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HISTORY VS “HERSTORY”?

TRANSLATING MARGARET ATWOOD’S *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*

Abstract

Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* possesses a very complex narrative structure, resembling a puzzle that the reader has to put together. The plot is mostly made up of the protagonist’s stream-of-consciousness-like narrative, which gradually reconstructs the sequence of events that led to establishing the oppressive social order of a near-future America. The short final section, presented in the form of a scientific paper, sheds some light on the Handmaid’s narrative, but leaves the main mysteries of the narrative unresolved. Indeed, as it seems to deprive the protagonist of her individuality as much as the oppressive Gileadean regime, it gives rise to the following question: does history in the form of “his story”, i.e. the version provided by the Cambridge historian who blatantly disregards the highly personal nature of the Handmaid’s narrative, insist that it should have provided more factual historical details, obliterate history as “herstory”? The answer that the author provides to this dilemma is given in the form of subtle hints hidden in-between the lines. This paper will try to establish how much of this novel’s complexity reaches the Serbian reader in translation.

Key words: Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, narrative structure, translation, history vs “herstory”

Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* is characterised by a highly intricate narrative structure, reminiscent of a puzzle that the reader has to put together by painstakingly matching the scattered bits of information supplied by the narrator, the Handmaid of the title, but which of necessity remains incomplete due to the open-ended nature of the narrative. Set in a dystopian, fundamentalist United States of the near future, the plot, for the most part, consists of the protagonist’s stream-of-consciousness-like narrative that reconstructs the sequence of events which brought about the oppressive social order that deprives her, and the major part of the population, of their fundamental human rights.

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To begin with, the class of women who are referred to as Handmaids by the regime of the Republic of Gilead, as the United States is now called, are deprived of their proper names. The term Handmaids, like many other elements of the new social order, originates from the Bible, where it refers to slaves who provided sexual services to the patriarchs and occasionally played the role of surrogate mothers (“Now Sarai Abram’s wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar” – Genesis 16:1). Even though Đura Daničić’s translation of the above sentence reads “Ali Sara žena Avramova ne rađaše mu dece. A imaše robinju Misirku po imenu Agara” (Postanje 16:1), we have reason to believe that the term “Sluškinja”, used by the Serbian translator in the title and throughout the novel, is more appropriate than “robinja” in the given context. Namely, although it is true that the military regime of Gilead (a biblical toponym) has deprived Handmaids of their basic human rights, at least it has not officially re-established the institution of slavery, so that, technically speaking, their position is that of a maidservant rather than a slave.

As if depriving them of their human rights were not enough, the fundamentalist regime of Gilead virtually deprives Handmaids of their identity as well: they are forced to renounce their proper names, and can only be referred to by the patronymic of the military Commander to whom they have been assigned. Thus the protagonist is referred to as “Offred”, which indicates that she is the property of the military Commander whose name is Fred. Analogously, her fellow Handmaids are called “Ofglen” and “Ofwarren”. The translator’s solution – to add the suffix -ovica to the corresponding male names from which the women’s names were derived – was applied consistently and resulted in natural-sounding names in Serbian: Fredovica, Glenovica and Vorenovica respectively.

One of the main characteristics of the narrative of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is the abundance of biblical proper names, toponyms and notional categories in the context of American society of the near future, which, in itself, is highly unusual. As Atwood herself has pointed out in a number of interviews and essays, the essentially fundamentalist regime of Gilead is based on a peculiar combination of the Puritan cultural milieu of 17th-century America and the ideology of the American New Right of the 1980s (Howells 1996: 127). In that sense, the translator’s reliance on Đura Daničić’s translation of the Old Testament in the case of the toponym Gilead (transcribed appropriately as “Galad”¹ in Serbian) is consistent with the author’s intention and faithfully recreates the implications of the original: it underscores the stark contrast between the biblical ideal and the monstrous nature of the regime.

Often enough, the religiously intoned elements of the narrative are used to stress the inhumanity of the regime by means of ironic reversal of the original meaning. That

¹ See, for example: Sva mesta u ravni i sav Galad... (Ponovljeni zakoni 3:10).

is the case with the term "Salvaging" (Atwood 1996: 31), adequately translated as "Spasenje" (Atvud 2004: 32), which does not refer to the saving of souls of believers, as one would normally assume in a religious context, but to public executions of enemies of the regime. Similarly, the term "Prayvaganza" (Atwood 1996: 31), translated as "Molitvagancija" (Atvud 2004: 32), which denotes a religious rite of mass proportions, through its unusual combination of the stem *pray* and the suffix taken over from the noun *extravaganza*, stresses the grotesquely exaggerated character of the use of the term and of the practice that it refers to. Another case in point is the term "Birthmobile" (Atwood 1996: 31), that is, "Porodomobil" in Serbian translation (Atvud 2004: 32). In a manner typical of the culture of Gilead, this neologism, which refers to a vehicle used to transport Handmaids so that they could attend a birth, overemphasises their procreative function, thus reducing their lives solely to the biological level. In all three cases referred to above, the adequate solutions in Serbian translation enable the reader to gradually expand his or her understanding of the Handmaid's narrative.

That is also the case with the car brand names, so typical of the Gileadean phraseology, which the Handmaid mentions at the beginning of Chapter Four: "Whirlwind, which is better than the Chariot, much better than the chunky, practical Behemoth" (Atwood 1996: 27), translated as "vihor, bolja od kočija, mnogo bolja od zdepastog, praktičnog 'slona'" (Atvud 2004: 27). All the car brand names are actually biblical references, as Coral Ann Howells points out (Howells 1999: 16). The first one, Whirlwind, appears in the Book of Jeremiah: "Behold, a whirlwind of the LORD is gone forth in fury, even a grievous whirlwind: it shall fall grievously upon the head of the wicked" (Jeremiah 23:19); as translated by Đura Daničić "Evo, vihor gospodnji, gnjev, izići će vihor, koji ne prestaje, pašće na glavu bezbožnicima" (Jer. 23:19). Chariots, of course, are mentioned in the Bible many times, starting with the Book of Genesis at its very beginning. "Behemoth", a monster that is a counterpart to Leviathan, is mentioned in the Book of Job: "Behold now behemoth, which I made with thee; he eateth grass as an ox" (Job 40:15). In Serbian translation, this may not be immediately reminiscent of the Bible, but if we consult Daničić's translation of this sentence, it transpires that this is how he actually translated Behemoth: "A gle, slon, kojega sam stvorio sa tobom, jede travu kao vo" (Jov 40:10). In all three cases, the translator manifested consistence relying on Daničić's translations to be found in the Old Testament. In this way, the translation achieves the desired effect: it emphasises the unusual combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar, the old and the new, 17th-century religious fundamentalism and 21st-century technology. This is evident in the case of the most prestigious car brand name among the three – the "Whirlwind", that is, "vihor". Instead of being associated with the engine performance in terms of horsepower, in line with the modern advertising industry, this brand name conveys a

message to “the wicked” about the fate that awaits the opponents of the regime: the Salvaging.

The names of some of the shops that the Handmaid frequents in the course of her shopping errands also contain biblical allusions. The florist’s shop called “Lilies of the Field” (Atwood 1996: 35) alludes to the lilies mentioned in The Gospel According to Luke: “Consider the lilies how they grow: they toil not, they spin not; and yet I say unto you, that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these” (12:27), translated by Daničić as “Pogledajte ljiljane kako rastu: ne trude se, niti predu; ali ja vam kažem da ni Solomun u svoj slavi svojoj ne obuče se kao jedan od njih.” This reflects the striving of the regime to fill as many elements of the daily life of its subjects with biblical contents and symbolism, as Coral Ann Howells observes (Howells 1999: 16). That is why the solution used in the Serbian translation – “Krinovi” (Atwood 2004: 36) – deviates somewhat from the tone and implications of the original. Possibly, the translator failed to spot the biblical association, or he may have been swayed by the immediate recognisability of the name in our context, since there are quite a few florist’s shops called “Krin” throughout Serbia.

The name of the shop called “Milk and Honey” (Atwood 1996: 35) is also of biblical provenance. Specifically, it is mentioned in The Second Book of Moses, Called Exodus, wherein Canaan is described as “a land flowing with milk and honey” (3:8). In the Serbian version, the translator used the word order that is more natural in Serbian (“Med i mleko”, Atwood 2004: 36). This faithfully conveys the message of the original in its semantic aspect and retains the telling note of irony from the original (Howells 1999: 18). Naturally, the desirable interpretation from the point of view of the regime would be that the name of the shop reflects the quality of life in Gilead, but it stands in glaring contrast to the reality of Gileadean everyday life.

[Due to the format of this paper, I cannot provide a more detailed analysis of the Serbian translation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. It is imperative, however, to comment, no matter how briefly, on the key moments of the final segment of the novel, entitled “The Historical Notes”.]

The Handmaid’s narrative ends abruptly when she is taken away by the secret police in the middle of the night in a black van – whether to prison or, possibly, to be executed, or to safety and freedom – the reader has no way of knowing. Some light is shed on her narrative by “The Historical Notes”, a paper presented in the course of a Gileadean studies conference, held almost two centuries after the events dealt with in the narrative. The presenter, a Cambridge professor of history, criticises the Handmaid’s narrative for not providing more factual information and a more exact depiction of the Gileadean regime. In doing so, he virtually deprives her of her individuality in much the same way as the theocratic regime of Gilead.

To add insult to injury, the professor even makes occasional sexist remarks, punning on the allusion to Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in the title by pointing out that "tale", in the sense of a story, is homophonic with "tail", in the sense of a very colloquial, bordering on vulgar, reference to a woman. In an attempt to be humorous, he refers to *tail* as being "the bone [...] of contention in that phase of Gileadean society of which our saga treats" (Atwood 1996: 313). *Tail* is adequately translated into Serbian as "riba" (Atvud 2004: 325), the expression being accompanied by a brief footnote explaining the English pun, which cannot be literally transposed into Serbian. This at least enables the reader to get the main drift of the professor's expose at this point, even though "the bone of contention is translated as "okosnica spora" (Atvud 2004: 325) rather than "predmet spora".

A little further on, the speaker attempts an equally unfortunate pun: he refers to "The Underground Femaleroad" as "The Underground Frailroad", hiding behind the feeble excuse that it was thought up by "some of our historical wags" (Atwood 1996: 313), that is, some university colleagues of his prone to tasteless jokes. The Serbian translation ("Podzemni put žena", Atvud 2004: 325) does justice to the former phrase, which is an allusion to the American Civil War era "Underground Railroad", a network of secret routes and safe houses established in the United States during the early to mid-19th century, and used by African-American slaves to escape into free states, Canada and Nova Scotia, with the aid of abolitionists and allies who were sympathetic to their cause. As used in the novel, the variation on the original phrase refers to a similar network helping women to escape from the oppression of the Gileadean regime. The phrase "The Underground Frailroad" is a subtle allusion to Hamlet's statement "Frailty, thy name is woman", which assumes bitterly ironic overtones as used by Atwood in the given context. Unfortunately, none of this will reach the reader of the Serbian translation, for the latter phrase was translated as "Podzemni put sena", the translator having opted for a rhyming pun which conveys none of the original meaning to the Serbian reader. A correct translation – "Podzemni put slabosti", for example, would have required another explanatory footnote, but that would be a small price to pay for retaining the original meaning.

In the final analysis, Atwood provides a subtle hint to the reader on whose story is to be believed – the Handmaid's ("her story") or the historian's ("his story"). It is to be found in the name of the university where the scientific conference is held: Denay, Nunavit (Atwood 1996: 311). In other words: deny none of it, that is, whatever the historian may say, it is the Handmaid who is to be trusted. The Serbian transcription ("Univerzitet u Denaju, Nunavit", Atvud 2004: 323), inaccurate as such (it should read "Dinej, Nanavit"), fails altogether to convey this message to the Serbian reader, which could have been achieved by means of an explanatory footnote.

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