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TRANSLATION AND IDEOLOGY: THE TRANSLATION OF CRIME FICTION IN BULGARIA DURING THE COLD WAR

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Abstract: Crime fiction during the Cold War era served as a link between the two sides of the Iron Curtain. Since such a link was impossible in practice, it had to be simulated. This paper discusses the mechanism of this simulation. In communist Bulgaria, crime fiction was often translated. This was no accident, since it was acknowledged by communist ideology as a "low" genre that symbolized the West's downfall and the total breakdown of its culture under the hegemony of capitalist consumerism. The communist government exposed the West's true nature through the translation of crime novels, namely its mercantilism, people's willingness to do everything for money, including committing crimes, and its total lack of morality.

Keywords: crime fiction; Bulgaria; West; translation; ideology.

Crime fiction had an ambiguous presence in socialist society. On the one hand, it was synonymous with 'low' mass art, representing one of the most hateful aspects of the capitalist way of life for socialism: the enjoyment of elementary human passions, of morally reprehensible motives for crime, and the greedy desire for luxury and wealth that crime novels inflame by showing us the life of high society.

On the other hand, although crime fiction was often seen as bourgeois from a Marxist perspective—since it typically neglected the working class and focused on the lives and settings of the wealthy—it was nonetheless widely translated and read. In the People's Republic of Bulgaria, as Communist Bulgaria was called, there were two series of crime fiction: "Ray" and "Crime Series"[1]. Many of the published titles in these series were translations. They mostly featured classic writers of crime fiction, such as Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Georges Simenon, and Boileau-Narcejac, but also others who subverted conventional crime narratives, such as Patricia Highsmith.

In a context where crime literature was publicly condemned as the product of a hostile culture, why was there still such a strong interest in the genre? This was not simply a random occurrence or the product of chance. There was little room for spontaneity or inadvertence in socialist literature, which was constantly regulated by a number of formal and informal censorship organizations. Authors were instructed on what to say and do, and adhered to the concept of "self-censorship." Publishing a book and promoting its author—which was impossible without the authority of censorship—stimulated the public's interest in that book or writer. This same authority presided over translations as well, particularly when it came to Western literature.

Literature under socialism had to be controlled not only because of the fear of infiltration of propaganda hostile to the official ideology but also because of the special place literature occupied in socialist society. Unlike today, literature held a high position in the communist world, much more important than that of music or visual arts, even more so than cinema. This was because Marxist philosophy is based on history, on narrative; it is itself a story about how the oppressed classes suffer under the yoke of the rich, how they will stage a revolution and free themselves from the domination of capital, building a just world. Beside history, stories also exist in literature, which explains why literature mattered so much. Every narrative in communist society must, overtly or covertly, reflect the grand narrative of the regime. Censorship was constantly ensuring that this was the case.

The overt dissemination of the grand narrative was the work of propaganda, and literature played an important role in this. Subordinated to the method of socialist realism, it must transform the prescriptions of authority into plots and verses. It was precisely the ideological control over literature that explains one of the key features of crime fiction during the communist period: its impossibility. In Bulgarian literature, from 1945 until 1990, up until the fall of the Berlin Wall, there were no crime novels. A different type of text took their place: spy stories. Indeed, crime fiction was fundamentally impossible under

[1] "Lach" and "Kriminalna poresica" (all translations into English are mine).

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socialism, as socialism claimed to be the most just society. If this were so, crime could not exist, as the reasons for it would be absent: people's needs were supposedly met, and they had no need to break the law to obtain what they believed they needed. Therefore, crime could only come from outside of the society: from infiltrated agents of the West, from traitors working for capitalist secret services, and from the so-called "former people"—those associated with pre-communist political conditions. Interestingly, the spy literature that replaced crime fiction under socialism was often called "crime fiction." This was not a random mistake but had its own ideological motivations: in socialism, crime could only be political.

For example, Bogomil Raynov's novellas *The Inspector and the Night*, *A Man Returns from the Past*, and *Brazilian Melody*, collected in the volume *Three Encounters with the Inspector* (1970) are closer in spirit to noir than to the traditional detective story (Rainov 1970). The emblematic elements of the crime narrative are all present: a crime, a detective, and the unexpected solution of the enigma. Yet, unlike what happens in the classic whodunit, the detective here is not a detached figure described from a distance, without insight into his motives — here, he narrates the story himself. Thus, the text achieves a characteristic feature of noir, which Tzvetan Todorov highlights in *The Typology of Detective Fiction*: the coincidence of the story of the crime with the story of its detection[2].

However, in each of the crimes described in these novellas there is an element that places it outside the bounds of "socialist reality." In *The Inspector and the Night*, the murdered man was a wealthy individual before September 9th, and his brother, who had emigrated to the West, used to send him dollars[3]. In *A Man Returns from the Past*, as the title itself suggests, the plot again involves a trace of the "fascist past": the victim had been a member of the commercial organization *Kometa*, which had dealings with the Nazis. In *Brazilian Melody*, the suspects are young people who do not take part in "socialist construction" but instead lead a bohemian lifestyle; suspicion falls most heavily on a character called Magda Koeva, who has "casual and frequent relationships with foreigners." In the first two novellas, the contradiction with socialist society does not stem from the fact that the criminal is a political enemy. The implication of *The Inspector and the Night* and *A Man Returns from the Past* lies within the framework of Lenin's understanding that the perpetrator of a crime cannot be associated with the state of the victorious proletariat — for in such a state, crime cannot exist[4].

For this reason, it was only natural that crime should be placed outside the community formed as a result of the successful socialist revolution. Pavel Vezhinov's novella *A Snuffbox* tells the story of a murder committed in a hotel at the capital's airport (Veginov 1981). However, it turns out that neither the perpetrator nor the victim is Bulgarian. Until the very last page, the story unfolds within the sphere of private existence. It revolves around money and an exceptionally expensive snuffbox that came from the Orient — once belonging

[2] See Todorov (1978: 9-21) "Typologie du roman policier" in *Poétique de la prose*.
[3] The pro-Soviet communist regime was established in Bulgaria on September 9, 1944.
[4] See Lenin (1918/1993/1999), *The State and Revolution*.

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to an Ottoman sultan. Yet, in the end, the narrative acquires another dimension: the murderess, a *femme fatale*, had worked for the Nazis.

Yanko Stanoev's novel *The River of Parting*, published in the prestigious crime literature series *Lach* in the year of "perestroika" — 1985 — also employs the device of a first-person narrator (Stanoev 1985). But here the story is told not by the detective, but by the criminal himself. The novel "speaks" from the perspective of a young man from the social periphery, deprived of family support and exposed to the influence of an environment that drives him toward breaking the law. Yet this does not mean that the young man's situation results from the society in which he lives. On the contrary, he receives support from the "great family" of society in the person of a representative of authority — the neighborhood police sergeant, who impresses him with stories about the war. It is precisely to this sergeant that the young man reveals the plan for the crime he is about to commit, urged on by his "friends." And he does not regret his action: "...I don't think I've taken a place in the despised society of informers and traitors." (Stanoev 1985: 58). By refusing to become a criminal, the protagonist becomes a worker.

The device whereby the narrator in a novella is himself the potential perpetrator of the crime— testifying in the first person about what has happened — is a common technique in the later development of crime fiction. Yet, in the context of the relationship between crime literature and socialism, it carries a different meaning. Since socialist society eliminates the conditions for the emergence of criminality, which is nothing more than an ephemeral phenomenon, it is logical for the criminal to be aware of his guilt and to be regarded as a credible source of truth about his own actions. The Stalinist trials of the 1930s, in which the accused testified against themselves, may appear as sinister caricatures of judicial proceedings, but they were fully consistent with the norms of socialist society. Nothing could be more natural than for an enemy of the people to say, "I am an enemy," and for his words to serve as grounds for a conviction — since it was only fitting that the criminal should identify himself as such when living in a world where crime, by definition, cannot exist.

The first-person narrator in *The River of Parting*, having turned to crime, has no other option than to confide in the sergeant about the planned criminal act, without considering himself as an informer. Such are the expectations of socialist justice "Often," asserts the lawyer Stefan Pavlov, "the person brought to answer in this [criminal] proceeding deeply recognizes his guilt before the state and society, before his comrades and relatives, repents of his anti-social deeds, and makes a wholehearted, sincere confession" (Pavlov 1966: 19). Yanko Stanoev's work, of course, is no exception. In Pavel Vezhinov's novella *An Incident on the Quiet Street* (1960), the main character, Dr. Nenov, runs over a child with his car and takes him into his home, where he treats him. In the end he decides to admit his guilt and return the missing boy. A key role in his decision is played by his own son. "I am a Pioneer," the child says… "I am not a bandit to have to hide… Dad, you must turn yourself in!" He then adds: "I will turn you in." (Vezhinov 1967: 152).

The notion that crime in socialist society is fundamentally impossible — and that, if it does occur, it is most likely driven by political motives — is not merely

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a theoretical or ideological concept, but is also thematized in socialist literature. In the novella by Kostadin Kyulyumov and Ventseslav Diavatov (the pseudonym of the poet and translator Stefan Getchev), *The Girl and the Traitor* (also published in the *Lach* [*The Ray*] series), the story begins with an old man being attacked on a train. This criminal act is not a murder, since the old man survives. Yet the case is not handled by a criminal investigator — it is immediately transferred to Major Kalinov of the counterintelligence service, who uncovers the hostile plot hidden behind the incident (Kyulyumov and Diavatov 1964).

The Girl and the Traitor presents us with a recurring pattern in the "crime" literature of socialism. The role of the detective is typically taken by a character bearing military rank — a major, lieutenant colonel, captain, or lieutenant, most often a major. Never a general. The general oversees the actions of the major from above. He is both a father and a friend. The balance between father and friend protects the plot from an Oedipal rebellion. The general observes Major Kalinov's behavior in *The Girl and the Traitor* carefully and with understanding, just as he does that of Lieutenant Colonel Panov and Major Ivanov in Slavcho Radivoev's *Operation "The Wild Pear"*, published in the *Track* (*Sleda*) series of the State Military Publishing House (1966). And when, through Operation "The Wild Pear," the gang of *goryani–bandits* ("Real *goryani*, that is, bandits," says Major Ivanov)[5] is defeated, the narrator concludes the story with the final sentence: "And as he [the general] sat down between his two assistants [Panov and Ivanov], he embraced them in friendship" (Radivoev 1966: 30).

The more complex issue lies with the hidden realization of the grand narrative of the regime. I would distinguish it from propaganda and define it as ideology. Ideology is not associated with the direct and explicit presence of the prescriptions of power. Rather, it involves their diffusion and dispersal, a masking of power's influence by presenting it as something different, unrelated to power—arbitrary and sudden, rather than the result of premeditation.

Louis Althusser sees ideology as identical to the unconscious[6]. The unconscious is the realm of the "other" in relation to what we consider ourselves to be. It acts on our behalf without our permission. Ideology makes us recognize ourselves in actions, thoughts, and beliefs that we might not want to perform or share. In ideology, the commands of power are replaced by statements that aim to appeal to us, to become part of our worldview. Ideology does not prescribe, but rather assimilates, in a way that does not seem intentional; it feels as if we are not being drawn to it, but rather subtly led into it.

It is similar to the Sirens' song in Homer's *Odyssey* — it lures us with a sense of happiness, the feeling that we have finally found ourselves, only to find that we have ended up elsewhere, under the control of power. Ideology is the paradoxical destruction of the boundary between memory and forgetting, or rather the paradoxical concealing of memory as forgetfulness. It seeks to make us forget about power by reminding us of it, but in such a way that we do not

[5] "Goryani" - name of an armed resistance movement against the communist regime in Bulgaria, which existed from 1945 to 1948.
[6] See Althusser (2008).

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realize this is happening, without being aware of what we are remembering while we are forgetting.

If the sphere in which propaganda is realized is literature, then translation is the site of ideology. Translated literature appears to be a space where the control of power is interrupted and the reader can freely engage with the other culture. However, under socialism, the existence of such spaces is contingent upon pre-approval. Crime literature acquaints the socialist individual with life in Western societies, but from a specific angle. In it, the focus is on crime. People in the West are portrayed exactly as socialist media 'describe' them: as living in an unjust world where there are no communities and everyone is an enemy of the other. One of the most important elements of socialist propaganda is the insistence that the West is decaying, ruled by corruption, greed, and base desires. This is precisely the 'picture' in which crime literature immerses us. There, the desire for enrichment, revenge, jealousy, the unprincipled gratification of sexual desire and selfishness prevail. Moreover, although classic crime fiction plots end with the discovery of the criminal, it is clear that crime does not disappear—the world continues to be attacked by evil.

Under socialism, translated works were often accompanied by a preface, which did not simply introduce the content of the text or provide the perspective of the preface's author but also served a dual rhetorical function. On the one hand, it must defend the book by elaborating on why the socialist reader needs this literature even though it is a product of the antagonistic Western culture. On the other hand, it also served to establish an ideological framework for the reading of the novel, which frequently included an endorsement of it. We are informed that the book adheres closely to the regime's ideology and that, in contrast to other works of the genre and contemporary Western literature generally, it takes the "correct" stand.

This is the case with the preface to Georges Simenon's novel *The Prison*, published in Bulgaria in 1982.[7] The preface states that Simenon diverges from other authors of crime fiction. He focuses on psychological depth, while they rely on cleverly constructed plots aimed at misleading the reader about who the murderer is. The emphasis on psychological depth was an important move in literary criticism under socialism, particularly after the Stalinist period. Psychological depth was used as an argument against the formalist games of Western modernists. Of course, it had to be measured—avoiding excess and transgression and steering clear of psychoanalysis in the motivations of characters.

Beside being valued as an investigator of the psychological mechanisms leading to crime, Simenon, according to the preface, deserved to be read for his sympathetic attitude toward the poor, which subtly appears in his seemingly neutral style, as well as for Maigret's "plebeian" appearance. In the introductory remarks to the translations of detective works, we can also find summarizing ideological statements, which clearly show why the genre is necessary for socialist society. In a note to the translation of Simenon's novel *Maigret and the Yellow Dog*, published in Bulgaria in 1983, we read: "The best works of the

[7] See Kufov (1982).

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detective genre in the West are a reflection of a society, of its sores. They ruthlessly criticize capitalist morals, the inner machinations of this society, and the connection between crime and the political world" (Simenon 1983).

Ideology turns out to be exactly where we least expect it. At first glance, Simenon's novel *The Prison* seems to have little connection to it. It doesn't present social injustices, nor does it feature the typical economic motives for crime found in classic detective literature. The murder here is not driven by a thirst for wealth but by jealousy. As is common in noir—a genre that inherits and to a great extent deconstructs the classic detective story—the focus is on the experience of the murderer's husband, Alain, whose portrayal at times disrupts the illusion of objectivity. In places, it's not entirely clear whether we are being shown the character's visions or "real" events. Yet, it is precisely in this world, seemingly so distant from ideology, that something emerges that turns the narrative toward it. This is the feeling the text conveys—the meaninglessness of the life of the Western person, surrounded by material things, driven by base passions and vices (sex and alcohol are constant themes in the book), alienation (Alain has no friends; he is trapped in his hallucinatory world), and, as a consequence, the logical end of the protagonist's life and the novel—suicide.

The individual in the communist society, especially in Bulgaria, isolated behind the Iron Curtain and forbidden to travel to the West, expects crime novels to "show" her / him what the space of the "enemy" looks like. Ideology, in order not to appear as propaganda, satisfies this desire but guides the reader in the direction needed by the regime. Crime fiction is closely tied to the city, where important spaces include hotels, streets, bars, restaurants, boudoirs of bourgeois homes, staircases, train stations, and brothels. Yet, it is difficult to encounter a beautiful, dreamlike Western city in such works. Instead, the city is more often veiled in greyness and darkness, the streets are dirty, and the bars are filled with the stale, heavy air of alcohol fumes, cigarette smoke, and sweat. Even when morning is described as a symbol of hope for something new and exciting, the description is blocked by some unpleasant nuance, as seen in this excerpt from Simenon's *The Prison*: "He spent a quarter of an hour leaning against the bar, settled into his car once more and drove up the Champs-Elysees under a sky that was indeed clearing, turning an ugly yellow, a yellow boil."[8]

The world presented in the detective story is divided into two sides: the detective and the others. The "others" are modern people, engaged in achieving their goals, which are often immoral, selfish, or simply criminal. The detective is distanced from the surrounding reality, devoted solely to solving the mystery of the crime, avoiding sexuality, or rather being asexual, childless, and somewhat autistic. If the "others" find a place in communist ideology as an allegory of "capitalist reality," then what should we think of the detective?

The preface to Simenon's novel *Maigret and the Man on the Bench*, published in Bulgaria in 1980, says:

[8] « Il passa un quart d'heure accoude au bar, s'installa une fois de plus dans sa voiture et remonta les Champs-Elysées sous un ciel qui, en effet, s'éclaircissait, devenant d'un vilain jaune, un jaune furoncle. » (Simenon 1968: 101).

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> He (Maigret) is a man of the people, he has not received a brilliant university education, he is not financially secure—like so many others, he will gradually climb the hierarchical ladder, he will be dependent on his superiors, and he will live on his salary. Maigret has never been, and will never be, an 'extraordinary' person, standing in opposition to all others, characterized by the little quirks without which the images of the eccentric Sherlock Holmes or the well-mannered old bachelor Hercule Poirot would fade. (Stefanova 1980: online publication)[9]

Here, the phrase "man of the people", used in reference to the famous police investigator, is a term that propaganda utilizes to designate individuals toward whom the regime feels sympathy. "People," a term inherited in the regime's vocabulary from Stalin, not from Marx or Lenin, has no connection to concepts like "nation" or "society." The "people," or as the frequently used phrase "the working people" makes clear, are what Marx calls the "proletariat," plus Lenin's addition—the "peasantry." Thus, the relationship between the detective and the others is a concretization of the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the "oppressed" classes.

This sympathy towards the detective is felt in the language of the translation of the novel *Maigret and the Man on the Bench*. The translation openly sympathizes with the character. For example, in the sentence, "[…] Just opposite was the brasserie where he liked to eat sauerkraut," the reflexive Bulgarian verb "pohapva si" is used—untranslatable into French or English—instead of the neutral verb "manger" in the original text[10]. "Pohapva si" literally means "eating" in an aesthetic sense, without a practical purpose, "for oneself," or simply "eats with pleasure." This verb in Bulgarian is usually used with condescending approval regarding the subject of the sentence. The approval here is condescending because, after all, Maigret is on the other, hostile side of the Iron Curtain.

According to Althusser (2008), ideology has a determining function in the formation of the subject. The difficult task of the communist society is how to form a communist subjectivity from different people with different desires. For this to happen, it is necessary for these desires to find their desired "other" in the ideas advocated by the regime. The meeting of the two essences is possible when the other is disguised to match the desires of the future communist subjects. The translation of detective literature plays a role in this masking operation.

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[10] "…Juste en face, se trouvait la brasserie ou il aimait manger une choucroute" (Simenon 1953 : 16).

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