

Milena Kirova. Book review.

За монографията: Владимир Трендафилов. *Употребите на британския ментор: рецепцията на Чарлс Дикенс в България.*

Издателство „Колибри“, 2015, 392 с.) [Vladimir Trendafilov. *The Uses of the British Mentor: Charles Dickens's Reception in Bulgaria*].

This book has a sizeable, almost-two-decades-long history. It also represents the finalizing stage of a researcher's long-standing interest in the Bulgarian reception of Dickens, and of British literature in general. The title may trick us into thinking that what we have here is just another probing, one of many, into a section of the reception history of foreign literatures in Bulgaria; but let me hasten to add that the book offers little in the way of mere conventionality. Unlike all those receptionist surveys we tend to call "thorough" or "detailed", it is an enticing and original piece of academic investigation. Through the prism of the main object of research, it builds up a concise cultural panorama of the Bulgarian literary consciousness from Liberation Day to the present. Dickens is certainly at the centre of attention, but through his presence in our culture, the reader can trace the story of our literary evolution. His very choice as a British "mentor" (the metaphor is vibrant with the use of terms like "centre" and "periphery") is exceedingly suitable, for his reception, starting in 1859, is literally concomitant to the flow of modern Bulgarian literature, ever since its inception day.

The choice of Dickens is still more to the point on account of a series of curious contradictions around his absorption in the Bulgarian culture. He is definitely the most consistently translated English writer in this country; yet his place and significance can hardly compare to the Bulgarian reception of some Russian or French classic authors. The second contradiction stems from the fact that many of the translations are actually inauthentic, either done from a mediating third language or subject to symptomatic omissions, corrections, adaptations. Last but not least, although Dickens was one of the earliest choices in the history of Bulgarian translation of fiction, he becomes a literary fact only with the maturation of socialist culture. All these issues raise a number of relevant questions concerning the "imitative character of Bulgarian modernity" or the possibility of importing foreign cultural values even at the cost of misreadings. Sometimes there even arise unexpected analogies as

between the Bulgarian cultural milieu in the 18-19th c. and the English language situation in the 11 c.

The book's introduction is not only an opening into the particular subject matter but also a good elementary guide to the first principles of reception theory. It also includes very interesting observations on 19-century British culture and society: the formation of the reading public, the rise of modern urbanism, the early boom of popular literature. Here, ultimately, we find a synoptic exposition of one of Vladimir Trendafilov's principal ideas about the specifics of Bulgarian modernity (viewed against a wide historical background) and the imitative character of Bulgarian literature, understandably vital in the mid-nineteenth century yet strangely ossifying in later periods, even into the present. Here I would offer, for the sake of illustrating this idea as well as its inscription into the book, a somewhat lengthier quotation:

"The beginning of our national revival marks the beginning of our modernity which, owing to its later development as compared to that of other nation-states, has a pronouncedly imitative character. During its early years, this was a normal state of things; but, sadly, the pattern of imitation did not pass away, and, in a certain sense, we have never outgrown it completely. However, what is undesirable from a global perspective as regards the self-reproduction of our national culture is good enough for the aims of the present book; for it upgrades the significance of its topic to centrality level. It is exactly the imitative character of the Bulgarian modernity that makes particularly important the research into our literary import."

The idea about the imitative character of Bulgarian literature - from the beginning of its history down to its present day - emerged and grew in power during the early 1990s. It looks impressive, drawing conceptual resource from the then fashionable post-colonial theory, seductive because of our inherent masochistic mentality, and even prophetic in its broad-spectrum reach. It is, however, highly controversial, and it is a sad fact that the debate which its popularity engenders and deserves has not occurred yet. There is one ironic comparison, I would like to make because of its very oddity. In 1884, just awaiting the publication of his co-compiled (with Konstantin Velichkov) "Bulgarian Chrestomathy", Ivan Vazov said: "To borrow today is to attain." With the naive enthusiasm of an educator back from revival days, deeply concerned about his national culture, he called his compatriots to glean from abroad what is necessary to develop on native soil. A little over a century later, the current wave of educators make an extensive use of imported theory in order to express an opinion contrary

even to their own practice: "We borrowed therefore we lost." *O tempora, o mores*, Aleko Konstantinov's Bai Ganyo would have said.

But let us return, for now, to the history of Dickens's reception in Bulgaria. Vladimir Trendafilov divides it into several periods, each of them judged against a cultural and then literary-historical background. The first period, between the birth year of the national revival and 1884, embodies some of the author's already known views on Bulgarian cultural history. The reading public, then, "was a direct function of the social structure" which comprised a population mostly rustic, illiterate, almost devoid of intelligentsia. What then precipitated the choice of Dickens so early in time? A chance error, surely: the first translated "Dickens" story was written by a completely different author. Trendafilov has managed to finish a researching job only started, before him, by the late Prof. Vladimir Filipov's intuitions, convincingly solving a complex puzzle of mistaken authorship. Then he offers a detailed analysis of the reasons behind the translators' interest for "A Christmas Carol", the (really) first and most often translated Dickens work.

The same period gave rise to another curious phenomenon: even before the complete translation of any Dickens work, there appeared (in translation again) a book about him, "Charles Dickens's Childhood" by Alexandra Annenskaya. Thus, the famous Victorian emerged on the Bulgarian literary scene first as a character and only then as an author of literary works - a symptomatic occurrence within our underdeveloped modernity. In other words, Dickens was introduced to Bulgarians "not as a living person but rather as an outlandish patriarch, a mentor, a teacher on a virtual lecturing tour among the local readerhood".

The section dwelling on the second period (1884-1944) takes a somewhat slow trip to Dickens but meanwhile it covers a number of very interesting cultural issues concerning the literacy rate, the reading practices and the particular readerly choices in those times. So it turns out that, although a popular translators' choice during the entire period, Dickens was not understood adequately, much less within the terms of the language games he plays in his works. Vladimir Trendafilov traces the quality and career of each translation, comparing their essential features, seeking the causes for their respective popularity or unpopularity. Simultaneously, in a specifically bold polemical manner, he makes a series of observations on the general mindset of the Bulgarian reader; here is an example involving the first assessment of the national literacy rate, immediately after Liberation Day, in 1880, measured at 3%:

"Alas, this is the practical contribution of our national revival, the end product of its overall activity. We can also become aware that only a few years prior to the census of 1880 most of our literacy was spread immediately beyond the borders of our national territory, in several Romanian towns and in Constantinople. Most of the intelligentsia was concentrated there, most periodicals were published there, our first literary classics were actually written there. The figures are such that we can legitimately ask ourselves: did we have an enlightenment outside the enlighteners; and a revival outside the revival men?"

It was only in the third period (1944-1989) that Dickens was given real access to the canon of Bulgarian translation. Vladimir Trendafilov puts a particularly strong emphasis on the post-1944 "modernist rift between the Bulgarian cultural past and present". In that historical context ("the most literary period in the history of Bulgaria") Dickens, "chiefly instrumentalized or fictionalized in the uses he had been put to until then", turned at length into "a classic writer, author of books which had stood the test of time". Translations noticeably improved, circulations reached numbers in the ten thousands or more. For example, within just four years, between 1975 and 1979, the novel "David Copperfield" was published in 200,000 copies, a circulation unthinkable nowadays. But, unlike the two earlier periods, the reception this time was based on stark ideology; the British novelist proved important because in his time he had managed "to intuit the principles of social evil", although never sensing the future of the proletarian revolution. This, once again, gave him a second-order status.

In the same chapter, Vladimir Trendafilov draws a dense map of the fluctuations in the interest toward Dickens, carefully distributing them against the shifting socio-political background. The largest portion, however, is taken by detailed analysis of the pre-1989 Dickens translations. A lot of translators' names are introduced along with their contributions to the field. Sometimes the commentary on them grows into a three-dimensional cultural portrait, as in the cases of Nelli Dospevska and Nevena Rozeva. Special mention must also be made about the competent analysis of translations done by Yanko Russinov, Sider Florin, Zheni Bozhilova and Nadia Sotirova.

The last period that the book dwells on covers the two decades after 1989. Here the survey of the reception of Dickens bifurcates, covering separately the translations and the scholarly production. The translations themselves are not many, as the reading public's affinity towards Dickens has slackened considerably. A positive recent phenomenon,

however, is the rising density and quality of research in Dickens studies demonstrated mostly by scholars with the Department of English and American Studies at Sofia University.

Now I will try to sum up those assets of Vladimir Trendafilov's book, which define its place in the contemporary Bulgarian literary studies. First of all, it is a contribution to the history of Bulgarian culture, even when the generalisations that it poses seem somewhat strained or sweeping. In this sense, the work may be viewed upon as a private history of the Bulgarian national culture, focused on the development of one particular receptionist phenomenon.

Secondly, beyond all doubt is its significance in the sphere of reception studies. The book can serve as an excellent introductory guide meant to teach basic terminology to newcomers to the field; from another perspective, it offers an exemplary methodological model usable for researching other foreign authors or even entire foreign traditions in literature which have influenced in some way or degree the formation of the Bulgarian culture.

Once again, Vladimir Trendafilov has proved his ability to formulate forthright statements concerning the history of Bulgarian culture - statements often drastic, controversial, yet always brimming with potentialities of groundbreaking scholarly debate. Very interesting is this aptitude on his part to constantly test the boundaries between possible and impossible, scandalous and constructive: a rare display of character in the field of contemporary criticism. Besides, his claims tend to be well-backed by factual and statistical data, always resting (especially in relation to the reception of Dickens) on a vast store of collected, ordered and systematized material. The probings into each period of the cultural situation in Bulgaria are enticingly furnished with observations on the history of British culture. The author's conclusions are supported by a huge referential corpus, which has resulted in thirty-four pages of bibliography at the end of the book.

And not by any means should I forget to mention the starting point of all first impressions from a book or an author: the mode of self-expression, the kind of writerly communication offered to the reader. Vladimir Trendafilov is a scholar who has advanced in clarity and precision through the years, aiming to write with great responsibility for the "unique" meaning that his statements purport to articulate. His style is both vivid and attractive, turning the book into an absorbing read as well as a valuable source of knowledge.