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LITERARY TRANSLATION IN RUSSIA

A CULTURAL HISTORY

WITHOUT QUESTION THE INFLUENCE of translation on the literary process is enormous. Translation can expand manyfold the number of readers for authors writing in languages with comparatively few native speakers, such as Icelandic, Flemish, or Danish. Most of Milan Kundera's admirers do not read him in the original Czech, and hardly any devotees of Isaac Bashevis Singer know his work in Yiddish. Ibsen's plays are classics of world drama, as are Strindberg's, but only a minority of their performances are in Norwegian or Swedish. Literary translation can, in fact, bestow immortality on works written in languages no longer spoken. Homer and Virgil and Sophocles have outlived their original languages. Hardly any Christians read the Old Testament in Hebrew or the New Testament in Greek.

Surprisingly, translations are occasionally found useful even by persons well able to read the originals. This is because a competent translation is also a commentary that enables the reader to see the original in a new light. For example:

> Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy wrote on one occasion that the magic perfection of Pushkin's dramatic poem "The Gypsies" became apparent to him only upon reading the poem in French. A comparison of the original with the translation unexpectedly unfolded to him hitherto unnoticed aesthetic qualities of an overly familiar Russian text. The translation became the mirror which enabled Tolstoy to see those features of the original which he was unable to notice earlier.[1]

In a similar vein, Lev Ginzburg reported:

> Russian-speaking Englishmen confess that after reading Samuil Marshak's [Russian] translations, they began to see Robert Burns in a new light: they got to like him for different reasons. Russian readers perceive [François] Villon's poetry more vividly and in a sharper focus than a Frenchman who reads him in the original. A modern translator of poetry enjoys a number of advantages over an author who lived two or three hundred years ago. He speaks in modern idiom, and is "technologically" better equipped. He is backed by several generations of verse honed and grown more perfect over

[1] Grigorii Lenkov, “Priblizhaias’ k Pushkinu”, *Inostrannia literature*, no. 12 (1977) : 227.

the centuries.[2]

Germans have long justly prided themselves on their renditions of Shakespeare. Thus the publisher Alois Brandl wrote: "In our classical translation [of Shakespeare] by Schlegel-Tieck the meaning is put forth so clearly that when I had to reprint it in a popular edition, there was sometimes not even one passage to be explained in a whole play— so perfectly had the Tudor words been recast in lucid and up-to-date German." Accordingly, Brandl could argue that a German reader or playgoer might understand Shakespeare better than "a Londoner, who has no other choice than to take him in the original."[3]

A more extreme case is that of Goethe, who wrote to Gérard de Nerval, the French translator *of Faust,* "Never before did I understand myself as well as I did while reading your translation."[4] In fact, he declared, "I no longer want to reread *Faust* in German, but in French everything impresses me again. It seems fresh, new, and timely."[5] And in 1825 Goethe told Eckermann that *Hermann and Dorothea* was almost the only one among his long poems that continued to bring him joy: "I like it especially in Latin translation. It appears nobler in Latin."[6]

Certain American writers also owe much of their fame to translation. Edgar Allan Poe is a case in point. In the view of critic Dudley Fitts, "Poe may not be much to begin with, but he takes on a real authority in a foreign tongue."[7] He does indeed. Poe has long been both popular and influential in Russia, like another American, author Jack London, who also "may not be much to begin with" in his homeland.[8] Yuri D. Levin, a leading Soviet specialist on literary translation, explained this phenomenon as follows:

> The foreign perception reflects a sense of distance and perspective. It enables us at times to see what one does not notice at close range. . . . [An example is] Sinclair Lewis, who upon reading an English translation of *Fathers and Sons*, discerned in Bazarov the "prototype of the innovator and radical of all time." We [Russians], on the other hand, could not see that. The universality of Bazarov was concealed from us by its concrete interpretation, which was influenced by the social conflicts in Russia during the 1860s. It was no accident that [the poet] Gumilev noted on one occasion, "To truly understand a poet, one should read all of his

[2] Ginzburg, *Nad strokoi perevoda,* pp. 20-21.
[3] Newton P. Stallknecht and Horst Frenz, eds., *Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1961), p. 73.
[4] Lenkov, "Priblizhaias' k Pushkinu," pp. 228-29.
[5] Lev A. Anninskii, comp., *Khudozhestvennyi perevod: Problemy i suzbdeniia* (Moscow: Izvestiia, 1986), p. 367.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Brower, *On Translation,* p. 33.
[8] For an informative account, see Joan Delaney Grossman, *E. A. Poe in Russia* (Wurzburg, 1973).

translations into foreign languages."[9]

Reference: *Literary Translation in Russia. A cultural history*, (1997), The Pennsylvannia State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, p. 10-12.

[9] *Khudozbestvennyi perevod: Voprosy teorii i praktiki* (Erevan: Izdatel'stvo Erevans-kogo universiteta, 1982), p. 30.