

REMARKS ON THE CONTEMPORARY VISIBILITY OF BULGARIAN LITERATURE IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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ABSTRACT: This article provides a summary of the current status of Bulgarian literature in the United Kingdom through the prism of works featured in four of the main British literary translation prizes: the International Booker Prize, the Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize, the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation, and the EBRD Literature Prize. Initially, after a brief overview of perspectives on literary translation in United Kingdom, the four prizes are contextualised within wider developments. Using available online data from the websites of each award, the prize-winners, shortlists, and longlists are examined to determine if literary works translated from Bulgarian are present, with the finding that very few have featured to date. However, with the award of the 2023 International Booker Prize to Georgi Gospodinov's novel *Time Shelter*, translated into English by Angela Rodel, selected media and popular responses to this news are also briefly presented, as is the immediate impact of *Time Shelter*'s victory on the profile of translated Bulgarian literature in the United Kingdom. In identifying nascent but growing interest from publishers and readers in English translations of Bulgarian literary works, the article acknowledges existing initiatives to promote Bulgarian-English literary translation. It also provides some suggestions on how to capitalise on this newfound visibility in the British context.

KEYWORDS: Angela Rodel; Bulgarian literature and culture; Bulgarian literature in the UK; Georgi Gospodinov; International Booker Prize; literary translation; reception of Bulgarian literature; smaller literatures; *Time Shelter*; translation prizes

Introduction

Though an important language in the Balkan and southeast European context, Bulgarian is currently taught at just two universities in the United Kingdom. As analysed in one of the author's previous publications (see Hoyte-West, 2023a) on the present state of research and teaching of Bulgarian studies in the whole of the British Isles, it is presently only available at the University of Oxford (where it is taught as an option in the Slavonic studies postgraduate degrees) and University College London (UCL), though it was previously taught elsewhere (see Holman, 2019). At UCL, the language is offered as a full undergraduate degree (BA) in Bulgarian & East European Studies, as well as at the MA and PhD levels, and the offerings there are characterised by a vibrant academic and cultural programme, including various events and study abroad possibilities (UCL, 2024a).

The United Kingdom also has a significant Bulgarian diaspora, particularly following the accession of Bulgaria to the European Union in 2007; in 2019, it was estimated as comprising over 120,000 people (Markova & King, 2023). In cultural terms, there is an official branch of the Bulgarian Cultural Institute [*Български културен институт*] in London, and Bulgarian Sunday schools have been created to help ensure and promote the spread of the language among children from the diaspora. However, as illustrated by the fact that it is taught only at two universities in the United Kingdom, Bulgarian is generally not considered to be a widely-spoken or widely-taught language in primary, secondary, or tertiary education. For example, at the time of writing, no school qualifications in Bulgarian are available at either GCSE or A-level, despite the existence of an online petition to encourage this development which had over 1,750 supporters (see Change.org, 2016).

It could be argued, perhaps, that this state of affairs has implications for the broader visibility of Bulgarian language and culture in the United Kingdom, and, with regard to the focus of this study, the role of its literature and the translation of it. Accordingly, the genesis for this project is an extension of the author's interdisciplinary research on translation studies, literature, and intercultural studies. This has included several publications on aspects of literary translation in the United Kingdom and the visibility of smaller literatures there, as well as general research on translation prizes both in Britain and elsewhere.

Building on a period of research and language study undertaken in Bulgaria in spring 2024, this article aims to shine a light on the visibility of Bulgarian literature in the United Kingdom at a crucial period. Indeed, the 21st century has brought interesting times for Bulgarian literature, as exemplified by the current "boom" in the production of novels and similar works (Костова-Панайотова, 2024); it is also present as an expatriate literature through the creative outputs of Bulgarians residing abroad

(Кирова, 2023). As literary scholars Mihaela P. Harper and Dimitar Kambourov state, the contributions to their important edited anthology on the topic (*Bulgarian Literature as World Literature* – see Harper & Kambourov, 2020a), highlight its inherent duality – i.e., notions of localism/immobility as opposed to the globality of Bulgarian literary production across the ages (Harper & Kambourov, 2020b). They add, that despite the fact that it may be considered as a “minor” literature, “Bulgarian literature should help redraw the conceptual mapping of world literature” (Harper & Kambourov, 2020b, p. 7). As will be discussed in this article, a case in point can be said to be the global attention that Bulgarian literature received following the award of the 2023 International Booker Prize.

Some brief observations on literature and translation in the UK context

The fundamental role of translation in how different literatures travel and circulate around the world is extremely well-known (for example, see Sontag, 2007; Bielsa, 2013; Sapiro, 2014; Venuti, 2022, etc.). Yet unlike in many other European book markets, and as has already been mentioned by the author elsewhere (see Hoyte-West, 2023b, pp. 237-238), not so much translated literature has traditionally appeared on the shelves of British bookshops (see *The Guardian*, 2023). Over the last decade or so, however, a number of interesting developments have occurred which – as also outlined in the author’s previous study – have led to the increasing prominence of translated works and literary translators (see Anderson, 2023; Self, 2023), as well as different awareness-raising schemes (such as literary translation mentorships), and the development of specialist publishing houses focusing on translated literary works, etc. Indeed, this change seems to have been particularly important for several “smaller” languages and literatures, as it can be argued that their translation into English ensures a wider readership and greater global presence.

As an example of a ‘smaller’ literature, the current issues surrounding Bulgarian literature and its translation into English are brilliantly encapsulated in an insightful chapter by Angela Rodel in the aforementioned edited volume *Bulgarian Literature as World Literature* (Harper and Kambourov, 2020a). In her study (Rodel, 2020), she observed the very small number of Bulgarian books which have been translated into English – just over 50 since the political and economic transition of 1989. In terms of the everyday aspects of rendering Bulgarian literature, she highlights the multifaceted and multivalent role of the literary translator in the whole process, i.e., as a “dominus factotum”, “scout”, “grant-writer”, “editor”, “collaborator/consultant”, “marketer”, “agent”, and “cultural ambassador”. In addition to providing the structure for her contribution, these diverse roles illustrate the complexities of the modern publishing market, thereby showing the multitude of factors that go into translating a book from one language to another, as well as providing additional insights into the process of how smaller literatures are represented and enter broader global circulation.

To turn to translation awards, in recent years the literary landscape has become dotted with different prizes, especially in the United Kingdom. As in any field, prizes can be said to be a key method of encouraging and recognising good work, but in the context of translated literature, they can also be said to advance public, commercial, and media attention for works originally written in other languages, therefore enhancing consecratory processes and the building of cultural capital. As outlined elsewhere (Hoyte-West, 2023b, pp. 239-241), most of these British literary translation prizes date from the current century, and as also mentioned in previous research, four of the main ones recognising works translated from other languages into English are the Booker International Prize (relaunched in 2016), the EBRD Literature Prize (first awarded in 2018), the Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize (first awarded in 1999), and the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation (first awarded in 2017). Alongside these awards, there are of course other prizes highlighting excellent performance in the literary translation of a range of languages and genres – these include, *inter alia*, the Stephen Spender Prize, the John Dryden Translation Competition, as well as the various awards given by the Society of Authors. As such, there has been significant public and media attention generated by these accolades, leading to increased interest in prize-winning authors, translators, and even whole literatures.

Accordingly, building on the foregoing overview, the aim of this study is to examine the presence of Bulgarian literature in major British translation prizes. This will be done – identically to the author’s previous study of Polish literature in UK translation awards (Hoyte-West, 2024) – by using a desk-based approach (Bassot, 2022) to consult a range of open-access online resources. In determining the lists of prize-winners and shortlisted works, this includes, in the first instance, examining the

websites of each of the four major translation prizes – the International Booker Prize, the Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize, the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation, and the EBRD Literature Prize.

Bulgarian literature in UK translation prizes

Starting with the oldest of the four awards, the Oxford Weidenfeld Prize, the website contained a full list of winners from 1999 up until the present day. Shortlists were available from 2007 onwards, and longlists since 2023. However, an examination of the data showed that up until the time this research was conducted (spring 2024), no Bulgarian work had featured to date (see Oxford Comparative Criticism and Translation, 2024).

Turning to the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation, which centres on the translation of works originally written by women (the translator may be of any gender), a wide range of data has been made available online. Among the shortlisted works, previous research has demonstrated that smaller literatures are certainly present (Hoyte-West, 2023c), and in addition, the website also contains details about works which have been submitted for the Prize since it was first awarded in 2017. Therefore, an analysis of the spreadsheets showed that one Bulgarian work was entered for consideration for the 2020 Prize: this was the poetry collection *Crookedness* [*Изкривяване*], by Tsvetanka Elenkova, which was translated into English by Jonathan Dunne and published by Shearsman Books (see The Warwick Prize for Women in Translation, 2024).

Funded by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the website for the EBRD Literature Prize contains information about the shortlists, longlists, and prize-winners since the award's foundation in 2018. Indeed, as detailed in the author's other studies (e.g., Hoyte-West, 2023c), the central aim of this award is to showcase 'smaller' literatures; a previous iteration of its website noted that it wished to "champion the literary richness of [the EBRD's] regions of operations [...] [and] introduce the depth and variety of the voices and creativity from these regions to the English-speaking public and a wider global audience" (EBRD, 2022). In terms of Bulgarian literature, one work featured on the shortlist for the 2023 Prize: *Time Shelter* [*Времеубежище*], by Georgi Gospodinov, translated into English by Angela Rodel and published by Weidenfeld & Nicholson (see Sconosciuto, 2023; BTA, 2023).

Moving to the International Booker Prize, which is perhaps the best-known (and, with a top award of 50,000 GBP, the best-funded of the four prizes), it is notable for Bulgarian literature that Angela Rodel's translation of Gospodinov's *Time Shelter* proved victorious in the 2023 International Booker Prize. In reiterating the book's blurb, the profile page on the International Booker Prize website describes the volume as "intricately crafted and eloquently translated", observing that the book "cements Georgi Gospodinov's reputation as one of the most indispensable writers of our times and a major voice in international literature" (The Booker Prizes, 2023a). It additionally highlights that this is "the first book from Bulgaria to be nominated for the International Booker Prize" (The Booker Prizes, 2023a), adding that the chair of the judging panel, the eminent French & Moroccan author Leila Slimani, noted that the book "offers us a perspective on the destiny of countries such as Bulgaria, which have found themselves at the heart of the ideological conflict between the West and the communist world" (The Booker Prizes, 2023a).

In terms of the global perception of *Time Shelter*'s victory, worldwide media responses were summarised in a long post on the International Booker Prize website (Mackay-Smith, 2023), which synthesised Bulgarian, British, and global perspectives from many different outlets, as well as input from celebrities, and ordinary readers. As such, the post detailed in the 24 hours after the announcement, the popularity of *Time Shelter* had soared 20,000% in the Amazon chart, reaching 13th place. Manol Peykov, the head of the Janet 45 publishing company which published the Bulgarian original, was reported as saying that Bulgarian literature "had never received such international recognition" throughout history (Mackay-Smith, 2023). The post also mentioned Gospodinov's considerable literary pedigree, noting that although he was previously not well-known in Anglophone world, he was the author of several prize-winning works both in Bulgaria and elsewhere. There was also acclaim for the translator Angela Rodel, originally from the United States, with the post noting that she was awarded Bulgarian citizenship in 2014 because of her contributions to literature and culture (Mackay-Smith, 2023). Other responses in the United Kingdom included an article in *The Guardian* newspaper, which underlined that *Time Shelter*'s victory meant that it was the first time that a Bulgarian work had won the International Booker Prize (Shaffi, 2023). Quoting the Prize's administrator, the article also

highlighted that smaller literatures were becoming more visible in the UK publishing market, a fact which has also been borne out by the author's previous work (see Hoyte-West, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, etc.) on translation prizes in the British context.

Since the award of the 2023 International Booker Prize, interest has also risen in Gospodinov's other works too. These include the subsequent UK release of *The Physics of Sorrow* (*Физика на тъгата*, again translated by Angela Rodel and originally published in the United States in 2015) and of *The Story Smuggler* (*Контрабандистът на истории*, translated by Kristina Kovalcheva and Dan Gunn), both published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson. Indeed the February 2024 *Financial Times* review of both of those books opens by stating that “the UK is late to the Georgi Gospodinov party” (Janney, 2024). Indeed, Gospodinov has mentioned that he has been inspired by the United Kingdom in his works – for example, by the notion of Brexit and the so-called idea of a ‘bright past’, but also by a 2010 article in *The Economist* which put Bulgaria at the top of the list of saddest countries (see Greenwell, 2015; The Booker Prizes, 2023b; also Janney, 2024). And, after the award of the 2023 International Booker Prize, Gospodinov took part in many book tours, talks, discussions, and signings in the United Kingdom (at times together with Angela Rodel) at well-known locations and institutions such as the famous Blackwell's bookstore in Oxford, University College London, and the universities of Oxford and Lancaster (see Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2023; University of Lancaster, 2023; UCL, 2024b; University of Oxford, 2024).

Bulgarian literature in the UK – what next?

As has been illustrated in this brief overview, the International Booker Prize win for *Time Shelter* has led to increased visibility of Bulgarian literature in the United Kingdom, as well as increased personal visibility for Georgi Gospodinov. This has included growing popular, critical, and commercial interest in Bulgarian literature, as demonstrated by the subsequent translation and (re)publication of other works by Gospodinov. A possible comparison could be made with the case of Polish literature post-2018, when Olga Tokarczuk won the International Booker Prize (and then, the Nobel Prize in Literature. Since then, as the author's other work has illustrated (Hoyte-West, 2024), more and more works of Polish literature now appear on the longlists and shortlists of major British translation prizes. In this regard, it will certainly be interesting to see what happens regarding the reception of other Bulgarian literary works in the United Kingdom – this includes new translations of authors from other eras, such as Angela Rodel's new translation of Vera Mutafchieva's 1967 novel *The Case of Cem* [*Случаят Джем*] (see Bulgarian Cultural Institute, 2024). In addition, linked in to the aforementioned ‘boom’ in Bulgarian literature, the commercial and popular potential of other works aimed at less ‘literary’ audiences is also something that could be considered further.

With regard to current initiatives to promote Bulgarian literature more widely, it must be noted that there are several schemes (primarily within Bulgaria) to promote translation and also literary translators – examples include the residency programme of Sofia Literature and Translation House [*Къща за литература и превод*] as well as the spring 2024 call for applications for emerging literary translators working from Bulgarian into English, based at the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation (2024). As has been mentioned above, there do seem to be some established literary translators working from Bulgarian into English – for example, these include Angela Rodel, Kristina Kovalcheva, Dan Gunn, and Jonathan Dunne, and the “Contemporary Bulgarian Writers” online portal also contains further details regarding other literary translators working into English as well as other languages (see Contemporary Bulgarian Writers, 2024). In the British context, initiatives relating specifically to Bulgarian are not so widespread at present – to give an example, Bulgarian has not yet featured among the list of languages selected for the National Centre for Writing's Emerging Translator Mentorships.

Accordingly, given the current vogue in Bulgarian literature in the United Kingdom, questions remain on how best to capitalise on this phenomenon. In terms of future possibilities, general pointers could include continuing with awareness-raising schemes for Bulgarian literature and culture, building on work already done, for example, by institutions such as UCL and the Bulgarian Cultural Institute in London. In addition, the development of relevant literary translation mentorship schemes for Bulgarian-English translators, together with the creation of a specific literary prize recognising translation from Bulgarian into English, could also heighten visibility. And interested bilingual members of the Bulgarian diaspora could also be approached, thus providing a potential source of literary translators who are fluent in the languages and the cultures of both the source and target

countries. However, it must be remembered that the development and promotion of such initiatives all depends on many different factors and impetuses, be they individual, institutional, or economic.

By way of conclusion

As these brief remarks have endeavoured to portray, the award of the 2023 International Booker Prize to *Time Shelter* has caused Bulgarian literature to burst onto the British literary and literary translation stage. As noted above, there has been strong media and commercial visibility since the award, as had been demonstrated by the moves made towards publishing two of Georgi Gospodinov's other works since then. Noting the (formerly) small demand, it appears that at present, literary translation from Bulgarian into English is concentrated in a small but high-quality group of literary translators, which nonetheless provides a solid basis for further development and expansion, such as through the creation of mentorship schemes for emerging literary translations, thereby increasing the pool of translational talent available. However, it is important to remember that it is still early days, and thus it remains to be seen how other translated works of Bulgarian literature fare on the British market, particularly with regard to its commercial and critical reception in the medium to longer term. This is especially true given that the publishing market, together with the wider (literary) translation industry, is also undergoing profound change, given the impact of modern-day factors such as advances in artificial intelligence and changing reading patterns and leisure habits. Yet, given these encouraging signs, it is clear that, as more and more works are translated from Bulgarian into English, the more visible Bulgaria and its literature will become on the shelves of bookshops not only in the United Kingdom, but also throughout the English-speaking world.

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