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TRANSLATION IN RUSSIA: THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATION

IN MY TALK I WILL DEPART from the general tenor of the conference and speak, not about the intrinsic problems of the craft of translation, but of translation under the pressure of external forces. I suppose this talk might be titled "The Politics of Translation," since much of the time translation in Russia has had to function in a situation of stress and under pressure of conditions that had nothing to do with literature or translation as such.

In the field of translation, as in so many other fields, the situation in Russia is quite unique – deplorable in some respects, enviable in others. There has always been great interest in foreign – particularly European – cultures in Russia, perhaps partly as a result of Russia's relationship with the West. Russia has never really been viewed, either by herself or by Europeans, as a European nation, but as a kind of cross between Europe and Asia, or, by some Russians, as an entity entirely apart, with its own culture and its own inimitable destiny. For some reason – perhaps because of industrial lag – Russia, that giant country, has been afflicted with the psychology of a small nation. In relation to the West, there has been a constant interplay of arrogance and a sense of inferiority, admiration and hate, attraction and fear: constant attempts to compare and compete, and a constant struggle between those who would turn West and bring the West home and those who would turn inward and develop Russia's own uniqueness, often preached with a mystical sense of messianic mission.

I experienced a good deal of this myself as a child. My family emigrated from Russia to Canada when I was very young and one day at school a teacher referred to Russia as a semi-Asiatic country. Typically, I was offended and protested that we were Europeans. I remember, it rankled for days.

When we were still in Russia, friends of my parents would speak approvingly of a man they respected as "a European," as though being merely Russian was equated with "primitive" and "provincial". One of my father's friends nicknamed him a "Scandinavian gentleman," and this was taken as a great compliment.

Among the pre-Revolutionary gentry, Russian was vulgar. They spoke French, and some affected an "English manner" to stress their superiority. Even Yevgeny Zamyatin, when he returned to revolutionary Russian after two years in England during World War I, cultivated the image of "an English gentleman" despite the fact that he wrote scathing satires on what he thought to be English life.

This conflict seems to persist to this day. Just recently a friend who had escaped from Russia less than two years ago spoke to me of a literary scholar we were discussing as "a man of European caliber" – "a European mind".

Historically, the political efforts to "open a window on the West" affected literature as well. In the seventeenth or early eighteenth century, the jester of Peter the Great translated Molière for presentation at court. Ambassadors to foreign courts brought home texts

of plays they had seen performed, and these were kept in the archives of the central administration of foreign embassies.

In nineteenth-century Russian fiction, we often encounter well-born young ladies reading gallant and sentimental French romances. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Russian scholars – Lomonosov, Karamzin, and others – translated La Fontaine, Homer, Pope. Great Russian poets – Zhukovsky, Pushkin, Lermontov – made brilliant translations of English and German poets including Southey, Walter Scott, Byron, Uhland, Goethe, Heine and Schiller. Zhukovsky translated *Undine* from the German of Lamotte Fouqué, and made free translations of the Persian and Indian epics *Zohrab and Rustem* and *Nalas and Damayanti* from the German translations by Rukkert. He also did a translation of the *Odyssey* on the basis of an interlinear translation done for him in German by a German scholar.

Nineteenth-century fiction, predominantly French, German, and English, was widely translated, as were the foremost writings of Italy, Spain, and the Scandinavian countries. This was also true of the works of the ancient world. The literate Russian had access to the best, or much of the best, of the world's literature. It was this that made it possible for a man like Gorky, who knew no foreign languages, to have a close and extensive knowledge of foreign literatures.

As for the quality of the translation, that is another matter. Much of it was extremely bad. Much was bowdlerized in conformity with Russian puritanical standards, and also, perhaps, in order to pass the censors.

Material for translation was chosen more or less haphazardly, as it usually is in commercial publishing. Attempts to systematize the choice and improve the quality of the translations came later, after the revolution.

The revolution in Russia signalled an extraordinary liberation of energies, especially in the arts. At a time when the country lay in ruins, when supply, transportation, and other economic activities were all but paralyzed, there was a sudden burst of cultural activities and a proliferation of schools and movements in all the arts, including literature.

Zamyatin[1] describes the situation in Petersburg during this period. It was, he says, "the merry and grim winter of 1917-1918, when everything broke from its moorings and floated off somewhere into the unknown." "Streets without streetcars, long lines of people with sacks, miles and miles trudged daily on foot, improvised stoves, herring, oats ground in the coffee-mill. And, along with that, all sorts of world-shaking plans: the publication of all the classics of all periods and all countries... the staging of the entire history of the world in a series of plays." "Petersburg, swept out, emptied; boarded-up stores; houses pulled down bit by bit for firewood... Frayed cuffs; collars turned up; vests, sweaters… Fevered efforts to outstrip want, and ever new, transient, precarious plans." "In frozen, hungry, typhus-ridden Petersburg there raged a veritable cultural-educational epidemic." "We hurried to meetings, one meeting overlapping another." And always the same people, Gorky, usually the initiator and chairman (he was the veritable patron saint

[1] The quotations from Zamyatin are from *A Soviet Heretic: Essays by Yevgeny Zamyatin.* Edited and translated by Mirra Ginsburg (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1970).

of literature in those days), Chukovsky, Blok, Zamyatin, Gumilyov, and others, less known in this country.

"It is difficult," says Zamyatin, "to repair plumbing or build a house, but it is very easy to build the Tower of Babel. And we were building the Tower of Babel."

Part of this Tower was the World Literature publishing house, founded by Gorky in Petersburg in 1918, under the People's Commissariat of Education. And to quote Zamyatin again, "As though recalling its role as a window on Europe, Petersburg flung this window wide open, and European works, in the excellent translations provided by World Literature poured out in editions of many thousands to all ends of Russia."

Russia was exhausted and starving after years of war and revolution, but this almost fanatical band of writers and poets threw itself into the work of saving and expanding the cultural life of the country. Books were to be made available to the widest circle of readers, old and new. These were to be given the best of world literature in the best translations. The preparatory work was placed in the hands of a "learned council of experts," under Gorky's chairmanship. The literatures of various countries were entrusted to specialists in their fields. Indian, Chinese, Arabic and Mongolian literatures were represented by academicians. German literature was entrusted to Blok and two professors. Gumilyov was on the committee for French literature. Korney Chukovsky and Yevgeny Zamyatin were responsible for the English and American literatures. Each group drew up long lists of books, which were then discussed by the council. Among the writers considered were such diverse figures as Carlyle (*Sartor Resartus*, later rejected), Thackeray, Hawthorne, Oscar Wilde, Shaw, Jerome K. Jerome, Hall Caine, Barrie and Rex Beach.

Earlier translations were carefully evaluated and often found unacceptable, and the problem arose of finding good translators and establishing standards. The office of World Literature was besieged by hungry ladies and gentlemen, members of the dispossessed gentry who knew foreign languages and thought that this was enough to qualify them. They were asked to submit sample translations, and the results were invariably disastrous. Attempts were made to draw established writers into the work – Kuprin, Merezhkovsky, and others. Nothing came of that either. Chukovsky and Gumilyov were asked to formulate the criteria for translation of prose and poetry. Soon after that, Chukovsky wrote a small book, *The Principles of Literary Translation*, in which he attempted to define the problems and develop some basic principles. He was actively helped in this by Gorky, Blok, and others. This book was later expanded and went through many editions under the title, *The Noble Art*. It was a pioneering work in a field which later received a great deal of attention and study.

With few exceptions, the translators of the time were, as Chukovsky describes them, a "gray mass" – hacks, without any conception of literary values or the problems and responsibilities of translation. This "gray mass" had to be trained and educated. This was not to be an academic exercise, but an urgent task, and it was launched with great energy and dedication.

A Studio of Literary Translation was organized in connection with World Literature, where lectures and courses and workshops were conducted by Zamyatin, Gumilyov, Lozinsky, a philologist who became one of the most brilliant translators in Soviet Russia,

and others. The students were both practicing translators and newcomers, as well as some writers who learned a great deal about their own craft by analyzing that of translation.

World Literature planned to publish two series, a standard edition of some 1500 titles and a popular one of 2500 titles. The publishing house existed until 1924, and in that period it issued about 200 titles. The lists were later taken over by other publishing houses.

The Anglo-American section prepared the works of Byron, Coleridge, Jack London, Joseph Conrad, Poe, Southey, Walter Scott, Upton Sinclair, Mark Twain, Whitman, Wilde, Wells, Shaw, O. Henry and others, all of them with introductions analyzing the work and the background of the given author.

Interestingly enough, the World Literature publishing house was very soon put to the service of the Soviet regime's propaganda abroad. In 1919, at a time when paper, like everything else, was scarce and everything was done on a shoestring, a most magnificent catalogue was issued. Gorky's introduction concerning the significance and objectives of World Literature appeared in it in Russian, French, English and German. The books to be published were listed in Russian and in the given language. This catalogue was to be distributed in all the major countries of the World.

At the end of the 1920's came a new period. Political considerations became dominant in the choice of material for translation, particularly with regard to contemporary writers. This meant rigid selection, controlled by definite criteria. Translation was often used as a bribe "to win friends and influence people" and as a reward. During the thirties and forties particularly, this meant that only "friendly" writers were to be translated: those who expressed themselves publicly in terms favorable to Soviet Russia and the Soviet regime; those who supported the Communist movement abroad; those who exposed the evils of capitalism. Sometimes mistakes were made. Friendly writers were invited to Russia, where they were often appalled by the disparity between propaganda and reality. Those who wrote damning reports when they returned were immediately attacked and ostracized. When André Gide wrote a critical report on what he had seen in Russia, he was immediately dropped and attacked. When Hemingway, a great favorite in Russia, published *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, which did not flatter the Communists in the Spanish Civil War, he instantly became *non grata*.[2] To a considerable extent, this is still true today, although the choice of material is now much broader.

Not only was the material for translation carefully controlled, it was also "edited," often severely. In this, the Soviet period continued the traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Early Russian translators of Shakespeare, for example, turned *Hamlet*, *Lear*, and other plays into propaganda for the divine right of the monarch and the glories of serving him. In one case, Lear's madness was altogether deleted, for how could a royal personage be mad? Care was also exercised to protect the delicate sensibilities of the reader from such vulgarisms as "marriage bed" or any references to the sensual passions. Zhukovsky, whose translations were excellent, nevertheless modestly transposed all physical references in the *Odyssey* and in the ballads he translated to a properly delicate spiritual sphere. In extreme cases, such words as "pants" or "breast" were deemed

[2] *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was not translated into Russian until a year ago. Today Hemingway's collected works are being published in the Soviet Union in Russian translation.

inadmissible, and you might read of a lady feeding her infant with her "bust," which for some reason was considered more delicate.

In Gogol's story, "The Nose," Major Kovalev wakes up one morning, looks into the mirror and discovers, to his horror, a smooth empty place on his face where the nose should be. In Russian literature, there is still an empty place where the genitals should be. And translators still dutifully castrate the texts they are working on to avoid shocking the reader with the vulgarisms of decadent Western literature.

I remember when Arthur Miller spoke here about his trips to the Soviet Union, he mentioned attending a Russian performance of *Under the Bridge*, which he could with difficulty recognize as his own. The family relationships of the leading characters were changed to eliminate the more "shocking" aspects of the erotic involvements.

This, of course, seems totally ludicrous, if not outrageous to us. Yet, in its less extreme form, it does reflect a valid problem that arises before the translator. In many cases, for example, we find ourselves compelled to modify the emotional tone of a passage because of a difference in the level of expression acceptable in the cultures concerned. What is dramatic in one language, may seem melodramatic in another. This is also true of the number or strength of adjectives one can use. The area of sexual explicitness is even more sensitive. It seems to me that bringing to the reader material for which he is entirely unprepared might, perhaps, do more violence to the work than deletion or toning down. In any case, the answer is not too simple. I recently saw a Russian translation of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, published in the United States and evidently held in stock for the day when it may be possible to bring it to Russia. The translation was pretty bad. But even apart from that, in Russian the four-letter words which we don't even notice any more because they have become a matter of daily usage are neither startling, nor revolutionary. They are so incongruous, so outside the normal experience of the reader that they are simply funny. And I am sure Henry Miller never intended that.

There has also been a good deal of mutilation of texts for political reasons. Points emphasized, changed, deleted, passages and chapters dropped, and so on.

In areas of no interest to the censors, however, translation has served a very useful, if not directly relevant function, and still does so to some extent. It became a refuge for writers who could not write without violating their conscience. This was especially true of poetry. Pasternak is an outstanding example. So is Zabolotsky, a fine, though lesser poet, and an excellent translator. So is Akhmatova. Just as some writers turned to historical fiction, often writing about the present under the guise of the past, so translators turned to fields where they could function without compromise. Pasternak translated Shakespeare, Goethe, Verlaine, Byron, Keats, Rilke, and Georgian poets. Zabolotsky translated *The Tale of Igor's Host*, Georgian poets, old and modern, and German poetry. Akhmatova translated Oriental, West-European, Latvian and Jewish poets. She also edited a collection of Korean classical poetry. It must be said, however, that politics were not the only reason for their doing this work, since the translation of poetry by poets is an old tradition in Russia. And it was not for political reasons that Samuel Marshak, who was not a great poet himself, produced his excellent translations of Shakespeare's sonnets, of Blake and Burns, or that Chukovsky translated Whitman and Kipling and chil-

dren's verse.

Another political fact has influenced the field of translation. Russia is a multi-national state. The number of ethnic groups in Russia is estimated at anywhere from one to two hundred. Some of them, like the Georgians, Armenians, Tadzhiks and others have old cultures and rich literatures. A large number of others, especially in north Siberia and the Soviet Far East, had no writing and no written literatures. An intensive effort was made under the Soviet regime to develop alphabets and writing for these cultures. Again, a good deal of the motivation has been political. Ideology cannot be instilled without the written word. The government's campaign to extirpate religion, to compel nomadic peoples to a settled existence, to collectivize even the native fishermen and hunters of remote areas, and to destroy resistance to change in the traditional ways of life could not succeed without written means of communication. And so writing and literacy became a major goal.

In this case, as in many others, literacy was often of dubious benefit. Many of these peoples had magnificent oral literatures which, of course, were directly bound up with their religions. The forcible destruction of religion and the "modernization" of "backward areas" meant the loss of enormous literary wealth, which ethnologists and folklorists today are hurriedly trying to minimize by recording what is still remembered by the old. The younger people have been to school. Some have had secondary and higher education. Many have become doctors, teachers, scientists. Some have become writers, to whom the Soviet regime points with great pride. Unfortunately, in this area the spiritual impoverishment is especially glaring. What these ravished cultures were given was reason – a very crude kind of reason – in place of wisdom; facts – or what pass for facts – in place of truth; and dogma in place of imagination. And it was now Lenin and Stalin in place of the Upper Spirit Topal Oyka, and Trotskyites and foreign imperialists in place of the man-eating Ninwits. Most of the new writers, with very few exceptions, turn out the dreariest and crudest kind of obedient socialist realism. But the poetry is often better than the prose, perhaps because the sources of poetry are so much closer to the sources of folk literature.

The new writers are widely translated into Russian. There are translations from Kazakh, Tatar, Chukchi, Bashkir, Kirghiz, Yakut, Ossetin, and other languages. Russian works, new and old, as well as foreign works, are translated into these languages. Some of the national works are translated into the languages of other nationalities. The Soviet Literary Encyclopedia boasts that more translations are published in the Soviet Union than in any other country in the world. Translation in Russia is done from and into more than one hundred languages, and more than half of the books published in Russia are translations.

There is an increasing amount of translation from African and Asian languages into Russian, and often from Russian into these languages, though mostly of political literature. A tremendous number of dictionaries is constantly being published in the languages of Russia, Europe, Africa and Asia.

Sections on translation exist in a number of colleges, usually in the foreign-language departments and sometimes in departments of fine literature. The study of languages gen-

erally has expanded since Stalin's death. The number of contemporary European and American works translated has also increased, and while the choices are still governed to a large extent by political considerations, they are somewhat more liberal and flexible.

And so, for a variety of reasons, first cultural, and then political, and lately, whenever the pressure relaxes, cultural as well, translation has become an enormously important area of literary life in Russia. During the past two decades, particularly, the problems of translation have received increasing attention. Linguists, literary scholars, writers, and translators have written widely about various aspects of the field. The theoretical work which began with the little book of principles by Gumilyov and Chukovsky has grown far beyond the original expectations of the founders. Dozens of works have been published in various languages and various parts of Russia, examining the many problems of language, communication, meaning, and various methods and approaches to re-creating a work in another language. Chukovsky continued to write in the field until the end, expanding and revising his book on *The Noble Art*. There have been numerous collections of essays on problems general and specific. One series is titled *The Craft of Translation*, another, *The Translator's Notebooks*. In addition to the work done in European Russia, individual studies have appeared in the Ukraine, Byelorussia, Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Tadzhikistan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaidzhan.

Various schools and theories of translation have come and gone.

Some of the important things that have come out of all this are a consciousness of craft, a considerable body of fine translators, a large and often excellently-rendered literature in translation, and, perhaps as important as all these, an attitude toward the translator as a valued creative artist.

Lest all this sound much rosier than the facts, let me add:

- despite the emergence of a corps of excellent translators, the mass of translations is still quite gray.

- translators are respected, but poorly paid. Like original writers, they are paid not by the size of the book or by royalties, but by the size of the printing. An easy little book printed in large quantity will pay more than a very difficult work issued in a relatively small edition. (And their editions run from ten thousand anywhere to two hundred thousand.)

- while the choice of works to be translated is somewhat broader, it is still severely limited by political considerations - especially with regard to modern works. Here, too, the size of the printing is manipulated at will, so that some works are sure to reach a small audience. "Moral" censorship is still in force, and works are still severely edited.

- just as many writers have written "for the drawer," so translators also translate "for the drawer" – or, in recent years, for underground publication by "Samizdat" – the "home publishing" so widely current today. A work is typed in several copies and distributed among friends. They in turn produce more copies, and so on – in a geometric progression. And so, many works officially unavailable actually gain a large circle of readers. The works of Ezra Pound, Allen Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti and others are circulated widely in "Samizdat" editions. So is Orwell (*1984* and *Animal Farm*); I have found (unacknowledged) quotations and ideas from *1984* slipped into a science-fiction story by a writer not

particularly notorious for opposition moods.

On the whole, despite the continued restrictions, censorship, and manipulation of availability, more and more contemporary literature is being translated and published officially in Soviet Russia. In the last ten or fifteen years, Russian readers have gradually been allowed access to a wide range of foreign writing, including works by such diverse writers as Joyce (early works), Kafka (in infinitesimal doses), Mauriac, Hesse, Camus, Sarraute, Böll, Grass, Golding (*Lord of the Flies*), Graham Greene, Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, Capote, Salinger, Updike, Cheever, Vonnegut, Carson McCullers, Chinese and Japanese writers, new and old. Some of the choices are easy to understand, some rather surprising. (Among the latter – the large and numerous editions of what is essentially non-ideological literature of play – science-fiction and detective and murder mysteries by American and other writers, which are enormously popular in the Soviet Union.)

It will be interesting to see what effect this expansion of the literary horizon will have on technique, approaches, and range of subject matter if and when the Russian writer ever regains the opportunity to learn to write again. The translator may then prove to have been an important factor in helping Russian literature find its way back to itself.

Reference: *The World of Translation*, PEN American Center 1970, p. 351-360.