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Accuracy and Reception: On Theological and Aesthetic Novelty in Two Novels by Teodora Dimova

Abstract

This article raises the question of functioning of the Biblical narrative in modern literature in the context of the local/individual experience of faith and the epistemological and existential question of truth. The focus is on two novels by the Bulgarian writer Teodora Dimova (born in 1960): *Марма Мариам* [*Marma, Mariam*, 2010] and *Първият рожден ден* [*The First Birthday*, 2016]. This case is particularly interesting because the Biblical story about Jesus has not been used here in order to create a parody or blasphemy, which could be expected as far as the postmodern de-contextualisation and re-evaluation of tradition are concerned, but to offer both an aesthetically original and theologically orthodox vision of the Christian God. So how to paraphrase the Biblical story and remain orthodox? How to actualize the existential potential of the Bible and achieve novelty? The analysis is conducted in the perspective of Paul Ricoeur's existential hermeneutics and phenomenology of memory, especially his concepts of testimony and mimesis,

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with regard to the question of the reception of Biblical paraphrases in (Bulgarian) modern culture.

Keywords: Bible, modernity, Bulgarian culture, Bulgarian literature, Teodora Dimova, reception, apocrypha.

Teodora Dimova (born in 1960) is one of the most acclaimed contemporary Bulgarian writers. She became famous at the beginning of the twenty-first century with plays and novels on social and moral topics, particularly with the novel *Ма̀йкуме* [*Mothers*, 2006], which has been awarded multiple times and translated into many languages. Recently, she has focused directly on the issue of religious elements within the everyday life experience. Interested in the Christian tradition, even officially involved with the Orthodox faith, she has written various texts which develop Biblical motifs and interpret human existence in the perspective of Christian values and dogmas (cf. Dimova, 2018). In this context, I would like to analyze two of her works: *Марма, Мариам* [*Marma, Mariam*, 2010] and *Първият рожден ден* [*The First Birthday*, 2016],¹ and by doing this – to raise the question about the truth(fullness) in literary paraphrases of the Bible narrative, as both works are poetic transpositions of the Gospel story. First, I will explore their relation to the source with regard to a dichotomy “aesthetic originality – theological orthodoxy”, and then I will try to overcome this perspective and problematize the question of accuracy and reception.

As far as the main storyline is concerned, the novel *Marma, Mariam* repeats the Gospel; it tells the story of Jesus of Nazareth, from the Annunciation to the revelation of the Risen Lord, although the action takes place in a non-linear way: it contains many reminiscences, conveyed especially through the free indirect speech. The events are presented from the constantly changing points of view of various characters, both the main and the supporting ones. The evangelical narrative is in fact a tale of the main character, Marma. The novel is set in two spatio-temporal dimensions. The primary dimension, or in fact the meta-level of the plot, which is marked in the book in italics, is Bulgaria after 1989 and the story of a middle-aged

¹ In further analysis I will use the term “novel” with reference to both of the texts. However, it should be noted that *The First Birthday* is in fact a short novel, a novella, and is described as such by the author herself – the subtitle of the work is *Повесть*. The genre differences are not relevant to my inquiry, although they correspond to the differences in terms of the plot and the setting that can be seen in these two works.

woman about how, as a result of unhappy events in her life, she has ended up in a small seaside village and began to serve in a small Orthodox church. There, she has opened up to God and decided to tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth again and again, and thus eventually she has become famous among the country folk. In this sense, the novel is a dynamic record of one of her stories.

As a result, at the level of composition, the novel stands out. The framework of one particular life of a contemporary woman along with the polyphony of the evangelical story enliven the familiar, almost boring tale about Jesus. In addition, the connection between the two spatio-temporal dimensions reveals itself during the storytelling. As the narrative develops, different epistemological perspectives integrate. The reader learns that the main text of the novel, which is divided into chapters introduced by thematically selected quotations from the Holy Scriptures, is only a tale, a story within the story. Then the spatio-temporal distance vanishes: first between the storyteller and the events she talks about, which is marked by giving up the inferential mood, a characteristic feature of the Bulgarian language, in favor of the realis mood in simple past or present tense, and then – between the protagonists of the story and the fictional recipients. The storyteller reveals herself more and more, speaks directly to her listeners, placing them more and more clearly within the very action that is built. The culmination of these shifts is when the fictional listeners are identified with the readers of the very novel – the Bulgarian people after the fall of communism, who have opened to the new trends in Western culture but lost their Orthodox faith; who have been deeply connected to the national Orthodox/folk tradition but at the same time used to the (alleged) lack of religious elements both in their social life and literature. The famous (self-) stereotype of Bulgarians as religiously indifferent receives here a second life; it was defined and spread by Bulgarian intellectuals in the interwar period, especially by the very influential literary historian Boyan Penev (Penev, 1921; cf. Drzewiecka, 2018), and then developed during communism.

Considering the plot, the novel complements the Gospel narrative also by offering a commentary to it. As a result, we are told, for example, why Mary married such an old man, or what the circumstances of the harlot's sin were (cf. John 8:1–11). In some cases, the storyteller gives more detailed information. For example, she calls Joseph's wife Rachel, admitting, however, that this is only her invention for the sake of argument. Some events are a compilation of several episodes or evangelical themes, for example: the appointment of Judas, who is the man possessed by a demon from Mark 5:1–20; the miracle of walking on water (cf. Matt. 14:22–32) in the conditions of a heavy storm (cf. Matt. 8:3–27). Also the statements

of the characters, especially Jesus himself, constitute a compilation and creative development of the Gospel text. As a result, we have a lot of paraphrases and (crypto)quotations that aim to better explain the meaning of the events. For example, the first announcement of the Passion (cf. Matt. 16:21–22) is presented in the novel not only using the words said by Jesus which refer to the Biblical source:

[...] който повярва в мен, ще бъде спасен и ще наследи вечността, а аз ще ида в Йерусалим и много ще пострадам от книжниците и първосвещениците, ще ме осъдят на смърт заради думите ми, ще промушат тялото ми с копие и на третия де ще възкръсна, (Dimova, 2010, pp. 139–140)²

but also includes his further explanation:

Да, именно те, именно старейте и първосвещениците, промълви след малко Исус, именно те, законниците, защото аз съм единосъщен на Отца, защото преди Авраам да е бил, аз съм. Те няма да ме познаят и ще ме убият. Смятат, че Бог е далечен и непостижим, че не може да има Син. Като че ли тяхното знание е по-голямо от Бог. Ще ме разпънат на кръст [...]. (Dimova, 2010, p. 140)³

The crucial element in the narrative technique, however, is the fact that the story is told from the point of view of different evangelical characters, which on the one hand enlivens the whole message, and on the other allows the listener to focus on the characters' psychology. A special case is Joseph – in fact the whole story begins from his point of view. Although at first he is grateful for his marriage to Mary and fully accepts the miracles that happen around them, in time he feels more and more lost and bitter. He becomes a heavy drinker, gets a stroke and, partially paralyzed, lives on the mercy of his family, blaming Jesus for all his misery. Although he experiences a sudden conversion on his deathbed, the reader should feel somewhat alarmed by the fact that he is not presented as a loving guardian of the Holy Family, but a gruff, half-mad old man. His behavior is explained as a simple manifestation of human nature, an expected consequence of constant contact with the divine, an inability to cope with a miracle. The opposite attitude is represented by Salomea, the daughter of Joseph, and thus in a sense the sister of Jesus, who is fully devoted to her younger brother,

² “[...] the one who believes in me will be saved and will inherit eternity, and I will go to Jerusalem and I will suffer greatly from the scribes and the high priests, and they will condemn me to death for my words, pierce my body with a spear, and on the third day I will rise again.”

³ “Yes, it is they, the elders and the high priests, Jesus said after a moment, it is they, the lawyers, because I am one with the Father, because before Abraham was, I am. They will not know me and will kill me. They believe that God is distant and incomprehensible, that there cannot be a Son. It is as if their knowledge was greater than God. They will crucify me [...]”

wants his constant presence, and over time develops feelings for him that go beyond sibling relations; despite rejection, she follows him to the end.

Another interesting case is the account of Matthew the Apostle. At the climax of the tale of Jesus' public activity, the narrative becomes the first-person plural. It turns out that it is the voice of spies, among them tax collectors, who are following the alleged prophet on the Sanhedrin's order and reporting in detail on his actions. It is from their account that we learn about the course of several most spectacular miracles of Jesus. It is thanks to this approach that the pride of the high priests and general hatred on their part are expressed, for example, in their attempt to cover up the miracle of restoring sight to the blind man from Luke 18:35–43. It is the attitude of the high priests that causes Matthew's conversion. And precisely at this moment, the narration goes from plural to singular and Matthew's name is introduced for the first time:

[...] дори ние, доносниците и митарите, дори ние, най-презрените, изпитахме погнуса от тяхното поведение, и аз им казах: повече няма да работя с вас. И те изведнъж млъкнаха, усетиха се такива, каквито бяха, аз повече няма да работя за вас, защото ще тръгна заедно с него, повторих им със съвсем твърд и спокоен глас / С кого ще тръгнеш?, попитаха те във внезапната тишина. / С Исус, казах аз, Матей, обърнах се и си тръгнах. (Dimova, 2010, p. 150)⁴

The aesthetic originality of the novel is achieved by interweaving the narrative modes and above all the poetic style of Dimova, which is characterized by short phrases and expressions, frequent equivalents of sentences, enumerations and repetitions, which make the narrative, on the one hand, somehow torn, on the other – smoothly pass from one thread to another. This continuity is also achieved by radically reduced punctuation, especially the lack of periods. The impression is that the text is a series of words spoken by the storyteller in the same breath; on the one hand it is an expression of the “here and now”, on the other – the effect of the desire to capture events “in progress”. The whole story happens against the background of descriptions of the landscape and the immediate surroundings of the characters, indicating colors, smells and sounds, which could correspond in fact with the conditions over the Bulgarian seacoast. This is how the visual-sensory aspect of a given moment is captured. It is no accident that several times the storyteller refers to well-known works

⁴ “[...] even we, the snitches and the tax collectors, even we, the most despised ones, have felt disgust at their behavior, and I told them: I will no longer work with you. And they suddenly fell silent, they felt themselves as they really were, I will no longer work for you, because I will go with him, I repeated to them with a very firm and calm voice / With whom will you go?, they asked in sudden silence. / With Jesus, I said, me, Matthew, I turned and left.”

of European art in order to present and visualize some scenes. For example, when describing a group of related lepers (Luke 17:11–14), she refers to the painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (implicitly: *The Blind Leading the Blind*).

Precisely these references to the horizon of the listeners/readers, these attempts to *involve* them in imagining the events, determine the dynamics of the narrative. What is more important, however, the storyteller brings up not only the psychological or social aspect of their life (asking, for example, to imagine the conversation between Mary and Elizabeth, difficult in terms of human life, or pointing to the horrific kitsch of Christmas) but also the metaphysical one:

[...] жадуваме за плодовете на духа, а получаваме делата на плътта / вътрешните ни човеци са празни и сламени / ненавиждаме ожесточените си сърца и помрачения си разум, суетата в себе си, невежеството, разпътството, похотта си / плачем / мечтаем за нов човек в себе си / а даваме място на дявола [...] (Dimova, 2010, pp. 129–130)⁵

In fact the storyteller develops here the famous words from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans (7:4–25).

For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. (Romans 7:18–19)⁶

The fate of Joseph is the strongest example of the weakness of human will, the inability of man to cope with the presence of good. Judas' betrayal also fits into this metaphysical model. The drama of human existence that emerges here brings to mind the words of Max Picard that the space between God and man is filled with *escape* (cf. Picard, 1951, p. 17; cf. Dorosz, 2010, p. 179). This thesis is repeated several times in the novel, both in the description of evangelical events and in the commentaries of Marma herself; in fact it characterizes the entire oeuvre of Dimova.

And it is in the ideological perspective that the theological orthodoxy of the novel should be perceived. While this work is aesthetically original, which means it does not repeat models of paraphrasing the Biblical story that are well known in the European and Bulgarian culture, it also remains within the framework of the Christian (Eastern Orthodox) doctrine.

⁵ “[...] we thirst for the fruits of the spirit, and we receive the works of the flesh / our inward men are empty and straw / we hate our fierce hearts and our darkened mind, vanity in ourselves, ignorance, corruption, lust / we weep / we dream about a new person in ourselves but we give place to the devil [...]”

⁶ All Biblical verses are quoted following the New International Version (NIV, 2011).

This fact deserves special attention. The history of literature, including Bulgarian one, suggests that fictional and doctrinal conformity somehow excludes aesthetic invention and artistic concept. Especially in the so-called postmodern times, when the biblical text becomes a pretext for initiating a literary play with the reader or creating a scandalous story with commercial purpose. In Dimova's novel, however, both the aesthetic concept and the invention are present, and as such they do not underpin the Christian message. Despite the changes, the core of the story fits in with the source. The best example seems to be once again the fate of Joseph. Also the fact that the wise men do not recognize in Jesus the king they have been looking for so long does not destroy the message. The truth about the Messiah comes to them later. Even if the plot solutions are surprising as far as the canon is concerned, eventually they fit into the ideological horizon of the Gospel and do not undermine its truths.

This harmony between dogmatic consistency and artistic invention is obtained thanks to the dialectics of distance and involvement that characterizes Dimova's novel. The distance towards the events is obtained, firstly, by constant and direct marking of the probability range: by the inferential mood or words such as "maybe", "probably", but also by conditional constructions or assumptions. Secondly, there is a reticence in regard to certain episodes and characters, which results either from too general description or partial lack of it, as is the case with the raising of Lazarus (cf. John 11:1–44). What is more, the silence of the storyteller around this event corresponds with the silence of the raised one – this story simply cannot be told. Thirdly, the distance towards the tale is preserved thanks to the changing points of view and the smooth transitions from the first-person narrative to the free indirect speech – from the main characters, including Jesus himself, to the second and third-level characters. This theologically "safe" mediation is guaranteed by the account by the third party.

On the other hand, precisely this instance of the third party as a witness guarantees the involvement. It is through the testimony in first person that an emotional bond, an existential and even a metaphysical tale is built. At the same time, the witness instance is doubled in the novel. The status of a witness is reserved not only to few characters from the story of Jesus' life, but also to Marma. The storyteller gradually becomes a participant in the events, which is marked by a change in the narrative mode and more frequent personal references. In the end, the readers themselves turn out to be participants. It is we who have killed the Son of God, it is we who are standing now on Golgotha, it is we who are feeling lost in the world after losing sense. This involvement is also triggered by the reference to Marma's

life experiences, which are specific, but at the same time familiar to other Bulgarians – in a particular, unstable socio-political situation after the fall of communism, but also to humans in general – after all, it is all about loneliness and lack of hope.

This combination of distance and involvement resulting in *a symbiosis of dogmatic conformity and literary invention* can be seen particularly well in regard to the two basic dogmas of the Christian Church: the Incarnation and the Resurrection.

The circumstances of Jesus' birth are presented primarily through the accounts of the shepherds and the wise men. What is surprising, however, is the scene when the archangel Gabriel, knowing the future of the Holy Family, full of concern and compassion, cries in the dark corner of the cave and prays that he may be with them until the end.

[...] затова Гавраил плаче и се облива в сълзи, плаче в най-дълбоката и тъмна част на пещерата, защото всичко трябва да стане така, както е писано, и в сърцето му се насъбира безкрайна жал към тези хора, към съдбата им, която те изобщо не знаят, и Гавраил се моли да му бъде позволено да бъде край тях, винаги да бъде край тях, да им изпраща утехата си, в най-тежките си моменти тези хора да знаят, че Господ е с тях [...]. (Dimova, 2010, p. 46)⁷

This image strengthens the dogmatic meaning of the event. It indicates the miserable nature of the situation, human weakness and unawareness, but also confirms the glory of the Incarnation of the Creator of “all things visible and invisible”. In this context, the twin physical resemblance between Mary and Jesus, which seems to be a logical consequence of the Christian truth that Jesus “became incarnate from the Virgin Mary”, deserves special – theological and aesthetic – attention.

[...] Мириам и Иисус с еднаквите си сивозелени очи, и двамата като близнаци, с еднакъв тъмносламен цвят на косата, с еднакви високи чела, по които сякаш непрекъснато се изписвали знаци, изпъкнали вени, прорязвали се от бръчки, косите и на двамата се спускали от двете страни на лицата им [...], като че ли в действителност имали едно тяло, но раздвоено, като че живели в своя мехур от светлина, не тази на света, затова така хипнотично се гледали, затова почти никога не разговаряли, затова движенията и жестовете им били толкова симетрични [...]. (Dimova, 2010, p. 66)⁸

⁷ “[...] that is why Gabriel weeps and sheds tears, weeps in the deepest and darkest part of the cave, because everything must be done as it is written, and in his heart there is an endless pity for these people, for their fate, which they do not know at all, and Gabriel begs to be allowed to be by their side, always to be by their side, to send them consolation, so that in their most difficult moments these people would know that the Lord is with them [...]”

⁸ “[...] Miriam and Jesus with the same gray-green eyes, both like twins, with the same dark hair color, with the same high foreheads, as if signs were constantly appearing, protruding veins,

The dialectics of distance and involvement manifests itself in full in the description of the Resurrection. This is the reason I will quote it here at length, keeping the text layout:

А вътре в новата гробница – тежката тъмнина, отрова от убийство, катран от чернота, греховност и смърт
 Океан от грехове
 Как се събужда човек или Бог в такава нощ, в такъв гроб, с такъв овален камък върху Себе Си
 Как се събужда, как поема първата си глътка въздух от тази чернота, наситена с катран, от този въздух, напоен със смърт
 Изправя се, вероятно съвсем бавно, върху мраморния камък
 Погребалните повивки се впиват в раните Му
 Раните Му живи ли са още?
 Кървят ли?
 Как започна да развива от Себе си повивките
 Как ги оставя върху мрамора
 Сърцето Му бие ли учестено
 Вижда ли къде е камъкът
 Вижда ли войниците пред него
 Ангел или ли до Него
 Гавраил дошъл ли е вече
 Помага ли Му да свали погребалните повивки от себе си, или отново е сам, съвсем сам, погребан, помазан, изоставен от всички, жените мироносци дори още не са станали и още не са тръгнали към гроба с мирото, развиделяването още не се случило, петлите още не са пропели
 Наситената тежка миризма на смирна и на алое, на тамян и на смърт
 Този път изоставен дори и от Мириам
 Бог в този гроб, в катранената тъмнина
 издълбана в скалата гробница
 Сам с камъка, гол, в сърцето на земята
 с раните по Себе си
 Не бил сигурен, че това ще се случи, че ще се справи
 Не бил сигурен, иначе не би се молил с онази покъртителна молитва в Гетсимания

cut from wrinkles, hair of both lowered on both sides of their faces [...] as if they actually had one body, but divided, as if they lived in their own bubble of light, not that of the world, so they looked so hypnotic, so they almost never talked, that is why their movements and gestures were so symmetrical [...].”

Инак нямаше да избие кървавата Му пот
Затова се е страхувал толкова много
Затова се е молел така упорито в нощта
Затова е молел приятелите Си да бъдат будни и бъдат с Него, да се молят
с Него
Било го е страх от онова, което предстои въпреки своето богосинство
Въпреки Преображението, силата, чудесата
Въпреки непрестанната връзка със Своя Отец
Познавал докрай тежестта на греха, плътта, чернотата му,

Той още ли е човек, или вече не е
Вече не е ли човек, вече само Бог ли е
И дори да е само Бог, но това е един Бог още в гробницата, още в тъмното,
още в нощта, още с камъка, който не е отвален, който е запечатан един Бог
още в гроба, в ада
Щяхме ли да Го обичаме толкова, ако беше само Бог?

И да възкръснеш от утробата на греха, от дъното на земята, от самото
сърце на този ад
И да бъдеш жив
По друг начин жив, неизказан

И тогава ангелът да отвали камъка
И звездната нощ да нахлуе в гроба, уханието на жасмин, свежестта да
смени миризмата на смърт и повивки
И ангелът да развие савана
И лунната светлина да падне върху мраморния камък, където е лежал
групът
Луната да облива отваления вече камък, отворения гроб, напуснатата вече
гробница
Гавраил да бъде с Него
Римските войници отвън пиянски да подхвърлят зарове, да притварят
очи
Гавраил и Иисус да минат покрай тях

Накъде ли е тръгнал Иисус в първия миг на своето Възкресение

Още невъзнесъл се, още неседнал отдясно на Отца си?

Още на тази земя? Още със спомена за раните, униженията? Още сред убийците?

Още сред онези, които въобще не Го изоставиха в най-страшния Му час?

Още на тази земя, изтъкана от грях?

Защо, защо още четирийсет дни на тази земя, изтъкана от грях?

Може би за да повярваме. За да се спасим, всичките. Тези, които са Го видели, и онези, които не сме Го видели. Затова тази финална, още по-крайна, немислима, неизречима саможертва.

За да Го знаем възкръснал.

Застанал до всеки от нас.

Жив, изтръгнал завинаги жилото на смъртта. (Dimova, 2010, pp. 238–241).⁹

⁹ “And inside the new tomb – heavy darkness, poison of murder, tar of blackness, sinfulness and death / Ocean of sins / How does man or God awaken at such a night in such a grave, with such an oval stone on Himself? / How does He wake up, take his first sip of sigh of this blackness, full of tar, of this air dampened with death / He faces, perhaps quite slowly, on the marble stone / Graveclothes claw at His wounds / Are His wounds alive yet / Are they bleeding? / How does He begin to take down graveclothes / How does He leave them on the marble / Does His heart beat fast / Does He see where the stone is / Does He see the soldiers in front of Him / Is there an angel next to Him / Has Gabriel come already / Does he help him to take down His graveclothes, or He is alone again, absolutely alone, buried, anointed, abandoned by all women, the myrrh bearing women have not got up yet and have not gone to the grave with the ointment yet, the daybreak has not happened yet, cocks have not crowed yet / The heavy smell of myrrh, aloes, incense, and death / This time, He is abandoned even by Miriam / God in this grave, in the tar darkness / carved into the rock tomb / Alone with the stone, naked, in the heart of the earth / with the wounds of His / He was not sure it would happen, that He would do it / He was not sure, otherwise He would not have prayed with that gruesome prayer in Gethsemane / Otherwise He would not have sweat with blood / Therefore He was so afraid / Therefore He prayed so hard in the night / Therefore He begged His friends to be awake and to be with Him, to pray with Him / He was afraid of what is to come despite He was Son of God / Despite the Transfiguration, the Power, the Wonders / Despite the constant connection with His Father / He knew the weight of sin, its flesh, its blackness, / Is He still a man, or is He not / Is He no longer a man, is He exclusively God yet / And even if He is exclusively God, this is still a God in the tomb, in the dark, in the night, with the stone that is not rolled away, which is sealed, a God in the grave, in hell / Would we love Him so much if it was God alone? / And to rise from the womb of sin, from the bottom of the earth, from the very heart of this hell / And to be alive / Differently, alive, unspoken / And then the angel shall roll the stone away / And the stellar night shall invade the grave, the smell of jasmine, the freshness to change the smell of death and yawns / And the angel shall unroll the graveclothes / And the moonlight shall fall on the marble stone where the corpse has been lying down / The moon shall enlighten the stone that has already been unrolled, the open tomb, the already abandoned tomb / Gabriel shall be with Him / Outside Roman soldiers drunkenly shall throw dice, close their eyes / Gabriel and Jesus shall pass by them / Where did Jesus go in the first moment of His Resurrection / Not ascen-

The description of the Resurrection is a full combination of all available tools which maintain the distance: the inferential mood, rhetorical questions, conditional and assumptive mood. At the same time, however, it is saturated with a great emotional engagement, a respect for a God and a compassion for a Human. It proclaims the Christian truth about God-Man handed over to be crucified, but resurrected for the sake of all people. This passage is a culmination of the storyteller's testimony of faith.¹⁰

The key is to be a witness and to testify, which is crucial part of the Gospel message and the Christian doctrine, but according to Marma, it is also about repeating the only story (about God on earth), in which we are the main characters. At the same time, however, Marma seems to undermine her epistemological credibility:

[...] това са историите на моето въображение, всеки има право да ги разказва, нали? Не ви задължавам да им вярвате, но вие сами го правите, защото историите са вътре във вас. Знаем, не е логично да разказвам, все едно съм била там, нямам обяснение за преживяното, но това разказване, повярвайте ми, има смисъл, и това ваше слушане и то има смисъл, и тези наши срещи са единственото, което все още е запазило смисъл. [...] Каква съм аз, че да знам тези неща? Не ги вземайте за истина. Вземайте ги за болното въображение на една бездомница. Защо да ги разказвам отново и отново? А вие защо ме слушате? Всеки ден слушате отново и отново все същата история. Защото тази история няма край, нито дъно. Защото единствено през нея се чувстваме живи. Действително живи. (Dimova, 2010, pp. 173–175)¹¹

ded yet, not at the right hand of His Father? / Still on this earth? Still with the memory of the wounds, the humiliation? Still among the murderers? / Even among those who did not abandon Him at His most terrible hour at all? / Still on this earth, woven by sin? / Why, why forty more days on this earth, woven by sin? / Maybe to make us believe. To save us all. Those who have seen Him, and those who have not seen Him. That is why this final, even more extreme, unthinkable, unspeakable sacrifice. / To get to know Him as risen. / Standing by each of us. / Alive, death's sting broken forever.”

¹⁰ This passage can be seen as a *pars pro toto* in regard to all aesthetic and ideological issues I am interested in. It is particularly meaningful and deserves indeed a more detailed philological and theological analysis. Unfortunately, it is impossible to extend the interpretation within this paper.

¹¹ “[...]these are the stories of my imagination, everyone has the right to tell them, right? I do not oblige you to believe them, but you do it yourself because the stories are within you. I know it's not logical to tell them as if I've been there, I have no explanation for the experience but this story, believe me, makes sense, and that listening of yours makes sense as well, and these meetings are the only thing that still makes sense. [...] What am I to know these things? Do not take them for truth. Take them for the ill imagination of a homeless. Why should I tell them again and again? And why are you listening to me? Every day you listen to the same story over and over again. Because this story has no end or bottom. Because only through this story we feel alive. Really alive.”

It is in the mode of personal experience that one can talk about the credibility of the story, its authenticity, its truth. It is about making present, and thus to neutralize the time and space differences, through reminding, imagining and visualizing. It seems it is the primal modus of Marma's tale, but also the narrative technique of Dimova.

The imperative of giving testimony/story-telling refers to both the main character of the novel and the author herself, both to the fictional listeners and the real readers of the book. And this is where the status of the novel as apocrypha, i.e. a modern biblical paraphrase that is understood as repetition in a new context, reveals itself to the greatest extent (for more on the concept of modern apocrypha, see Drzewiecka, 2014b, 2016). And as such, it should be considered in the perspective of the triad "memory – imagination – visualization" as it is about recalling or reminding of events through the lens of personal life. Testifying/storytelling, then, is about the ontological truth, not the epistemological one. It is an existential and hermeneutic act, it is a confession of one's own faith, which builds a sense for both oneself and others. Moreover, as Paul Ricoeur claims, a testimony "constitutes the fundamental transitional structure between memory and history" (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 21). Therefore, the case of modern apocrypha is particularly interesting as the events that are paraphrased refer to the story about Jesus of Nazareth, which has been spread and further developed thanks to the first witnesses of the Christian faith. On the one hand, it is indeed a part of the sequence of the historic events, on the other it is a form of communal memory, a testimony itself.

This understanding of giving testimony as an ontological act is confirmed in the second (short) novel by Dimova which paraphrases the Biblical motifs, *The First Birthday*.¹² As the author informs in the note on the cover, it fully corresponds to the Orthodox Tradition, although it is an expression of a personal, and so artistic reflection on the everyday life dimension of a specific event in the history of the Holy Family. The novel is a peculiar record of the conversation that Mary and Joseph have on the day of Jesus' first birthday. While in exile in Egypt, they recall their lives from before: the circumstances of their acquaintance and marriage, the journey to Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus, the visit of the wise men, and the escape from Nazareth. The plot repeats the Gospel of James, an apocryphal writing that is important especially in the Orthodox tradition, but also other extra-biblical and liturgical sources, especially as far as the flight into Egypt is

¹² I will analyze this novel to a lesser extent just to show general characteristics and mark some key elements that I perceive as important from the point of view of my final conclusion. It does not mean, however, this work deserves less attention. Particular theological and aesthetic solutions are as interesting as in *Marma*, *Mariam*.

concerned. The story focuses on the social and moral difficulties generated by the miraculous conception of Jesus, mainly from the Joseph's point of view. Again the focus is on the psychological aspects of the events.

The controversy around the pregnancy is a particularly painful moment – especially for Joseph.

Ти ме гледаш умолително, Мариам, по лицето ти се изписва болка, ти би искала повече да не се връщаме назад, но нима е възможно това? Всяка наша стъпка е съпътствана от чудо, а човешкият разсъдък нали все жадува да разгадае чудесата, Мариам, да ги сведе до малкия човешки свят, да ги натика в него. И сега именно защото става една година, откакто нашият син се роди, затова искам да си спомним всичко, което се случи тогава. За да бъде за моя поука, Мариам. И за мое покаяние пред теб, Мариам. Да изговорим всичко, което извърших против теб, Мариам, и против себе си, и против Бога. Не само защото не ти повярвах, а защото ти причиних зло. Причиних ти сълзи, причиних ти унижение, Мариам. Зная, че си ми простила. Зная, че си забравила. Зная, че си ме оправдала дори. Но моля те, изслушай ме, Мариам. Това е моето умиване пред теб, моето разкаяние. Защото сигурно още много необикновени неща ще се случат, Мариам, докато синът ни порасне. Това е само началото. Трябва да сме подготвени, опростени, пречистени, слети в едно, за да отгледаме Божието дете, Мариам, което е и наше дете. (Dimova, 2016, pp. 75–76)¹³

The flight into Egypt itself is also a very difficult memory, although it is – again – marked by miracles. The account about finding fresh water on the dessert is one of the most important moments. Moreover, it is a perfect example of the dialogical nature of a storytelling that is both literary expanded in Dimova's novel and projected as an ultimate goal of co-remembering.

А помниш ли чудото при сикомората, Йосифе? Бяхме отседнали в селцето Матарие, престоят ни е него беше спасителен, живителен, и двамата бяхме изтощени до краен предел от непрестанното пътуване, горещината

¹³ “You look at me pleadingly, Mariam, there is pain on your face, you wish we would not go back anymore, but is that possible? Every step of our life is accompanied by a miracle, and human reasoning is always eager to unravel the miracles, Miriam, to bring them to the small human world, to push them into it. And now precisely because it's been one year since our son was born, I want to remember everything that happened then. For my lesson, Mariam. And for my repentance before you, Mariam. To say all that I have done against you, Miriam, both against myself and against God. Not just because I didn't believe you, but because I did you evil. I caused you tears, I caused you humiliation, Mariam. I know you forgave me. I know you forgot. I know you justified me even. But please, listen to me, Mariam. This is my washing before you, my repentance. Because probably many more unusual things will happen, Mariam, until our son grows up. This is only the beginning. We need to be prepared, simplified, purified, fused into one to raise a child of God, Mariam, who is also our child.”

нарастваше с всеки следващ ден, всяка вечер ти разпъваше сенниците и на сутринта ги прибираще, което е достатъчно изморително, особено за сам човек, защото аз с нищо не можех да ти помагам, с нищо, и докато се придвижваме с магаренцата си, видях наред пустошта огромно дърво, царствена сикомора, свещено за египтяните дърво, с разперени клони, могъщо, като че ли не расте в пустиня, а край оазис, самото то оазис и остров от прохладата и сянка, и заслон [...] да, останахме в селото няколко дни, докато и двамата се възстановим, и хазяите, които ни подслониха, бяха удивени, че от камъните до сикомората е бликала вода, те никога не бяха чували там някога да е имало вода, а се говореше, че дървото е на повече от хиляда години, че за местните жители е свещено, че единствено то е оцеляло, когато Бога изпратил върху египтяните пламъка на своя гняв, изпратил насекоми да ги жилият и жаби да ги погубват и убил лозята с град, водата под него е бликала заради теб и заради детето ни, Мариам, за да ви разхлади и съживи, и дървото е свело огромните си възлести клони, за а ви запази под прохладата си, и ветрецът е задухал, за да ви освежи, говорим и мислим едни и същи неща Йосифе, изричаме взаимно мислите си на глас, нашето странно двугласие, нашето ежедневието, песенно говорене между молитва и шепот, шепотно припомняне, прошепване премеждията и чудесата, които ни съпътстват, чудесата-премеждия, за да ги пазим и да ги помним, да навлизаме все по-дълбоко в чудния им смисъл, Господ ни изпитва, спохожда ни нощем, узнава нашите помисли и разтапя сърцата ни, Мариам. (Dimova, 2016, pp. 105–108)¹⁴

What is interesting, we learn more about Mary from her husband than herself. Joseph is the main storyteller, who uses either his memories

¹⁴ “Do you remember the miracle at the sycamore, Joseph? We were staying in the village of Matarié, our stay was life-saving, vital, and we were both so utterly exhausted from the constant journey, the heat grew with each passing day, every night you stretched your sunshades and in the morning folded them, which is tiring enough, especially for one man on his own, because I could not help you with anything, with nothing, and as we moved with our donkeys, I saw in the midst of the wasteland a huge tree, a royal sycamore, a tree sacred to the Egyptians, with outstretched branches, mighty as if it were not growing in the desert, but in an oasis, itself an oasis and an island of coolness and shade, and shelter [...] yes, we stayed in the village for a few days until we both recovered, and the hosts who sheltered us were surprised that there was water pouring from the stones near the sycamore, they had never heard there was any water there, and it was said that the tree is more than a thousand years old, that it is sacred to the natives, that it survived when God sent flames of his anger on the Egyptians, sent insects to sting them and frogs to destroy them and killed the vineyards with hail, the water under it has flushed for you and for our child, Miriam, to keep you cool and alive, and the tree has narrowed its enormous branches to keep you under its cool, and the breeze has blown to refresh you, we talk and think the same things, Joseph, we say to each other aloud our thoughts, our strange double voice, our daily life, our song speaking that is between prayer and whisper, whispering remembrance, whispering of the accidents and wonders that come with us, accidents-wonders to keep them and to remember them, to go deeper into their marvelous sense, the Lord is testing us, walking us by night, recognizes our thoughts and melts our hearts, Mariam.”

or imagination to recreate the past. In fact, the real object of the story becomes his listener (i.e. Mary). Repeated various times, the tale about their experiences serves, as he explains, to strengthen the memory, and so – their mutual purification and affirmation. Storytelling as giving testimony becomes an act that sustains the existence.

As suggested above, both novels of Dimova can indeed be analyzed in the perspective of Ricoeur's existential hermeneutics, but also the phenomenology of memory (cf. Ricoeur, 1974, 1984, 2004). However, it seems particularly promising to use his concept of *mimesis* as a procedure of transposition of what is presented (a plot) into a presentation (a fiction) (cf. Ricoeur, 1984, p. 47) since it is understood not as a structure guaranteeing epistemological conformity but as an action that refers to the ontological truth of the storyteller/ writer and the listener/reader. In this way, the problem which is key for the concept of apocrypha, i.e. of imitating/repeating the canon, pretending to be the source, claiming to be truthful, is in fact neutralized, of course, beyond the ironical suspension of the postmodern situation. Here, the aim is to uncover the experience, to understand through the image, to remember and to present. Imagination is a crucial part of this process. According to the final words of Marma, blessed are those who believed, although they did not see, i.e. those who “only” listened to the story, that is, they received double-mediated testimony. So are the readers.

Тази Исусова последна благословия към всеки новопристъпил във вярата, която премахва вековете и времето, тази последна негова благословия, която всеки от нас лично получи заради неверника Тома, тази благослови, която рано или късно ни застига през живота ни като изумителен и незаслужен дар, като най-дълбокия печат от земното ни съществуване. (Dimova, 2010, pp. 253)¹⁵

In the triad “remembering – imagining – visualizing”, the medium is a story understood as a testimony, which is confirmed by Dimova herself in one of the interviews she gave after the novel *Marma, Mariam* was published:

[...] много добре знам, че един роман никога няма да обърне човек във вярата, ако преди това не е бил привлечен към нея. Но по някакъв начин ще му помогне. Да, литературата винаги по тайнствен начин помага на отделния човек, влияе му, кара го да се придвижва по пътя си. Аз съм убедена,

¹⁵ “This final blessing of Jesus to every newcomer to the faith that abolishes ages and times, this final blessing each of us personally received for the unbelieving Thomas, the blessing that sooner or later catches up to us throughout our lives as an amazing and undeserved gift, as the deepest seal of our earthly existence.”

че не можеш да повярваш, ако не видиш, че някой друг е повярвал. Затова и този императив, който непрестанно усещаме в себе си – да свидетелстваме. (Dimova & Nikolov, 2011, pp. 6–7)¹⁶

I have already interpreted this intuition (see Drzewiecka, 2016, pp. 347–355), as I read it through the prism of the romantic concept of “individual epiphany”, in Charles Taylor’s terms, which proclaims an authentic poetic experience, not the traditional metaphysics. It is the literary (original) paraphrases of the Holy Scripture (Story) that seem to embody this ideal of authentic expression, where authenticity retains its ambivalence and is not only a creation “against”, but also self-determination in an open dialogue with the Other (including the other meaning) (Taylor, 2003, p. 67; Taylor, 2001, pp. 419–494). Such a paraphrasing attitude builds a personal horizon of meaning in a conscious “creative” act – as a being that is weaker than the universal structure of the myth or religious faith but opens to a new “attunement”. The “individual epiphany” postulated here is beyond the matter of ontology, since meaning is no longer searched in the hidden nature of things but in axiological experience (Berger, 1979b). It seems that Peter Berger speaks in a similar way about participation in a higher order, when he thinks of inductive religious thinking as the most adequate in the conditions of (post)modernity (i.e. under the “heretical imperative” – the need to make own worldview choices) (Berger, 1979a). It consists in turning to one’s own experience, albeit in the light of a particular religious tradition (understood as a collection of evidence concerning it). This approach is reflective and maintains an empirical distance, but at the same time remains open to the experience of the sacred.

It seems, however, Ricoeur’s notion of a testimony could enlighten this participation/involvement of the reader/listener in a slightly different way, as it opens for the question of reception.¹⁷ Both of Dimova’s novels that I am

¹⁶ “[...] I know very well that a novel will never turn a man to faith if he has not been drawn to it before. But somehow it will help him. Yes, literature always in a mysterious way helps the individual, influences him, makes him move on his way. I am convinced that you cannot believe it if you do not see that someone else has believed it. That is why this imperative, which we constantly feel in ourselves – to testify.”

¹⁷ Ricoeur’s notion of a testimony is a complex problem, not only because of an “inconclusive style of [his] philosophical argument” (Dowling, 2011, p. IX), the presence of unobvious, multi-dimensional relations between different concepts, but also because of the changing points of view or recontextualizations that are typical of the development of his philosophy as such. The ideological horizon which interests me emerges in a wide context of various thoughts on time and being that occur in many Ricoeur’s writings, so there are some shifts in ideological dominants as well. Moreover, the notion of testimony concerns the fundamental discussions in humanities that have received new approach in the last few decades, especially the question of truth (and representation, repetition, accuracy). This is the reason why I would like to mark up only a particular perspective of thinking in regard to a particular problem, which opens when engaging

interested in are indeed about the testimony and are testimonies themselves. They *tell* about the most important part in the process of reading/listening according to Ricoeur, namely that what man gets to know is in fact himself: his experience is re-described and enriched by the story, his response to the text brings it up to date and calls into being as a discourse. What interests me more, however, are consequences of this understanding as far as the issue of a novel's reception is considered.

When interpreting Dimova's apocrypha in terms of a testimony, one can talk about two aspects or (as if) stages of their reading, although it seems more obvious in regard to *Marma, Mariam*. First, the novel can be seen as a testimony in terms of a verifiable statement. It is a paraphrase of the biblical text (i.e. the source known to the recipient), so verification is possible by juxtaposing it with the plot and the doctrinal model. The figure of a witness is particularly important – the storyteller/the main character tells about the events (the fiction), but also offers a meaning (the sense), which is why Marma's identity is of particular importance as far as the question of trust on the part of the recipients is concerned (more on different aspects of Ricoeur's notion of "testimony", cf. Lythgoe, 2011). In this way, the fundamental dimension of the testimony (of Marma) is revealed – a testimony as a trustworthy dialogue. The object of legitimation is not the factuality (or even the compatibility with the source), but the meaning that is added by the storyteller (or – the only meaning that exists). Faithfulness is more important than accuracy. The adequate regime of testifying is "I believe in", not "I believe that" (Lythgoe, 2011). It turns out, however, that it is the singularity/exemplarity of this testimony (as a literary work/story) which becomes a premise of its communicability and universality (Ricoeur, 1998, pp. 173–186; Savage, 2012, pp. 182–186). And it is this aspect that uncovers another dimension of interpreting the process of giving and transmitting meaning through the prism of Ricoeur's concept of *mimesis*.

If *mimesis* allows to capture a certain relationship between literary works as stories/tales and philosophical inquiry that is focused on understanding and illuminating existence, one should ask how is it possible to transfer

Ricoeur's sense-making horizon (in Charles Taylor's terms). I assume we can talk about continuity of Ricoeur's thought, about a certain comprehensible horizon which is coherent, although it is not absolutized, and thus the shifts in the philosopher's reflection are not disturbing but enriching. *Time and narrative* (Ricoeur, 1984) and *History, memory, forgetting* (Ricoeur, 2004) are the most important writings as far as the meaning of the two main notions of testimony and *mimesis* is concerned; I will not address, however, these issues and particular discussions within the field. I would like to use these notions in a non-oppressive or exclusive way, according to the principles of so-called weak thought, agreeing to potential inaccuracies or losses/excess of sense, as the subject of my reflection is the so-called contemporary apocrypha, or rather their critical reception.

meaning from reality and living experience to literary work at all? How does the story not only express but also shape the life experience? For Ricoeur, the matter is beyond the issues of imitation and similarity, which seems particularly interesting when considering a literary work that paraphrases intentionally. If his concept of mimesis links preunderstanding of human actions, composing a story and application of the narrative into one's life (Ricoeur, 1984), the aspect I am most interested in, while analyzing apocrypha, is the refiguration of reality (or the source) and its actualization in a new context, which concerns both the recipients and the writer themselves. In fact, it concerns all of the stances: the author, the narrator, the listener, the reader, and is about the process of understanding quite an ambivalent subject, namely the testimony of the first Christian witnesses.

If the reader perceives things according to their experiences and traditions in which they are rooted (including the literary one), in the case of Dimova's novels the epistemological horizon is defined by the collective experience of post-communist society, the individual experience of personal existence in such a place and time, but also by a certain knowledge of the biblical story and the local tradition of reading it. In the Bulgarian case, one can risk the statement that the latter is marked by an unequivocal apocryphal trait. Bulgarian writers "read" the Bible through the prism of either the local folk and Church traditions, which manifest themselves in the local rituality or confessional identity, or the Western European and Russian "heretical" (anti-dogmatic) modes of interpretation that have emerged within the framework of the Enlightenment contestation, and in this sense – the reading/reception is double repetitive (Drzewiecka, 2016, 2018). As a result, in listening to Marma's story/reading Dimova's novel, a certain recognition (of the plot and interpretation) occurs, but there is also a certain enrichment of it or even breaking of the well-known practices. Thanks to the aesthetic originality, Marma's testimony/Dimova's work turns out to disrupt accepted conventions and expectations. Precisely by this gesture, it becomes "the subversive point it turns against the moral and social orders" (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 79). It opens the recipient to change, dialogue, as it requires an answer.

This accuracy in terms of the plot and dogmatic closeness should not, however, be viewed in terms of similarity or receptiveness. Dimova's act of creating an "accurate" paraphrase is not a return to the original, but a step beyond the dichotomy "source – copy". In the light of Ricoeur's notions of testimony and mimesis, it is not a literary paraphrase but a transfer of sense. This transfer, however, concerns not the plot but the structures of human existence. For Ricoeur, "a logic of possible narrative units is still only a logic of action" (Ricoeur, 1985, p. 43), therefore:

To become a logic of narrative it has to turn toward recognized cultural configurations, toward that schematism of narrative constituted by the plot-types handed down by tradition. Doing something becomes recountable only through this schematism. It is the function of a plot to bend the logic of *possible* acts toward a logic of *probable* narratives. (Ricoeur, 1985, p. 43)

Within this framework of cultural codes, the singularity and communicability of the novel/testimony occur, but without any claims for a total meaning, sharp boundaries or definitions. It is a testimony of a personal experience and reception of both the author/writer and the recipient/reader.

In the case of Dimova's reconfiguration of the Gospel, the relationship between reality (source, reference point), narrative fiction, and changing life experience, but also between history and memory, gains additional weight. As shown, the perspective of mimesis as a triple act of sense-making can enrich the reflection on paraphrasing the Bible. However, I would like to engage it in a different manner and bring it up not in regard to the relationship "Dimova – Bible" or "narrator – story" but "literary critic – modern apocrypha". It seems to me that, in this particular context, the question about the apocryphal nature of a literary work that paraphrases the Bible receives a new meaning, and the answer could give a new nuance to the problem of Biblical reception.

If one can speak about a particular tradition of the Bible reception in the history of Bulgarian literature, it would be a reading of two kinds: the theological/dogmatic reading and the aesthetic/critical reading. They are usually mutually exclusive but lead to the same conclusion: a general rejection of the work in question. I have written about this modus of interpretation in the context of the case of Nikolay Raynov (Drzewiecka, 2014a), which is focused on the interwar period and related to the specific role of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in Bulgarian society at that time but does reflect in the next decades, as the question of the religious essence (or even orthodoxy) of a literary work (or even the whole oeuvre of a writer) is the leitmotif of the Bulgarian literary history (Drzewiecka, 2018; Dzhevietzka, 2018). If a theologian seeks "accuracy" with the dogma and the Biblical plot, which is understood as the absolute truth, then a literary critic or historian seeks "accuracy" with current aesthetic trends, although the focus is still on the relationship with the source, which is perceived in terms of accuracy. The latter can be seen as an adequate attitude, nevertheless it still raises the issue of apocryphal nature of a literary work and thus asks about the reception of the sacred text. However, one may ask under what circumstances a literary work is orthodox, or accurate (as far as official/

traditional understanding is concerned). Although this question seems to be inadequate in regard to the aesthetic creation, it is being constantly asked. Discussions that occur periodically in regard to various aesthetic works (novels, movies, etc.) seem to confirm the social validity of the traditional/religious claims of meanings.

This issue, of course, concerns the “great question” of so-called secularization of modern (Eastern European, including Orthodox-grounded) cultures. Here, I will not develop it further since the subject of my concern is a specific case as a context and pretext for raising the question of apocryphal reading. However, it should be pointed out that both the specific tradition of Bible reading and the power of the institutional/the Church voice in the public sphere have their effect on the reading and shape the intensity of discussions. In this regard, the issue of the popular and critical reception of the two novels by Dimova is especially meaningful, as it seems these works have not received a particular interest among the wider audience and there are only a few reviews by literary experts, and all of them are somehow predictable as the main line of interpretation is focused on religion and faith.¹⁸ I will not analyze the actual critical reception of the novels to a greater extent, although it seems to confirm my thesis that the main reference point of the interpretation is Christian faith and institutional/traditional belonging. Indeed, the Christian perspective is strengthened by various activities of Dimova herself, including, for example, her participation in such TV programs as *Вяра и общество* [*Faith and Society*] (“*Pürviiat rozhden den*” – *naï-novata kniga na Teodora Dimova*, 2016). Nevertheless, in my view, Dimova’s approach is more nuanced and open to complexity of life and does not mean direct and simple (or simplified) call for religious conversion in the Bulgarian socio-historical context. That is why conclusions such as these:

Отказът от ‘новаторство’ в реторически и тълкувателски план спасяват от суетна горделивост. [...] може би единствената иновация, която си е позволила Теодора Димова, се проявява в пластичната смяна на гледните точки, в темпоралната пулсация между минало, сегашно и бъдеще време и техните модалности, както и в сложния синтаксис, основан на наслоителната сила на периода и на често разменяните места между изречението и абзаца [...]. (Kamburov, 2010)¹⁹

¹⁸ On *Marma, Mariam*, see Kamburov, 2010; Todorova, 2013; on *The First Birthday*, see Novkov, 2017; Rodozov, 2016.

¹⁹ “The refusal of ‘innovation’ in rhetorical and interpretive terms saves from vain pride. [...] perhaps the only innovation that Teodora Dimova has allowed herself is manifested in the plastic change of points of view, in the temporal pulsation between past, present and future time and their modalities, as well as in the complex syntax based on the layering force of the period and in the frequently exchanged places between the sentence and the paragraph [...]”

or:

Всичко, което разказва романът ѝ, и начинът, по който го прави, не оставя и сянка на съмнение в етическия ригоризъм на нейната позиция, в безкомпромисната суровост на нейната присъда [...]. [...] предприетото от Димова има характера на консервативна революция. (Kamburov, 2010)²⁰

seem to me as a reduction, and – in fact – a testimony of a “traditional”/ the canon-related reading, which raises the question of (the lack of) religious faith and accuracy. On the other hand, there is also a (post)modern expectation of psychological accuracy and emotional and aesthetic challenge:

В това е и големият залог: дали книгата ще успее да убеди своите читатели в безвременната автентичност на чувствата, терзаещи героите ѝ; дали относително голямата дистанция, от която се пристъпва към психическия и интелектуалния живот на персонажите, ще задоволи едни съвременни очаквания; дали практическата липса на интелектуални антиномии в третирането на евангелския сюжет ще бъде оправдана от един покорен от силата на вярата, но още повече от истинната вяроност към събитието читател. (Kamburov, 2010)²¹

If Dimitar Kamburov reads *Marma, Mariam* through the lens of the secular and the postmodern, and even slightly criticizes its allegedly conservative message, then Mitko Novkov reads *The First Birthday* through the lens of the Christian faith and acclaims the novel because Dimova

²⁰ “Everything that her novel tells, and the way it does it, leaves no shadow of doubt in the ethical rigor of her position, in the uncompromising severity of her sentence [...]. [...] what Dimova undertook has the character of a conservative revolution.”

²¹ “This is the great bet: whether the book will be able to convince its readers of the timeless authenticity of the feelings that torment its characters; whether the relatively long distance from which the mental and intellectual life of the characters is approached will satisfy some modern expectations; whether the practical lack of intellectual antinomies in the treatment of the gospel story will be will be justified by a reader who is submissive to the power of faith, but even more submissive to the truthful accuracy to the event.” (Kamburov, 2010). The contemporary literary critic that I quote here, Dimitar Kamburov, comments also on the ethico-aesthetic aspect of the novel but, in the end, he compares it with famous authors of scandalous or heretical paraphrases, the key purpose in which is to show that “the parable of Christ (today can mean or) means something other than the canonical reading of the church and tradition” (“Христовата притча (днес може да) значи нещо друго, различно от каноничния прочит на църквата и традицията”; Kamburov, 2010). In this context, *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Nikos Kazantzakis and *Encyclopedia of the Dead* by Danilo Kiš are given as great Balkan examples, which again reveals a particular convention of reading. As a result, *Marma, Mariam* seems to Kamburov both moderate and biased, and its author – harsh and ruthless.

[...] извършва нещо, на което от либертианските литературни среди едва ли би се погледнало с добро око, едва ли от тях би се възприело безрезервно – да описва със средствата на литературата евангелската истина” (Novkov, 2017).²²

The final conclusion of the latter is indeed significant as far as the “traditional” reading (in Bulgarian literary history) is concerned:

Никой обаче, никой писател, поне доколкото на мен ми е известно, не пише “Евангелие според Евангелието”. Е, нашата Теодора Димова го прави, българката Теодора Димова пише на български език Евангелие според Евангелието. (Novkov, 2017)²³

In the light of Ricoeur’s sense-horizon, the concern is not only about the “heretical” (or not) attitude toward the Bible on the part of the writer but also the reception of the work by the reader, who is an individual with their own epistemological horizon. The matter is not whether the work repeats the source, but in what regard and to what extent it influences a particular reader. What is relevant is not the dogmatic and/or narrative accuracy, although they are often perceived as the key interpretative elements, which – by the way – can be seen as a peculiar manifestation of a *Protestant bias* in Talal Asad’s terms (1993). The so-called Protestant bias is regarded here as a particular focus on beliefs and ideological aspects of religiosity, and so – on their relationship with the institutional regimes of meaning, which seems to be typical of the Western notion of religion (for more on the religion-related prejudices in social sciences, see Lubańska, 2019, pp. 21–43). In the light of Ricoeur’s understanding of mimesis, and having in mind the paradoxical status of modern apocrypha in this regard, one should ask how a literary work works. Biblical paraphrase could be perceived as a literary text in terms of a testimony which calls for reaction. The sense that is communicated by it is the “world” that is contained only potentially in a configured story, while being actualized and brought into existence – it is only a matter of imagination, which is always individual regardless of the common cultural traditions and epistemological patterns. This does not mean that the reading/reception becomes arbitrary and goes beyond the rules; this means that it cannot be interpreted in relation to the doctrine and accuracy. The criterion is faithfulness with one’s own life.

²² “[...] does something that libertarian literary circles would hardly look favorably at, it would hardly be perceived by them unreservedly – to describe the gospel truth with the means of literature.”

²³ “However, no writer, at least as far as I know, writes ‘Gospel according to the Gospel’. Well, our Teodora Dimova does it, the Bulgarian Teodora Dimova writes in Bulgarian Gospel according to the Gospel.”

Here, of course, all kinds of boundaries, i.e. our criteria and classification, start to blur. It is obvious that mimesis establishes a distance between the author's "world", the recipient's "world" and the "world" of the story being told. There can be no direct reference here, nor truth in the sense of representative illusion or repetition. In Dimova's apocrypha, the boundaries between fictional and historical stories as well as their specific claims to credibility do blur as well. There is a source message referring to historical events but confirmed by a kerygmatic text. There is a personal paraphrase by a writer. There is a listener's reception of a narrator's/main character's testimony. There is a readers' reception of an author's testimony.

Concluding, Ricoeur's category of *mimesis* along with the notion of a *testimony* as a trustworthy dialogue that is situated between memory and history seem to open a new perspective on literary biblical paraphrases. On the one hand, it allows us to go beyond the blind alley of the necessity of epistemological credibility, it opens to aesthetic innovation, and at the same time maintains the right to axiological faithfulness. On the other hand, it reveals the dynamics of the process of self-understanding of both the author and the reader (including the literary critic), points to the background of the common imagining and re-presenting. In the end, it neutralizes all the boundaries, both in writing and reading, both in the act of testifying and storytelling. There is only a unique border area, yet familiar in terms of singularity and exemplarity, the great frontier zone that should be understood as a zone of contact that is marked by a particular individual and their unique, yet familiar experience. In this light, the question of orthodoxy of a literary work such as a modern paraphrase of the Biblical narrative does seem misunderstood and indeed requires reframing.

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Zgodność i recepcja.

O teologicznej i estetycznej nowości w dwóch powieściach Teodory Dimowej

W artykule została poruszona kwestia funkcjonowania narracji biblijnej w literaturze nowoczesnej w kontekście lokalnego i indywidualnego doświadczenia wiary oraz epistemologicznego i egzystencjalnego pytania o prawdę. Autorka koncentruje się na dwóch powieściach bułgarskiej pisarki Teodory Dimowej (ur. 1960): *Марма Маруам* [*Marma, Mariam*, 2010] i *Първият рожден ден* [*Pierwsze urodziny*, 2016]. Przypadek ten jest szczególnie interesujący, ponieważ biblijna opowieść o Jezusie nie została tu wykorzystana w celu stworzenia parodii lub bluźnierstwa, czego można by oczekiwać w kontekście ponowoczesnych dekontekstualizacji i przewartościowań, ale aby zaproponować wizję chrześcijańskiego Boga, która jest zarówno estetycznie oryginalna, jak i teologicznie prawowierna. Jak więc sparafrazować historię biblijną i pozostać ortodoksyjnym? Jak urzeczywistnić egzystencjalny potencjał Biblii i stworzyć oryginalne dzieło? W analizie autorka odwołuje się do hermeneutyki egzystencjalnej i fenomenologii pamięci Paula Ricoeura, zwłaszcza jego koncepcji świadectwa oraz mimesis, w odniesieniu do kwestii recepcji parafraz biblijnych w (bułgarskiej) kulturze nowoczesnej.

Słowa kluczowe: Biblia, nowoczesność, kultura bułgarska, literatura bułgarska, Teodora Dimowa, recepcja, apokryf.

Note

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