

## UNEASILY BULGARIAN: LINES OF INQUIRY ABOUT THE RECEPTION OF *FRANKENSTEIN*

*Vitana Kostadinova*  
*Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv*

This essay outlines the reception of Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* in terms of translations of the text and accompanying paratexts for the Bulgarian editions in 1986 and 2012. With two translations into Bulgarian, Zhechka Georgieva’s (1981, reprinted in 1986) and Zhana Toteva’s (2012) there is room to compare and contrast lexical and grammatical choices. In addition, the rendering of the title, the presence or absence of an epigraph, the explanatory notes, and Georgi Tsankov’s critical introduction to the 1986 publication add to the overall package of text and paratexts.

**Key words:** Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Bulgarian translations, paratexts

Years ago, while preparing to teach Translation Studies, I came across an article that made it clear how jeopardized a species the translator was. The world was not obsessed by Artificial Intelligence at the time – the terms in circulation were Machine-assisted or Computer-aided translation. The publication in question did not theorise about it; it rather laid bare the parameters of a practice that apparently had found a niche in the American market. This is how it went: a publisher would choose a foreign title to be rendered in English; instead of hiring a translator they would run the source text through a computer programme; the result would obviously have the deficiencies of non-human translation; to make it fit for publication they would turn to an editor to iron out the glitches, most often a writer who had no knowledge of the foreign language of the original; and ... *voilà!* Discrepancies between the source text and the English-language version of it were irrelevant. This got me seriously worried about the art of translation. Gradually, however, I came to realise that the underlying problem was unrelated to the use of machines – it was a question of prioritising domestication. Certainly, publishers cannot do that without the tacit assistance of the reading public. Venuti’s *The Translator’s Invisibility*

reveals the ins and outs of the industry that accommodates those preferences for a text that reads as if written in English in the first place (1995). (I wonder if the same sort of ideology lies behind the lip-synching in dubbing when it comes to audio-visual translation – but let me not digress.)

In Bulgaria we may be lulled into a sense of complacency that this does not necessarily concern the smaller languages, that translating down is very different from translating up (to borrow David Bellos' terminology), that our translation practices have always maintained a degree of foreignising. This is not exactly wrong but it is not entirely true either, if we consider how award-winning translators of literature define a good translation. At the one end we have well established translators who were schooled in the principles of translation and were actively applying them before 1989. Here I am drawing upon the interviews with the winners of the annual *Krastan Dyankov* competition organised by the *Elizabeth Kostova* Foundation. Yordan Kosturkov was awarded a prize in this contest in 2008 and to him a good translation meant and still means that people should not be very much interested in the translator, that they should read the text as if it were written in Bulgarian (Kosturkov 2008). At the other end we have the new generations of translators who developed their sensibilities in a more global world. In her interview after winning the competition in 2019, Zornitsa Hristova insists that a good translation provides its readers with what the original offers to its audiences (Hristova 2019). The focus seems to have shifted. But let me quickly add that this is not just a generational thing. Nadezhda Radulova, who was born in 1975 and won the *Krastan Dyankov* award in 2009, maintains that when reading a good translation we forget the text was translated (Radulova 2009).

While it is self-evident that translations are meant for those who cannot read the original, a less conspicuous truism is that, generally, these are people unfamiliar with the foreign culture and context. It then becomes an ideological (as well as psychological) issue how the publication should supply some of that context and handle the balance between what is familiar and what is unfamiliar to the prospective reading public; to what an extent the reading process should expose them to the foreign and thus keep them alert, and to what an extent it should reiterate the home-grown and by doing so let them relax. Inevitably, these are amongst the ingredients of the centuries-old formula that the role of literature is to teach and delight. Some translators err on the side of education (by foreignising too much), others for the sake of unobtrusiveness (by domesticating too much).

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With this in mind, let me consider the Bulgarian versions of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and signpost a couple of lines of inquiry that have to do with the text and its paratexts.

We have two Bulgarian translations of the original and they both go back to the 1831 edition as their source text, a revised *Frankenstein* after the death of husband Percy in 1822, and after foregoing anonymity in 1823. For the first translation into Bulgarian in 1981, Zhechka Georgieva kept the title of the novel in its entirety, *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, preserving the mythological references to the Titan who tricked the supreme deity, was responsible for the creation of man (according to Lucian's "Prometheus on Caucasus"), and was sentenced to eternal suffering (Lucian 1905: 53 – 61). Mary Shelley's journals point to the fact that Percy was reading Lucian's *Works* in September – November 1816 (Feldman 1987:141 – 2, 145), while she read (some of) them in December 1816 and again in 1818, this time in translation, she says (Feldman 1987: 148 – 149, 209 – 210). In the second half of November 1816 the poet read *Paradise Lost* aloud for the benefit of his companions. Another one of his readings in August 1816 – June 1817 was Plutarch (Feldman 1987: 126, 176), an author that Mary Shelley had looked into (in Italian translation) in 1814 (Feldman 1987: 37) and whom we can find on her reading list for 1815, along with the *Sorrows of Young Werther* (Feldman 1987: 91, 88). I mention these, as they are central readings for the Creature in *Frankenstein*. It is safe to assume that theirs was a household where books and ideas were discussed. To go back to Prometheus, he was a favourite with both Percy Shelley and Byron. Byron published his poem *Prometheus* in July 1816, echoing its sentiments in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto 3 (1816), and later modifying the "Promethean spark" in *Manfred* (1817). In view of these literary ideas Andrew Cooper argues that the novel's "modern" Prometheus is Walton rather than Victor Frankenstein (Cooper 1988: 549) but such discussions must have been lost on Zhana Toteva, whose 2012 translation reduced the title to the name of the protagonist. One wonders whether twenty-first century readers were perceived as less interested in intertextuality.

In 1981 Zhechka Georgieva incorporated the epigraph that the author attached to the first edition (1818) and later removed in subsequent publications. The epigraph is from Book 10 of *Paradise Lost* and uses Milton's epic to give readers a snapshot of what is to come: "Did I request thee, Maker, from my Clay / To mould me Man? Did I solicit thee / From

darkness to promote me...?” (Shelley 1818a) („*Нима, Създателю, съм искал / от пръстта човек да ме изваеш, / мигар аз самият съм те молил / от мрака да ме извлечеш?*” – Shelley 1981; Shelley 1986: 327). For the Bulgarian reading public of 1981 *Paradise Lost* was unfamiliar as a text because its first translation (Alexander Shurbanov’s) was coterminous with that of *Frankenstein*. Zhechka Georgieva’s decision broadened the readers’ horizons, one may argue, as the mapping of Mary Shelley’s characters onto the relationship between Adam and God is an interpretative tool for the narrative. The epigraph was also kept in the 1986 edition of her translation.

Zhana Toteva did not care for the epigraph even though her translation could rely on three decades of *Paradise Lost* in the Bulgarian context. Fair enough, Milton’s lines were not in her source that followed the 1831 revisions; more importantly, perhaps, the newly imported *Frankenstein* was no longer about cultural heritage: with the Gothic ambience of the cover art, the novel got reduced to the stereotypes of popular culture.

The narrative begins with the letters of Captain Walton to his sister. It is worth looking into the opening sentence of his first communication, as it sets the tone for the rest of the text in terms of translation. In English, its informational value is to calm down the addressee and only then does the reader find out about her anxiety: “You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprise which you have regarded with such evil forebodings” (Shelley 1831: Letter I). The word order in Bulgarian seems to somewhat transform the message by highlighting the past at the expense of the present and focusing on the sister’s apprehensions rather than on the speaker’s good fortune: „*Ще се зарадваш, като научиш, че началото на едно начинание, което ти очакваше с такива мрачни предчувствия, не бе съпътствувано от никакви злополуки*” (Shelley 1986: 327). You might be wondering how the second translator handled the situation – I know I was. Disappointingly, Zhana Toteva’s solution looks like an editorial intervention rather than a brand new rendition: „*Ще се зарадваш да чуеш, че начинанието, което ти очакваше с толкова лоши предчувствия, не бе съпроводено от никакви прежеждия*” (Shelley 2012b: 5). The two Bulgarian versions of the sentence use the same word order. If that were a language requirement, it would not have been worth mentioning, but word order in Bulgarian is flexible enough to express the original theme and rhyme. If anything, the translated sentences sound more naggy, and – should we resort to stereotypes – they complicate Susan Wolfson and

Ronald Levaio's commentary in their annotated edition of *Frankenstein*: "The brother-sister relation initiates a series of gender-contrasts: between male visionary excitement and female foreboding; between male thirst for glory and female domesticity; between male bonding and bonds of marriage and family" (Shelley 2012a: 65). The Bulgarian renditions of male speech embrace an attitude that may be pigeonholed as rather female, with an underlying "I told you so" type of message.

In the translation of 2012 there are echoes of the previous one not only in terms of syntax but also in the choice of lexical units. When the English original says, "These are my enticements, and they are sufficient to conquer all fear of danger or death, and to induce me to commence this laborious voyage with the joy a child feels when he embarks in a little boat, with his holiday mates, on an expedition of discovery up his native river" (Shelley 1831: Letter I), Zhechka Georgieva follows the lead and represents this as, „Това са моите съблазни и те са достатъчни, за да победят страха от опасностите и смъртта и да ме склонят да предприема това трудно пътешествие с радостта на дете, което тръгва в лодка с другарчетата си на откривателска експедиция по родната река” (Shelley 1986: 328). Zhana Toteva's version seems promising to begin with and then resorts to the same old: „Ето това е, което ме мамии и то е достатъчно, за да надделее над всеки страх от опасност или смърт и да ме подтикне да предприема трудното си пътешествие с радостта, която детето чувства, когато се качва на малко корабче с другарчетата си от лятната ваканция и тръгва на откривателска експедиция по своята родна река” (Shelley 2012b: 6). The spectre of modifying previous translations looms larger than the use of translation platforms as a shortcut to publication, particularly if awkward phrases from before the digital age get reiterated: when Victor builds up the tension to reveal his being shocked by the result of animation, he says, "His limbs were in proportion..." (Shelley 1831: Chapter 5), which Zhechka Georgieva rendered literally, „Крайниците му бяха пропорционални..." (Shelley 1986: 365), and Zhana Toteva did not improve on it, „Крайниците му бяха пропорционални..." (Shelley 2012b: 61). Obviously Google translate was not available back in 1981 and even if we wish for the editor to have streamlined Zhechka Georgieva's translation, she has the advantage of being a pioneer in this endeavour. The 2012 translation sounds derivative.

In addition to the choice of words and word order, the act of interpreting a text calls for a judgement in terms of tenses, and this is where the two translations of *Frankenstein* noticeably part ways. The past

perfect tense in English may refer to single occurrences or repetitive actions and it is up to the translator to figure it out, as in “For this I had deprived myself of rest and health” (Shelley 1831: Chapter 5). Zhechka Georgieva opted for a completed act of depriving, and her decision was ruled by the noun “health”: „Заради тази мечта се бях лишил от отдих и здраве” (Shelley 1986: 365). Zhana Toteva, on the other hand, substituted the noun for “health” with a verb corresponding to “get ill”, thus limiting the deprivation to “rest” and infusing repetitiveness into it, while the loss of health becomes a single occurrence: „Заради това се бях лишавал от отдих и се поболях” (Shelley 2012: 62). The latter sounds much more agreeable to a native speaker of Bulgarian but it seems a bit of an exception while reading the 2012 version. An important aspect of grammar in the Bulgarian translations is the presence or absence of *renarration*. Renarration signifies whether the evaluation of the speaker is primary (their own) or secondary (renarrative), whether it is objective or subjective. It builds on two oppositions: the first opposition shows whether the speaker refers to somebody else’s information (renarration) or relies on their own information (non-renarration); the second opposition has to do with the speaker’s evaluation of how the utterance corresponds to reality. (cf. Vaseva 1995: 7)

As renarration is not a grammatical category in English, translators have to use their own discretion for introducing it in their Bulgarian texts. This example calls for the reader’s (translator’s) judgement: “She was a Roman Catholic; and I believe her confessor confirmed the idea which she had conceived” (Shelley 1831: Chapter 6). The sentence appears in a letter from Elizabeth Lavenza to Victor Frankenstein, and is part of the story of Justine’s mother. Zhechka Georgieva had Elizabeth renarrate the information about Madam Moritz second-hand, and reinforced the grammatical category by lexical means, adding a phrase roughly meaning “as far as I could gather” to express “I believe”: „Тя била католичка и изповедникът ѝ, доколкото разбрах, потвърдил идеята, която вече си била втъпила” (Shelley 1986: 372). Certainly, Elizabeth had no way of witnessing a conversation between a Roman Catholic and her confessor. Zhana Toteva disregarded grammatical renarration altogether and followed the English original with its lexical cues: „Тя беше римокатоличка и съм убедена, че изповедникът ѝ потвърди идеята, която се бе оформила в главата ѝ” (Shelley 2012: 72). Using witness mode past tense for something apparently not witnessed provokes cognitive dissonance for the reader. In terms of the bigger picture, Zhana Toteva is not alone – twenty-first century translators from English into Bulgarian have a troubled

relationship with *renarration*; this, however, does not signify the loss of the category as the media consistently use it in reporting events; it appears to be a case of foreign-studies graduates not recognising the need for it due to the lack of Bulgarian-language training as part of their degree.

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Another line of inquiry that has to do with the Bulgarian reception of the novel necessitates keeping track of the paratexts accompanying the translated *Frankensteins*. Zhechka Georgieva's translation was first published in 1981, on its own, and then in a collection of Gothic novels in 1986. I would like to draw your attention to the latter edition and more specifically to that bit of Georgi Tsankov's foreword which introduces Mary Shelley. The patriarchal atmosphere of her own time survives in the critical representation: we first learn that she was Shelley's wife and Byron's confidante in the latter's soul-searching (Shelley 1986: 28). Not only is she said to have been in their shadow – she is still in their shadow. Her personality is interpreted through her social functions: a discreet follower of her ailing husband, handling his admiration for other women with an omni-benevolent smile; a supportive companion for her stepsister, providing consolation after Claire Clairmont's breakup with Byron and taking care of their daughter Allegra (Shelley 1986: 28). If these were the lines of *Victorian* narratives about Mary Shelley, no interpretive distance suggests that the Bulgarian critic may think otherwise. She is then appropriated and domesticated as "little Maria". *Little* on account of going back to her childhood but also as a gesture towards a previous foreword, Dimitri Ivanov's in 1981. Erroneously, she is said to have grown up in Scotland (Shelley 1986: 28). In actual fact, she spent a couple of years with the Baxter family in Dundee (1812-1814). Furthermore, Georgi Tsankov treats the narrative of *Mathilda* as evidence of Godwin's incestuous thoughts (Shelley 1986: 28). The novella was only published in 1959 because Mary's father withheld the manuscript he had received and never gave it back to his daughter. The publication did cause a stir in the twentieth century, but using fiction to prove biographical dispositions does not work on any level. *Mathilda* was penned between August 1819 and February 1820, while Percy wrote *The Cenci* in the summer of 1819, the Venetian drama of incest and revenge that he wanted his wife to do. He leaned towards forbidden topics and had already published *Laon and Cythna; or, The Revolution of the Golden City: A Vision of the Nineteenth Century* with an incestuous relationship between a brother and a sister. In

the preface to that publication (later repressed, the poem edited and republished as *The Revolt of Islam*), he said: “It was my object to break through the crust of those outworn opinions on which established institutions depend. ... The circumstance of which I speak was introduced, however, merely to accustom men to that charity and toleration which the exhibition of a practice widely differing from their own has a tendency to promote.” (Shelley 1818b: xxi) Experimenting with provocative ideas was part of the Romantics’ *modus operandi*.

The introduction to the Bulgarian edition of 1986 recasts the elopement with Shelley as Mary Godwin being kidnapped (Shelley 1986: 28). The style is essayistic and the details evoke the eccentricities associated with the Satanic School that the Shelleys and Byron were grouped into back in the day. The representation of the author of *Frankenstein* is blown out of proportion with an incongruous reading of that detail of her own preface to the 1831 edition of the novel, which talks about the conversations between Byron and Shelley on the topic of experimentation. In her words, “They talked of the experiments of Dr. Darwin, (...) who preserved a piece of vermicelli in a glass case, till by some extraordinary means it began to move with voluntary motion” (Shelley 1831: Preface). The Bulgarian readers learn that the intentional movement of a piece of pasta was observed in a test tube (Shelley 1986: 29). Whether Mary Shelley misapplied the Italian word *vermi* in the diminutive (to denote “small worms”) or misremembered the word altogether, it certainly makes no sense to think of vermicelli as pasta or noodles in the context of Erasmus Darwin’s experiments. According to Desmond King-Hele, she may have misheard the word in the conversation between the poets, or Percy Shelley may have made a mistake; in any case, Darwin’s biographer points to the notes in the scientist’s *The Temple of Nature* (1802) where Darwin describes “vorticellae” rather than “vermicelli” (King-Hele 1999: 361): “Thus the vorticella or wheel animal, which is found in rain water that has stood some days in leaden gutters, or in hollows of lead on the tops of houses, or in the slime and sediment left by such water, though it discovers [shows] no sign of life except when in the water, yet it is capable of continuing alive for many months though kept in a dry state” (Darwin 1825: 63).

The liberal attitude towards facts is extended to the novel itself. Readers learn that the protagonist is a Dr Frankenstein (Shelley 1986: 29). The critic has conflated the literary character with his transformation in screen adaptations.



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Explanatory notes are another staple of translations and they usually reveal the educational impulses of translators. Zhechka Georgieva's translation includes 15 notes and they are all preserved for the 1986 reprint; Zhana Toteva's are not numbered but seem to approximate 25.

The 1986 edition of Gothic novels has all explanatory notes for the four texts at the end of the volume. In a way, this strategy takes into account the "willing suspension of disbelief", even if the editors are not prepared to go all the way and cancel all interventions that "break the flow, disturbing the continuity by drawing the eye, albeit briefly, away from the text to a piece of information" (Landers 2001: 93). Readers may choose to ignore endnotes, with no unwanted information lurking at the bottom of the page to distract them. Entertainment seems to have the upper hand here. The comments in the 1986 publication introduce Byron's physician, relate the legend about Lady Godiva, differentiate between Erasmus and Charles Darwin, pay homage to Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, explain foreign phrases, or clarify references to obscure authors and untranslated texts. The explication that Pandemonium is the capital of Hell according to Milton's *Paradise Lost* makes a lot of sense on account of the contemporaneous publications of the epic and the Gothic novel in 1981, as Bulgarian readers would have had no chance to acquaint themselves with it.

In the 2012 edition the publisher has opted for footnotes. Footnotes are much more convenient for the readers actively interested in the additional information as no flipping of pages is required; they are more in tune with Appiah's "thick translation" (Appiah 2000): "The notion of thick translation addresses the question of understanding and representing, in one's own language, texts that derive from a culture and language significantly different from one's own" (Hermans 2019: 588). Translator's notes do exactly that – they help readers understand the culture of the original. The use of asterisks for the footnotes in the 2012 translation of *Frankenstein* adds a retro feel to the actual presentation on the page. I would call Zhana Toteva's twenty-first century approach to explanatory comments free style. She felt the need to elaborate on the metaphoric use of "albatross" in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* but did not bother to check the translated titles of Coleridge's poem, which had already been published in Bulgarian twice in 2010: rendered by Angel Igov as *Сказание за стария моряк* and by Manol Peykov as *Балада за стария моряк*. It might be worth adding that Igov's translation is of the 1798 text that was included in the *Lyrical Ballads*, the one that Mary Shelley would have

been familiar with when writing *Frankenstein*; whereas Peykov's renders the 1834 version with the glosses. In English there is a long tradition of abbreviating that title to *The Ancient Mariner* but this does not work the same way in Bulgarian as the poem is not as familiar to readers. So when *Римите на стария моряк* becomes *Старият моряк* later on, this confuses the reader.

Looking up information in the internet age is infinitely easier compared to the 1980s: a lot more details can be offered and Zhana Toteva has gone for it, but it is a bit of a shock to see *Paradise Lost* in a footnote on the assumption that readers have never heard of Milton's epic. This is a reminder that the target audience for the newly translated *Frankenstein* is not necessarily steeped in canonical texts. Similarly, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is also provided with a footnote to inform the uninitiated that it was written by Goethe. In this context it seems a rather unexpected oversight that Plutarch's *Lives* are deprived of one. On the topic of omissions, while quoted excerpts of poetry are traced to the titles and authors of the original texts, no mention of the translator of the verses into Bulgarian is made, so we are to assume that Zhana Toteva rendered them herself. In the case of Percy Shelley's "Mutability" she left the title in English (2012: 112).

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With its late arrival, *Frankenstein* sits uneasily in the Bulgarian context. It was preceded by Arthur C. Clarke's "Dial F for Frankenstein", which made an appearance in Bulgarian in 1972; by 1986 screen adaptations had already turned the protagonist into a doctor for the literary critic introducing the novel to the reading public; and then the Promethean fervour was extinguished in 2012, leaving a Gothic flavour with sci-fi elements to it. The absence of renarration in the language of the 2012 translation is uneasily Bulgarian itself but this probably does not matter for an audience that needs an explanatory note to tell them that *Paradise Lost* is an epic poem by Milton. For the Romantic *Frankenstein* of Mary Shelley's time, the bell seems to have tolled.

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