

2004: *Ulysses* for the First Time in the Bulgarian Language

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Abstract

The translator of Joyce's *Ulysses* into Bulgarian emphasises in this article the difficulties of translating the novel into her native language given not only the cultural differences between Ireland and Bulgaria but also the linguistic deviations employed by Joyce. Vassileva describes how she has been forced to test to its limits the potentiality of the Bulgarian language.

Joyce's *Ulysses* appeared for the first time in Bulgarian on May 5, 2004, thus marking the centenary of Bloomsday, which was to be celebrated on June 16 the same year. Being the proud translator of this modernist bible of a book, I was exhilarated to learn that the novel had tremendous success among the Bulgarian reading public and three thousand copies were sold in less than a month.

What can I say about my work as a translator? I am at a loss. Probably the best way of illustrating the work of a translator is by giving examples of how he has managed or not to recreate the artistic qualities of a given book. In my case though, the examples will be in vain due to the strangeness of the Bulgarian language. Few will be able to appreciate them, though some such examples will inevitably appear in this piece. That is why I decided to comment on those peculiarities of *Ulysses* which make it a work of art incomprehensibly different from all that has ever been created in the

best, the most contemporary, even the most experimental works of Bulgarian literature, since this is the background against which I work. The contrast is stunning. And to support this I will mention only one fact: the patriarch of Bulgarian literature, Ivan Vazov, who wrote the first Bulgarian novel *Under the Yoke* in 1894, while *Ulysses* appeared in 1922. This makes a span of less than 30 years separating the first Bulgarian novel from the bible of Modernism, a very short period from a historical point of view. *Ulysses* is an urban, an encyclopaedic, multi-layered work and a very hermetic text – a phenomenon unknown in our literature. In other words, the gap to be bridged in translating Joyce's *Ulysses* into Bulgarian was wide enough to engulf any translator. That is why I approached the novel as if it was a canonized text, a deeply encoded text, as if it was my first translation, though I already had thousands of pages behind me, covering writers like Virginia Woolf, Walt Whitman, Lawrence Durrell, Vladimir Nabokov and other difficult authors. Nevertheless I felt like an absolute beginner. I have never before experienced a text like *Ulysses*. Even Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* is incomparable with it. Because once you get into the rhythm of the waves and the exquisite atmosphere of the novel there, you are saved. When I said that I had to overcome an enormous gap I also meant another thing. The Bulgarian is a down-to-earth literature, mostly of village and country life, with a few works portraying city life and none experimenting with the so called stream-of-consciousness in the way it developed in the West –where the stress is laid not so much on the story, as on reticence, on the inwardness of the narrative, a voyage into the consciousness and fragmentation of form. To say nothing of the departure, which we encounter in *Ulysses*, from linear or progressive narrative, this blurring of the sacred boundaries between the real and the imagined. And when you have no native examples to follow, the translation becomes an almost insurmountable obstacle. It is one thing to translate *Ulysses* into French and quite another into Bulgarian! In rendering a text into a foreign language, local literary traditions matter. And just like Joyce stretches English to its limits, I had to do likewise with Bulgarian –to lift our language, to expand it, to shift it for the purposes of the narrative, to encode it, decode it and recode it, a task which often took my breath away in awe and sheer impotence. It is very difficult to stretch to its limits a conservative language –it bursts at the seams and makes readability even more difficult. This is unbearable for the reader, to say nothing of the

translator, who bears all the responsibility for making a masterpiece sound like one. The language of *Ulysses* is twisted, artificial, with deliberately blurred meanings. Conventional novelistic expectations with regard to character, plot, plausibility, etc., are not only of no assistance to novel readers in Bulgaria, even to the most learned ones, but just the contrary, they increase their baffled inability to grasp the book, which poses a major problem. The encyclopaedic nature of the book is also shocking, though it is in a parodic form: long lists of people and places, exhaustive instances of English prose (Oxen of the Sun), endless enumeration of facts and details (Ithaca) seem pointless and boring, when encountered in a novel. What I mean is that this unusualness of the novel is a barrier for the translator, who in addition to the author has to think about the native reading public as well and about its reactions to the novel. A difficult decision for me as a translator was even a simple thing like punctuation. For instance, in “Every fellow for his own, tooth and nail. Gulp. Grub. Gulp. Gobstuff.” (Lestrygonians) I was not bothered at all about how to recreate the alliteration. I did it easily and smilingly: “Всеки гледа себе си да уреди, със зъби и нокти. Граби. Глозга. Гълта. Гадната гранива гнъс.” The punctuation, however, still puzzles me. A Bulgarian would normally put commas in the enumeration of verbs, as would the English as a matter of fact, since the full stop would normally interrupt the ascending gradation in this case. This constant deconstruction upon deconstruction is found too often in the Bulgarian text, it sounds artificial and pretentious and stands as a stumbling block to the imaginative transformation of the text on the part of the translator. But I have forbidden myself any liberty with the canonized text of *Ulysses*, and all these cases of punctuation, as well as other decisions about my interpretative strategy, had to be settled each one separately. Like in the “Sirens,” when Leopold Bloom imagines Molly and Blazes Boylan making love: “Tipping her tepping her tapping her topping her. Tup.” Here the lack of commas in the Bulgarian would look like a mistake, an omission without producing the effect of intensity it intends. The reader would rather say to himself, a mistake again! – nowadays they don’t make books like they used to. So at least it would seem to the unaccustomed-to-experiments Bulgarian lover of literature. But as I already said, I approached *Ulysses* as a bible and the effect of it was a little bit straitjacketing. Some critics argue that language itself, in its variety of forms, is the true hero of *Ulysses* and I fully agree with them. But what kind of language! Joyce told Budgen that the English

language was wonderfully rich in words, but they were not the right ones, hence the book is filled with linguistic inventions and multiple examples of self-created grammar.

Another obstacle for me, because of its unprecedentedness against the background of our literature, was this eighteen-fold approach to the text, where each episode is not so much a different story as a different style and literary technique. And what is more – unlike what we encounter in the “Oxen of the Sun” episode, where we have a sheer imitation of styles from the time of Chaucer to American slang (one for each embryo month) – here the different styles are evolved by Joyce himself, complete with a language to fit, a language conditioned by the content. In *Ulysses* even a tram, a wave, a bar of soap gets a voice! Consciousness is constantly bombarded with memories, sensations, songs, quotes, ballads, advertisements. The effect is kaleidoscopic. No matter how difficult a novel is, after covering its first fifty pages the translator usually settles into its mood and meaning and the work proceeds smoothly, while in *Ulysses* you have to start anew eighteen times, trying again and again to grasp a new style and a new meaning. And to prove my point here are the words of Joyce himself, explaining the task he is taking up in *Ulysses*: “The task I set myself technically in writing a book from eighteen different points of view and in as many styles, all apparently unknown or undiscovered by my fellow tradesmen ... would be enough to upset anyone’s mental balance.” Right! You have to be sort of crazy to devote three years, and when I say three years I mean 365 days x 3 – no holidays, no vacations, no Sundays or Saturdays – three full years of uninterrupted work (for fear that once I get out of the text I will have to double my efforts to enter into it again, which proves its hermetism again) for three euros per page and a bonus of a deadly deadline. What I gained is not money, but the enormous satisfaction of rereading the best books in world literature and of making a deeper and very modern insight into a human comedy my own. I am thankful.

Another stumbling-block in *Ulysses* is the lack of genre, or the *ad hoc* genre which is to be witnessed also in *Molloy*, *The Waste Land* and other great works of modernism. But this frustrates the reader much more than the translator, who may even feel liberated by the awareness that there are no genre-rule restrictions. I am constantly referring to the reader, because the translator is actually

the first reader of a given work – a notion on which I shall dwell below.

True, to alleviate the burden on both readers and translators, Joyce has given Carlo Linati and Stuart Gilbert an explanatory schema in which every episode has been assigned a location, an hour, a symbol, an art and literary technique and in some cases a colour and organ of the body, but, frankly speaking I didn't find them of any assistance in my work, except for the translation of the metaphors within a given chapter. Even without the schema, though, it is pretty obvious that the "Aeolus" (warden of the winds) episode stands for the lung, the "Sirens" for the ear, the "Oxen of the Sun" for the womb, "Penelope" for the flesh, etc. But for the translator, I repeat, this knowledge is helpful only as far as metaphors are concerned. And what is more, the schema for *Ulysses* appeared and was written after the novel had been finished, which again makes it even more superficial.

Lexically speaking, in translating *Ulysses* I had to forget my English and cross into the peculiarities of Hiberno-English and Ireland's culture at the beginning of the 20th century. Words like *jarvey* for coachman, *curate* for pot-boy, *hazard* for cab-stand, *hunkers* for haunches, *oxter* for armpit, *faucet* for tap, *thewless* for inert and many more were not to be found in most dictionaries. The translation work on a word-level is the easiest thing for any experienced translator. Not here. I will comment only on "curate": the word presents a misleading puzzle at first, since the person it represents serves in Dublin bars and not the Church, like throughout Europe, even Eastern Europe, even Bulgaria – кюпе. The word has been so deeply rooted in the Church for centuries that the translator is tempted to twist the meaning of all the rest in order to subordinate it to this clerical core of the word "curate." So obvious is its meaning. Your feelings, however, cultivated through many literary pages, immediately sounds the alarm and alarmingly you discover that this curate does not serve in the Church at all, but in an inn, though both institutions are equally sacred for the Irish. From that point on, however, you start doubting every single word of the text and the text is a long one. The task becomes even harder because this doubt gnaws at you to the very end of the work and to the very end of the three years of translation in my case. When I was working on *Ulysses* I didn't have the help of either "*Greenspeak – Ireland and Her Own Words*" by Paddy Sammon, or of the dictionary *Slanguage* by Bernard Share. I didn't have the help of the Bulgarian National

Library where such aids are also missing. My personal library and brain had to be stocked with dictionaries of a new language, since Hiberno-English features prominently in all the works of Joyce. The same holds true for such adjectives as *bald and bothered* with which the waiter in the Ormond bar in the “Sirens” episode is repeatedly described. He is not a ditherer, but simply deaf (“bothered” being a loan translation of *bodhar*, or hard of hearing). Actually the departure from standard English in *Ulysses* is sometimes so drastic that you have to start studying Old English and Gaelic constructions. The omission, for instance, of the subject-relative in the interior monologues: “Here is this nobleman passed before,” “There is a young student comes here some evening,” “I know somebody won’t like that,” “It was a commercial traveller married her.” When I said Old English (which, thank God, we have studied thoroughly at Sofia University) I meant also such words like *faggot*, a seventeenth-century word for “woman,” or a *great leg* for “great influence.” In order to remain calm, cool and faithful to Joyce, the translator has to know in advance that there are certain constructions in the verb phrase which are associated with popular Irish speech. One of them is the *after + ing* structure in “You are after hitting me” for instance, meaning “You have just hit me,” since this use of the perfect tense is lacking in Gaelic. The same is true of the *do + be* construction for habitual action; or in Molly’s colloquial speech, where simultaneous actions are rendered by *and + noun phrase + ing form*, where standard English would normally use a subordinate clause with “when” or “while,” to say nothing of the many cases of “*says I*” encountered in the novel. There are many more instances of linguistic obstacles to be surmounted while struggling with the translation of *Ulysses* into a Slavonic language. In other words I had to get used to new means of expression within the framework of an otherwise familiar language and to the feeling of a constant uncertainty.

It goes without saying that from a linguistic point of view the most difficult episodes is “Sirens,” where Joyce doesn’t write rhythmically merely to make the text aesthetically pleasing in any superficial way. The rhythms carry meaning, literally, the music carries the words on its back, where above all else one must listen to the song in the sentence. “Style is a very simple matter; it is all rhythm. Once you get that, you can’t use the wrong words,” says Virginia Woolf. In the same way the translator, performing in her

native language, applying her craft, will know when something rings false or is out of place. This means that the translator needs to listen to the music of the sentence, to play the “score” of the text in her own language and what is more – in a way which does justice to the original. Since I have also translated *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf, I must say that the “Sirens” episode was much more difficult for me from the point of view of sheer musicality, compared with *The Waves*, where you get carried away by the word rhythm of the waves and the human souls and it takes you to a satisfactory performance. In the *fuga per canonem* literary technique, however, I never stopped wondering at the use of words instead of notes. It is an impossible technique when you try to recreate it in another language, or at least in Bulgarian. At times I had the feeling that the text should be merely transcribed, because the onomatopoeic sounds for the ringing of the hooves, the tap of the blind stripling’s cane and the rattle of the jaunting-car, the bed-quoits and the passing trams are different in different languages. In such cases the translator faces the dilemma – to be faithful to Joyce or to the logic of her native language. I have chosen to stick to the logic of Bulgarian for the sake of the reading public. Admitting the great difficulties I experienced in translating this episode, I must also admit that, in such a dense and complex work as *Ulysses* there are so many things to look out for, and it takes such an effort sometimes just to understand what is there on the page, that you can easily lose a little something. Take for instance “The Oxen of the Sun.” The latter functions as a stylistic display and here Joyce is concerned primarily with shapes, styles of writing and form, but form cannot exist without content and content is the prop and the mainstay of translation. And that is the reason why I read so many critical reviews and analyses – in order to grasp the meaning, because very often Joyce refuses to let us have a clear view of what is happening. I did my research properly and was therefore familiar with all the Joycean obscurities, with all the allusions – geographical, historical, literary, musical and mythological – but nevertheless I had to translate the novel in such a way as to preserve all the original vagueness in the Bulgarian version of the text, so that it could be open for future interpretation by readers and critics alike. To conceal the meaning and to do it up to the same degree as it exists in the original sometimes is more difficult than to reveal it. This was a really hard task, but like all hard tasks it is also very rewarding when you get the knack of it. What makes the translation of *Ulysses* exasperating is the fact that Joyce uses the language in such a way as

to make the access to the thought impossible. He is deliberately blocking it, deliberately misleading us – and this is what maddens the translator, because she has already read enough to know what is meant, but nevertheless has to render it vague, dim and murky for that is what faithful translation is about. Though “faithful,” “equivalent” and “adequate” are relative assessments in translation. The identity of otherness is approached personally and few could know exactly what happens in the head of the translator. Joyce himself was honest enough to say about his *Ulysses*: “I’ve put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that’s the only way of insuring one’s immortality”. Honest and arrogant to the extent which blows the mind of the translator.

But for me what made the translation of *Ulysses* so exasperating though enjoyable are a number of things worth mentioning here. In the first place let me mention Joyce’s beloved alliteration. I suddenly discovered how flexible, supple and yielding the Bulgarian language is. How easily and naturally a coinage like “jocoserious” becomes the Bulgarian “смехориозно” – a perfectly monolithic word, full of meaning – funny and serious at the same time. Other such examples can be seen above, where I was talking about my punctuation dilemma. Besides, and this is something to be proud of, when you translate such an impossible text you cannot help noticing how the target language, the language into which you translate, gains a lot and becomes more subtle not only in terms of words, but in terms of images, perceptibility and style as well. Great enrichment to the benefit of the Bulgarian. Before my eyes the Bulgarian language suddenly revealed a potential I never suspected in it before and, what is more, once affected by a beneficial foreign influence, it easily yields to it and could be correspondingly moulded. I can assure you that Joyce in Bulgarian doesn’t sound bad, once I’ve spent a couple of days on a page. My Bulgarian, of course, is a little better than my English. But as I see it the role of the translator is that of a language-builder. When I translate I do it with words that emerge from my linguistic background, but this stock of words is being stretched by the very act of translation. If translation renews language, it starts with the translator – the maker of this new language. In the process of translating *Ulysses*, of rewriting, drafting and redrafting it, I’ve actually refined my interpretation of the different layers, meanings and music in the language of this epic –

part consciously, part unconsciously. No matter how unusual a novel *Ulysses* is, while rendering it into Bulgarian it evoked memories, strings of images and chains of words from my native environment. In this meeting of myself with the alien *Ulysses* I felt like a boiling pot, a mixture of my own and the other culture – a very demanding encounter, full of responsibility to this otherness. I must confess also that my translation was subjected to periods of ineffectual, blocked creativity and inability to proceed, enhanced by the total solitariness of the translator's work. Translation as a whole, and this is especially true for the translation of *Ulysses*, may seem a spontaneous and intuitive affair, but the spontaneity and intuitiveness in my case emerged after a long and painful struggle with Joyce, after prolonged research, consultations and multiple drafts – all the ingredients that go into professional literary translation.

I belong to a culture and a language shared by a mere eight million people. Translations from other countries and languages are vital to us. Without them we will become more isolated and doomed to provincialism.

I've heard someone of my colleagues say that "one hasn't really read a book properly until one has translated it." And that is true. Before starting a translation, you have to be its first and its best reader – the translator as reader should be different from what the academic reader is, she should be, in my opinion, a much more passionate reader and, most of all, a well-informed reader. In other words, you should know as much as possible about Joyce and *Ulysses*, about the history of literature, about genres and literary forms. You have to detect with an experienced eye the materials and methods which have gone into making the original work. But the translator takes on a text in a physical manner. It is not enough to have theoretical and abstract understanding of the meaning of the text – the translator's job is to rebuild this meaning into a new version, starting from the characters and the syllables to go into the unfathomable depths of the text. The translator does not enter the text through the same door as the literary critic either. The latter can choose any door which best suits his specific literary ideas and intentions. The translator, though pursuing just the physical recreation of the novel, must nevertheless be familiar with as many views as possible of the novel. In my case these were Richard Ellmann in the first place (an enormous help), also Stuart Gilbert, Hugh Kenner, Anthony Burgess, Vladimir Nabokov, Robert Adams,

Frank Budgen and his *The Making of Ulysses*, and many more whose names I have already forgotten.

These, more or less, are my rambling thoughts on the translation of *Ulysses*. It is very difficult for me to organize them in a better way because I am emotionally involved to a distracting degree. Five years have elapsed since I finished this bible of a book, but I still feel exhilarated by the fact that I managed to create another after-life for *Ulysses*. While trying to describe my work on the translation of *Ulysses*, I actually found out that this is an impossible task because it would have meant restoring what happened in my head during the time of the translation. Because all sorts of “fidelity” and “infidelity” stuff describe nothing. A proper description of the work would mean having to get into the head of the translator – my own in this case. This, however, is only possible if you analyze the raw material of actual translation: my own archive, diaries, all sorts of notes that I took in those days, the laboratory of my imaginative creation. But this black box is already lost. I have discarded it. Only the result is available now and my confused feelings, mostly of pride, since the appearance of *Ulysses* in Bulgarian was inexcusably delayed, but thanks to me now it is a fact. To live three years with James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is an enormous challenge and torment, an enormous ecstasy and delight. Actually the spectrum of feelings is indescribably broader. I will wind up by saying only one thing: I am aware that the novel, *Ulysses*, is discussed much more than it is read, but it is still the work of a genius which has overturned world literature in an unprecedented manner and it makes no difference whether it is liked and read or disliked and unread. Whoever has dared to cross its threshold knows it, but no one will ever know it better than its translator.