TRANSLATION CLASSICS IN CONTEXT

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CHAPTER 6

TRANSLATION AND THE CLASSIC

The Russian Case

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Introduction

The statement of the Lithuanian scholar, poet, and translator Tomas Venclova that the literature of most nations begins with translations (Venclova 1979: 111) is highly pertinent to the Slavs with their shared history of literacy[1] and especially one of its successors – Russian literature, which this study will focus on. Indeed, translated literature came to be a starting point for the nascent literature in Kyivan Rus'[2] and more than once acted as a powerful catalyst in its fate.

The very first texts were brought to the Slavs together with a script – initially the Glagolitic, eventually the Cyrillic alphabet – by the brothers Cyril (826–869) and Methodius[3] (815–885), later canonised as saints. They were sent from East Rome, which has later been termed the Byzantine Empire, by request of Prince Rastislav of Moravia, and arrived in Slavic lands in 862 as missionaries, which was very much in accordance with the Empire's interests. A spiritual transplantation was not possible without the sacred books and texts indispensable for promoting Christian teachings and message. As translation is crucial for the spread of ideas, a major translating project was undertaken by missionaries and their disciples after they had created a script. A written language, Old Church Slavonic,[4] 'as a written lingua franca for Orthodox Slavs' (Franklin 2002: 84), serving missionary aims by transmitting the sacred texts from Greek to a new Slavic context, is one of the greatest outcomes of that mission. It is not surprising, considering their purpose, that the body of texts transferred to the Slavs encompasses writings essential to the needs of Christian liturgy and life. This *corpus translationum* was later enlarged by South Slav translations and eventually by renderings and redactions made in Rus', but it still did not include any exegetic work of the

Fathers or any major philosophical work, being predominantly marked by Christian rigorism. As Francis J. Thomson (1999 XXI: 13) put it: 'Early Russia never received the humanist element in Byzantine culture …'

Sharp pejoratives have been reported about the fact that not a single classical[5] or secular works (with few exceptions) has been attested in the selection of books, which one would expect to find in a collection of writings obtained from such a superior culture as the Byzantine, the heir to the culture of classical Greece. The results, range, and content of the acculturation of the Greek intellectual heritage, which was originally common to all Slavs, were determined by the course of the mission, which unexpectedly encountered rivalry from the Western Church, leading to persecution from the German clergy in Salzburg and even to the imprisonment of Methodius. It is of particular interest that the major issue in this conflict concerned a fundamental aspect of reception practice: whether or not the liturgy should be translated into the language of the new congregation and celebrated in their own language. This issue came to have divisive consequences for the Slavs, resulting in two spiritual domains: *Slavia Orthodoxa* and *Slavia Romana*.[6] The latter, which adopted the Catholic faith, used Latin as the liturgical language, which also served as a gateway to the treasury of ancient literature. By contrast, the former, which followed the Eastern Orthodox Church and its own language, was deeply immersed in the reception of a new Christian paradigm of ideas, isolated 'from Western intellectual development' (Press 2007: 2).

It is understandable that the question of language and, consequently, the art of translation became crucial for access to the classical heritage of the ancient civilisations of Greece and Rome, but because of the different historical and geographical conditions, the experiences with the classical heritage varied considerably in different Slavic domains. Thus, Slavs in some Balkan towns in Croatia and Dalmatia identified themselves, even on a smaller scale during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as direct descendants of Roman settlers (Jovanovic 2017: 18), while other parts of the Slavic world, especially East Slavs, lacked such self-identification.[7] Therefore, it is neither possible nor justified to consider the translation practices among the Slavs as a common process. In the following, we will concentrate on translation issues in Rus' and one of its heirs, Russia, not least because the question of its classical heritage has given rise to scholarly debate and controversy.

It has been repeatedly pointed out that Rus' literature 'was not classically oriented' until the paradigmatic shift which began in earnest and systematically only in the early 18th century with Peter I (r. 1682–1725). A hard-line reformer, Peter explicitly guided a radical Westernisation of the country and opened it to an influx of new kinds of secular impulses from literary systems and models revived in the West during the Renaissance a few centuries earlier. It is thus only from the 1730s onwards that Russian literature begins to develop in step with Western literature (Terras 1991: 119).

However, all observations on the practice of text reception in pre-Petrine Rus' point to the dearth, or absence of consciousness, of the classical element within the Byzantine literary heritage. The few exceptions to the absence of classical antiquity in the body of the transmitted literature were hardly perceived as classical by the new audience in Rus'. Thus, a collection of Stoic ethical instructions, the *Encheiridion*, by the Greek philosopher Epiktetos, compiled in the 2nd century by a disciple of his, reached the Slavs in the 10th century. However, a pre-Christian adaptation to monastic ideals was made by omitting classical elements or lending them appropriate features, e.g. the philosophers became hermits or apostles (Bulanin 1991; Thomson 1999 VII: 308). Aphorisms and didactic sayings attributed to ancient writers and philosophers, now unnamed, distorted, and merged with Biblical and patristic quotations, were included in anthologies, such as *Zlatostruj* (mainly containing works by John Chrysostom) and *Pčela* (*Melissa*), which were translated in the late 12th or early 13th centuries (Obolensky 1982: VIII, 58; Thomson 1999 VII: 328). As mentioned above, the first selection of texts to be translated was subordinated to new homiletical needs. Thereafter, all formal writing culture in Rus' until Peter I had an ecclesiastical or edifying character. The search for the reasons for the absence of major classical works in philosophy, science, dogmatic theology and other secular literature in the transmitted text-corpus was to spark a heated controversy among scholars (more on this below).[8]

Curiously enough, when addressing the issue of translation and classics one is inevitably confronted with the remarkable rise of Russian literature: a culture initially ignorant of the aesthetic ideals of the classics gave birth to canonical writers and thinkers who would be considered classics in world literature. Scholars have referred to this as a paradox, since Russia's recent impact upon Europe's cultural heritage has been recognised as models of the world canon, placing it on a par with classical antiquities. Some scholars consider that Russian literature 'excelled in the novel to the extent that the Greeks and the English excelled in tragedy' (Morson 1998: 150). It has also been stated that 'the ten Russians [classic Russian authors] have found more readers in the past 30 years than the 50-odd Greeks and Romans' (Wes 1992: 3). And this is despite the fact that, unlike the rest of Europe, Russia did not benefit from the rediscovery of Greco-Roman antiquity during the European Renaissance (ibid.).

After all, it seems chronology is not a factor when it comes to accessing the classics. The latter varied considerably within Europe itself. Rather, it seems to be a question of how it has been naturalised by the receiving culture, how it has been acculturated, i.e. appropriated, utilised and converted into new values. The results of contact with the unfamiliar are intimately linked and correlated with the openness and receptivity of the mind, curiosity, and a great deal of courage to embrace the unknown in a melting pot of new ideas, concepts, and thoughts. Perhaps that is why Andrew Wachtel (1999: 54)

stated, 'Russia's manifest destiny was built not on any inherent quality of Russian culture itself but rather on its ability to absorb and perfect what it had taken from outside'. Wachtel highlights the nature of the Russian language as an important aspect of such a successful acculturation, which 'includes within itself qualities of world's major languages. It lends the language a flexibility and capaciousness that makes it an ideal vehicle for universal cultural translation' (ibid.: 55).

Historical Overview

Translations have defined the very nature of written literature in Kyivan Rus' in its coming into existence and later in Russian culture. From its emergence and down to the second half of the 18th century, translations constituted the bulk of all book production in Russia (Danilevskij 1995: 96). Translations have therefore been singularly formative to Russian minds. Two decisive moments in the text reception history of medieval Russia are particularly salient. The first one, as already mentioned, was conditioned by the baptism of Kyivan Rus' emblematically dated to 988[9] – a crucial historical point, which has had profound impact upon all the ensuing history of Slavic lands down to the present day.[10] In the first stage of this reception history, the canonical texts of Christianity formed the core of the translated corpus, which had been processed and assembled in the mid-9th century in Moravia and after 885 in Bulgaria. It has been highlighted that 'in this selection there was no place for the classics of ancient Greek literature, still read and studied by educated "humanists" in Byzantium …' (Børtnes 1992: 5, see also Franklin 1983: 519, Podskalsky 1996: 131–132, 434–435). It has also been stressed that in terms of content and volume, the transmitted collection of writings reflects a set of manuscripts that could be found in a medium-sized Byzantine monastic library limited to the 'basic essentials of Christianity' (Thomson 1999 VII: 304). Apart from Scripture, it included homilies, hagiography, collections of monastic sayings, the Nomocanon (canon law),[11] and exegetical texts. Secular literature was represented to a much lesser degree. There were, in broad terms, some historiographical works, one geographical work, and a few fictions, the latter however assigned a Christian guise. They are (roughly): theology – Michael Synkellos' *On Orthodox Faith*; history – the chronicles of John Malalas (d. 570s), George Hamartolos (mid-800s) and George Synkellos (d. after 810), and the *Jewish War* of Josephus Flavius; hagiography – the *Life of Basil the Great*, and apophthegmatic collections (in Slavonic known as *paterika*); apocrypha – the *Apocalypse* of Methodius of Patara (Pseudo-Methodius d. c. 311); the geographical work of Kosmas Indikopleustes' (6th century) *Christian Topography*; narratives of fictional or half fictional character – the *Tale of Barlaam and Joasaph*, the *Alexandriad* (the poem of Diogenes Akrites), and other mainly secular or half-secular works.[12]

> The sole theoretical work on rhetoric ever translated was an abridged
> version of George Choiroboskos' *On poetic tropes*, which was translated
> in the late ninth-early tenth century, not out of an interest in rhetoric but
> as an introduction to the varying approaches to Biblical exegesis.
>
> *(Thomson 1999 VII)*

Although one could sometimes find motifs, allusions, reminiscences, and
mentions of classical authors, and even instances of pre-Christian philoso-
phical concepts or elements of mythology interpolated into the lives of the
saints, these texts were filtered through a Christian and above all ascetic lens.

The second crucial moment for the reception of texts in medieval Rus'
is related to the Ottoman conquest of South Slavic territories in the Bal-
kans at the turn of the latter part of the 14th century. Prominent figures of
monasticism came to Rus' with a wave of immigrants from the Balkans
and later, after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, also from Byzantium.[13]
The period from the end of the 14th century onwards had resulted in a
new influx of writings, which meant a significant increase in the transla-
tions available in Rus', including retranslations and new copies of earlier
translations. Outside the Slavic realms, new translations were made in the
last quarter of the 15th century and the first quarter of the 16th century in
the scriptoria of the monasteries of the Mount Athos with the involvement
of Serbian monks. The list of texts conveyed to Rus' in this period is the
subject of constant scrutiny by scholars. It was recently revised to include
several secular works.[14]

The Classics now reached Rus' in sporadic translations from Latin and as
an echo of European humanism. In 1518, the works of the Greek philoso-
phers Aristotle and Plato, albeit in an Orthodox Christian guise, reached
Muscovy with the Greek literati, such as Michael Trivolis[15] (known as Max-
imos the Greek or Maximos the Philosopher), who after more than a decade
of study in Italy and a stay in a Dominican monastery, had been commis-
sioned as translator in Moscow. Translations from Greek and from Latin
were made by Maximos the Greek himself, by his companion Dmitrij Ger-
asimov (who was also acquainted with several Renaissance scholars), Theo-
dor Karpov, and other followers. One of these was Prince Andrej Kurbskij
(1528–1583), known as the first Russian dissident. Although initially a con-
fidant of Ivan the Terrible, Kurbskij became his adversary and took refuge in
Lithuania in 1564. From his exile, where Kurbskij devoted himself to studying
Plato and Cicero, he sent accusatory letters to the Tsar. The last, from 1579,
contained two chapters of Cicero's rhetorical treatise *Stoic Paradoxes* in
Russian translation (Wes 1992: 23). Furthermore, secular translations from
languages other than Greek were also made in the second half of the 15th
century in neighbouring Lithuania, and an influx of translations from Latin
and Polish executed in Lithuania reached Muscovy in the second half of the
16th century.

The real increase in translation activity from Latin and Polish, however, occurs in the second half of the 17th century during the rule of Tsar Alexej (r. 1645–1676). A large proportion of the translators during that period were Greek, Polish, Moldavian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian immigrants – a stream of educated 'humanists who viewed classical antiquity as an integral part of culture' (Thomson 1999 VII: 346).[16] The first of four translations of Aesop's *Fabulae* (a highly domesticated one) was made from Polish in 1609 by Theodore Gozvinskij in Moscow. The translation activity of this period, with its first influx of translations from Latin originals, can be seen as a kind of praeexercitamina for the coming period of Peter I's Westernising project. Nevertheless, it was not a matter of a conscious translation policy of the classics, but rather quotations and references conveyed via secondary sources. Francis Thomson summarises that the glimpses of classical allusions brought to Muscovy in this period must be seen as

> an exotic import entirely foreign to early Russian culture and it came to form an important element in the clash between the old cultural tradition and the new, which ultimately led to a schism in Russian society and the church.
>
> *(Ibid.)*

The real and definitive paradigm shift in Russian culture occurred only in the 18th century under Peter I, when the history of literary reception in Russia underwent a complete change of course towards new and mostly scientific texts and instruction books as a means of satisfying the needs of the sweeping transformation project with its newly opened technical schools and academies. Once more, translation met vital requirements of society, this time serving the utilitarian necessities of new technologies. Peter's extensive modernisation programme, also taken up by Ekaterina (Catherine) II (r. 1762–1796), broke the more than eight-century-long marginal (from a Eurocentric point of view) position of medieval Russia, opening the country not only to pioneering stream of ideas and innovations but also to foreign experts in every conceivable field of society, which eventually brought Russia on par with its European neighbours and brought the country from the backyard into the salons of the European enlightened élite. Peter's ground-breaking changes at all levels and in all structures of social life, emulating the patterns and experiences of Europe, required an unprecedented translation effort. The translation project, in turn, was in need of a new educational system and learning organisation, different from the ecclesiastical one. A large number of translators from abroad – Polish, Ukrainian, German, and Swedish – were assigned to translate from their own languages as well as from Latin. A new generation of young people (exclusively sons of the aristocratic establishment) formed a new stratum of literati, educated in Europe, in environments which at that time constituted the centre of liberty-loving humanistic ideas with a

particular predilection for classical (Greek and Roman) literature. Several of them became influential writers and translators, intermediaries of a new kind of secular literature, introducing philosophy, political science, law, fiction, poetics, and most major Latin and Greek classics.

Translations made in this period acted as a powerful motivator, introducing new genres, new diction, and new technologies into the system of the receiving Russian culture. From that time on, translation activity in Russia took on a new and much more extensive secular dimension, which now also focused on profane matters. Although it had always been an important part of the literary system in Russia, translation now became a matter of national importance, with the ruler personally involved in the choice of works to be translated and in the translation activity itself. Peter's personal commitment to modernising the culture of writing led to the simplification of the latter, the use of the civil typeface instead of that of Church Slavonic, and stimulated the press and printing. The revolutionary, comprehensive and brutal reform programme, initiated by the monarch himself, increased the importance of book culture and literacy. Now the selection of classic works to translate, as works to learn from and models to imitate, appears more systematic and deliberate.

It was in the 1730s when humanists and enlightened intellectuals such as Antiox Kantemir, Vasilij Trediakovskij, Mixail Lomonosov, and Aleksandr Sumarokov wrote and translated directly from Latin, that Russian readers were purposefully introduced to the Classics. Therefore, this period is considered a watershed in the history of the reception of the Classics in Russia (as we saw, the rediscovery of Greco-Roman antiquity during the Renaissance in Western Europe had never reached Russia). It was only after Peter's thoroughgoing transformation and Catherine's further empire-building 'Greek Plan'[17] that the reception of the classics in Russia became widespread (Kalb 2017: 472).

Critical Issues and Topics

As noted, key aspects of early text reception in Rus' have been the subject of sustained and lively scholarly debate. Two important and recurrent questions have been particularly salient: the non-transferred educational praxis in connection with book transmission from Byzantium to Kyivan Rus' (Golubinskij 1901), and the aforementioned lack of a secular component within the repertoire of translated literature in Rus', especially the lack of classical antiquity and Byzantine theological works. The scarcity of exponents of the classical tradition in Rus' has been strongly emphasised in terms unusual in the scholarly debate. Commenting on the fact that the classical literary heritage did not reach the Slavs in the early waves of adopted literature, scholars wonder: Why did Byzantium not transmit their ancient treasures to Rus', or rather, why did Rus' not care to receive them (Fedotov 1946: 39)? Georges Florovsky suggested that it was in fact a 'crisis of Byzantine culture in the Russian spirit' (Florovsky 1937/1983).

The centuries before Russia's Westernisation, i.e. pre-Petrine Rus', have been seen as an age of darkness, of no civilisation, characterised only by a poor literacy that only sufficed for reading and copying texts.[18] Fedotov exclaimed, 'the poverty of intellectual culture in ancient Russia is amazing. For seven centuries – that is, until the seventeenth – we know of no scientific work in Russian literature, not even a dogmatic treatise' (Fedotov 1946: 38). The mental and cultural state of an entire region has thus been described in terms such as 'intellectual poverty', the 'dwarfed Russian intellect' (ibid., 40) and 'the voiceless almost dumbness of early Russian culture' (Florovsky 1937/ 1983). It was also Georges Florovsky who, wondering whether there was a state of silence or reflection in Kyivan Rus', coined the idiom the '*intellectual silence*' of Russia[19], by claiming: 'The most disquieting question in the history of Old Russian culture is this: What was the reason for what can be described as its intellectual silence?' (see also Florovsky 1962).

In the 1990s, Francis Thomson revived the debate on 'the intellectual bankruptcy of the Russian people' (Thomson 1999 I: 118–120). He points out that

> … the very idea of classical antiquity as an essential part of culture was absent. The corpus of available translations did not provide an adequate foundation or stimulus for the development of serious original intellectual thought in the sphere of theology, let alone philosophy.
>
> *(Thomson 1999 VI: 195)*

Thomson's publications triggered a wave of retorts to his claims of a highly idiosyncratic abnormality in Rus' text reception. Several explanations have been put forward for such an irregularity. The main argument has been the linguistic disservice caused by the benevolent missionary effort to present the faith in Slavonic translation, as opposed to the West Slavic area, where Latin came to be 'a key to salvation' (Thomson's wording, 1999). Another argument points to the obscurantism of the Orthodox Church, with its lack of 'stimulus to intellectual enquiry, which led to an unquestioning observance of rites without a true understanding of their meaning' (Thomson 1999 XI: 3).

The reaction of the scholarly community, particularly in Russia, was defensive, justifying the limited volume, on the one side, and the thematic narrowness, on the other, of the literature translated. Speaking of the early period's lack of receptivity and the inability or unwillingness to embrace the Byzantine classical heritage, some scholars suggested that Rus' seemed to be paralysed by the charm of Byzantine civilisation, by its 'perfection, completeness, and harmony' (Florovsky 1962: 14). Others in turn pointed to the inability of Byzantine culture to transmit its cultural heritage to the Slavs and spoke of Byzantium's cultural

> 'autism', which could not succeed in most of its missionary projects because of, among other things, an ideology suffering from lethargy,

insensitivity and arrogance (Ivanov 2003: 339, 343). It has also been proposed that 'the Slav translators, in dealing with their Byzantine heritage, evidently made a conscious effort to avoid those large and complex works that a newly converted public would have found hard to understand'.

(Ivanov and Turilov 1996: 284)

Some voices have warned that comparing cultures in this way is problematic. They argue that using the same yardsticks the identical conclusions can be reached for any other location where the circumstances are similar to those in Rus', i.e. an inferiority of culture before turning to Europe (Temčin 2001). The most recent contribution to this discourse by Donald Ostrowski (2018) offers an analysis of the historical and ideological circumstances surrounding the inheritance of the classics by both the Western and Eastern parts of the Roman Empire. He too points out the Church as the mediator of culture transmission in both cases, but traces the difference in outcomes in *Slavia Romana* and *Slavia Orthodoxa* to the difference in *mentalité* and epistemology between the two Churches (Ostrowski 2018: 37).

Scholars have also been preoccupied with scouring the Slavonic body of translated texts for classical elements and allusions to antique mythology, quotations, and names of philosophers in florilegia, and even a couple of historiographic works (Radcig 1971: 3–65, Tvorogov 1979: 3–31, Franklin 1983: 507–537, Bulanin 1991). However, such reflections of Classical antiquity are in fact an integral part of all Christian literature 'simply because Christianity is the eldest daughter of the antiquity', as Robert Bolgar (1981: 708) affirms. There is plenty of evidence that pagan components were woven into Byzantine hagiography, as 'a result of the confluence of elements from the old pagan literature and Christian literature, with its new content and ideas' (Speranskij 1904: 47).

This entire polemic reflects the zeitgeist of our polarised time. It seems that two opposite positions have emerged. On one side of the barricade was a politicised historiography with tendencies to capitalise on the early history of Rus' and to glorify it in an unreasonable and exaggerated way. On the other side – scholars who are trying to counter Russia's imperialist appropriation of East Slavic history (which, incidentally, has taken on new disastrous dimensions today). But criticism of Russia's 'backwardness' had in fact already been voiced by earlier Russian intellectuals. Thus, in his *Lettres philosophiques*, written in French and circulated between 1826 and 1831, Pëtr Čaadaev (1794–1856) mercilessly condemned the primitive nature of Russian culture as defined and inculcated by the Orthodox Church. Pëtr Čaadaev's view of his own homeland's sole contribution to world history as an example too repugnant for other nations to follow precipitated the split in the Russian intellectual community which is still ongoing between *Zapadniki* ('Westernisers') and *Slavophiles* (defenders of Russia's own distinctive way). In the first quarter of the 19th century, i.e. in the very prelude to Russian literature and philosophy,

Čaadaev proclaimed that Russia had yet to contribute a single original idea to the history of thought. His philosophical letters influenced the scholarly debate on the development of Russia in general and on the history of reception in Russian culture in particular.

Current Contributions and Research

The controversy over the *intellectual silence* of Rus' began long before research fields such as translation studies, postcolonial studies, and reception theory emerged. By highlighting the lack of reciprocity and the inherent power imbalance in 'cultural dialogues', these fields have nuanced the scholarly discourse on reception history, and a strong awareness of the power relations in, for example, text transmission have emerged (see, for instance, Tymoczko 1999). This awareness is important for understanding the role of translations in shaping national identity. It is also important for understanding the cultural and historical role of translations, since as a dialectical force within cultural evolution they have the ability to reshape not only the receiving culture's literary polysystem (Tynjanov 1967; Even-Zohar 1990) but also the perception of the same. Being an integral part of a literary paradigm, translations can act as an innovative force that forms the national literary polysystem.

When it comes to the literary system of early Rus', scholars usually speak of a literature that 'in a certain sense emerged in a vacuum, as it was not derived from folklore, like Greek or Latin literature', and at the same time it was not part of 'any continuum of succession from the ancient literatures with their rhetorical organization' (Živov 2005: 722). This view agrees well with Dmitrij Lixačëv's earlier statement on the subject, i.e. that it is meaningless to talk about influence during the first stage of the reception history, because there was nothing to influence: 'Byzantine literature could not influence Russian literature, since the latter simply did not exist' (Lixačev 2014: 21). The first translations to reach Rus', in this understanding, seem simply to have had nothing to interact with.

What is not taken into consideration in these interpretations is that they are derived from observations based only on the written component of the receiving culture. Yet, increasingly, scholars find elements of orality even in works of classical antiquity.[20] Moreover, researchers believe that the oral dimension of written texts, long underestimated by the scholarly community, retained its function until late antiquity and even beyond (Ercolani and Lulli 2022a: VII). A culture with no written language would in all likelihood have had an oral tradition of storytelling in the construction of collective memory and for the cultural transmission of knowledge and wisdom fundamental if not existential to the shaping of a collective identity.[21] In that sense, no written culture arises in a vacuum, since the oral culture is the predecessor of the written one. Such an understanding of the oral component of the early

written culture can also be applied to the texts conveyed to Kyivan Rus'. It is thus likely that the inherited textual culture may have appealed to and even interacted with native oral narratives, calling for a revision of our perceptions which has been further enabled by the growing scope of the birch bark letter finds – unique written evidence of the spoken language in early Rus'.

In addition, the relationship between early monasticism and the philosophical formation has been reinterpreted by recent research. There is a growing awareness that in times of cultural transition and the rise of monasticism, in search for teaching forms as well as learning methods 'models were taken from established collections of classical texts'.[22] This is also true of the tradition of collected stories, such as the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, whether it concerns the underlying idea of such compositions or their function in both secular and monastic school settings, when teaching language and rhetoric (Searby 2020: 91). Rather than dichotomising the early monastic and the philosophical formation, Samuel Rubenson argues, they need to be studied as a continuum of an educational tradition, without denying differences in interpretation and social status, because in training and educating within the monasteries they must have used learning patterns and schooling traditions familiar to them from the surrounding society (Rubenson 2012). Not only the form, but also the content of the Christian teaching is closely related to Classical literary traditions and the ethos of Greek Stoic philosophy (Rubenson 2004).

In any case, the reception history of Rus' and one of its successors Russia is a remarkable example of the integration of the foreign into its cultural system. Ending up at the very heart of the nascent literature translations became a strongly defining cultural factor. Over time, however, as Russian literature took shape, the inherent dynamics of competing elements led to the relegation of translated literature to the periphery of its cultural polysystem, which, interestingly enough, coincided broadly with the rise of imperialist self-image in recent centuries. The peculiarity of Russia's cultural polysystem lies in its bipolar duality: from being an inferior illiterate recipient to becoming a superior multicultural power admired by former masters.

For a better understanding of this complexity, complementary theoretical models of postcolonial studies are useful, enabling us to look at the relationship between cultures involved in a transmission *vis-à-vis* reception as rarely symmetrical or reciprocal. This activity is characterised by inequality, a one-way flow of texts, the perceived superiority of the contributing culture, and the concomitant subordination of the receiving culture. In Rus', Byzantium has been worshipped as a role model and its culture has been considered highly desirable to emulate. As soon as Kyivan Rus' received the Byzantine system of values, it strove to conform itself to its system, endeavouring above all to emulate and copy Constantinople spiritually and culturally, in literature as well as in painting and architecture (Uspenskij 2002: 43, 50).[23]

The Byzantines, in turn, regarded the Slavs as ignorant and unsophisticated savages. The Slavs and their conversion were of strategic importance to the Byzantine Empire in its endeavour to extend its cultural and political influence (Herrin 1973, 2013: 33–57, see also Uspenskij 2008: 131–138). From the point of view of a Byzantine metropolitan élite, being engaged in the mission amongst the 'barbarians' was far from an attractive prospect. As Viktor Živov (2002: 79) put it, with a clear allusion to a parallel in colonial history: '... an enlightened Byzantine looked on life there [in Bulgaria] in the same way as a nineteenth-century Parisian regarded service in Algiers'. In fact, the orientation of Rus' towards Byzantine spiritual culture was a deliberate choice on the part of the ruler, the steps taken in this process were initially coercive in nature, such as the introduction and organisation of instruction practices witnessed in the Primary Chronicle (Uspenskij 2002: 35 and 43).[24] In other words, the subordinate Slavs were adopting literacy along with the liturgical language of their spiritually and culturally prestigious masters.

These features remind us in many ways of procedures typical of colonising. Various aspects of them are recognisable from those described in postcolonial studies, although we are obviously dealing with a colonisation of cultural or spiritual space rather than geographical. The language used by scholars when depicting the role of Byzantium in its cultural and religious interactions with the Slavs is unambiguous. Their vocabulary speaks in clear language of *Byzantinisation, Christianisation*, or *Hellenisation*, alongside *civilising* (Herrin (2008), Ševčenko, Uspenskij). In her discussion of aspects of Hellenisation in the early Middle Ages, Herrin (1973: 117) articulates it clearly by referring to *Greek colonisers*, while Ihor Ševčenko (1991 XXX: 231) speaks of *Byzantine cultural imperialism*. In due course Russia would become an 'ecclesiastical province of Constantinople' (Fedotov 1946: 21–22). In contrast, when analysing the other party in the historical interaction, i.e. Rus', one traditionally avoids identifying it as a colonised culture. This can be explained by the fact that the results of this civilising mission are perceived as entirely beneficial if not salvific by the receiving culture.

Returning to the body of texts transmitted to the Slavs, we find an ample body of edifying literature alongside the Scripture with an extraordinarily vital and fluid tradition of text transmission. These were timeless texts that circulated for centuries over a large area of the Christian world. About the Apophthegmata Patrum collections originated in Egypt in the 4th– 5th century Samuel Rubenson (2016: 10) states that 'belong, strangely enough, to Western literature's greatest classics of all time', using the term *classic* here in an extended and inclusive sense.

These books were ranked after the canonical liturgical texts in the hierarchy of Byzantine reception in Rus' (Børtnes 1992: 4). To judge by their vast popularity lives of saints might be compared to antique novels, having similar functionality and emotional effect on the reader. Victor Terras (1991: 25) placed the saint's lives on a par with classical narratives, calling them 'the

heroic epic of the church'. They appealed to the audience with their exciting plots, an intrinsic spirit of adventure and travelogue, dramatic turns and unexpected collisions, miracles, and at times exotic milieus, catching the audience's minds and imagination. Now cast in a hagiographic mould these stories also provided a strong moral compass.

These Byzantine accounts were wholeheartedly adopted by the newly converted audience. Collections of exciting stories that were conveyed to them in their own language provided prototypes for the emerging literature of Rus', which was shaped by two main principles: mimesis and compilation. These texts were taken not only as 'the models which all other texts should follow if they had any pretensions to literature' (Uspenskij 2002: 86), they also served as building blocks for indigenous composers in their storytelling providing them with pieces to paste into their own text collages. In this way, new stories were created.[25]

On the whole, compilation as a method was an established and well-trusted procedure. This practice seems not to have been restricted to the genres of hagiographic and apophthegmatic literature (these two, being genealogically kin, are not always easy to tell apart). This mosaic technique was widely used to make use of pieces of assorted material from different genres, arranging them into a new textual collage. Multiple evidence of active borrowing from Byzantine literature led Russian researchers to reconsider earlier prevalent overestimation of literary activity in Rus'. Thus, Anatolij Alekseev (1996: 279–280) stated: 'Nowadays we understand much better that the original literature of that period was founded on the principle of literary compilation and the manipulation of existing ideas, images and verbal formulae'.

The impact of the translation mission on Russian literary language is so significant that it led Boris A. Uspenskij (2002: 20) to characterise Russian literary language as having an 'extrovert orientation', that is to say, being directed towards the 'acquisition and incorporation of alien culture'. Uspenskij continues,

> In such a case, native culture is generally considered as a continuation of the alien culture. Thus, Russian book culture (or writing, education and so on – 'literature' in its direct etymological sense) was until the eighteenth century perceived as a continuation of Greek, and in the post-Petrine period of European culture.
>
> *(Ibid.)*

This observation on the character of this specific receiving culture certainly recalls the statement of Cyril Mango concerning Hellenic culture as merely plagiarising Babylonians, Chaldaeans, Egyptians, Hebrews, Phoenicians, and others in the domain of arts and sciences (Mango 1981: 54). This remark of Mango may be an attempt to challenge the strong and still dominant Eurocentric perspective when it comes to exploring the history of cultural

reception. At the same time, it goes to show that there was an inherent dynamic in most cultures to embrace ideas, to borrow stories and to imitate them. Moreover, imitation was for a long time a desirable approach and was highly recommended to authors. As Joachim Du Bellay's[26] famous manifesto from 1549 illustrates, contemporaneous literati were encouraged to copy the 'great Greeks' (Du Bellay 2001/1549). The manifesto of Du Bellay *La deffence, et illustration de la langue françoyse* symbolises the spirit of its time – the epoch of the Renaissance, its humanism and nostalgia for classical antiquity. His appeal to embrace the Greco-Roman classics is straightforward in its unmistakably nutritious vocabulary, as he encourages his contemporaries to imitate the aesthetics of the Greco-Roman models by using words like *devour, digest, turn into blood*, and *nourish*:

> *Immitant les meilleurs Aucteurs Grecz, se transformant en eux, les devorant, et apres les avoir bien digerez, les convertissant en sang, et nouriture, se proposant chacun selon son Naturel, et l'Argument qu'il vouloit elire, le meilleur Aucteur, don't ilz observoint diligemment toutes les plus rares, et exquises vertuz, et icelles comme Grephes, ainsi que j'ay dict devant, entoint, et apliquoint à leur Langue. Cela faisant (dy-je) les Romains ont baty tous ces beaux Ecriz, que nous louons, et admirons si fort: egalant ores quelqu'un d'iceux, ores le preferant aux Grecz.*
>
> *(Du Bellay 2001/1549: 91–92)*

> [Imitating the best Greek Authors, transforming himself into them, devouring them, and after having digested them well, converting them into blood and food, each proposing himself according to his Nature, and the Argument he wanted to elect, the best Author, of which they diligently observed all the rarest and most exquisite virtues, and these as Grephes, as I have said before, enjoined, and applied to their Language. This doing (as I say) the Romans beat all these beautiful Writings, which we praise, and admire so much: now equaling one of them, now preferring him to the Greeks.]

Du Bellay was convinced that, by imitating the classics, new eminent personalities of Greco-Roman rank would emerge among his compatriots. Before the notion of originality replaced the idea of imitation, the latter was a reliable way for European literature to convey the aesthetics of its superior masters, the Greco-Roman classics.[27] It seems that the literature of most European countries begins with imitations, to paraphrase Venclova's statement that opens this chapter.

Future Directions

The main point of this chapter is to highlight the interwoven nature of all storytelling, which could be likened to a carpet that, as it travels between

various cultures, is torn up and rewoven into a new work, a new composition in each new milieu. It is precisely this that makes storytelling universal in nature and makes it necessary for us to broaden the concept of the classic. Second, it indicates a shift in emphasis from questions of 'delay' in entering the European literary stage, from questions of whether a culture has entered the European literary scene at all, to exploring the remarkable phenomena that arise in the encounter between different cultural elements. In the case of the literature of Rus' and Russia, a culture 'born in translation', as Brian J. Baer (2016: 1–20) put it, which initially had no knowledge of 'classics', but which turned into an influential actor at the highest level, powerful enough to inspire other cultures. The once inferior literature itself gave birth to literary canons. Can this be explained by the felicitous interplay between the spirituality of Christian monasticism and the aesthetics of the European neoclassicism, both brought into Russia through translation? Given that no culture emerges in a vacuum and that literatures are developing dialogically we should reread texts intertextually and in a wider context. This might give unexpected results. Future analysis of the reception history of Russian literature should take into account theoretical approaches developed in the field of postcolonial studies. Such an approach might give reasonable explanations for some hitherto unexplained features of this particular text reception.

Conclusions

The literature of Rus' and Russia gives us convincing proof of mimetic writing, following models and norms established within Byzantine storytelling. A sort of 'text collaging' and imitation of one's Byzantine masters were practiced in medieval Rus' and later in Russia, displaying a shared legacy in text mediation.

If classics are interpreted as works that contain timeless and universal ideas and actions, then early medieval hagiographic and apophthegmatic texts are undoubtedly classics that have inspired new readings, new translations and reinterpretations. The fact that they remain a formative factor in Russian literature and identity even makes them timeless classics.

Notes

1 The common Slavonic literary tradition until the 11th century is generally considered homogenic, which makes it difficult to distinguish texts written in Rus' from those composed in other Slavic lands (Obolensky 1982: 57).
2 The principality of the East Slavs, Kyivan Rus', is the cultural cradle of present-day Belarusians, Russians, Rusyns, and Ukrainians. In three centuries (roughly estimated), from the end of the 9th and at least until the Mongol invasion of 1237–1240, Kyiv was the religious, political, and cultural centre of the East Slavs. Referring to common East Slav period between ca. 950 and 1300/early 1400 that can be characterised as 'the first phase of the emergence of the "land of the Rus" as a coherent entity with some degree of political, geographical and linguistic definition' (Franklin 2002: 1), I follow the scholarly tradition using the toponymic

words *Rus'* or *Kyivan Rus'* (also when including allusions to the language and the literature of Kyivan period). Whereas for the time of Moscow's becoming the ascendant principality in northeastern Rus' by its consolidation of the city-states and take-over of the position of Kyiv as pivot of power in the region, after the middle of the 14th century, the name *Muscovy* and the attribute *Muscovite* are used. Simplifying these complex processes, I use the term *Russian* (with double s) for the period which starts from the 14th century onward with regard to Russian writings divergent from the common East Slavonic.

3 For the transliteration of Cyrillic characters, romanisation principles applied in the *Encyclopedia of Slavic Languages and Linguistics* are used, while proper nouns are usually transliterated from their linguistically vernacular forms with exception of cases where established and recognisable anglicised variants are used.

4 In the scientific literature there are several competing terms for this written language, such as Old Bulgarian, Old Slavonic, and Old Church Slavonic.

5 As the term is used here, *the classics* refers to the literary legacy of the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome, while *the classical tradition* designates 'the influence, which the exploitation of that heritage is able to exert' (Bolgar 1981: 7). In fact, Robert Bolgar advocates for a broader understanding of the notion, comprehending all aspects of human activity, not just 'exalted spheres of literary, philosophical and artistic achievement, more than just masterpieces', since several aspects of European culture, usually not associated with the classical tradition, such as Christianity, occultism, allegory, and the novel had their roots in Greece and Rome. This is indeed a fair view on the complexity of classical antiquity. Nevertheless, our issue and aims impose on us the need to keep our focus strictly on issues of text transmission.

6 *Slavia Orthodoxa* ranges over 'the spiritual community of Balkan and Eastern Slavs', while *Slavia Romana* embraces the western lands of Czechs, Poles, Slovenes, and Croats (Picchio 1984: 250 and Picchio 1991/2003).

7 As Francis Thomson expressed it 'Whereas the ruins of classical cities and temples in the Balkan may have given the South Slavs a vague inkling of the grandeur of classical antiquity, this was clearly not the case in Russia' (Thomson 1999 VII: 343).

8 Some scholars believe that the 'linguistic autonomy' and narrow text transmission, precluding access to Greek literature, 'conveyed an attitude of profound hostility, scorn, and suspicion not only to the Roman church but also toward everything Western' (Terras 1991: 16).

9 This fact has been described as a paradoxical outcome of the Christianising mission, as the latter initially had not targeted Rus'. On the mission of Cyril and Methodius and the introduction of a writing system among Slavs, see, for instance, Ševčenko 1982: V, 225; Dvornik 1970; Obolensky 1994; Schenker 1995; Podskalsky 1996; Franklin 2002.

10 This more than millennia of history is being distorted and capitalised today by Moscow in order to justify its ruthless acts of war against Kyiv.

11 On Rus' reception of the Byzantine legislation, see Franklin 2002: 132–171. On the Nomokanon transmitted in this first body of texts, its dating and attribution, see also Thomson (1999 I: 113–114).

12 For a detailed chronological overview of the reception of classical antiquity in early Rus', see Francis Thomson 1999 VII: 303–364.

13 By the reign of Ivan IV Terrible (1533–1584), after throwing off Mongolian overlordship and the annexation of Rus' principalities, Muscovy emerged more and more as the sole Orthodox state, viewing itself as the successor of Byzantium (see for example Thomson 1999 VII: 306). The interaction between power and the church created the conditions for the doctrine of Moscow, *The Third Rome*. Today, several historians contend that the concept carried marginal, if any, weight for the secular rulers of 16th-century Muscovy and actually gained real importance only in the 19th century (Poe 1997; Ostrowski 2006).

14 It has also been shown that unlike the first Bulgarian period of text reception, which had preserved mainly in Russian copies, this time translations from this period were predominantly Serbian (Turilov 2014: 329).

15 More in detail in Wes's *Classics in Russia*. Dmitrij Čiževskij (1971: 62) opines that it is certainly true that Maxim 'had studied in Italy, where he met proponents of humanism, but his sympathies lay rather with the antihumanism of Savonarola'. Girolamo Savonarola (1452–1498) was a rebellious republican and puritan preacher who, among other things, called for a Christian renewal. He condemned clerical corruption, despotic rule and exploitation of the poor. For his ideas, Savonarola was executed in Florence. Nowadays he is considered by some to be an important forerunner of the Reformation.

16 After the Polish-Lithuanian period, Ukrainian and Belarusian literati played a crucial role in the transmission of texts to the Moscow Church, as they had direct access to Latin translations (see for example Wes 1992 and Thomson 1999). This fact led Thomson to paraphrase Horace's verse ii, 1, 156–157: '*Ucraina capta ferum victorem cepit et artes intulit agresti Russiae*' (Thomson 1999 VII: 348), which means 'Ukraine the captive took her savage victor captive and brought the arts into rustic Russia'.

17 The Greek Plan put forward by Catherine II in the early 1780s was aimed at restoring the Byzantine Empire.

18 This has actually been contradicted by excavation finding of numerous birch bark letters.

19 For a systematic overview of this debate, see Ostrowski 2018.

20 See the two volumes *Rethinking Orality I* and *Rethinking Orality II* edited by Andrea Ercolani and Laura Lulli (2022) and Ercolani et al. (2022).

21 On the pedagogical function of liturgical choral singing, see Susan Ashbrook Harvey (2020), who in her study of the choral tradition in the Syrian Church has found that women's liturgical singing preserves evidence of the oral tradition, as they recite the knowledge and wisdom in which they have been trained and which they have been educated to pass on.

22 Rubenson, Samuel, 'Monasticism and the Philosophical Heritage'. In: Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, Oxford Handbooks (2012; online edn, Oxford Academic, 21 November 2012), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195336931.013.0015 (accessed 25 September 2022).

23 The reorientation of Rus' was all-embracing: churches were erected after prestigious Byzantine models, other examples of Constantinopolitan architecture were built, customs were adopted, and rituals imported. In this process of cultural reorientation, personal names changed in the receiving culture – an acculturation reflected in birch-bark letters found in Novgorod and other Russian towns. They eloquently manifest how pagan Russian names were almost completely replaced by Christian names, allowing the researcher to trace the process of this truly paradigmatic shift in Old Russian anthroponymy (see Zaliznjak 2004: 205 and 211–216).

24 Historians have offered various accounts of this, see, for instance, Ševčenko 1982 and 1991; also works cited in Dimitri Obolensky 1994.

25 For more about this see Karine Åkerman Sarkisian (forthcoming) 'Transmission Practices in the Early Hagiography of Medieval Rus''.

26 The French poet and humanist Joachim Du Bellay (1522–1560) influenced linguistic processes of codification and standardisation of French during the second half of the 16th century. www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/personnage/Joachim_Du_Bellay/108261 (accessed 8 June 2018).

27 On remakes and adaptations of works of Greek philosophers in Golden Age Rome and Europe, including Greece, see, for instance, Mikhail Speranskij (1904: 45).

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