

## TENNYSON AND GEO MILEV – MAPPING AN ENCOUNTER THAT NEVER TOOK PLACE

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Работата предлага разсъждения върху възприятието на Гео Милев на онтологична проблематика в творчеството на викторианския поет Алфред Тенисън. Преводите на Гео Милев на две стихотворения на Тенисън се вписват приносно в собствените му философско-поетически търсения, отразени в „*Антология на жълтата роза – лирика на злочеста любов*“ (1922) – по отношение на обобщена тематично-концептуална мотивация на подбор на конкретни чуждоезични творби и техника на превод (завидно адекватна за литературно-времевата си определеност).

**Ключови думи:** преводна рецепция, Алфред Тенисън, Гео Милев, прагмовост, тленност

Tennyson ranks as the most well known poet of the Victorian age, yet his entry into Bulgarian literature by means of translation has been marked by unsteadiness, sporadic interest in chronological terms, and on the whole, insufficient critical competence about the specificities of his intellectual development. One obvious exception to that is Geo Milev's work on the poet which conveyed two of Tennyson's best lyric pieces to the Bulgarian reading public in 1922: „*Come not when I am dead,*“ 1851 („Последна молба“, or „*Когато аз умра, недей идва*“); and „*O that 'twere possible*“ („*Загубено щастие*“ or „*О, само да беше възможно* –“), itself written independently in 1833–34, then modified as „*Stanzas*“ in 1837 and related to another work dedicated to the memory of Arthur Hallam, to eventually appear as section IV of part II of *Maud* (1855)<sup>1</sup>. These two poems are

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<sup>1</sup> Close comparative textual analysis indicates that whereas Geo Milev might have known of this poem's earlier existence as a singular piece, he most probably used the edition of *Maud*, 1855 (on the similarities and differences in the textual evolution of this poem see more in: Ricks 1989: 989–992). Proof to that is for instance that Geo Milev translates „*And the shadow flits and fleets,*“ (l. 230) as „*И сянката тлей и мълчи,*“. An earlier version of this poem reads: „*And the sunk eye flits and fleets,*“

closely knit into the texture of Geo Milev's *Anthology of the Yellow Rose* („Антология на жълтата роза“, 1922). What we have here is a compilation of some of his best translations of European poetry, from the Renaissance to his day. British poets include: Shakespeare, John Fletcher, Thomas Moore, Keats, Elizabeth Barret Browning, Lord Byron, W. B. Yeats, William Wordsworth, Christina Rossetti, Oscar Wilde. The foreign is interspersed with brilliant and poignant works by eminent Bulgarian poets, such as: Dimcho Debelyanov, Georgi Minev, Ludmil Stoyanov, Theodore Trayanov, Ivan Vazov, Peyo Yavorov. It is beyond any doubt that Geo Milev sought to establish a general, multi-lingual and cross-historical context of ideas: ponderousness, existential detachment from the mundane, alienation, a tendency for self-evaluation, reflective and melancholic overtones to do with the themes of transition, mortality and the essence of truth – revealed to, or achieved by, man. Milev studied the foreign meticulously in order to work out and solidify his own creeds,<sup>2</sup> but in this case he did an enviably good job in translating two of Tennyson's most critically assessed poems – also most emblematic of the poet's general thematic inclinations. My efforts have therefore been directed at shortening the historical and cultural distance between two most sophisticated poets that never actually – as they could not in the proper physical sense of the word – met and at exploring the common ontological ground between the two in literary terms as mediated by translation.

Prior to Geo Milev, Assen Belkovski had already translated „*Come not, when I am dead*“ in 1898. As for *Maud*, there is another famous section of it translated by Alexander Shurbanov in Bulgarian and published in 1995.<sup>3</sup> Tennyson is largely missing from literature textbooks and anthologies in Bulgaria and in this case Geo Milev's work is an invaluable contribution to the reception of the poet as such in Bulgaria in historical perspective. In „*Come not, when I am dead*“ Milev manages to retain the iambic line (dominantly in pentameter, with dimeter and trimeter cropping up), though with some changes.

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(ibid.). „*Sunk eye*“ could be translated as: „помрачен/ помръкнал поглед“, „унил поглед“, „замислен поглед“, „безпътен поглед“.

<sup>2</sup> Shurbanov & Trendafilov, eds. 2000: 180.

<sup>3</sup> Shurbanov, Alexander. *Maud*, XXII (1–11). 1995. Шурбанов, Александър. *Английска поезия (превод и съставителство)*. София: Обсидиан. 1995, 83–86.

*Come not, when I am dead,  
To drop thy foolish tears upon my grave,  
To trample round my fallen head,  
And vex the unhappy dust thou wouldst not save.  
There let the wind sweep and the plover cry;  
But thou, go by.*

*Child, if it were thine error or thy crime  
I care no longer, being all unblest:  
Wed whom thou wilt, but I am sick of Time,  
And I desire to rest.  
Pass on, weak heart, and leave me where I lie:  
Go by, go by.*

The stanzaic division in Milev's version is precise whilst the rhyming scheme demonstrates his desire to achieve balance between original rhyme and overall semantic impact (original line: *ababcc dedecc*, translation: *ababbb cdcdbb*). In that respect Milev did a better job than Assen Belkovski (*ababccc ddddeee*). He also took further the notion of the pointlessness of mourning and planted it in the more existential context of despair whilst making the survivor's weak heart exempt from the necessity to remember. Geo Milev allows for some imprecision in conveying certain obvious words and therefore concepts. For instance, „*Unhappy dust*“ (l. 4) becomes „*злочастна сянка*“; the „*plover*“ (l. 5), which would normally be translated in Bulgarian as „*дъждосвирец*“ is hereby termed „*буревестник*“ („*гарван*“ in Belkovski – also imprecise); the phrase „*being all unblest*“ (l. 8) is not translated altogether; „*Wed whom thou wilt [...]*“ (l. 9) becomes „*Свободна си*“ („*Да, ожени се...*“ in Belkovski's version). Also missing from the Bulgarian version is the beginning of line 11: „*Pass on, weak heart, [...]*“. Despite the seeming technical incongruity, Geo Milev's translation is overall a far better rendering of the original than that of Assen Belkovski because it manages to preserve the general air of the deceased person's generous forgiveness for the survivor's inconstancy in maintaining memory alive.

„*O that 'twere possible*“ picks up part II of *Maud*, and conveys in full only three of the 13 original cantos in section IV, namely: 1, 3 and 13:

I.

*O that 'twere possible  
After long grief and pain  
To find the arms of my true love  
Round me once again!*

III.

*A shadow flits before me,  
Not thou, but like to thee:  
Ah Christ, that it were possible  
For one short hour to see  
The souls we loved, that they might tell us  
What and where they be.*

XIII.

*But the broad light glares and beats,  
And the shadow flits and fleets  
And will not let me be;  
And I loathe the squares and streets,  
And the faces that one meets,  
Hearts with no love for me:  
Always I long to creep  
Into some still cavern deep,  
There to weep, and weep, and weep  
My whole soul out to thee.*

The translation is selective and delves into the lyrical speaker's intimacy in expressing solitude, loss and his inability to relate to the external world. It is only through union with a beloved that he might be able to acquire personality but the beloved one is unattainable and everything else is repulsively alien and uncoveted. What is missing is the background of courtship between the two and the natural canvas of peace, beauty and of feigned moral decency (present in the original section). Throughout this monodrama happiness is jeopardized by social convention and the unruliness of personal passion. Since this is the only translation of this work of Tennyson's in Bulgarian, we could not examine it in comparative terms. Tennyson's evasive iambic trimeter in this case gets transformed into anapest: that seems to somehow elongate, to drag, the line even further and imparts to the translated version a more gruesome, more contemplative, less dolorous air than that of the original. The curt, akin to

the 4/3-step balladic iambic line that Tennyson resorts to in this section of *Maud* (known especially for its play of metre) is presented in the Bulgarian anapest: adequate to the tendency of Bulgarian language to accommodate longer words. Indeed it was only in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century that the iambic line was being introduced in Bulgarian poetry, mostly through Yavorov and Liliyev, and apparently a great deal through translations of Germanic verse (Gasparov 1989: 167, 183, 229–30). The most peculiar breach that Geo Milev allows himself is his division of canto 13 into two: he separates the first three lines from the rest. Compare: „*But the broad light glares and beats,/ And the shadow flits and fleets/ And will not let me be;*“ (ll. 229–231); and „*Но блясва денят сред лъчи – / И сянката тлей и мълчи,/ И чезне пред моите очи*“. The effect is achieving an overture, an introduction through contrast: whilst the day breaks, his heart sinks with pining after Maud; the coming of light is a poor substitute for the lack of his beloved. Day/hope and night/despair are conceptually reversed. External space is thus made doubly more confining than that in the original and the internal acquires the role of a mystic passage into oblivion. „*Into some still cavern deep*“ (l. 236), is rendered as: „*Прага на безмълвност и мрак да прекрача*“. All mundane and temporal is left behind when the lyrical self in Geo Milev’s version is about to step over the threshold of sensual awareness and reveal his weeping soul to Maud. But whereas the original line stresses the entirety of the lyrical self’s being about to be accommodated into Maud’s soul, the Bulgarian version accentuates the actual process of confession and remorse before Maud as before a witness. Compare: „*Always I long to creep/ Into some still cavern deep,/ There to weep, and weep and weep/ My whole soul out to thee.*“ (ll. 235–38); and then: „*Едно мойта мисъл желай:/ Прага на безмълвност и мрак да прекрача/ И там да изплача, изплача, изплача/ Пред тебе душата си в болка без край*“. The original insists on personal uniqueness; the translation focuses on the feeling in progress.

What determined Geo Milev’s choice of poets to include in „*The Anthology of the Yellow Rose*“ was most probably a desire to study the process of self-formation, of inner development via contemplation, via at times destructive self-analysis and catechizing estrangement from the world without. Amongst the Non-English names here we find those of: Ada Negri, Heinrich Heine, Alfred de Musset, Franz Grillparzer, Mikhail Lermontov, Richard Dehmel and Dante Alighieri. Grief, solitude, death at birth, autumnal melancholy, lonely pilgrimages, soul-wrenching separation from the beloved person, belated appreciation of the *Other*, annihilating loss and grief, unrequited passion, homeless intelligence, dissolving

religious faith and disintegration of communal values – all these overtones find a steady abode in Geo Milev's own tendency for dramatic monologue, but also in another cycle of folklore-plated poems named „*The Icons Are Asleep*“ (1922). The amalgamation of notes both suicidal and self-revelatory is his typical response to the spiritual poverty of the outside world where episodicity, unsteadiness, fleetingness and superficiality reign. It is clear that Geo Milev sought those poets to translate whose works contained ideas similar to his own beliefs about the depiction of man and his soul in the modern world. Whilst anthologizing, the poet was developing his own corpus of imagery, thus actualizing our own literary climate against a retrospective translation of in this case Anglo-Germanic poetry (Mileva, ed. 1940: 3–20; Svintila: 1981: 183–85). Petar Velchev notes that Geo Milev offers a rich and an authentically structured model of the reception of the contacts of Bulgarian literature (poetry) with universal cultural achievements and paradigms. And in this case the synthesis between translation and original contribution contains his input in Bulgarian symbolism (Milev 2007: 7–28). It was as early as 1913-14, in the *Listopad* magazine, that Milev offered his translation of Christina Rossetti's poem *Song* („*When I am dead, my dearest,*“ – „*Legacy*“ in Milev's version – originally written in 1848 and published in 1862; cf Gorcheva 2008) and later included it in his *Anthology of the Yellow Rose* (Milev 1922a: 61). Supplying his translations with introductory and explanatory notes about the relevant poets, Milev draws a rich palette of variations on the theme of „hapless love“, demonstrating an especial interest in European symbolism and broader (all-19<sup>th</sup>-century) Romanticism (cf Gorcheva 2008). Milev happened to be one of many anthology-makers in Bulgaria in the early 1920s (cf Hadjikosev 2000: 101–05). Geo Milev's advantage in this case was that he had reliable command of English language. During his three-month stay in London in 1914 he met the avant-garde Belgian poet Emile Verhaeren (cf Furnadzhieva 2010). Geo Milev's polyglot capacities enhanced his reception of modernist European poetry and his emergence as an original poet on the basis of inter-textual communication with both the foreign, as well as his own natural environment (contemporary and folklore). It was in the process of comparative self-formation through translation that his versions of works such as Tennyson's „*Come not, when I am dead*“, and „*O that 'twere possible*“ were born.

In „*The Anthology of the Yellow Rose*“ Geo Milev dialogizes with fellow-believers as well as with himself, especially in unearthing the richness of chthonian imagery (the grave, death, oblivion, separation and

physical decay). On a broader level, he dialogizes with the Past: real and literary. His associative attraction to cosmic imagery allows for symbolist re-creation of the world in subjective terms. His evolution as a critic and translator of poetry could indeed be traced in the journals he edited: in *Zveno* (in English: „Link“/ „Unit“), 1914, in *Plamak* (in English „Flame“), from 1924 onwards, but also in his folklore-based poetic cycle „*Ikonite Spiat*“ („*The Icons Are Asleep*“; cf Sarandev 2004: 325–67).

Geo Milev’s preoccupation with the theme of mortality, evident in his choice of poems to translate from Tennyson, is in unison with his research of the modern soul which oscillates between paganism and Christian faith (cf Gorcheva 2006: 32-39). The former ought to be uprooted in order to cultivate the latter. Milev’s orientation in this case is towards Norse-Germanic-Celtic mysticism and medieval symbolism – both discoverable in early Western European Romanticism. In „*The Icons Are Asleep*“ the soul suffers from material unutterability: it wakes up from its dragon sleep of bloody sensuality (in part I called „*Zmei*“, in English „*Dragon*“) only to roam, widow-like, through the „*black wood*“ (in „*Ston*“, in English „*Moan*“), and then, having nearly acquired itself in the solitude of monastic re-awakening (in „*Krast*“, in English „*Cross*“), it heads towards its grave to be buried in the earth (in „*Grob*“, in English „*Grave*“): nameless, eyeless, faceless, entirely non-defined – amidst a wilderness of stone, moss and raw bones, and the void looming in the distance.<sup>4</sup> With the ending of subject-plot definability, characteristic of carnal earthly existence, the soul faces the formless silence, which, sadly, holds no promise of redeemed selfhood. To Geo Milev, *the grave* must have been the crossing point not only between learned/Christian and pagan, between Present and Past, but also between native Bulgarian literature and foreign literature – folklore and modern. In his pioneering work „*Modern Poetry*“ (in Bulgarian: „*Modernata Poesia*“. *Zveno*. 1914 – 4–5. pp. 301–11), Geo Milev argues that the modern soul is strung not from logic and knowledge, but from intuition: „*modern poetry is not derived from a weak modernity: it stems from a vast historical universalism, which requires a psycho-historical, rather than a sociological study*“ (ibid.)<sup>5</sup>. That goes very well with Milev’s belief that rebelliousness is embedded in creativity: a rebellion against oneself, against what is familiar, imposed, conventional, predictable; it is movement towards satisfying the needs for cognitive growth (Stefanov, ed. 1996: 7). Both poems of Tennyson present in „*The Anthology of the Yellow Rose*“ signal a desire to abandon the earthly, the

<sup>4</sup> My translation of the quotes from Geo Milev’s work.

<sup>5</sup> My translation. See: Popov 1980: 5–16.

communal, the verbosity of the knowable, and step into originally voiced unbounded emotion which gathers the self and intimizes it to an *Other*:

*„Едно мойта мисъл желай:  
Прага на безмълвност и мрак да прекрача  
И там да изплача, изплача, изплача  
Пред тебе душата си в болка без край.“*

The translation of Christina Rossetti's „*Song*“, put immediately after „*Come not, when I am dead*“, illustrates Milev's steady interest in the theme of the transition between cognition/responsibility and oblivion/freedom in ethical terms:

*Когато, мили мой, умра,  
Тъжовни песни ми не пей;  
Над мене рози не посаждай,  
**Ни кипарис да се тъмней:**  
Над гроба ми тревата само  
Зелена, росна остави;*

*И ако искаш – припомни си,  
И ако искаш – забрави.  
И нека сенки да не виждам,  
И да не сецам аз дъжда;*

*И нека да не чувам ноцем  
На славей тъжен песента...  
И в сън така, сред вечен сумрак,  
не ще ме сепне ничий глас:  
Щастливо нека да си спомням  
Щастливо да забравя аз.“<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Original poem by Christina Rossetti (1848): „When I am dead, my dearest,/ Sing no sad songs for me;/ Plant thou no roses at my head,/ Nor shady cypress tree:/ Be the green grass above me/ With showers and dewdrops wet;/ And if thou wilt, remember,/ And if thou wilt, forget.// I shall not see the shadows,/ I shall not feel the rain;/ I shall not hear the nightingale/ Sing on, as if in pain:/ And dreaming through the twilight/ That doth not rise nor set,/ Haply I may remember,/ And haply may forget.“



„*The handful of black earth*“, which appears in „*Cross*“ in „*The Icons Are Asleep*“ bears again this interest in the function of the grave as a symbol of delimitation, of definition of selfhood in *Being on both sides*: for the Survivor, and for the dead. Some lines are strikingly similar: „*Там моя гроб ме чака в мрак потаен/ – ни плачуца върба, ни кипарис – / и в плочата надгробна ще вдълбая/ сам свойто име: горка летопис/ на любовта ми...*“ These two poems – by Christina Rossetti and by Geo Milev – are similar to Thomas Hardy’s poem *When Dead*, published in 1925, in his poetic volume *Human Shows, Far Phantasies, Songs and Trifles*:

*„It will be much better when  
I am under the bough;  
I shall be more myself, Dear, then,  
Than I am now.*

*No sign of querulousness  
To wear you out  
Shall I show there: strivings and stress  
Be quiet without.*

*This fleeting life-brief blight  
Will I have gone past  
When I resume my old and right  
Place in the Vast;*

*And when you come to me  
To show you true,  
Doubt not I shall infallibly  
Be waiting for you.“*

Hardy’s poem is in full consonance with Tennyson’s and Geo Milev’s but whereas it promises future reunion and remedial consolation in the life beyond, the other two do not insist on communal re-integration, despite the particularized romantic imagery of natural wholeness. Tennyson’s „*Come not, when I am dead*“ offers forgiveness for the survivor’s negligence and a desire to rest from spatial and temporal unsteadiness, from cognitive vigilance.

Milev was not merely a translator-educator: he was a poet whose own creative growth we may be able to trace by analyzing his poetic

translations.<sup>7</sup> Whilst endorsing the perception that literary translation means both global cultural inter-penetration and national-psychological authentication, he demonstrates preoccupation with themes of general humanitarian validity.<sup>8</sup> His collection, „*The Anthology of the Yellow Rose*“, offers a variety of poetic interpretations – by different poets, of different historical and language belonging – who all raise the issue of the growth of self-perception via memory of what is no longer available, what is lost, or what has been left behind unappreciated. Notable is the poet’s interest in the themes of love and of mortality. He recognizes one’s inability to attain self-cognition during one’s earthly existence despite one’s attempts to reach fullness of expression and to gain utmost knowledge. An act of poetic translation, in particular one with a passion for existential matters, is above all an act of experiential revelation, of openness of interpretation, and of hermeneutical exchange – between various temporal layers (most immediately: that of creation and that of interpretation), as well as between various consciousnesses defined by the philosophical and psychological charge of one language or another. Above all, Geo Milev demonstrates willingness to understand the foreign, the far-off, through translation. On a formal level, that is obvious in that alongside translated poetic works, his *Anthology of the Yellow Rose* offers a range of poems written by Milev himself in the context of Bulgarian Modernist poets: a desire to shorten the distance between the object of interpretation and the interpreting register. Geo Milev demonstrates awareness of the fact that translation means creative trans-position, or overcoming the historical situation of creation and that of perception – in this case more than half a century, but in fact one between late Western European Romanticism and Bulgarian symbolism. Inserting one’s own poetry amidst foreign explicitly shows what Wolfgang Iser believes could be referred to as „*an act*“: of knowledge as well as of existential performance (Iser 2004: 25, 27, 30, 32, 57). In this case therefore, what we have is not merely a technical rendering of a set of poets from one linguistic context into another. Revived – intentionally and conscientiously – are *other* contexts for the sake of anthropological revision of the themes of love and death through which the ‘here’ and ‘now’ (i.e. Geo Milev’s and his Bulgarian contemporaries’ own works) map the ‘there’ and ‘then’ in the aporeticity of treating the issue of the critical position of the in-between-ness of existence (between birth and death and through love) and of cognition

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<sup>7</sup> Further, on the theme of poetic translation with regard to Geo Milev’s contribution see: Cf Filipov 1981: 183–242; Hadzhikosev 1983: 206–09; Velchev 1983: 214–17.

<sup>8</sup> Lilova 1981: 64, 194, 198–99.

(through knowing the actual, as well as the Past; or the foreign, as well as the native).

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