

Alenka Koron

ZRC SAZU Institute of Slovenian Literature and Literary Studies

alenka.koron@zrc-sazu.si

The Image of Bulgarians in the Poem Cycle *Rapsodije bolgarskega goslarja* by Anton Aškerc: The Imagological Perspective

Abstract

After a brief presentation of imagology as a field of contemporary comparative literature, the paper critically analyses the image of Bulgarians in the poem cycle *Rapsodije bolgarskega goslarja* (1902) by Slovenian poet Anton Aškerc (1856–1912). This cycle of thirteen poems deals with the liberation struggle of the Bulgarians from the Turks. The Bulgarian translations of the poems received a relatively extensive reception, which was not true of the original version in Slovenia. The present paper attempts to demonstrate the origin and function of the image of Bulgarians as representatives of a foreign nation or as the Other in the intercultural transfer of Aškerc's cycle. From an imagological perspective, it sheds light on the social and cultural processes in which the poet's image of the Foreign was formed.

Keywords: imagology, Anton Aškerc, Slovenian epic poetry, Ivan Vazov

1.

Imagology is a term for the research of national stereotypes in literature. These stereotypes arise from contact with other cultures when the Self becomes aware of its relationship to the Other (Pageaux 2005: 10) and expresses this "awareness" of the divergence between two types of cultural reality in mental images of the Foreign in literary works, poems, plays, travel literature or essays. Traditionally, imagology is a part of comparative literature and is conceived as a field that, in addition to national stereotypes, also reflects the nature of cultural representations and images of national identity. However, imagological research is never narrowly comparativist, but incorporates many other approaches from the broader field of humanities and social sciences in an interdisciplinary way.

Imagology differs from sociology in that the subject of its research is

not society but discourse, as national characterizations are *locus communis* and hearsay rather than empirical observation or fact, as emphasized by Beller and Leerssen (2007: xiii). Analysis of stereotypical national characterizations should therefore certainly not overlook the fact that its sources are subjective and rhetorically shaped and therefore not representative of social realities but of literary and discursive conventions. The discourse of interest to imagology is *imaginary* discourse; it either detaches the nation from the rest of humanity as something different or typical, or it indicates the moral, characterological, or collective-psychological motivations for the conferred social or cultural differences (xiv).

When we speak about imagology we are, of course, also interested in what an image is. With regard to this question, W. J. Thomas Mitchell (1986: 10) introduced five semantic categories: “graphic (pictures, statues, designs), optical (mirrors, projections), perceptual (sense data, ‘species’, appearances), mental (dreams, memories, ideas, phantasmata), verbal (metaphors, descriptions)”. Images of other people can, in fact, also be found elsewhere – they can be projected optically, perceived in their external appearance and metaphorically defined – but the most important source of national typological fictions, as studied by imagology, are mental images, ideas and *Vorstellungsbilder* (Beller 2007: 4). In philosophical, psychological and neurophysiological theories, for instance, these mental images are studied as “inner images”, while literary science focuses on verbally and textually codified images. Beller (2007: 4) defines the image as “the mental silhouette of the other, who appears to be determined by the characteristics of family, group, tribe, people or race”. Such an image is very influential; it directs our opinion and our value judgments of others as well as our behavior towards them. Cultural differences between ourselves and others, as well as differences arising from language, mentalities, everyday habits and religions, can evoke positive or negative reactions and images. If we observe them more closely, however, we can determine that these reactions are often a reflection of our own views and perspectives, which are culturally conditioned by prior knowledge and often appear as stereotypes.

Literary science has long been concerned with images of this kind as they appear textually in literature when speaking, for instance, about topos, clichés, prejudices, commonplaces, stereotypes, etc., so it is possible to agree with Leerssen (2007: 17) that imagology, too, has its own “archaeology” and “pre-history”. However, we will not trace these aspects very far back here. One of the fundamental works that stimulated the development of interest in the changing image of Germany and the Germans in France is the book *De l’Allemagne* by Mme de Staël. Imagology as a study of national characteristics, however, emerged in France as one of the most important fields in *littérature comparé* in the generation of literary histori-

ans following Gustave Lanson. An additional impetus for the development of imagology was, of course, nationalism, which became a hot topic of scientific discussion at the end of the nineteenth century, but had been a driver of the social and historical processes of state formation even earlier. At the beginning of the twentieth century (1905), Fernand Baldensperger wrote two works on the *images collectives* of the English and the Germans among the French. Shortly after the German occupation, Jean-Marie Carré's *Les écrivains français et le mirage allemand, 1800-1940* (1947) appeared, which was created entirely in the historical and social context of the post-war events and shattered the previously somewhat idealised image of Germany among French authors. In 1951, Marius-François Guyard introduced the imagological approach as one of the most important approaches in *littérature comparée* in the chapter "*Le étranger tel qu'on le voit*". However, the development of imagology was hampered for several decades by the criticism of René Wellek, for whom imagology was a form of sociology and was therefore ranked among the extrinsic approaches of literary scholarship. It was not until the 1980s that Daniel-Henri Pageaux resumed work in this field in France. Pageaux also directly influenced the development of Slovenian imagology through the work of Tone Smolej (2005; 2021). Meanwhile, from the 1960s onwards in Aachen, Hugo Dyserinck developed the imagological branch of the French comparative school. His pupil Manfred S. Fischer also distanced himself from Pageaux and his views, while Joep Leerssen continued Dyserinck's orientation in the Netherlands. Elsewhere in Europe, writings on comparative imagology also emerged, such as those by Franz K. Stanzel, Wolfgang Zach, Waldemar Zacharasiewicz, Jean-Marc Moura, and Manfred Beller. One thing that modern researchers have in common is that they are interested in national stereotypes that are a product of historical development and are more political intellectual projections than sets of objective conditions and attributes. For the most part, they therefore follow the constructivist paradigm of nations and nationalisms, as established by Eric Hobsbawm, Pierre Nora, and Benedict Anderson.

The aim of imagological analysis is thus to scientifically study the origin and function of images of a foreign (or one's own) nation, with the help of sociological, ethnological, socio-psychological, political, and historical studies. This aim used to be cosmopolitan, in the spirit of Goethe's *Weltliteratur*, and imagological analysis was considered to contribute to better mutual understanding and mutual tolerance. If this appears overly utopian, imagological research should at least contribute to exposing literary constructs in social processes, to which stereotypes about oneself (one's nation) and other nations contributed a specific rhetorical charge during the emergence of national identities.

2.

Slovenian-Bulgarian literary contacts have a long history. They were discussed by Matej Rode (1987) in tandem with Bogdan Benko, and later by their Bulgarian colleague Ljudmil Dimitrov in the chapter “Bulgarian-Slovenian Literary Contacts in the Past and Today” (2016) and the article “Bulgarian-Slovenian Cultural Contacts: An Attempt at Systematization” (2020), so their findings will not be repeated here. The focus of the present discussion is the poem cycle *Rapsodije bolgarskega goslarja* (Rhapsodies of a Bulgarian Fiddler) by Anton Aškerc. The cycle was published in 1902 in several issues of the literary magazine *Ljubljanski zvon* (Ljubljana Bell), which was edited by Aškerc himself at the time. Due to its content and its suggestive subtitle *Slike iz zgodovine bolgarske vstaje* (Pictures from the History of the Bulgarian Uprising), the cycle has a rich reception history in Bulgaria. The aforementioned Slovenian literary scholar Matej Rode has written the most about this reception, but it has also been researched by his Bulgarian colleague Najda Ivanova in two articles published in Slovenian (2005; 2011). In the first article, Ivanova focused mainly on translational issues, while in the second article, in addition to the reception of the cycle in Bulgaria, she also discussed the imagological aspects of Aškerc’s text, with particular emphasis on linguistic-cultural and linguistic-cognitive questions as well as textological issues. Before returning to Ivanova below, some basic information is presented about the poem cycle itself, which was translated into Bulgarian in its entirety a few years ago (Aškerc 2016).

In the Slovenian literary system and poetry canon, Aškerc is credited with enriching epic poetry, which predominates in his writing, but he was also an ardent supporter of Slovenian cultural nationalism. When he became the editor of the liberal literary and cultural magazine *Ljubljanski zvon* in 1900, he immediately tried to introduce a new editorial policy that would propagate the idea of pan-Slavism among readers (Rode 1982/83: 294). As the editor of the magazine, he covered other Slavic literature relatively well with various articles, but this was not true of Bulgarian literature. In the 1880s, he had drawn on Bulgarian material for some of his poems and had even visited Bulgaria for a few days when he returned from Constantinople in 1893. In addition, he learned Bulgarian and even considered finding a job at the Bezenšek brothers’ bookshop in Bulgaria after leaving the clergy. Thus, as both an editor and a poet, he decided to compensate for the lack of Bulgarian articles himself. One of the apparent motivations for Aškerc’s cycle of poems, as Rode also mentions (1982/83: 295), was his renewed contact with the Swede Alfred Jensen, who had translated Aškerc’s poems into Swedish. It was Jensen who told

Aškerc about the newly discovered monument to Vasil Levski in Sofia in 1901. Whatever the case may be, the cycle was created on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the liberation of Bulgaria from Turkish rule and illustrates episodes from the April Uprising of 1876, which was brutally suppressed by the Turks. It may have been precisely for this reason that the uprising triggered the Russo-Turkish War in 1878, in which the Turks were defeated, and Bulgaria liberated. On the basis of a letter by Aškerc dated 14 February 1902, in which he expresses his despair over national cultural struggles between Slovenian liberals and conservatives, backwardness, the general lack of freedom and neglect of national affiliation, Marja Boršnik (1951: 508), the editor of the second volume of Aškerc's collected works, concludes that the poet's original impulse for praising the heroic Bulgarian struggle against the Turks was born out of personal indignation at the "deplorable domestic situation".

At the end of the publication of *Rapsodije in Ljubljanski zvon*, Aškerc himself noted that he had studied the works of Zahari Stoyanov, Hristo Botev, Stoyan Zaimov, Dimitŭr Strashimirov, Stefan Bobchev and others while writing the cycle. Each of the thirteen poems of the cycle (only twelve were included in the first publication in *Ljubljanski zvon*, but another poem was added later for *Četrta zbornik poezij* (Fourth Collection of Poetry) in 1904), as well as the cycle as a whole has a motto in Bulgarian from the poetry of Hristo Botev. Despite the similarities with Ivan Vazov's *Epopėja na zabravenite* (Epic of the Forgotten, 1881–1884), literary scholars believe that the latter was not a direct influence, as Najda Ivanova reports (2005: 473). Opinions on this question are, however, divided. Ljudmil Dimitrov (2016: 109; 2020: 72), for instance, takes the opposite view, claiming that Aškerc "copied" Vazov in his own way and included certain heroes in his epic that do not appear in Vazov's work. A thorough comparative analysis would therefore be required.

The English title of Aškerc's cycle is *Rhapsodies of a Bulgarian Fiddler*. In a Slovenian-German dictionary of the poet's time, the word rhapsody (*rapsodija* in Slovenian) is defined as part of an epic (*epopeja*). Fiddle (*gosli* in Slovenian) is an archaic Slovenian term for violin, but Aškerc probably had in mind the folk music instrument that is known in both Serbian and Bulgarian folk music, although it is less typical in the latter. As Najda Ivanova concludes (2011: 196, 198), it is very likely that for the Slovenian reader, the title suggests the image of a fiddler following the style of Filip Višnjić, a blind performer of Serbian folk songs who presented his songs to Serbian anthropologist Vuk Karadžić. The source of this image of a fiddler is, however, more of South Slavic Romantic origin than Bulgarian. The subtitle *Pictures from the History of the Bulgarian Uprising* reminds us that these are images, fragmentary episodes, rather than the

representation of a continuous, epic course of events. The poet nonetheless tried to create the chronology of the narrated events with dates inscribed under the titles of the individual poems and with the sequence of poems in the cycle itself.

The longest poem is the first (1), entitled *Vasil Levski*. In the first episode, Levski is a deacon with a beautiful voice, who dons secular clothes, abandons the church and becomes a hajduk. In the second episode, Levski is presented in various identities, which he adopts on his tumultuous travels around the country. In the third episode, he takes refuge in a lonely inn on a winter night, where he is captured by the Turks after a short struggle. In the last episode, he is hanging on Turkish gallows: the executioners mock him, but his friends promise revenge. The following poems are mostly much shorter and focus on (2) scenes in the hajduk camp in Oborišče, in the middle of the Balkan forest, where rebels are taking Mass, and (3) on a celebration in Panadžurišče when the proud hajduks ride into town and are enthusiastically greeted by the townsfolk. In these poems, the poet names the heroes of the insurgece – Gavril Benkovski¹, the hajduk priest Grujo Banjski and Rajka Georgieva – all of whom call on the Bulgarians to fight for freedom. This is followed by the poems (4) *Boj pri Petriču* (The Battle of Petrič), in which the town of Petrič, under the leadership of the hajduks, resists the Turkish siege, and (5) *Bracigovski topovi* (Bratsigovo Cannons), in which center stage is taken by the Bulgarian slave Rada, who does not conceal her patriotism before her master, a Turkish commander, even though the villagers are defending Bratsigovo with nothing more than wooden cannons. (6) The poem *Batak* speaks of the massacre of the mountain inhabitants who trusted the words of a Turkish commander when he promised to pardon them if they surrendered their weapons. (7) *Teohana Čistemenska* is a freedom-loving Bulgarian woman who chooses to die along with her daughter in a church, imploring her husband to take their lives rather than surrender to the Turks. (8) *Baj Stančo*, the hero of the eponymous eighth poem, also prefers to choose an honorable death and jumps from a bridge into an abyss, as if to defy the hajduk Duke Benkovski. (9) *Baj Vuljo*, on the other hand, betrays Duke Benkovski, whom the surviving hajduks spare to be punished by his own conscience. The next two poems are about Botev. (10) *Hristo Botev na "Radeckem"* (Hristo Botev on the "Radetzky") is about the occupation of a steamer on the Danube and its diversion to the bank of the Kozloduy, where Botev leads three hundred hajduks in a battle against the Turks, while the next poem (11) tells of his heroic leadership of the decimated rebel troops against the Turks, describing the battle in which Duke Botev himself was killed. The

¹ Aškerc wrongly writes Gavril instead of Georgi Benkovski, making him also a hajduk Duke.

twelfth poem, (12) *Hajdukova vizija* (The Hajduk's Vision), is the only poem that is undated. It tells of a surviving hajduk who experiences a vision of fighters from the north (Russia) who will finally defeat the Turks and liberate the Slavic Balkans. The final, thirteenth poem, (13) *Mati Tonka Obretenova* (Mother Tonka Obretenova), again focuses on a woman, the mother of five sons, three of whom have been killed, while two remain captive in a Turkish prison. After the liberation of Bulgaria, Mother Tonka lives to witness the return of one of her two surviving hajduk sons.

Based on previous research, Najda Ivanova (2005) undertook a thorough translational analysis of the six poems from *Rapsodije bolgarskega goslarja* that had already been translated into Bulgarian: *Bracigovski topovi*, *Baj Stančo*, *Mati Tonka Obretenova*, *Boj pri Petriču*, *Panadžuriška slavnost*, *Vasil Levski* (although only the first part of the cycle had been translated, this was not indicated on the translation). Like Rode before her, she found that the translations, with the exception of *Mati Tonka Obretenova*, were aesthetically flawed. In her own analysis, however, she was primarily interested in the role of language and national stereotypes expressed in intercultural communication (2005: 463), the reasons for the various stylistic and other deviations of the translations from the original, as well as the cultural specificity of Aškerc's subjective literary treatment of historical facts. Ivanova (2011: 195–196) also analysed the Slovenian and Bulgarian reception of *Rapsodije*. With the exception of Bezenšek's (1902) comparison with Ivan Vazov's *Epopeja pozabljenih*, Aškerc's cycle had almost gone unnoticed by the Slovenian cultural public. Until Aškerc's death, the only two translated poems to attract attention were *Bracigovski topovi* and *Baj Stančo*, and these mostly circulated within the framework of trivial poetry and school literature. Ivanova found that the most comprehensive assessment of *Rapsodije* was by the Bulgarian literary historian Boris Joco in his study *Bolgarska trpljenja in boji za svobodo v slovanski poeziji* (Bulgarian Sufferings and Struggles for Freedom in Slavic Poetry, 1935). Joco compared Aškerc's cycle to Vazov's *Epopeja* and the epic poem *Krvava pesem* (Bloody Song) by Penčo Slavejkov. In his evaluation, which is not exactly flattering towards the Slovenian poet, he took Bulgarian national stereotypes as his starting point, especially drawing from the canon of Bulgarian literature of national revival and its modern development. He was therefore biased and was critical of Aškerc's singular poetic depiction of historical facts, which had arisen within a different literary system. Joco was disturbed, for instance, by the inadequate psychological nuancing of the negative characters (Baj Vuljo in the eponymous poem, the Turkish commander in the poem *Batak*) and of Rada from *Bracigovski topovi*, while also being critical of the genre impurity of the poetry in terms of epic expression, as well as the stylistic inconsistency and incoherence of

the poems in the cycle. In Ivanova's assessment of the poem *Vasil Levski*, which is the focus of her article, she was more lenient towards Aškerc and devoted more consideration to imagology.

3.

In his poem cycle, Aškerc thus constructed the image of Bulgarians from the specific situation of Slovenian cultural nationalism, which, around 1900, when Slovenians were still included in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, was becoming increasingly radical. An important background unifying idea was Pan-Slavism, the movement promoting the cultural coexistence of Slavic nations. Like other creators of Slovenian works in which representatives of foreign nations (e.g., Greece, Poland, and Bosnia) appeared mainly as fighters for liberation from foreign rule (Smolej 2021: 8), Aškerc was interested in the Bulgarian national struggle for liberation from the Turks, which the Bulgarians only achieved after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, as a kind of symbol of national revival and national consciousness he desired in Slovenia. The very title of the cycle shows that the image of Bulgarians in Aškerc is intertextually conveyed through examples from South Slavic heroic epics, from which the poet also borrowed stylistic means. In the Slovenian literary system at the time, the epic was regarded as a highly desirable and prestigious canonical genre. It is, however, important to point out that the poet, in his reference to epic poetry, occasionally showed considerable “individualism in the lyricisation of epic content”, as Najda Ivanova (2005: 465) noted.

In the cycle, Aškerc poetises freedom as an absolute value for which it is worth sacrificing one's life. This is indicated by the motto of *Rapsodije*, for which Aškerc chose the following stanza from the ballad *Hajdži Dimiter* by Hristo Botev: “He who fell in the fight for freedom / he does not die. For him mourn / heaven and earth with living nature, / the singer mourns him in his songs!” (cited after Dimitrov 2020: 71). With the intercession of the poet, the struggle for national freedom brings immortality, which is a recurring theme for Aškerc. With rare exceptions, such as the traitor Baj Vuljo, the poet attributes a freedom-loving nature to Bulgarian men and women, laymen and clerics; danger, the military superiority of the enemy and the closeness of death do not deter them from the struggle for national freedom, again with the exception of the inhabitants of Batak in the sixth poem of the cycle. The heroic rebels (Vasil Levski, Gavril Benkovski, Hristo Botev) and the freedom-loving, brave mothers (e.g., Teohana Chistemenska and Tonka Obretenova) are noble and idealised characters. Their tragic sacrifices will not be in vain. With Russian military support, the future of the nation will be triumphant, as the poet points out in *Ha-*

judkova vizija. Aškerc's view of the Turks, on the other hand, is largely Turkophobic; they are represented as violent and dishonest people who fail to keep their word and are prone to cruelty.

Another feature of the Bulgarian uprising against the Turks that fascinated Aškerc was the role of clerics, who took part in the uprising along with the other revolutionaries. This active engagement in political struggle and military uprising, which is not characteristic of Slovenian socio-cultural stereotypes, receives a great deal of the poet's attention. Already in the first poem, there is a biographical parallel with Vasil Levski, who takes off his monk's habit and (in Aškerc) sings of the long years of Bulgarian servitude: "Today I abandoned my monk's habit, / I was shorn of my long hair ... / I cursed all of my past... / Vasil Levski is now my name!". Aškerc himself resigned from the priestly service, retiring at his own request and becoming an archivist. As the editor of the liberal-oriented *Ljubljanski zvon* and as a poet, he heroically threw himself into the national cultural struggle. Already in the poem *Vasil Levski*, one encounters a juxtaposition of the attributes of Christianity and violent or militant rebellion, which is a very non-stereotypical association for Catholics. For Slovenian readers, this must have seemed very culturally specific, perhaps even exotic: "Monk Ignatius no longer exists! / Hajduk Levski now stands before you, / but the prayer book is now his sword! ...". Similar examples can be found in the poem *Tabor v Oborišču*, in the Mass celebrated by Gruj Banjski: "He opened the sacred books, took the cross in his left hand, / but in his right hand the priest holds a sharpened cutlass; / and with a mighty bass he sings an antiphon from them that is unusual but bold: / 'Death to the tyrant Turk!' ...". In the same poem, the hajduks swear by both the Gospel and their weapons: "[A]nd each hajduk placed his hand there / on the three mighty sacred objects one after another / [...] / each swore on the Holy Gospel, / he swore on a loaded revolver ...". In *Panadžuriška slavnost*, the priests hold Gospels and cutlasses in their hands: "After Nedeljko a swarm of comrades ride / many in the robes of church priests / when the hajduk heroes sit on horses, / they hold Gospels and cutlasses in their hands."

As Ivanova (2005: 437) notes, at the time when the translations of Aškerc's works passed into the Bulgarian literary system, the literature of national revival, by which he was certainly inspired to some extent, was no longer the dominant developmental aesthetic, but it had nonetheless played a part in creating the social consciousness and ideological stereotypes of historical thinking. This fact channeled Aškerc's translations into the proximity of Bulgarian mass culture through the reception filter of the literature of national revival. In the light of the new translations (Aškerc 2016), too, it would be interesting to observe the effect of the national revival transfer and to determine how the adaptation to the target (Bulgarian) culture took

place this time, but this is already a topic that would require a special, new study.

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