

NOTES ON BULGARIAN POETRY: A BIRTH IN TRANSLATION

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Human society, the world, the whole of
mankind is to be found in the alphabet.
Victor Hugo

It is possible and necessary to savor the poetry of a foreign tongue through the translation of its poems and poets. Taken individually, however, these are but the signposts (and the sign-makers) — Campos de Carvalho’s intriguing “*pucaros búlgaros*” — of an epopee whose protagonist is language itself, manifesting the mysteries of the spirit that nurtures it.

In the case of Bulgaria, there is a special date that spells out this almost magic meaning and marks the beginnings of the poetic journey — “24 May,” the day of “Bulgarian Learning, Culture and Education, and Slavonic Literature,” also known as “The Day of the Alphabet and of Enlightenment,” and “The Day of the Thessalonica Brothers, SS. Cyril and Methodius.” Such are the long explanatory titles of this quite exceptional national holiday in which the overwhelming majority of Bulgarians can, and still do, take pride and inspiration.

For Bulgarians, 24 May memorializes seminal events dating back to more than a millennium ago. These bring together the conversion of Bulgaria to Orthodoxy in 864 under Knyaz Boris, some two hundred years after the founding of the state (681), the official adoption in 885 of the Glagolitic alphabet (precursor of the Cyrillic variant that replaced it in the 10th century) introduced in the country by the pupils of Sts. Cyril and Methodius, and the consecration of Old Bulgarian as the official language of the church and state.

On this day, every year, school children of all ages, university students, and educators of all ranks march through the streets of Bulgarian towns in a grand parade, singing the hymn in honor of St. Cyril and St. Methodius, Apostles to the Slavs, the creators of the alphabet. “*Go Forth, O People Reborn!*”¹ is the anthem, composed by the poet Stoyan Mihailovsky in 1892, a decade after the liberation of modern Bulgaria from 500 years of Ottoman domination as a result of the Russo-Turkish war in 1878:

¹ The hymn is 56 lines long.

Go forth, O people now reborn!
The path to future bright do trod,
And with the written word,
This force that renovation spells,
Your destiny do hence recast!

The Devotional Status Of The Cyrillic Alphabet

Az Buki (My ABC)²

I am Bulgarian. I am a man.
It is perfectly simple, little children.
I am Bulgarian. I am a person.
It's as simple as can be.

Come on, little girls with pink ribbons!
Come on, little boys with pink cheeks!
I am Bulgarian. I am Bulgarian.
I am a person. I am a person.

Az! Buki! Vede! Glagoli!
A! B! C! D!
I am, o my God!

— Ivan Metodiev

Except for the Slavic languages using Cyrillic, I know of no other literature with as many poems dedicated to the “Mother Tongue” and its icon, the Alphabet — perhaps no fewer than those addressed to “Poetry” in other traditions. This particular piety expressed itself in the middle ages in both declamatory and liturgical poetry. The former excelled in orally transmitted folksongs, by far more numerous and richer in content and size, at the time, than the liturgical ones, which, nonetheless, soon grew and flourished as well. From the very beginnings of Bulgarian written poetry, the most widespread architectonic form of liturgical hymnography was the *acroverse*. Many examples have been preserved and handed down through copies over the ages.

² Ivan Metodiev in “Майка на вселената“/ СЛОВОТО
<http://www.slovo.bg/showwork.php3?AuID=329&WorkID=15310&Level=2>

TN: “Az, Buki, Vede, Glagoli” denote the pronunciation of the first 4 letters of the Cyrillic alphabet during the pre-modern period. The words also form a nursery-style rhyme used as a mnemonic.

Considered the height of artistic creation, the first poem in written Slavonic after the creation of the *Glagolitic* is supposed to have been authored by Constantine Cyril himself, in the form of an alphabetic *acroverse*. What has been firmly established, however, is that Constantine of Preslav (a collaborator and hagiographer of St. Methodius at the turn of the 10th century, and founder of the Bulgaria Preslav literary school) wrote such poems in both alphabetic and phrasal *acroverse*. His “Alphabet Prayer” is the best-known example of this poetic genre in Old Bulgarian:

With this prayer I pray to God:
 O God of all creation — Founder
 Of the visible and invisible,
 Send the Lord Living Spirit
 To inspire in my heart a word
 Which will be of benefit to all
 Who live within Thy commandments.
 For Thy lamp is the very lamp of life
 And a light for the paths of the one
 Who seeks the Gospel word
 And begs to receive Thy gifts.
 For now the Slavic race is hurrying, too —
 Everyone has converted to Christianity
 Wanting to be called Thy people.
 They heartily implore Thy mercy, God!
 But give me now Thy expansive word
 O Father, Son, and Most Holy Spirit
 As I beseech Thee for help.
 For I raise my hands to Thee always
 To receive strength from Thee and wisdom
 For Thou givest strength to the humble,
 Healest every being.
 Deliver me from the Pharaoh’s malice
 Grant me cherubic thought and intellect
 O venerable, Most Holy Trinity.
 Transform my sadness into joy
 So I may begin to write with wisdom
 Thy most marvelous wonders.
 Having received the strength of the Six-winged
 I walk now in their name and deed.
 I shall make public the word of the Gospel
 Giving praise to the Trinity in the Godhead
 Which every generation sings —
 Young and old — with their understanding.
 A new tongue, giving praise always
 To the Father, Son, and Most Holy Spirit:
 To Whom be the honor and power and glory
 From all creation and from all that breathes

Unto the Ages of Ages, Amen.³

Such works were handed down as a spiritual “family heirloom,” copied and translated into the evolving language, and served to inspire poets and hymnographers for many centuries to come.

Translation: “word-as-deed”

National literature is the creation of writers;
the work of translators makes it universal.

José Saramago

The consecration of Old Slavonic⁴ was understood to mean that it had become a language fit for prayer, a Pentecostal dispensation, the justification for creative endeavor, theologically grounded in and on par with iconography⁵.

A millennium later, echoes of this passionate faith are still heard in the beautiful poem “Prayer” by the great Russian poet, M. Lermontov (1837):

³ Translated by Thomas Butler. <http://www.slovo.bg/showwork.php3?AuID=48&WorkID=671&Level=1>. Accessed 30 Apr. 2011.

⁴ The old Bulgarian language, whose written literature was to “quicken” the other Slavic languages such as Russian, Ukrainian etc., in the course of their respective histories of Christianization.

⁵ Icons are central to the Byzantine experience of God; however, by the eighth century they had become the center of a passionate doctrinal dispute. [...] Icons were defended by two leading monks: John of Damascus (656-747) of the monastery of Mar Sabbas near Bethlehem, and Theodore (759-826), of the monastery of Studius near Constantinople. They argued that the iconoclasts were wrong to forbid the depiction of Christ. Since the Incarnation, the material world and the human body had both been given a divine dimension, and an artist could paint this new type of deified humanity. He was also painting an image of God, since Christ the Logos was the icon of God *par excellence*... [hence] God [who] could not be contained in words or summed up in human concepts, could be described by the pen of the artist or in the symbolic gestures of the liturgy. [...] [By] 820, the iconoclasts had been defeated [...]

Ever since, the first Sunday of the Great Lent, known as “The Triumph of Orthodoxy,” celebrates the return of the veneration of icons. [...] In his *Greater Apology for the Holy Images*, the monk Nicephoras claimed that icons were ‘expressive of the silence of God, exhibiting in themselves the ineffability of a mystery that transcends being. Without ceasing and without speech, they praise the goodness of God in that venerable and thrice-illuminated melody of theology’ [...] in ninth-century Byzantium, Greek Christians saw theology [and all the arts through which it was practiced — painting, translation and copying, hymnography, liturgical worship dramaturgy] as aspiring to the condition of iconography. In theological language, icons are not ‘painted.’ The work of making an icon is called ‘writing an icon.’ Greg Rappleye, “Icons: Windows on the Sacred”, at <http://sonnetsat4am.blogspot.com/2007/11/icons-window-on-god.html>. Accessed 30 Apr. 2011.



Prayer

When my life is arduous,
And sadness overwhelms
I say one prayer marvelous,
I learned it all by heart.

There is true grace and power
In living words' accords,
Evoking unexpectedly
The holy breath in sound.

The heart forgets its troubles then,
And doubt melts away,
Truth has arrived, tears brook,
And all turns, oh, so light.

A communion of faith and language effected through the alphabet and the written word helped forge a shared national destiny for the Bulgars and the Slavs, the two distinct ethnic groups of the kingdom of Bulgaria, albeit not without bloody conflicts, especially with the resisting pagan aristocracy. There arose other challenges as well. As noted by J. Meyendorff (1979),⁶ the widespread use of the new alphabet and the consequent rendering of liturgical service in the Slavic vernacular had to face the ambivalence and even bitter resistance of the Byzantine clergy and literati, much as the Frankish clergy who held the “heresy of the three languages” had once opposed Saint Cyril’s mission to the Moravian kingdom (*ibid.*)⁷

The challenges drew no less spirited defense by the Slavic clergy. Thus, the fiery Chernorizetz Khrabr’s poetic polemics:

⁶ Though the mission to the Slavs was sponsored by the Byzantines, “‘Cyrillo-Methodian ideology’ [...] characterized by the translation of both Scripture and liturgy into the vernacular language of the newly converted nations [was not always unproblematic]. In actual fact, however, Byzantine churchmen were not always consistent with the principles adopted by the first missionaries; historical evidence shows that enforced Hellenization and cultural integration were also practiced, especially when the empire succeeded in achieving direct political control over Slavic lands” (Meyendorff, 1979: 217).

⁷ Cyril and Methodius, during their mission to Moravia and their stay in Venice, had several discussions with Frankish missionaries who believed that the Gospel could be communicated only in the three languages used in Pilate’s inscription on Jesus’ cross: Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. By contrast, Cyril and Methodius stressed that, in the East, Slavs, as well as Armenians, Persians, Egyptians, Georgians, and Arabs, praised God in their own languages.

O Pismenah

(An Account of the Letters)

Hitherto, the Slavs lacked books and, being pagans, they could only read and surmise things with marks and notches. When they accepted Christianity, they were compelled to write the Slavic words in Roman and Greek letters [...]

But how is it possible to write well, with Greek letters, such words as GOD or LIFE or VILLAGE, or CHURCH [...] or MAN [...] and others like these? And thus it remained for many years.

Thereafter the man-loving God who arranges everything, and who did not abandon man without an intellect, sent unto him Saint Constantine the Philosopher, called Cyril, a righteous and truth-loving man, and he created for them thirty-eight letters: some of them were patterned after the Greek letters, and some of them according to peculiarities of Slavic speech [...]

[...] Still others ask: Why Slavic books? They were created neither by God nor by the angels, nor did they originate from the very beginning like the Hebrew, the Roman and the Greek books, which, coming from the very beginning, are acceptable to God.

And still others wonder why God created letters in the first place [...]

[...] What can we say to such lunatics? But let us answer them as we have learned from the holy books, that everything in due course comes from God and not from anyone else. First of all, God has not created either the Hebrew or the Greek language, but only the Syrian language that Adam spoke, and from Adam to the Deluge, and from the Deluge to the time God distributed the languages at the Tower of Babel, for it is written: “The languages were all mixed up.” And as the languages were all mixed up, so were the mores, and the traditions, and the ways of life, and the laws, and the arts, according to the people: to the Egyptians went land-surveying, to the Persians, the Chaldeans, and the Assyrians went astrology, palmistry and witch-craft, bewitching and the other human arts; and to the Hebrews, meanwhile, the holy books, in which it is written that God created the heaven and the earth and everything which is on it and man and everything in an order, as it is written; to the Greeks, meanwhile, he gave grammar, rhetoric and philosophy.

Should you approach a Greek student and ask him who created your letters or translated your books and when, very few of them will know. However, if you approach even the youngest Slav pupil and ask him, “Who has created your alphabet and translated your books,” all of them know and the answer they will give you is: “St. Constantine the Philosopher, called Cyril: he created our alphabet and translated our books, along with his brother Methodius.” And if you ask him when, he will know and will answer that it was done during the time of the Byzantine Tsar Michael and of Boris the Bulgarian Prince [...] in the year 6363 from the Creation of the World.

There are additional answers, too, which we are going to list some other place, for time is running short now. Thus, brothers, God has given intelligence to the Slavs; glory unto Him, honor and power, and veneration now and forever in worlds without end. Amen.

In all the exegetic writings of the period, the main argument is that the proclamation of the Gospel is essential to the very nature of the Christian faith, which is a

revelation of the eternal Word or Logos of God. This Word must be heard and understood; hence the sacred duty of translating Scripture and worship into the vernacular. J. Meyendorff (1979: 217) comments:

This principle — expressed by the Prologue in terms which Martin Luther would not have disavowed — will remain the distinctive characteristic of Orthodox missions, at a time when the Christian West was opting for a unified but dead language — Latin — as the only channel for communicating the Word.

By contrast, the Slavic missionaries justify their translation zeal through a continued appeal to Scripture. In the words of St. Constantine of Preslav:

Since you have learned to hear, Slavic people,
Hear the Word, for it came from God,
The Word nourishing human souls,
The Word strengthening heart and mind. [...]
Therefore St. Paul has taught:
“In offering my prayer to God,
I had rather speak five words
That all the brethren will understand
Than ten thousand words which are incomprehensible.”⁸

Thus, the unfolding of the common faith witnessed the burgeoning of cultural activity, especially hymnography and the translation of liturgical services. These works helped internationalize the artistic and devotional material as part of the process of the spread of Christianity to Russia and other Slavic-speaking lands. The Byzantine models were quickly transformed to suit the local hagiographic interests, dedicated to the praise of Slav saints.

Practically all translators were also hymnographers, known as the “angel-voiced” — a direct translation from the Greek. The alphabet also found wide application in musical works, not only textually but in figures and musical notation as well. The liturgical works, though elaborated within the orthodox cannon, were nevertheless original creations. Over time, each Orthodox nationality has appropriated and adapted the verbo-melodic models to the natural rhythmic and melodic sounds of their own unique language and cultural tradition.

⁸ “Prologue,” in Meyendorff (1979).

Copy in the Middle Ages aimed to achieve a merger with the model. To read the Holy Scripture meant to contemplate God’s manifestation in the entire universe. “To create the physical material of their body (the covers and the binding, the parchment, calligraphy and illuminated miniatures) was part of the symbolic incorporation of mankind in the divine dispensation. Some of these manuscripts were considered “timeless,” “eternal,” belonging to the whole world, and were richly decorated. They were kept in public view as were icons.”⁹

The unfurling of this cultural activity in which translation, understood at its most encompassing, was the grounding practice, posed, however, specific problems for the practitioners.¹⁰ The relationship between original and translation raises the eternal question of fidelity to the original. For the translation of sacred books, or liturgical texts, the issue looms even larger and is sharply debated, since only the strictest correspondence is generally permitted. Every deviation may even be read as or lead to the “scourge of heresy.” But St. Cyril quickly came to the conclusion that a “blind,” mechanical correspondence of words between the Greek original and the attempted Slavic expression is impossible, if sense is to be preserved. After all, it is the latter that is essential:

“For what we need are not the words or expressions, or clever turn of phrases, but their meaning (logos).”¹¹

Instead of a mechanical correspondence, what St. Cyril succeeded in achieving, according to the hagiographers, was “to wrestle from the ‘rude’ Slavic tongue, an unsuspected treasure” (ibid.) — namely, he fashioned original Slavic words and expressions to render Greek philosophical terms. Daring innovations at the time, these words have remained in use in Russian and Bulgarian, maintaining their original meaning, to this day. Altogether, these early translations by the two brothers and their Bulgarian pupils were particularly successful in making these cultic works accessible;

⁹ Тържествено Честване На 24 Май — Ден На Българската Просвета, Наука И Култура И На Славянската Писменост В Централната Сграда На Българската Академия На Науките; *04_4.pdf* <http://d.bas.bg> Accessed 10 May 2011.

¹⁰ Saint Cyril was the first to offer some theoretical considerations in this respect. Unfortunately, only a small fragment of the so-called “Macedonian sheet,” where his views were recorded, has been preserved. Nevertheless, the basic outlook is intelligible (Central Library of the Bulgarian Library of Science, 2007).

¹¹ In the sense of “reason”, “logos.” Донка Петканова, «Старобългарска Литература», 1 част, стр. 142. София, Издателство Наука и Изкуство, 1986 (cf. Petkanova, 1986: 142).

they were widely circulated due to their closeness to the vernacular and the coining of important Slavic theological equivalents without overburdening the text.

It is in this vein of reasoning that “*translation*” is rendered very early on as “Slovestno Izkustvo” —“word art”, “the art of the word” and St. Cyril calls its practitioner, “*Hudojnic*”, i.e., “Artist”.

The Translator

I implore you, fathers and brethren, read and
correct, but do not curse [me].
Theodociy

This “*hudojnic*,” this “artist,” renders the Greek “*metaphrastes*,”¹² in practice involving a wide variety of activities such as copying, decorating, interpreting, commenting, translating and adapting and above all toiling very, very hard, under harsh conditions.¹³

“In all of medieval Bulgaria there are no more interesting, more colorful, more intelligent, more enjoyable characters than they,” a contemporary Bulgarian scholar assures us.¹⁴

Their life and/or the story of their vocation or trade is often recorded on the wide margins of the manuscripts. They speak of suffering, of hunger and acute discomfort, but

¹² *Metaphrast*. Origin: Medieval Greek *metaphrāstēs* one who translates... a person who metaphrases, *esp* one who changes the form of a text, as by rendering verse into prose [from Medieval Greek *metaphrāstēs* translator] www.TranslationCertification.org. Also means “compiler” as was St. Simeon the Metaphrastes, a 10th century Byzantine saint.

¹³ Producing the manuscript copy was slow and arduous as well as very expensive, especially before the introduction of paper. The commissions came mainly from the king and the nobility. Petrinsky cites the expenses involving the production of a copy of Plato’s works, which took several months to complete. It was for a rich Byzantine bibliophile of Constantinople in 895 and cost 21 *nomismi* — 8 for the parchment and 13 for the work of the copyist. This was equivalent to the value of 95 grams of gold or a ton and a half of wheat. With time and technical innovation, the prices went considerably down. The common practice was to address the demand and give the payment to a monastery; the assignment of the tasks and the selection of the scribe(s) remaining the prerogative of the elders. See Ivan Petrinsky: “Pishi greshnitche I prepisvai!” *Sega*; May 19, 2011;

<http://www.segabg.com/online/new/articlenew.asp?issueid=9207§ionid=5&id=0001301> At:

<http://www.segabg.com/online/new/articlenew.asp?issueid=9207§ionid=5&id=0001301>.

Accessed 26 May 2011

¹⁴ *Ibid*. The quotes in the text are my own translation.



also of gratitude, hope and humility... “Oh, I’m hungry, and my heart is troubled!” is the cry recorded in the 14th century Radomirov Psalter.

These personal asides make for most rewarding reading in addition to being a precious source for medieval history. There, the Old Bulgarian scholars and scribes record fragments of their daily lives, lauding, for instance, the memory of the charitable souls that brought them food, candles or writing supplies. The margins also speak of spells of bad luck and mishaps: “Anathema to the devil, who made my candle fall and burn my leg!” wrote an indignant 16th century translator. Another complains that when he left his cell to warm himself outside, some ill-mannered bird left his droppings on the almost completed sheet. Toothache troubled George the Grammarian...¹⁵ Loudly repenting for copying mistakes, these monks appear firmly committed to their mission — whether entrusted to them by their ecclesiastic superiors or of their own choosing, especially in later centuries.

The translated works become an organic part of the national literature and helped shape its evolution. At the same time, copying worked as a form of selection which both defined literary development at the same time and, as a process, reflected the social tastes, needs and aspirations.

The rich harvest of the translators’ zeal was the thousands of manuscripts, of which only a few hundreds have remained, mainly in libraries abroad. The main reason for this is the long periods of political turmoil and the destruction of the state, temporarily, under Byzantine rule from the 11th to the end of the 12th centuries, and permanently, after the Ottoman conquest.

It was precisely the monks — scribes, copyists, translators and teachers — who scattered in monasteries of difficult geographical access or in foreign lands and saved tradition and learning after the fall of Bulgaria at the end of the 14th century.

¹⁵ Ibid. Here are some more examples: “I, sinful George, in [village] Stulp [Bitolya] on a flat plate was writing in St. Vrachev [monastery] on the 30th day of December. Remember in [your prayers], brethren, for my hands are freezing. Here I wrote, here I ate, here I lay myself to sleep with no fire...”

“I, sinner Beloslav, sinful and foolhardy to do evil but slothful for the good, whose homeland is the grave, and sins — his wealth, [and] wickedness — his fame, have written instead of brother Joseph a leaf of the Psalter. Glory forever, Amen!”

“Write, Vultcho, write and transcribe, ’cause a hand will rot, but the glory of God remains forever.”

It is, thus, not surprising that in mid-18th century, one of them would spark the rebellion against the Hellenizing phanariot policies of the Greek-dominated Christian administration of the Ottoman empire, first as a cultural, consciousness-raising movement for the revival of the Bulgarian language through the establishment of Bulgarian national schools and later as a full-fledged national liberation movement.

Translation as an awakening of national consciousness

A national language is a band of national union.

Noah Webster

According to Meyendorff, the deliberate translation policy that from the very beginning went hand in hand with the spread of Orthodox Christianity brought about the rapid “indigenization” of the Church, which became an integral part of the various national cultures and deeply rooted in their lives, such that neither foreign domination nor secular ideologies could easily uproot it. “But indigenization also implied the existence of ‘national’ churches, especially after the dismemberment of what Obolensky has called the ‘Byzantine Commonwealth’. Modern nationalism further secularized the national self-consciousness of East European nations,” and laid the foundations for the bloody disputes and wars that outline the modern history of the region (Meyendorff 1979: 218).

The destruction of the Bulgarian sources and translated literature was widespread during the Byzantine domination of Bulgaria. This was a deliberate policy meant to deprive the reemerged kingdom from important cultural and political references.

Wholesale destruction and suppression of all types of literature written in Bulgarian, not to mention the razing to the ground of the churches and monasteries themselves, was even more pronounced during the many centuries of Ottoman domination. The few that survived were found in distant, hard-to-reach cloisters in the mountains. Many manuscripts were carried away to new lands by the exiled clergy, especially to Russia, but also to Western Europe, Italy in particular. The “memory” of the lost culture slumbered in the folklore, particularly in the folk songs, where historical characters, battles, victories and tragedies were transfigured into legends, sayings, ballads



etc. With the passage of time, the organic link with Old Bulgarian was gradually lost. The new writings reflected the contemporary vernacular. What permitted the forging of the link with the historical past was again the alphabet and the renewed zeal of seeking and discovering Bulgarian past history through re-translating chronicles and other references written primarily in Greek, but also in other foreign languages. “Bulgaria” was rediscovered and brought to life in spirit and in revolutionary fervor through the efforts of these copyists and translators.

Their heroism, for such it was, in view of the persecutions by the phanariot administration of the Ottoman Empire, and their exhortations for the maintenance of the Bulgarian language, mark the beginning of the modern Bulgarian national liberation movement in the second half of the 18th century.

Paissiy’s famous “Slavo-Bulgarian History” written after the arduous work of compiling and (re)-translating Bulgarian documents sifted out of their “exile” in foreign chronicles, hagiographies etc. sounded the battle horn for the movement of national liberation, begun as a battle for the revival and preservation of the Bulgarian language — in schools, in literature and in liturgical service.

For Paissiy, as for his contemporary, the Russian poet G. Derzhavin: “Through the Word man is almighty, language is the key to nature and all learning.”

One of the most famous and best-loved poems by the great national poet, Ivan Vazov, witness to the liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman rule a century later, is dedicated to the memory of Paissiy, in gratitude for his epoch-making writings. The beautiful translation by Peter Tempest provides some idea of classical Bulgarian poetry.

PAISSIY

O reckless and foolish one! Wherefore art thou ashamed
to call thyself Bulgarian? [...] Or did not the Bulgars
possess a kingdom and state? Be thou not deluded,
Bulgarian, but know thine own origin and tongue...

Paissiy (1762)

A hundred and twenty years back... Deep shadow!
There, where the Mount of Athos narrows,
A refuge hidden from worldly deceit,
For prayer and rest a placid retreat,

Where only is heard the Aegean roaring,
The whispering gorse and the seabird soaring,
Or the solemn tolling of a vesper bell,
In a humbly furnished, slumbering cell
That a spluttering lamp was dimly lighting,
An obscure, pale-faced monk was writing.

What was he penning there, pensive, alone?
The Life of a saint, or a sacred tome
Commenced long ago, then long forsaken,
Again at this midnight hour undertaken?
Was he recording there tokens divine,
Or composing a eulogy, fair and fine,
To a miracle-worker in wonders abounding
Of Egypt, Greece, or the Holy Mountain?
Why was he taxing body and brain?
Was he a philosopher? Was he insane?
Was this the imbecile imposition
Of an abbot of rigorous disposition?
At last he relaxed and said: "That is the end:
A new life chronicle I have penned."
With glances of tenderest rapture he greeted
His labour of many long years, now completed,
The fruit of his vigil, his will-power's child,
Which half of his span upon earth had beguiled —
A glorious Life! While it was begotten,
All else, even Heaven, he had forgotten!
Never did mother so tenderly gaze
On her first-born son, nor hero raise
Fond eyes to the prize of his desiring!
Like a Bible prophet in ancient style,
Or the hermit severe of Patmos isle,
Who boldly unfolded the secret of darkness
And God's own will on the roll of parchment,
Pale and elated, a glance he hurled
To darkest chaos, to the starry world,
To the gleaming Aegean that softly slumbered,
And, raising the pages aloft, he thundered:
"Henceforth Bulgarians near and far
A history possess and a nation are!"

Let them discover from these my writings
That once they were great and again shall be mighty,
From glorious Vidin to Athos Mount
Our law was esteemed of great account.
May all our brothers read here and remember
That Greeks are perfidious people and clever,
That we have repulsed them — and more than once —
That's why they can't stomach the likes of us;
That we, too, had kingdoms and capital cities,
And native-born patriarchs, saintly figures;

We, too, in this world have performed a good deed,
Given all Slav peoples the books they read;
When other folk shout: "You Bulgarian!" wildly,
Let brothers know this is a name to take pride in.
And know that great God, to whom praises are sung,
He, too, understands our Bulgarian tongue;
And shameful it is when a person goes running
To join with the Hellenes, his kith and kin shunning,
Spurning his God-given native speech
And his very own name, like a senseless beast.
Woe to you, fools, who like sheep are erring,
The poisonous potion of Greeks preferring,
Who fell of your very own brothers ashamed
And Hellene corruption greedily acclaim,
Who sinfully scoff at the bones of your fathers
And mock all our ways, as too simple and artless:
It's not your own kin, though, who sully your name,
You fools, it is you the cause of their shame!

Read and discover upon these pages
The deeds of your forebears in long-gone ages:
How bravely with many a kingdom they fought,
And powerful kings to them tribute brought,
And the Bulgar state led a great existence;
How Boris the saint in Preslav was christened,
How churches there sprang up at Assen's will,
How the Tsar sent gifts; about Samuil,
Who lost his own soul in the depths of Hades,
Conquered Durazzo and Greece invaded;
Read here and know of Tsar Shishman as well
And how into bondage our kingdom fell;
And of Ivan Rilski, whose sacred relics
Show still their miracle-working merits;
Read how great Kroum beat Nicephorus, lined
His skull with silver and drank from it wine,
How Simeon drove out the Magyar raiders
And had from Byzantium humble obeisance.
A scholar was he, a philosopher wise,
His own native language he did not despise
And when there was no one for subjugation
He sat and wrote books as his relaxation.
Here read and now study what I have set down,
In many a legend and chronicle found,
Read, brothers, so men do not mock and ignore you,
Nor foreigners give themselves airs before you...
This book now receive! It is my bequest,
So may it be copied, made manifest,
And scattered through lowland and valley, go speeding
Wherever Bulgarians are dying, bleeding.
Find here revelation, the grace of God's truth,
To young — gift of wisdom, to old — gift of youth!

Whoever shall read it, shall never repent it,
Who masters it, he shall have knowledge in plenty.”

Thus spake the man in the anchorite cell,
Who gazed at the past and the future as well,
Who, many a service and sacrament skipping,
Had never relinquished the pen he was gripping
And many a canon and fast had not kept,
But toiled without cease and at rest never slept.

Thus spake, a hundred and twenty years before us,
This hermit of Athos, in God’s view not flawless,
Who secretly kindled, when all ways lay dark,
In people’s awareness the very first spark.

1882

But Vazov lived in a different world, where the newly-founded Kingdom of Bulgaria turned out to be the heavily molested foster-child of the Great Powers’ imperial politics in the Balkans. The conflicts and the temptations were different. Faced with the new ideologies, the old verities were not sufficient to help overcome the divisions. In vain he appealed to the beauty and strength of the Bulgarian language:

Oh sacred language of my ancestors
Abode of pain, of age old sorrow,
Oh tongue of her who bore us
not for joy but for soar troubles.

Beautiful speech, who
has not maligned thee?
Did anyone to shield thee offer?
Who took a moment to stop and listen to
thy sweet melody?...

The poet then pledged to be the faithful son defending his beloved mother tongue from the onslaught of blasphemy. Such fidelity and dedication would serve to castigate and put the detractors to shame, declared the last verse of his passionate poem.

But it was all in vain. The disunity of faith could not be overcome.

“Terrifying is the stench of dead words”

L. Gumilev

In the first half of the 20th century, the great poetic talents, all of whom were also excellent translators, paid homage to the ideological idols of the age; each according to his preferences, molded, stuffed and stifled his art to fit the straight-jacket of a secular half-truth cannon. Sometimes the mutilation ended up in actual “blood sacrifice”, through the lethal offices of the executioners of the successive “kingdoms of unbrotherliness.”

It was no small irony that the strongest defense of the honor of “tongue and nation” came, nevertheless, in that fateful hour, from the mouth of a well-known ideologue:

At the Nazi show trial in Leipzig on the Reichstag Fire (1933), the communist defendant, the Bulgarian political exile G. Dimitrov, triumphantly changed the very course of the proceedings. Turning the accusations against his own accusers, the showcase went from a pro-fascist to a pro-communist propaganda bonanza that was enthusiastically received by the larger democratic circles throughout Europe and beyond. And Dimitrov’s defense began with the evocation of the historical importance of the Bulgarian alphabet and language:

“I have not only been roundly abused by the press — something to which I am completely indifferent — but my people have also, through me, been characterized as savage and barbarous. I have been called a suspicious character from the Balkans and a wild Bulgarian. I cannot allow such things to pass in silence. [...] Only Fascism in Bulgaria is savage and barbarous. But I ask you, Mr. President, in what country does not Fascism bear these qualities?” President: “Are you attempting to refer to the situation in Germany?” Dimitrov: “Of course not, Mr. President. At a period of history when the ‘German’ Emperor Karl V vowed that he would talk German only to his horse, at a time when the nobility and intellectual circles of Germany wrote only Latin and were ashamed of their mother tongue, Saint Cyril and Saint Methodius invented and spread the use of Old Bulgarian script in my ‘barbarous’ country.”¹⁶

Unfortunately, pride in the time-honored heritage did not spare Dimitrov’s party comrades and countrymen either from the Stalinist bullet or from the infamous labor camps during their subsequent exile in the USSR.

Nor did Dimitrov’s triumphant return to Bulgaria after WWII bode well for Bulgarian society and culture, especially for the written word. Shortly after his death, the son-in-law and political successor to the proud defender of SS. Cyril and Methodius’

¹⁶ Gide, A. and A. Malraux. *Pour Thaelmann*. Paris, Editions Universelles, [n.d. 1936?]: <http://www.marxists.org/history/france/popular-front/1936/gide-malraux.htm>. Accessed 26 May 2011.

historical feat, under pressure from “Kremlin On High,” simply disallowed the holy day of 24 May and banned all references to essential aspects of Bulgarian history. There was nationwide indignation which soon threatened to become a protest movement. Facilitated by the death of Stalin and the subsequent rise to power of Khrushchev with his revelations of party crimes, the commemorative date was soon restored. But the honor was hollow.

By the second half of the century, secular orthodoxy, in politics as in culture, needed no semblance of faith and was simply and brutally imposed. Piety, upon demand, was offered theatrically, cynically, and always with underlying motives on the part of the select few poet-bureaucrats. There was no question of freedom of speech or expression, especially through the written word.

Under these circumstances, the foremost factors that had providentially preserved the national spirit and creative self-expression — the Cyrillic alphabet, the banned Orthodox faith, and the highly unfavorable political geography of the country¹⁷ — now conspired to further restrict and alienate Bulgarian poetry. Creative literary activity was forced to run almost exclusively on the tracks of translation of foreign works. This was the only relatively free territory available, and the poets and writers were quick to take advantage of it. Everything they could lay their hands on was translated — from required and non-required Soviet and Russian literature to medieval Chinese chronicles, Korean sacred writings, Chaldean inscriptions, “The Secret History of the Mongols,” all of European literature, especially since the Renaissance, all of early and classical Antiquity, Neruda and other Latin American poets, novels, the short stories of Machado de Assis, Jorge Amado, of course, but also G. Figueiredo’s “Aesop,” and a selection of Manuel Bandeira, Arabic and Persian classics, The Quran, Turkmen poetry, and Nizami Ganjevi of Azerbaijan.... — All of this without counting the highly persecuted translations from “Samizdat” Soviet and satellite literature... But the number of Bulgarian works translated abroad was and remains infinitely smaller.

¹⁷ Situated at the heart of the Balkans, Bulgaria had no border with any western European country and this deprived the *intelligentsia* from establishing more reliable channels for smuggling out national literary or political works.

Yes, translation made things culturally livable by feeding tasty tidbits to the Gargantuan appetite of a captive society, desperate for contact with the wider world — survivable, but just barely so... As a contemporary Bulgarian poet, Kiril Kadiiski (2004), now translated in French and Spanish, sobbed:

Silentium¹⁸

Perhaps silence is the soul of all things, as a famous poem claims,
but the soul of language is not made of silence.
The soul of the language is the silence that screams.

Evolving Epilogue

At the end of the first decade of the new millennium, the political tally of roughly 130 years since Bulgarian independence after 1878 stands as follows:

5 major wars — 3 regional, in addition to WWI and WWII;

4 mass revolutions — 2 nationalist, 2 communist-led.

4, mostly bloody, coup d'états;

This does not include the numerous rebellions and conflicts on smaller scale.

Only the 1989 coup has been sufficiently peaceful to encourage hopes for new, unexplored opportunities. If ever there was a time for the synthetic poetry advocated by O. Mandelshtam, the contemporary “glossolalia” in which all themes and traditions are on call at the will and inspiration of the poet and the listener alike, it certainly is now. And young Bulgarian poets are hard at work making their difficult multifaceted heritage and current concerns manifest in and through the written word.

But, as all things Bulgarian traditionally go, this stage did not escape one more highly-spirited dispute related to the alphabet, just before the entry of the country into the European Union:

¹⁸ The title of a well-know O. Mandelstam poem. Kiril Kadiiski
http://www.kadiiski.com/poezia/en_poezia_fr_cy.html

To keep or not to keep under the new technological conditions and political predilections those ancient separating signs that had so branded their agonal meaning in the very soul of the nation?

An exhausted, but unyielding, thoroughly modern Vladco Murdarov (2004) put an end to the family quarrel with his:

“Непротивоезикоругателствувайте!”

The meaning of this “minimalist” creation is roughly: “Blaspheme-not-your-language” said as one long-winded word. A 30-letter invention calqued on another popular but “unworthy of dictionary mention” 39-letter battle cry:

“Непротивоконституционствувайте” - (“Do-not-act-against-the-constitution”), which, as legend has it, was first hurled, as verbal abuse, at striking university students by an exasperated minister of culture and education in the interwar period.

An evocative possibility based on a verbal falsification!

An *“Anedota Búlgara”*, no doubt!

On 1 January 2007, Cyrillic became the third official alphabet of the European Union, following the Latin and Greek alphabets. Some tree decades earlier, in 1980, Pope John Paul II had declared SS. Cyril and Methodius co-patron saints of Europe, together with Benedict of Nursia.

All things considered, these omens spell auspicious tidings for Bulgarian poetry in the new millennium.

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