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The Last Man in Bulgaria

Abstract
The article maps the Bulgarian translation of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (2022) onto the author's reception in this country and discusses aspects of the interaction between readers and text in terms of language and culture. It argues that the English writer feminises the discourse by choosing the Sibyl of Cumae over Milton as a figure of authority, and plants a number of intertextual references that would be lost on Bulgarian-language readers. The overview of the Bulgarian context is paired off with readers' reactions to the Bulgarian-language edition on Goodreads.

Keywords: Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, Bulgarian translation, reception

It is 2024 and Mary Shelley's name is still synonymous with *Frankenstein*. Even more so in a country where no other text had crossed the language barrier until 2008 when three short stories ("Transformation," 1831; "The Mortal Immortal," 1833; "The Evil Eye," 1830) made an appearance in Bulgarian, rendered by Milen Ruskov.[1] The first Bulgarian translation of *Frankenstein* was published as late as 1981, and a new one in 2012 reinforced the bond between the author and her creation. In 2016 "The Mortal Immortal" (transl. Ognyana Ivanova) was included in a collection of short stories about love. A year later Shelley's very short story "The False Rhyme" was translated by Yavor Tsanev and printed in a Bulgarian periodical dedicated to sci-fi, fantasy, detective and horror stories, mysteries and the like (even though the plot is reminiscent of the dramatic adventures we associate with *The Three Musketeers*), while the long lost "Maurice, or the Fisher's Cot", written for Margaret King's daughter Laurette, was rendered by Boryana Darakchieva and published on its own in 2017. Across the Atlantic a collection of Victorian science fiction got compiled that year under the title *Frankenstein Dreams* (ed. Michael Sims). Emblematically, it included "Dreams of Forgotten Alchemists (from *Frankenstein*)" by Mary Shelley. In 2019 the collection found its way onto the Bulgarian market with the help of translators Rositsa Todorova and Adriana Momchilova.

To this modest Bulgarian interest in the English Romantic author, 2022 added *The Last Man* (transl. Gergana Rancheva, Iztok-Zapad Publishing House). The

[1] This overview of Bulgarian-language publications relies on the existing library catalogues. No *de-viso* research has been carried out to look into the periodicals of old.

apocalyptic vision of the end of humanity came at the back end of a pandemic when readers were tired of doom and gloom and were less and less interested in the topic; this must have given the project the sense of urgency palpably felt in the rushed-through translation approach. The cover of the Bulgarian edition advertises the novel as written "by the author of *Frankenstein*" and this is no local invention – it rather imitates the strategy accompanying the original back in 1826. The formula was identical with "by the author of *Waverley*" but it was not used for the sake of anonymity as Mary Shelley had already owned her first novel in 1823. It may have had something to do with the arrangement between the young widow and Sir Timothy on the topic of Shelley's name in print, which she worked around in various ways.[2] Nowadays it is more of an advertisement strategy as few Bulgarians would be familiar with the author and many more with the Frankenstein story that, myth-like, has pervaded European culture. The cover art of the Bulgarian publication suggests the end of the world but this is not the type of prophecy that the novelist penned for us: her text is about loss and loneliness, it is about managing catastrophe and grief, it is about surviving psychologically. After the death of her husband, Mary Shelley felt "the deepest solitude" (Shelley, *The Journals* 430). On the 14th May 1824, the night before she got the overwhelming news that Byron was gone too, she recorded in her diary, "The last man! Yes, I may well describe that solitary being's feeling, feeling myself as the last relic of a beloved race, my companions extinct before me"; the following day she added, "Life is the desart and the solitude – how populous the grave" (Shelley, *The Journals* 476–7; 478).

The novel boasts an epigraph from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which brings to mind the 1818 *Frankenstein* that relied on the same authority to suggest an interpretative lens for the text. Paradoxically, the epigraph for *The Last Man*, "Let no man seek / Henceforth to be foretold what shall befall / Him or his children," goes against the narrative endeavour (Shelley, *The Last* 3). The Bulgarian edition references it only in general terms as to title, author and translator, which means that the reader is not facilitated to contextualise the quotation: Adam has been shown the future of the world and is upset by the death and destruction he has seen, he realises that pre-knowledge is not preventative and it multiplies his suffering in apprehending the grief to come (Milton XI, 754–786). That is a rather dark take on the human condition unless we identify the ways in which Mary Shelley transfigures its meaning.

[2] The editors of her *Journals* offer these details: "When *The Last Man* was published in January [1826], 'by the author of *Frankenstein*' appeared on the title page in lieu of Mary's name. However, even though the first edition of *Frankenstein* had been anonymous, her name had appeared on the title-page of the 1823 edition which Godwin had brought out. Thus she was widely known to have been its author, and the reviewers referred to her by name, which angered Sir Timothy Shelley. Though Mary was certainly not to blame, Sir Timothy Shelley expressed his irritation by suspending her allowance. (Ingpen, pp.586-8; *SM*, p. 1076) "(Shelley, *The Journals* 498, f.2)

The novel opens up with an introduction that provides the narrative frame. A first-person account specifies the time and the location, and ties those to the author's lived experience, feminising the perspective. In a visit to the Sibyl's Cave in 1818, the narrator and her companion collect the leaves of prophetic writing they have found, in full awareness (one would imagine) of Adam's warning to not seek prophecies as Milton has it in Book 11 of his epic. The Sibyl's role as an oracle and seer is inseparable from her gender. Thus, the juxtaposition between Milton and the Sibyl becomes a rivalry between male and female narratives. The written word of the Sibyl is found on "leaves, bark and other substances … in various languages" (Shelley, *The Last* 7), which multiplies the discourse. It is further feminised by the narrator's work of deciphering: "Scattered and unconnected as they were, I have been obliged to add links, and model the work into a consistent form" (Shelley, *The Last* 8). In other words, the intro promises an attempt at rewriting the epic from a female perspective and employs the authority of the classical period for good measure.

The reputation of the Cumaean Sibyl was celebrated by Virgil's *Aeneid*, where the hero recounts,

> Arriv'd at Cumae, when you view the flood
> Of black Avernus, and the sounding wood,
> The mad prophetic Sibyl you shall find,
> Dark in a cave, and on a rock reclin'd.
> She sings the fates, and, in her frantic fits,
> The notes and names, inscrib'd, to leafs commits.
> What she commits to leafs, in order laid,
> Before the cavern's entrance are display'd:
> Unmov'd they lie; but, if a blast of wind
> Without, or vapours issue from behind,
> The leafs are borne aloft in liquid air,
> And she resumes no more her museful care,
> Nor gathers from the rocks her scatter'd verse,
> Nor sets in order what the winds disperse. (Virgil, Book 3, ll. 441–452)

The authority of antiquity challenges Milton's authority on the topic of prophecies and the narrator in the introduction opts for the Roman over the Christian. As Timothy Ruppert argues, "Through this reconfiguration, she suggests that visionary poetics originates not in patriarchal scriptural history (particularly as Milton interpreted it) but in a distinctly matriarchal pagan past" (Ruppert 2009: 144). Nonetheless, the artistic licence of the nineteenth-century *interpretation* appears to have the upper hand over the classical heritage: "Doubtless the leaves of the Cumaean Sibyl suffered distortion and diminution of interest and excellence in my hands. My only excuse for thus transforming them is that they were unintelligible in their

pristine condition." (Shelley, *The Last* 8) If the Cumaean Sibyl supplants Milton, Mary Shelley's narrator supplants the Roman oracle – in the process, the prophetic leaves have become literature: they did not make sense in their original form; they were mediated by a nineteenth-century interpreter connecting the dots in her own fashion. The version of the future that she put forward is imagined, it is not etched in stone. This, then, re-casts Adam's comment used as an epigraph (the prophecy is not at all certain), and sacrifices antiquity for the Romantic imagination. Ultimately, Milton does not shape up the fictional universe as in *Frankenstein* – the novelist declares her emancipation. Ironically, the words she works with are the words of men: Milton's, Virgil's or his translator's (Dryden). The phrase "Sibylline leaves" evokes Coleridge as well, on account of his 1817 collection of poems. Certainly, any reference to Coleridge is lost on the Bulgarian readers, who are unaware of his "Sibylline Leaves" collection as it was never translated in this country. Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Virgil's *Aeneid* do exist in Bulgarian translation but are not popular reads for twenty-first century audiences.

In the Bulgarian edition of *The Last Man*, hardly any explanatory notes accompany the fragments of the Sibyl's story, which would be largely unfamiliar to the general reader, and the quotation from Petrarch's sonnet in the original Italian remains inexplicable in its foreignness – a translation in a footnote would have clarified the connection with the leaves of the Sibyl for twenty-first century readers. The word "leaves" itself can be rendered in two different forms in Bulgarian: "*листа*" is more directly associated with plants, while "*листи*" has this double reference to vegetation and to sheets of paper. Both forms were utilized by Georgi Batakliev in his Bulgarian translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* to describe the activities of the Sibyl of Cumae: "*и думи дълбае на листи*," "*Всички слова на листата*" (*Вергилий* 179). Gergana Rancheva alternates between "*листа*" and "*страници*" in her translation to keep the link between leaves and pages of writing. She has markedly gendered the narrator of the introduction as female, which is very much in the spirit of the original. Her transcription of Cumae, "*Куме*" (*Шели* 2022: 7), however, is anglicised and at odds with the established reference to the place in the Bulgarian translation of the *Aeneid* (1980) as "*Кума*" (*Вергилий* 423).

In the opening chapters of the novel, with characters and circumstances introduced for the first time, while the reader grapples with a lot of information, the language of the translation becomes progressively more foreign and it does not seem to be for the sake of foreignization. Here are a few examples of phrases that native speakers of Bulgarian would not opt for: "*стиснатата милостиня на земята*" (*Шели* 2022: 14), "*За мен бе полепнало чувство на обида*" (*Шели* 2022: 14), "*учтиво отвращение*" (*Шели* 2022: 15), "*искрената роса на любовта*" (*Шели* 2022: 16), "*характерът ми бе обществен*" (*Шели* 2022: 16), "*стоях на билото, с море от зло, търкалящо се в нозете ми*" (*Шели* 2022: 18), "*всеобщото сетиво на осезанието*" (*Шели* 2022: 27), "*които облякоха въпроса в лицемерие*" (*Шели*

2022: 49), "*предложението беше загубено*" (*Шели* 2022: 49), "*привеждането на косата на чуждия деспотизъм за отсичането на новопоникналите свободи на собствената му страна*" (*Шели* 2022: 87), "*тя се упрекна за престъплението на смъртта му*" (*Шели* 2022: 87) – the combinations of words range from the incompatible to the incomprehensible. Spelling mistakes may occur in any piece of writing, but it is worrisome when they denote inadequate coordination between the parts of speech in the sentence, as in "*този начин на живот, чийто беди далеч надхвърляха удоволствията му*" (*Шели* 2022: 14). Prepositions are often the casualty in translation, and yet, this type of misuse confirms the growing suspicion that we have a case of computer-assisted translation gone unsupervised: "[*майка ми*] *остави другото си дете в моето братско попечителство*" (*Шели* 2022: 15). There is also the odd idiomatic phrase rendered literally as, for instance, "*всеки, който спомене Лондон, бива изпратен в Ковънтри за един час*" (*Шели* 2022: 104). One does not need to be a rocket scientist to figure out that the literal meaning does not work; the idiom means "to refuse to speak to somebody, as a way of punishing them for something that they have done" (OALD). The absence of understanding affects the plot as well. Chapter 10 is psychologically rather tense after Perdita's accidental discovery of her husband's infidelity. The emotions are illustrated with opera arias that the characters play and sing, and one of them is "*Porgi, amor, qualche ristaro*" from Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, "in which the deserted Countess laments the change of the faithless Almaviva" (Shelley, *The Last* 116). The poignant reference is parodied by the ignorant carelessness of the translation, "*изоставената графиня оплаква промяната на невярната Алмавива*" (*Шели* 2022: 105). For anyone familiar with the opera, it is clear that in the phrase Almaviva stands for the Count and is therefore gendered as male; and yet, one wonders how many of the readers would be aware of it if the translator and her editor were not. These occurrences interrupt the flow of reading much more effectively than the missing explanatory notes would have done, so it is not for any theoretical consideration that clarifications are far and few between.

Initially, such examples of what appears to me as machine translation seem at odds with the scrupulous application of the non-witness narrative mode to the Bulgarian text. The first instance can be traced early on in Chapter 1 with the story of the narrator's father: "*Неговото потекло е неизвестно, но обстоятелства отрано го поставили в центъра на общественото внимание*…" (*Шели* 2022: 11). The lack of a definite article for the word denoting "circumstances" ("*обстоятелства*"), however, grates the ear of a native speaker of Bulgarian. Later on, the non-witness narrative mode becomes too prominent and the lack of coordination between its usage and the neighbouring past-tense sentences makes reading the Bulgarian translation a bumpy ride:

> *За него земята била разстлана като път, небесата – изградени като балдахин.*
> *Ейдриън чувстваше, че е част от нещо голямо. Той бе съпричастен не само към човечеството… Душата му бе изпълнена със съчувствие и посветена на поклонението пред красотата и съвършенството. Ейдриън и Реймънд се срещнали и между тях се надигнал дух на омраза.* (*Шели* 2022: 36–37)

What do we know about the translator? – not very much. The only other translation that Gergana Rancheva's name is associated with (according COBISS) is C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne's *The Lost Continent: The Story of Atlantis* published by the same publishing house, Iztok-Zapad, once again in 2022. She is also the author of a book review printed in *Literaturen Vestnik* in 2014 – if, indeed, this is not a coincidence of names. The language used in that publication bears no resemblance to the infelicities in the translation of *The Last Man*.

Mary Shelley's text displays a multiplicity of cultural layers and I would like to touch upon some of those that remain hidden from the Bulgarian reader. An early reference in her text is Cumberland, a historic county associated with the Lake District of England and with the Lake poets. Upon his return to England in 1800 Coleridge moved to Keswick, Cumberland, within a few miles of Wordsworth's Dove Cottage in Grasmere. Mary had been an admirer of Coleridge ever since she was eight years old when, hidden behind the couch, she secretly listened to him recite *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to her father (Gordon 30). In January 1824, she met him, probably at Charles Lamb's, and after the encounter enthused about "his beautiful descriptions, metaphysical talk & subtle distinctions" that had reminded her of Shelley's conversations (Shelley, *Journals* 474). In *The Last Man*, her characters Lionel and Perdita are from Cumberland and are, coincidentally, representations of the author in a novel that reconstructs the intellectual circle she thrived in. Lionel embodies her awe and admiration for Percy Shelley, her common sense, her empathy and hierarchy of values, whereas Perdita stands for the tortured passions, for the tender or raw emotions, for the Romantic sentiments. Planting her alter egos in Wordsworth-and-Coleridge country, Mary Shelley seems to suggest that her writing is comparable to theirs: Lionel is the narrator of the story and calls himself "the shepherd of Cumberland" (Shelley, *The Last* 32). The phrase is rather suggestive in its symbolism as it combines the location with the image of the "happy Shepherd-boy" in Wordsworth's *Intimations Ode* – also labelled "Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!" – ultimately, someone whose "Immortality/ Broods like the Day" (Wordsworth ll. 35, 114, 118–119). Lionel's immortality leaves him all alone to brood around the world. Such parallels are not feasible for Bulgarian-language readers as Wordsworth is only marginally present with a 2010 translation of the *Lyrical Ballads* (trans. Angel Igov), which do not include the ode of 1807, whereas Alexander Shurbanov's introduction to Coleridge (in his 2013 edition of the Romantic poet's selected poetry and prose) does not cover the Lake District context.

The feminisation of the discourse in the framework is not challenged by the male narrator in the actual account of events. On the one hand, Lionel's sensibilities are rather feminine; on the other hand, his voice is controlled by the women in the narrative frame. The hero around whom the narrative is carefully woven is Adrian, a stand-in for Percy Shelley. The outline of the character in Chapter 3 of the novel echoes Mary Shelley's sentiments in her Preface to *Posthumous Poems*, a volume she put together and saw published in 1824: wise, brave and gentle, she called him (Shelley, Preface, iv). She had already characterised him as the "spirit of light and love unworthily ensh[r]ined and linked to mortal pain" in a journal entry from 3rd June 1823 (Shelley, *Journals* 467). Reading about Lionel Verney's fascination with Adrian, the audience gets a sense of Mary falling in love with Percy: "I could not rest. I sought the hills; a west wind swept them, and the stars glittered above... 'This', I thought, 'is power! Not to be strong of limb, hard of heart, ferocious, and daring; but kind, compassionate and soft'" (Shelley, *The Last* 25). The ethereal-angel image of Percy Bysshe Shelley that the Victorian age constructs begins with the poetic outpourings of a grief-stricken widow, and the gushing narrator of her apocalyptic novel plays a role as well. Detecting the literary figure behind the character, however, would be quite a challenge for Bulgarian-language readers as the poet is not well known in this country.

A central poem for Shelley's oeuvre is "Ode to the West Wind" and it is essential for *The Last Man* as well. The early mention of the phrase "west wind" above (on page 25 of the novel) weaves the natural with the political symbolism that is to come:

> Then mighty art thou, O wind, to be throned above all other vicegerents of nature's power; whether thou comest destroying from the east, or pregnant with elementary life from the west; thee the clouds obey; the sun is subservient to thee; the shoreless ocean is thy slave! Thou sweepest over the earth, and oaks, the growth of centuries, submit to thy viewless axe; the snow-drift is scattered on the pinnacles of the Alps, the avalanche thunders down their vallies. Thou holdest the keys of the frost, and canst first chain and then set free the streams; under thy gentle governance the buds and leaves are born, they flourish nursed by thee. (Shelley, *The Last* 189)

In this paragraph Mary Shelley elaborates on the imagery in the poem. She has her narrator address the wind as the speaker in the poem does; she reiterates the earth-air-water triad; crucially, she spells out the importance of power. "Ode to the West Wind" has been translated into Bulgarian by Tsvetan Stoyanov and this gives its readers a slim chance to recognise it within the novel but Shelley's poetry is not on the national curriculum and the ode is not widely read.

A much less known poem of Shelley's is the sonnet "To a Balloon Laden with Knowledge." It documents his fascination with hot-air balloons, as well as biographical circumstances that can be summarised thus: "In the summer of 1812 at Lynmouth, Shelley, Harriet and Miss Hitchener had made balloons to float copies of *Declaration of Rights*" (Shelley, *Journals* 121, f.4). In 1816 we have a record of Mary making a balloon for Percy, which they tried to set up on his birthday but there was too much wind and it caught fire (Shelley, *Journals* 121, 123). This prehistory has its impact on one of the imaginative inventions in the novel, the mode of transportation via sailing balloons. Science fiction if one thinks about it, but it is not at all certain how many of the casual twenty-first century readers would register the fact that hot-air balloons were never used for travelling. Invented back in the eighteenth century, at the time they must have sounded like a promising branch of science for the practicalities of every-day life. Flying is certainly a much preferred travel option in the twenty-first century even if airplane passengers would not consider their fatigue caused "by a constant exposure to the air" at the end of a journey (Shelley, *The Last* 61).

The narrative decision to have Lionel fly to get to his sick friend as soon as possible is accompanied by these iambic-pentameter verses he recites to the pilot:

> Oh! human wit, thou can'st invent much ill,
> Thou searchest strange arts: who would think by skill,
> An heavy man like a light bird should stray,
> And through the empty heavens find a way? (Shelley, *The Last* 61)

Mary Shelley does not specify the author by name but she does reference him with this sentence meant to illustrate the prophetic power of literature: "Such was the power of man over the elements; a power long sought, and lately won; yet foretold in by-gone time by the ***prince of poets***, whose verses I quoted much to the astonishment of my pilot, when I told him how many hundred years ago they had been written" (Shelley, *The Last* 61, emphasis added). The poet with a princely reputation was Edmund Spenser, whose monument in Westminster Abbey is inscribed with "the Prince of Poets in His Tyme" (Westminster Abbey). Editor Chris Washington attributes the verses to Thomas Heywood's "The Tale of Dedalus" and points to a possible derivation from Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* 2.43–44 (Shelley, *The Last* 61, f.8). The Oxford text archive of the Bodleian has made a copy of "*De arte amandi*; and, The remedy of love, Englished" (1662) available online, and the lines quoted in the novel do occur in Book 2 of *The Art of Love* but the edition does not stipulate a translator (Ovid 30). There is even an 1804 edition of a volume, entitled *Shakespeare's poems*, which ascribes a number of unlikely texts to the bard, including "The History of the Minotaur" wherein the quoted lines reside too (Shakespeare 113). Whoever Mary Shelley might have had in mind, the Bulgarian edition mentions only Ovid (*Шели* 2022: 346).

The other poet of her circle of "the Elect" (Gordon 474) Mary Shelley fictionalised as Lord Raymond, a truly Byronic hero – in Byron's poems the hero is thrown into relief by adoring heroines – the novelist used the same technique to add to his characterisation:

> Five years had failed to destroy the dazzling unreality of passion. Most men ruthlessly destroy the sacred veil, with which the female heart is wont to adorn the idol of its affections. Not so Raymond; he was an enchanter, whose reign was for ever undiminished; a king whose power never was suspended: follow him through the details of common life, still the same charm of grace and majesty adorned him; nor could he be despoiled of the innate deification with which nature had invested him. (Shelley, *The Last* 99)

The idealisation does not rule on its own, it gets mixed with real-life impressions of Byron's extremities of temper:

> His passions, always his masters, acquired fresh strength, from the long sleep in which love had cradled them, the clinging weight of destiny bent him down; he was goaded, tortured, fiercely impatient of that worst of miseries, the sense of remorse. This troubled state yielded by degrees, to sullen animosity, and depression of spirits. His dependants, even his equals, if in his present post he had any, were startled to find anger, derision, and bitterness in one, before distinguished for suavity and benevolence of manner. (Shelley, *The Last* 106)

Mary Shelley had witnessed Byron's coldness and cruelty in treating her step-sister Claire Clairmont and could easily infuse biographical details in the fictional representation of the relationship between Raymond and Perdita. This was also the space to heal herself from all anxieties provoked by Shelley's infidelities that she would not publicly admit: according to Fiona Stafford's analysis, "Perdita's lament over the discovery of Raymond's new attachment suggests a painful allusion to *Epipsychidion*: … Through the anguish of Perdita, it seems, Mary Shelley could at last appraise her feelings about Shelley's attraction to other women…" (Stafford 1994: 225). The character of Perdita accommodated her being lost; it allowed her to separate the memory of the man she adored from the feelings of jealousy, bitterness and emptiness. The exultation of her tenderest feelings is aptly expressed in the quotation referencing Perdita's devotion to Lord Raymond before her reunion with him in Greece: "Her dear heart's confessor – a heart within that heart" (Shelley, *The Last* 137). The Bulgarian edition explains the *cor cordium* inscription on Percy Shelley's gravestone but misses out the personal usage of the words in his wife's journal – she calls him "*meum cordium cor*" and hopes for a reunion in the afterlife (Shelley, *The Journals* 467). Readers of the novel would be able to perceive the parallels with the personal lives of the literary figures only if they are familiar with their biographies.

The Shelleys have no proper biographies rendered in Bulgarian but a novel called *Mary* was translated from Dutch in 2023, a fictionalised life story of Mary Shelley. Byron's popularity accounts for the 1985 translation of André Maurois' novelized biography of him and for the 2012 publication of Iliya Iliev's comparative discussion of his and Yavorov's lives.

Motifs from Byron's writing can certainly be traced as well – here is an example. In a conversation between Raymond and Lionel, there is a speech that echoes Manfred's speeches in his conversation with the chamois hunter:

> You are of this world; I am not. You hold forth your hand; it is even as a part of yourself; and you do not yet divide the feeling of identity from the mortal form that shapes forth Lionel. How then can you understand me? Earth is to me a tomb, the firmament a vault, shrouding mere corruption. Time is no more, for I have stepped within the threshold of eternity; each man I meet appears a corse, which will soon be deserted of its animating spark, on the eve of decay and corruption. (Shelley, *The Last* 155)

The Byronic hero perceives Lionel as a natural man, whereas he himself embodies scepticism, he is done with life and this has changed his take on time. To bridge the gap between the world of the living and the world of spirits Byron borrowed a phrase from Milton's *Comus*, "to my task" and assigned it to Manfred (I.1; II.2). Mary Shelley gives it to Perdita, who is going through the motions of life, while she feels dead inside, because her husband has been unfaithful (Shelley, *The Last* 111). Allusions to Manfred would not posit a cultural challenge – there are four worthy poetic translations of Byron's dramatic poem, the latest one published in 2020.

The political aspirations that informed the lives of Byron and Shelley and those who cared for them are reworked in the novel in a utopian/ dystopian fashion. England is a protectorate and both Raymond and Adrian act as Lord Protector in their turn. The challenges of the plague are first interpreted as bringing people together against a common foe: "As at the conclusion of the eighteenth century, the English unlocked their hospitable store, for the relief of those driven from their homes by political revolution; so now they were not backward in affording aid to the victims of a more wide-spreading calamity." (Shelley, *The Last* 194). A vision of the egalitarian reveries of William Godwin and the socialist views of his follower Percy Shelley are contextualised within the plot:

> It was found, that, though at first the stop put to all circulation of property, had reduced those before supported by the factitious wants of society to sudden and hideous poverty, yet when the boundaries of private possession were thrown down, the products of human labour at present existing were more, far more, than the thinned generation could possibly consume. To some among

> the poor this was matter of exultation. ***We were all equal now***; magnificent dwellings, luxurious carpets, and beds of down, were afforded to all. (Shelley, *The Last* 259, emphasis added)

Chillingly, the leveller is death. Mary Shelley appears more sceptical about human nature than the men in her life when offering an account of the laws of the jungle overruling empathy and fairness:

> Several hundreds landed in Ireland, about the first of November, and took possession of such vacant habitations as they could find; seizing upon the superabundant food, and the stray cattle. As they exhausted the produce of one spot, they went on to another. At length they began to interfere with the inhabitants, and strong in their concentrated numbers, ejected the natives from their dwellings, and robbed them of their winter store. (Shelley, *The Last* 241)

Byron would have approved of her scepticism. But there was nothing sceptical in his representation as a war hero in the fictional universe of the novel. Mary Shelley must have drawn upon the memoirs of Byron published immediately after his death, among them Thomas Medwin's *Conversations of Lord Byron* (1824) and Pietro Gamba's *A Narrative of Lord Byron's Last Journey to Greece* (1825).

Sometimes, something fictional may highlight present-day occurrences and Chapter 11 provides an example of that. On the topic of war between Turkey and Greece, the author makes this comment: "Greece prepared for a vigorous resistance; it rose to a man; and the women, sacrificing their costly ornaments, accoutred their sons for the war, and bade them conquer or die with the spirit of the Spartan mother" (Shelley, *The Last* 133). For readers in the 2020s, the remark triggers a parallel with contemporary politics: Russia invading Ukraine in 2022 and the reactions of patriotism witnessed. Even though Mary Shelley had no experience of war herself, her mind was made up on that account; through her mouthpiece Lionel Verney she puts her finger on the existential threat, "Two soldiers contended for a girl, whose rich dress and extreme beauty excited the brutal appetites of these wretches, who, perhaps good men among their families, were changed by the fury of the moment into incarnated evils" (Shelley, *The Last* 134).

For the 2020s, the most resonant aspect of the plot is the discussion of the plague. Mary Shelley was not interested in the symbolism of the contagion, the way Albert Camus was when he wrote his novel. She deals with crisis management on personal and societal levels. The novelist may have drawn on contemporary events as the cholera and typhus epidemics of the early 1820s but she certainly looks back to the literary precursors as well, and references Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) and Charles Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* (1799):

> I had never before beheld one killed by pestilence. While every mind was full of dismay at its effects, a craving for excitement had led us to peruse De Foe's account, and the masterly delineations of the author of Arthur Mervyn. The pictures drawn in these books were so vivid, that we seemed to have experienced the results depicted by them. (Shelley, *The Last* 213)

Curiously, the Covid pandemic reignited the interest in Defoe's fictional representation and gave readers a chance to see that human nature had not changed all that much: the novella had been translated into Bulgarian in the 1980s by Vassil Atanassov. The seemingly unprecedented *global* scale of the threat in the twenty-first century is purposefully delineated in *The Last Man*:

> Can it be true, each asked the other with wonder and dismay, that whole countries are laid waste, whole nations annihilated, by these disorders in nature? The vast cities of America, the fertile plains of Hindostan, the crowded abodes of the Chinese, are menaced with utter ruin. Where late the busy multitudes assembled for pleasure or profit, now only the sound of wailing and misery is heard. The air is empoisoned, and each human being inhales death, even while in youth and health, their hopes are in the flower. We called to mind the plague of 1348, when it was calculated that a third of mankind had been destroyed. (Shelley, *The Last*, 192)

Going back in time to a recorded experience that may fill the void of not knowing what to expect does not sound alien either – the Spanish flu of the early twentieth century played that role in 2020. What may strike the Bulgarian reading public as different, however, is the response of the state:

> … many had lost father and mother, the guardians of their morals, their mentors and restraints. It would have been useless to have opposed these impulses by barriers, which would only have driven those actuated by them to more pernicious indulgencies. The theatres were open and thronged; dance and midnight festival were frequented—in many of these decorum was violated, and the evils, which hitherto adhered to an advanced state of civilization, were doubled. The student left his books, the artist his study: the occupations of life were gone, but the amusements remained; enjoyment might be protracted to the verge of the grave. (Shelley, *The Last* 224)

If Mary Shelley's liberal focus on the individual ties in with the initial British reactions to the pandemic in early 2020, the restrictions imposed on the population in Bulgaria were much more authoritarian and readers would have seen the text as a point of reference. Some of the messages would have been demotivating while

lock-downs were still in place: "Plague is the companion of spring, of sunshine, and plenty. We no longer struggle with her. We have forgotten what we did when she was not." (Shelley, *The Last* 258) This brings to mind the recent comment of a Ukrainian friend, who said that living with the threat of war has become a habit.

Certainly, the novel should be read as a novel, for the poignancy of the drama, for the depiction of characters, for the imaginative and for the scary. To get feedback on that is difficult though, as the posts of Bulgarian readers are few and far between. One of them tells the world he was intrigued by the advertisement that featured the dystopia and the pandemic in the novel, but his trusted Goodreads reviewers warned him it was rather dense and his experience of the opening thirty pages or so prompted him to agree; he finds issues with the small print, the long descriptions, and the scarcity of direct speech; interestingly, he makes no mention of the language of the translation (*Цолов*, Facebook).[3] Amongst the Goodreads reviews of the Bulgarian edition there are seven ratings of it (as of May 2024) and the average evaluation is less than three stars. Most readers are unhappy with the slow pace of the action. This said, one of the reviewers, ecstatic about the novel and Mary Shelley, praises the editor, who allegedly did a great job (presiyana). I am perturbed that such usage of the Bulgarian language may be admired. Readers from the English-speaking world seem to be more accommodating of Mary Shelley's novel. As a professor of English puts it, "Reading *The Last Man* is timely for other reasons, as it explores subjects such as climate change, same-sex love, mass migrations and displacements across continents, the detriments of misinformation campaigns, and the perils of fanaticism." (Miranda) In our Bulgarian context, however, reading seems to be more of an escape from than an engagement with reality. Even when appreciative of the author's erudition, one of the reviewers on Goodreads admits to being overwhelmed by boredom (*Цолов*, Goodreads). He is also the person who finds issues with the cover art. Book covers are certainly the responsibility of the publisher. And yet, even if the publication of a book is a collaborative effort, with creative and technical sides to it, readers rarely think of the publishing house or the translator, their overall impressions are paired off with the author.

[3] *Днес подхванах романа „Последният човек" от Мери Шели, авторката на каноничния „Франкенщайн". Анонсиран е като антиутопия с пандемия, развиваща се през 21 век, което принципно звучи доста любопитно. Но в гуудрийдс няколко души, на чието мнение се доверявам, изреваха, че книгата е яко тегава и доколкото успявам да се ориентирам от първите трийсетина страници, така ще да е – голям формат, ситен шрифт, пространни описания, оскъдна пряка реч... абе типично за викторианската проза. Поради това обстоятелство, докато се боря с нея (аз съм тъпо и упорито копеле и не смятам да се отказвам, пари сме давали, ама-ха* 🙂*) ще си „почивам" с разни неангажиращи комикси/графични новели, че и от тях доволно се натрупаха.* (*Цолов*, Facebook)

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