centuries.⁸ As one would notice in Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, in 1800 it was pertinent to call for contrasting poetry with science rather than with prose. The significance of that delineation is well lost in the 20th century. To complicate matters further, the Bulgarian language offers the same word for science and for scholarship, thus blurring the distinction between sciences and humanities.

The historical specificity of translations is revealed on different levels, and a prominent example here is the treatment of the temporal. Byron's Manfred doesn't care about the future because he needs to make his peace with the past:

I lean no more on superhuman aid;
It hath no power upon the past, and for
The future, till the past be gulfed in darkness,
It is not of my search. [Act I, Scene 2]

Surprisingly, Stoyanov and Grubeshlieva's version in Bulgarian reads "I don't believe in the supernatural forces because they don't have power upon the past; and what is awaiting me in the future? It is veiled in darkness" (Byron 1938). This entirely changes the speaker's perspective. The Manfred of this translation is curious as to what the future may hold in store for him and it's the future that remains in darkness rather than the past. Of course, in the context of 1938, with the threat of war in the air, people were not indifferent to their tomorrow and the atmosphere of the period looks like a plausible explanation for the translators' take on the original phrase.

A suggestive instance of how time runs for different people and in different political settings is the Bulgarian translation of "since that all-nameless hour" [Act I, Scene I], which is rendered as "in that hellish moment" by Stoyanov and Grubeshlieva (Byron 1938). The reading of the episode is closely related to the interpretation of the adjacent metaphor: in Byron's text the hero says that good and evil have been to him "as rain unto the sands," which asserts in poetic terms that they haven't influenced him; in the 1938 Bulgarian version of the metaphor, Manfred is said to have been "estranged" from everything surrounding him, very much in the style of Sartre's *Nausea* written in the year of the translation. Such alienation reflects twentieth-century dispositions and explains the passivity infused into the translation of Manfred's "Now to my task" when interpreted as "The time has come..." (Byron 1938)—the radical difference between the two periods lies in the

⁸ Clifford Siskin elaborates on the emerging disciplinarity of knowledge in *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse* (1988) and in *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain 1700—1830* (1998).

role of the individual, the Romantic personality cult (as laid out in Byron's *Manfred*) versus the twentieth-century disappointment that the intentions of the person are of no consequence.

The influences of the background could be discerned in minute details like the fleeting image of the mermaid [Act I, Scene 1], which is somewhat idealised in the 1938 translation and reminds of the repertoire of the Bulgarian symbolists. The impact of local folklore, literature, and culture in general, upon translations could be amplified by what is current in the historical flow of ideas. Here is an example of what could be seen as the effect of contemporary philosophy. Alone in the Alps, Manfred's soliloquy envisages his own tragedy—so saying that

There is a power upon me which withholds,
And makes it my fatality to live; [Act I, Scene 2]

is consistent with the utter individualism underscored in the dramatic poem. In Stoyanov and Grubeshlieva's translation, not only have the two interpreters modified expressions and condensed the monologue, they have also rendered Manfred's "me" and "my" from the excerpt above as "us" and "our" (Byron 1938). This generalisation introduces the existential problem of the twentieth century—you don't have to be a Byronic hero to feel the burden of creation; readers are drawn in as people who share this general disposition towards life as punishment. Or, to look at it from a different angle, in the twentieth century, Byronic attitudes are not limited to Byron's poems, they have become a fact of life.

Another frivolity in this translation is the use of tenses. In Manfred's exchange with the Witch of the Alps [Act II, Scene 2] it is the present tenses that prevail, which ties in with the fact that the main character is communicating with supernatural forces—thus, his manner of expression is adequate to the sensitivity of the immortal beings since, as the spirits have informed him, to them "the past / Is, as the future, present". Nevertheless, in Stoyanov and Grubeshlieva's translation, verbs in the present are often converted into past-tense forms, while reiterative actions and progressive states are substituted for terminative ones (Byron 1938).

In the process of analysing the variability of translated texts and considering the contextual influences on reception, Stanley Fish's question "Is there a text in the classroom?" emerges modified. In different-language classrooms, the readers' perception of a text is mediated by the interpretation of translators. And then, in addition to the set of influences at work when translations are being done, there are always the cultural and literary allusions of the original text to be considered. Intertextual references usually form connotative clusters and could be deemed as leading to parallel universes. One such constellation in *Manfred* opens up a dialogue with the Bible. "Sorrow is knowledge," says Manfred quite at the beginning of the dramatic poem. The line refers to the words of the Ecclesiastes,⁹ but it takes the statement of the Bible a step further: it is not only

⁹ Ecc. 1:18, King James Version: For in much wisdom [is] much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.

that knowledge brings sorrow, but also that sorrow translates as knowledge. Khristov's translation keeps Byron's inversion, garnishing it with a Nietzschean leap to individualism: "Oh sorrow, you are a great instructor of mine!" (Byron 1920) Milev's version preserves the abstraction but his "Knowledge is sorrow" ignores Byron's variation on the theme and remains consistent with the statement in the Bible (Byron 1919). It's only Stoyanov and Grubeshlieva's rendering of the phrase that reflects the meaningful twist of the original (Byron 1938).¹⁰

Placed immediately after this reference, Byron's differentiation between the "Tree of Knowledge" and "that of Life" [Act I, Scene 1] highlights the Biblical discourse in the text, introducing the context of the Fall and the Lord's response to the violation of His will (Gen 3: 22—24). This allusion to the Bible is missing in Stoyanov and Grubeshlieva's translation, in which "The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life" is interpreted as "life and reason are two separate worlds" (Byron 1938).

A key image for Christianity is the figure of Cain. Byron brings it in his *Manfred* with all the implications of fratricide that go with it:

By thy delight in others' pain,
And by thy brotherhood of Cain,
I call upon thee! and compel
Thyself to be thy proper Hell! [Act I, Scene I]

It is again in Stoyanov and Grubeshlieva's version of the text that no mention of Cain or Hell is preserved—probably carried away by a pursuit of melody and rhythm, they have skipped the Biblical imagery, thus losing an essential cultural and philosophical layer going back to Milton and relating the Christian notion of Hell to subjectivity.¹¹

The loss of religious implications, whether intended or not, is not in dissonance with the curtailed presence of Christianity in the twentieth century. After all, God was declared dead and the philosopher who proclaimed it had a tremendous impact on Bulgarian modernisms. What sociologists identify as Bulgaria's traditionally lower level of religiousness compared to Central European countries and Russia (Galabov 2001, 8, f.9) may have had something to do with it too.

The translators' choices inevitably reflect their age; in the Bulgarian versions of *Manfred*, the words and phrases seem to be stamped by the post-Nietzschean epoch when "power" and its synonyms and derivatives expressed the prevalent understanding of Nietzsche's philosophy as summarized by his sister:

¹⁰ The official translation of the Bible by the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox church took decades. It was based on the official Russian translation but it kept deviating from its source. The 77 books were printed together as late as 1925. Up to that time there was no better and more authoritative translation than the Protestant translation of the 1870s.

¹¹ "The mind is its own place, and in it self / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n ..." – John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 1.

Stated briefly, the leading principle of this new system of valuing would be: "All that proceeds from power is good, all that springs from weakness is bad." (Foster-Nietzsche 1905)

Thus, the abbot's appreciation of Manfred's character,

This should have been a noble creature: he
Hath all the energy which would have made

A goodly frame of glorious elements, ... [Act III, Scene 1]

is interpreted by Bulgarian translators along the lines of "he would have been a noble being, he has the power ..." (Byron 1938). Similarly, when the spirits demonstrate their respect for Manfred, saying "Had he been one of us, he would have made / An awful spirit" [Act II, Scene 4], the 1938 translators have decided on the Bulgarian word for "all-powerful" as the equivalent of "awful". They have also introduced the new era of non-believers [in line with Nietzsche's pronouncement] when rendering

'Tis strange—even those who do despair above,
Yet shape themselves some phantasy on earth,

To which frail twig they cling, like drowning men. [Act III, Scene 1]

into Bulgarian. The anguished and hopeless people of these lines are turned into "those who don't believe in God" in Stoyanov and Grubeshlieva's translation (Byron 1938).

Allusions might be omitted in accordance with the spirit of the new times but it is also possible for intertextual references to go unobserved by translators as well as by readers. Sometimes those are unexpected and very difficult to trace, as the connotation of "glorious orb" imported to the dramatic poem. The phrase appears in Manfred's eulogy for the sun [Act III, Scene 2] and re-contextualizes its earlier usage in Cowper's devout "Happy Change".¹² The religious undertone ties in well with Byron's other name for the sun as a "minister of the Almighty," but Cowper's hymn is not familiar to Bulgarian readers, so the nuance of the phrase is lost. Furthermore, the Christian framework is entirely removed from the 1938 translation of the monologue where the reference to God is left out and "minister of the Almighty" is translated as "a king of luminaries" (Byron 1938).

Similarly, a metaphor may open the door to a parallel text. When Manfred addresses the sun as "thou, the bright Eye of the Universe" [Act I, Scene II], readers would call to mind

¹² The collection entitled *Olney Hymns* was published in London in 1779. Cowper's contributions to the volume were initialled "C." Here are the stanzas from "The Happy Change" that illustrate the religious message of the poem:

The glorious orb whose golden beams
The fruitful year control,
Since first obedient to Thy Word,
He started from the goal,

Has cheer'd the nations with the joys
His orient rays impart;
But, Jesus, 'tis Thy light alone
Can shine upon the heart.

Shakespeare's metaphor of "heaven's fiery eye"¹³ and their reading of Byron's poem will be informed of this intertextuality. In that scene, the hero goes on to express a state of dejection: "thou shin'st not on my heart". In the original, Manfred's statement, though charged with grief, has an air of matter-of-factness. In the symbolist interpretation of the phrase, the eye of the universe gives love to the entire world and only the "I" remains excluded: as if cosmos and earth have been conspiring against the hero. With their choice of words the 1938 translators shift the notion of activity outside the speaker, thus reinforcing the opposition between the individual and the rest of the world, implying that man is just a pawn on the chess-board of life.

The examples of what gets lost or transformed in translation could be multiplied but the conclusions drawn from them remain consistent: translated texts are culturally seasoned and snippets of the whole are considered on their own; or drawing upon Shelley's metaphor, this is what the "violet in the crucible" looks like, a bit misshaped and somewhat dismembered. Such an image is, of course, a romantic prioritisation of the original over the translated text. Shelley's comment,

Hence the vanity of translation; it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its color and odor, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower—and this is the burden of the curse of Babel. (Shelley 1995, 252)

is most often interpreted in the light of Robert Frost's definition of poetry as what gets lost in translation. But Susan Bassnett discards such an essentialist attitude and chooses to discuss Shelley's imagery in terms of change and growth rather than loss and disintegration (Bassnett 57-75).

This then may change the critic's take on Geo Milev's loyalty to the original – it becomes a function of his understanding of Byron's poetry as belonging to the past, whereas Stoyanov and Grubeshlieva's adaptation could be viewed as an act of "re-writing" the text in order to surface its dialogue with their present day. And if Geo Milev is the better reader of Byron's nineteenth-century *Manfred* and suppresses his own presence as a translator, Stoyanov and Grubeshlieva's achievement is the *invisibility of translation* (Venuti 1995, 1-42). With regard to Kiril Khristov, his goal seems to be the quest for *self* in the process of identification and distancing from Byron's text. Overall, the analysis of the reading—writing interaction between the Bulgarian readers of *Manfred* and Byron's work and the breakdown of the cultural layers in specific textual examples reveal that translation is a dynamic development from the initial realization of the author's intent, through the numerous cultural transformations of the original text to a specific concretisation, rather than a static result of language conversion.

¹³ Shakespeare, W. *Love's Labours Lost*, Act V, Scene II.

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