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The Printing press – Background and Significance for the Bulgarian-Serbian Cultural Exchange in the 19th Century*

This article is an attempt to analyze the contacts between Bulgarian and Serbian cultures in the 19th century in the light of a “wonder discovery” – the printing press. Its role and significance for the radical changes that occurred in the social, cultural and literary communication is studied. The relations between men of letters such as Jovan Rajić and Atanas Nešković, journalists such as Danilo Medaković and Georgi S. Rakovski, the printer and publisher Konstantin Ognjanović, are also subject to this analysis. Based on some works by Konstantin Fotinov and P. R. Slaveykov the understanding that the printing press revealed new worlds and blurred boundaries – not only in terms of time and space but most of all spiritual and cultural boundaries, is advanced.

Key words: printing press, cultural exchange, Bulgarian and Serbian context, 19th century

The printing press is one of those engineering breakthroughs that radically changed the literary and cultural communications. It set the course of certain interactions and empathy, it blurred certain boundaries – not only in terms of time and space but most of all spiritual and cultural boundaries.

The revelation of new worlds through the printing press can be directly linked to getting to know the Other, to developing in full scope the dialogue with the Other – moreover so, given the closely bounded sharing of a common ethnical fate.

19th century was the time of great changes and crucial events in the southern Slavic, Balkan context, which led to sudden twists in the political sta-

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tus-quo but most of all in the cultural and in the spiritual-educational rise of the individual who dared wish for liberty. Which means – to dedicate himself wholeheartedly to liberty: as to a long yearned dream and ideal, as to an irreversible imperative moral norm.

Undoubtedly, the essential role of the book can be distinguished here – the Gutenberg book, the printed word, which was not only quicker and easier to distribute and access but also in the overall Balkan 19th century settings – it pursued inherent educational-cultural and ideological-propagandistic goals and objectives.

From 1806 on (since the release of „Nedelnik” by Sophronius of Vratsa – the first printed book in vernacular containing Sunday sermons) Bulgarians were still more intensely going to encounter the printed book as a phenomenon, to discover the world it revealed, to recognize it as an essential part of their existence which was step by step gaining a sense of completeness.

The purpose of this study is to trace back the cultural interrelations in the context of this topic between the Bulgarian ethnos and another ethnos, which is too close to it in terms of popular customs, culture and historical fate – the Serbians. The focus of interest in this study is some particular instances of cultural interaction in the 19th century in the light and presence of the printing press and the printed books featuring men of letters, educators and journalists such as Jovan Rajić, *Atanas Nesković*, Konstantin Ognjanović, Danilo Medaković. Their efforts formed a stage in the development of a trend that had already become irreversible and was outstandingly reflected in the cultural and literary periodicals of Bulgarian Revival period (Konstantin Fotinov, P. R. Slaveykov) – which is the focus of study in the second part of this article.

I.

The knowledge of history – construct of the present

The social and political dependence and the threat of losing one’s spiritual identity in the situation of servitude predetermine, especially considering the impetuous development of educational processes and enlightenment, the occurrence of certain impulses of self-preservation with regard to the fate of community. A means to oppose the infamous present was to gain knowledge of the glorious historical past – a valuable but also a moral highlight whose arrangement, classification and apologetic recollection played a markedly consolidating function.

Therefore, the historical speech of the Athonite monk Paisius of Hilendar regathered, „assembled”¹ the disunited Bulgarian ethnos. Nearly four

¹ Ref. to the fundamental article by Marin Drinov entitled “Father Paisius, his time, his history and his disciples”. – *Periodical of the Bulgarian Literary Association*. Кн. IV, 1871.

decades later an eminent public figure and man of letters would recourse to similar strategies, only adding something entirely and definitely innovative and completely different that was going to radically change during Revival Period the cultural and literary communication, in particular. *Atanas Nešković* will be remembered in the development of Bulgarian Revival literature as the author of the first *printed* history of Bulgarian people: „История славеноболгарског народа из г. Раича историе и неких исторических книг, составленна и простим языком списана за синове отечества” (*History of the Slavonic Bulgarian people by Mr. Rajic, stories and some historical books, composed and written in vernacular for the sons of fatherland*) (1801).

This way the Paisius’ tradition was not only continued but most and first of all it was spread and advanced to include the engineering achievements of that time. Typography made the reach for selected and offered historical set of data easier and accessible (this was one of the reasons why *Nešković’ history was more popular and more widely distributed in Western Bulgaria* than the Paisius’ history). The “typesetting” of a new book was an important step to speeding up the spiritual and cultural-educational development. The printed book integrated, united, bound into one indivisible entity not as much – just formally – the “ones with the same ethnical origin” but rather – and immutably – the ones who were on the same wavelength, the ones who shared the same ideas, the ones who were dedicated to the pursuit of a common cause.

Bulgarian-Serbian cultural and literary interrelations in that respect were demonstrated in the line of borrowings based on the analogous ethnical life paths but also as a consequence of the authoritative, value-added historical narrative told by the primary source – Jovan Rajić. His book „История разних славенских народов най-паче Болгар, Хорватов и Сербов” (*History of the various Slavonic people, most of all the Bulgarians, the Croats and the Serbs*) (1794-1795) which appreciably formed the basis of the *Nesković’ one*.

The consistent diachronic observation – starting from „О Словенской Болгар породе и языке” (*On the Origin and Language of Bulgarian Slavs*) – and ending with „О возобновлений Болгарского Кралевства и последнем падений” (*On the Rise of Bulgarian Kingdom and its Final Fall*) – was made in a somewhat different context and was given new interpretation by which the highest achievements of that once glorious people became directly and publicly available and known to its uneducated, suffering, humiliated descendants.

Book-printing – mission and necessity

The literature in the early Bulgarian 19th century, while seeking its own identity, was quick to see book-printing as a possible means to spread ideas and phenomena, to shape certain concepts, to imbibe the spirit of belonging.

Book-printing became not only a time-related necessity but it evolved into a mission, into a vocation for those whose efforts were constantly directed to the pursuit of general welfare (Берон 2004, Кутинчев 1920, Пенев 1977). Book-printing is one of those engineering breakthroughs that directly impact the blurred boundaries (in terms of time and space), the eradication of differences. It was the common cause that mattered, the united dedication. Therefore, it was not a surprise that the Razlog-born Bulgarian Marko Teodorović would create the ABC book for Serbian children and the Panchevo-born Serbian Konstantin Ognjanović would ardently care for Bulgarian education and culture – both through his literary works but also by an important undertaking of his.

In 1842 in Constantinople Ognjanović created „Трудолюбива пчела” (*Hard-working Bee*) – one of the first Bulgarian printing houses.

This way book-printing as a technical activity and educational gesture was not just an isolated instance of a given tendency, it was actually turned into an occupation – moreover, it bore the typical characteristics of Bulgarian National Revival – it was done for a clearly distinguished public benefit; it acquired institutional nature in the conditions of missing sovereignty.

In this respect, following the meaningful presence of a figure such as the street-vending book-seller, book-printing houses were charged with the meaning and significance of a carrier, disseminator and promoter of *knowledge*, which also meant showing the way to the Other and to the world, including the way to oneself.

In the 50-ies of the 19th century there occurred some major changes in the Bulgarian emigrant circles, which gradually paved the way and consolidated the radical positions with regard to the real public political everyday life as the only possible road to the attainment of the innermost ideal – liberty. In this respect, a considerable role was once again played by the printed word, which was used to present, substantiate and propagate ideas, trends and convictions in view of the painful being of society.

A key figure in the Bulgarian public, political and cultural life as a whole, which perfectly fitted in the specific context, was undoubtedly Georgi S. Rakovski – a revolutionary, a journalist, a poet, who, preceding Hristo Botev, was able to fuse together both the word and the action to the point of tragic sublimity. His firm conviction and dedication to the national cause using “press and sword” along became equivalent to an imperative moral norm implicitly adhered to.

In 1857 in Novi Sad Rakovski started publishing the newspaper named „Българска дневница” (*Bulgarian Diaries*) – it was his first undertaking in the area of journalism, editorial and publishing work. The influence of Doctor Danilo Medaković was evident – its structure, composition, the very pub-

lishing, even the naming led straightforward to „Срѣбски дневник” (*Serbian Diary*) (Deretić 2013, Арнаудов 1969, Николова 2004). There was yet another instance of interaction of ideas and cultures – despite the inevitable differences – considering the similar life paths and the general requirements of historical time.

Printed word was recognized as an unfailing tool for “awareness”, for patriotic inspiration and national self-consciousness, for provoking people to express themselves by definitive action.

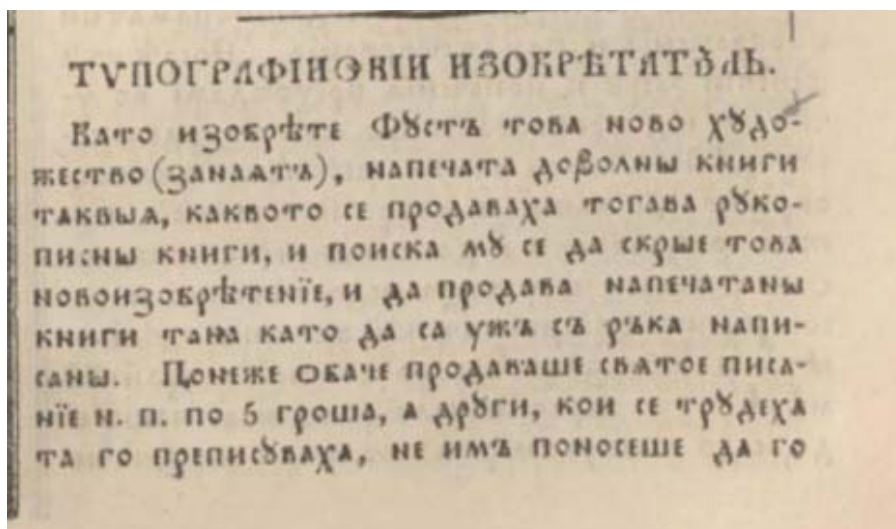
II.

As early as the first appearance of Bulgarian periodical press, book-printing as occupation and the image of printing press became characterological on the background of the offered range of themes that aimed to satisfy the literary-cognitive needs of the all-sensible reader. The scientific documentary materials, fully based and inspired by the educational trends typical of that time, took part in the matching of different cultural codes while taking in consideration accordingly the peculiarities and the origin of their object of observations, their initial source (quite often those were translated texts) and the target audience. This way, the art of “typography” crossed and brought closer the individual aspirations and quests on the unevenly paced but otherwise common road to cultural and educational rise.

Konstantin Fotinov was a highly erudite man of letters, largely formed in a foreign social and cultural environment, and carrier of the integral and completed concepts of enlightenment, who was well aware of the need to provide total coverage through the periodical he was editing, which was named „Любословие” (*Philology*), by giving full-scope information and observation on the different aspects of social, cultural, economic life, which from the 40-ies on became ever more intensive. Therefore, a summarized and synthesized scientific documentary material such as „Типографийский изобретател” (*Typographic inventor*) would find its special place in the literary-educational quests of its *author* because the subject of that documentary was to highlight some aspects of that most fascinating artistry and the role of its inventor, and not just in terms of its relative retrospective grounding. In its own way it imposed the importance and irreversibility of the subject-phenomenon of human culture on the background of the Bulgarian road to and amidst culture which was taken a few decades ago. Naturally, it would be inappropriate to idealize and exaggerate the significance of such a short, though quite instructive, article, more of historical and biographic nature and less of evaluating journalistic nature, which focused on a particular, specific subject; the fact is though that the use of that subject in the context of intentions and overall concept of

„преводителя и издателя списание сего” (*the translator and editor of this periodical*) was charged with certain function – to discover, teach and illustrate to the Bulgarian reader of the National Revival period (who lacked any tradition and experience in reading articles of that sort) what private knowledge was and to relate it to contemporary life (especially through the public figure of the printer and his business) – in the light of the close, known, one’s own environment.

Gutenberg’s partner – Johann Fust (1400 – 1466) – was recognized as a key person with fundamental role in a phenomenon which brought additional confrontation between handwritten and printed word while striving to satisfy certain material interests:



The new invention was popularized definitely to the detriment of copyists. The conscientious replacement meant depriving them of their benefits, as a result of which the cultural and literary communication acquired a different, more specific status, and the possession and holding of *books* was directly related to the holding of a certain social status. Thus, the presence and distribution of *incunabula* – the earliest printed books that were sold pretending to be manuscripts to be charged for more expensively (Хаджикосев 2000: 357), as if they played contradictory, dual roles – to distinguish and to consolidate at the same time the notion of new search as showing and facilitating the access and reach to knowledge but also to destroy that notion little by little by turning to the previous, the old environment as one that provided means and opportunity for easier profit.

That fact would be substantially highlighted in the observations and later on in a text like „Печатопис” (*Typography*) by Petko R. Slaveykov in the periodical „Смесна китка” (*Bouquet*) demonstrating the attempts of Bulgarian readers of the National Revival period to feel empathetic to the great attainments of human creative (engineering, in particular), constructive activity. Furthermore, such closeness in the references by individual authors and composers was due not only to certain influence on their literary endeavors or the use of similar prime sources, it rather resulted from the selection and adding value to the other, the foreign one, through cultural experience and through their submission to the requirements and needs associated with the building of its own cultural image.

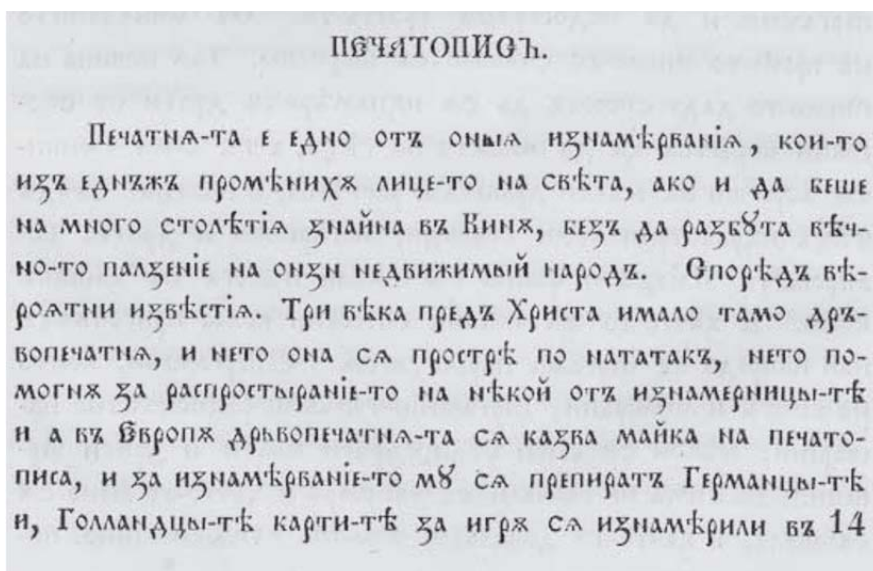
The printed book, as with every innovation, along with its obvious and undisputed advantages, kept back something mystic, secret, unknown, something scary and sometimes even repulsive. The very technique of arranging letter signs on paper, i.e. the kind of dismantling man from the aureole of a creator (rewriter), constructor, possessing the knowledge, evoked uncertainty, bewilderment. The printer revealed to the world a sort of artistry that was inaccessible and incomprehensible for the wide public circles, it was meant only for those who had inside knowledge. Therefore, within the fairy tale and fantasy-like world-perceptive attitudes the printer was immediately and directly associated with the figure of mediator, being completely capable of conditioning and organizing the surreal, the things beyond the visible world: „Наклеветиха го прочее на правителя (запчѝа) и наклопаха както чародейца (магесника)” (*He was slandered to the governor and smeared to be a sorcerer (magician)*). Moreover, the printed book was decorated but with red ink, which further evoked symbolic associations: „учиниха го да е негова кръв; пристойно прочее изрекоха, че има най-чевръсти и големи сообразности и сходства сос преизподни и Адови бесы” (*they concluded it was his own blood; further they knowledgeably told there were the most nimble and great conformities and similarities with the abyss and hell’s own evil spirits*).

No doubt of course that typography was a sorcery *sui generis* requiring much effort and sacrifices. The initial ambivalence accompanying its perception and internalization though was much more interesting and symptomatic – ranging from exaltation and enthusiasm inspired by the engineering thought of mankind to the fear of its particular materialization and subsequent rejection to “пути нечестивых” (the way to hell).

One way or another, the printing press was an invention “most fascinating” and it was exactly that inherent trait of it that would radically change forever the methods of text-writing, distribution and perception. That was something that the Bulgarian man of letter and editor was very well aware of and was trying to apply as orderly and consistently as possible.

Some of the above-discussed highlights in K. Fotinov's article were also mentioned in another text a few years later, where the still prevailing clerical Slavonic typeface was their least – formal – proximity. The saying is about the scientific documentary article entitled „Печатопис” (*Typography*) by P. R. Slaveykov, which was included in the contents of the first Bulgarian literature periodical – „Смесна китка” (1852) (*Bouquet*). In terms of periodical's composition the prospective eminent editor and journalist's approach was determined in consideration of the very concept of the periodical – skillfully and well-reasoned, including materials of different nature that dealt with the knowledge of the world and man's place in it. Therefore, here too the leading tendency of imagery and suggestion was quite naturally expected to be literature and education-oriented. That tendency also determined the nature of selected texts, which were then grouped into separate *Цветове* (*Flowers*) thus they came to compose a colorful bouquet of ideas and themes.

The article dealing with the typography was published in *Flower III*, which was meaningfully entitled *Science and Artistry*.



The once started line of comprehension and internalization of one of those inventions that „изведнѣж промениха лицето на света” (*suddenly changed the face of the world*), of the machine that could eternalize by written word all kinds of memorable events, where “artistry” with the meaning of occupation but also with the meaning of an art that was subject to strict requirements and rules, was given additional content value but also a range of symbolic connotations.

The discussed text was preceded by an article about the substance used for writing in antiquity – the continuity in terms of ideas and themes was obvious: the peculiar diachronic overview through the various publications on the history of written word, in addition to merely showing, naming and distinguishing, was aimed most of all at conditioning and adding value; the object of observation and the object of performance of that task – the image of “тискарницата” (the printing press) – was seen as ineradicable mark on the road to cultural and civilization progress of mankind. Like the mark Bulgarian history of culture left on the road to „облагородванието” (*ennoblement*), as an emphatic presence in the middle of the nineteenth century, despite the social and political circumstances or maybe because of them.

On the other hand, the article about typography was followed by a material dedicated to the discovery of America – at a first glance there was little in common between them but indirectly and metaphorically the thing that brought them together was the apparent aspiration for gaining knowledge about and reliving the discovered new horizons – both geographical but most of all – spiritual.

Exactly they were the focus of the narrative, which abounded in facts by explaining descriptively and simply the typographical techniques, starting from the somewhat primitive ones and concluding with the improvements of Gutenberg and Fust:

The carving of each plate was a difficult and funny thing to do. It was very hard to correct the mistakes that carver omitted; the words did not come off even and clearly discernable; the constant movement of wooden plates from a damp to a dry place caused them to rot and the letters to fall down, they had to make new plates for each book, as many plates as the pages of the book were.

(...)

Gutenberg either invented on his own or learnt from Johann how to use the movable letters, it is though just to say that he felt the shortcomings, the difficulty of handling and the short life of these letters, therefore in 1449, taking his compatriot the goldsmith Fust (...), a hard-working and much capable man, for helper and partner he produced letters carved on ore, which marked the start of the second stage and the true progress of typography.

The tendency that avails itself for building the image of the new invention took the course of beautifying and idealization – for the role it played while pushing the evolution of human culture in another direction. Therefore, accordingly – of the specific dialogue of the spirit, of ideas *within* and *through*

it. A direction that also integrated irreversibly the Bulgarian tradition, in particular.

That tendency was also linked to the strict distinction and consolidation of the “exquisite” quest by reference to the facts and authenticity, which functioned as an emphatic axiologizing gesture:

Dutchmen say that their compatriot Laurentius Coster from Haarlem was the first one to invent the wooden letters by carving them while walking. With those letters he first printed the Sunday prayer and other small things, he was bewildered how to arrange the letters one next to the other and to press them all together with equal force on paper when the pressing mechanism (vice) of the wine press drew his attention and he used it as a model to construct the first Printing press. To fix the letters on their place and to prevent their displacement during pressing he thought of perforating the letters in depth and string together all the letters in one row and tie them with a thin thread, which no doubt was a great fun to do but also took a lot of hard work, if any corrections were needed. This way first the Donatus' Latin Grammar was printed and some other booklets that were popular in the 15th century, and those printed works became so precious and cherished that very often they were given as royal presents.

The introduction of printing press in public life led to new hesitations in the manifestations of word – the former opposition between *verbal* и *written speech* now took another dimension: *the handwritten* and *the printed word*. On one hand, the great invention absolutely facilitated the easier and more accessible spread of materialized knowledge about mankind and the world, it thoroughly changed the methods it was transmitted and assimilated, brought high respect for the authority of the printer, the editor, who was recognized as the mysterious custodian and (transmitter) carrier of the unreachable knowledge that was hidden from the uneducated man. On the other hand, though – it provoked vehement counteractions on the part of copyists who exactly by those reasons „лишаваха ся от големите си ползования” (*were deprived of their huge profits*).

Glorification and resistance.

Admiration and doubt.

Those were the extreme poles through which the printing press was breaking a trail to reach the people in order to become one of the brightest symbols of „просвещението на човеческият род” (*the enlightenment of human kind*), while its educated inventors and inspired followers would become the new Triptolemus whose sprinkled seeds produced so much and most valuable fruits, for the sake of which the memory for that invention

would die away only when every dearth of ennoblement disappeared from the face of earth.

It can be argued that the efforts of the studied writers clearly fit into the Revival cultural and literary tradition of understanding, illustrating and affirming the new inventions entering in the public life, facilitating and enriching the dialogue between their own and foreign culture.

A dialogue based on the unreserved and consistent cultural and creative activity in the name of collective prosperity. And that is precisely what makes this activity so valuable, noble, necessary and so unattainable.

A dialogue enveloped by the spirit of empathy, of the open and sincere desire to find ways to each other, and that means – to oneself.

A dialogue, which thanks to the researched here Bulgarian and Serbian writers and enlighteners, gets even richer and more meaningful nuance. And irrevocable importance – for the construction and preservation of cultural image and the national identity.

And the end product of this close to the concept of “art” invention – the book – really has a soul and it is important for the reader to be interested in it. At least because it makes the mental activities that are needed more than bread (Казанакли 1868: 47) easy and accessible.

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Summary

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