The Bilingual Muse

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Conclusion

If we insist on measuring the success of a work of literature by its critical or popular resonance, we probably would have to arrive at the somewhat melancholy thought that the self-translated poems discussed in this book were mostly failures. Even highly revered authors like Tsvetaeva, Nabokov, and Brodsky had difficulties finding a receptive audience for their self-translated poetry. The situation was worst for Tsvetaeva. To her great frustration, she was unable to publish her French translation of Mólodets, and when the book finally appeared in print half a century after the author's death, it attracted little attention. Nabokov and Brodsky, unlike Tsvetaeva, easily found a publisher for their self-translated poems, of course, given that they had already become literary celebrities during their lifetime, but their self-translations received at best a lukewarm reception. Even though Tsvetaeva, Nabokov, and Brodsky have developed an international cult following and their works are the focus of major academic “industries,” their self-translated poetry has remained largely in the shadows. Only Brodsky's self-translations have begun to attract scholarly scrutiny in recent years, but the overall opinion of his achievements as a translingual poet seems not to have improved much. In a generally laudatory review of Alexandra Berlina's monograph on Brodsky's self-translations, Michael Eskin argues that the book, in spite of its qualities, nevertheless fails to put Brodsky on the map of American studies, given “the simple fact that Brodsky's English poems simply do not make the cut as indigenous poems in English.” The double mentioning of “simple” and “simply” endows Eskin's statement with the seemingly self-evident obviousness of a truism.

This apparent lack of success may validate the opinion that poetic self-translation is an inherently doomed undertaking, given the doubly challenging task of writing poetry in a non-native tongue and reconstructing a text with specific formal and aesthetic qualities in a different linguistic medium. Personally, I do not find such an explanation particularly persuasive. In spite of the assumed difficulty of poetic self-translation, a closer look reveals that the practice is more widespread than one might think. The prejudice against self-translated poems may stem less from an intrinsic weakness of the translations than from a monolingual bias of readers who assume that any translation of a poem—particularly one made by a non-native speaker of the target
language—is inevitably “worse” than the original, even when it comes with the cachet of authorial intention.

Interestingly, the Russian self-translating poet who has probably received the most positive response from Anglophone critics is Katia Kapovich. Paradoxically, she is someone who denies that poetry can be translated at all. Since Kapovich presents her self-translated poems as English-language originals, the American critics who praised her collection *Gogol in Rome* were unaware that some of the poems in that volume are self-translations of Russian source texts. The critical praise was based on the assumption that the poems in the book were all original English-language creations, albeit written by a non-native speaker of English.

The bias against poems composed directly in a non-native language seems to be weaker than the bias against self-translated poems. This becomes visible in the critical response to Nabokov’s and Brodsky’s Anglophone poetry. Richmond Lattimore, while denouncing Nabokov’s “awkward” self-translations, claimed that “in most of the English-composed poems . . . the awkwardness vanishes.” Similarly, John Skow opined that Nabokov’s self-translated poems were “generally flawed,” but that “[a] few of the English poems are splendid, of the high quality of the long poem in *Pale Fire*.” As we have seen, Brodsky’s poems written directly in English—at least some of them—have been praised as original and inspired contributions to Anglophone poetry, while his self-translations have found fewer defenders.

What seems to be at stake here is a romantic privileging of the original text and the original language, which makes translation—even when done by the author—a problematic enterprise. To be sure, ideas of translatability have fluctuated considerably over the years. The romantic cult of originality rooted in the individual genius of the mother tongue turned self-translation into a very marginal endeavor for much of the nineteenth century. Modernist and formalist theories, on the other hand, have made multilingual approaches to poetry viable again, even though the assumption of striving for “equivalence” between source and target text has been met with increased skepticism in the light of postmodern and deconstructionist approaches to translation.

Among the poets considered in this book, we find a wide spectrum of opinions concerning the translatability of poetry. The most optimistic position is taken by Tsvetaeva, who considered poetry itself a form of translation and thus by definition always translatable. Brodsky had a similar view. Like Tsvetaeva, he claimed that “poetry after all in itself is a translation; or, to put it another way, poetry is one of the aspects of the psyche rendered in language.” If we take the position that any poetic text is always already a translation, there is no reason to deny the theoretical feasibility of infinite further retranslations. Elizaveta Kul’man also assumed that the “spirit” of a poem
survives its incarnation in different linguistic media. At the other end of the spectrum we find Katia Kapovich, who denies that poetry can be translated at all. Nabokov’s rigid theory of literalism amounts to more or less the same position. Nabokov’s characterization of translation as a form of physical violence is echoed by Kapovich’s comparison of (self-)translation to open-heart surgery. Nevertheless, both Nabokov and Kapovich went against their own theory in their practice of self-translation—Nabokov by deviating from his literalist credo, and Kapovich by an (admittedly limited) engagement in an activity that she declared to be impossible in the first place.

The opposition between translatability and untranslatability is in reality somewhat of a false dichotomy. It is equally trivial to claim that nothing is translatable and that nothing is untranslatable. Lawrence Venuti has argued that the assumptions of translatability or untranslatability in fact represent two sides of the same coin, which he calls the “instrumental model” of translation. In this view, the task of translation is seen as the “reproduction or transfer of an invariant that is contained or caused by the source text, whether its form, meaning, or effect.” Rather than the instrumental paradigm, Venuti champions what he calls the “hermeneutic model” of translation. In his definition, “translation is an interpretive act whereby the translated text comes to support meanings, values and functions specific to the receiving situation.”

Inevitably, this raises the question of the target audience. For whom are self-translations written? Walter Benjamin opened his famous essay on the task of the translator with the somewhat startling assertion that “no poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener.” By implication, Benjamin seems to be saying that no translation is intended for the hapless reader who is ignorant of the original language. Part of the negative reaction to the self-translations of Tsvetaeva, Nabokov, and Brodsky is probably due to the fact that none of them aimed to accommodate their respective target audience. In other words, they refrained from what Venuti would call a “domesticating” strategy. Tsvetaeva’s and Brodsky’s insistence on preserving meter and rhyme in translation was bound to appear outlandish to a public accustomed to free verse, while Nabokov’s literalism flew in the face of received ideas of “poeticity.” Rather than in an identifiable national tradition, these translations locate themselves in a transnational hybrid space. The risk one takes with such a position is to become unreadable to a monocultural audience. In the words of David Bethea:

Who is Tsvetaeva writing for in this world when late in life she translates her own poema-skazka The Swain (Molodets), a work already strangely inverted vis-à-vis the original, into French that, if grammatically correct, syntactically resembles Russian? Her voracious poetic appetite having exhausted the semantic, prosodic, and generic resources of her native speech, she moved into
a linguistic no-man’s land. By the same token, who is Brodsky writing for when he smuggles into his Russian verse extended scholastic arguments and elaborate English metaphysical conceits that can only be perceived as profoundly alien to the native tradition?7

Tellingly, the few positive appraisals of Tsvetaeva’s and Brodsky’s self-translations have generally come from bilingual native speakers of Russian, that is, readers who do not need a translation of the text. Perhaps self-translations serve a different function than the one traditionally imputed to translations. As we have seen, they can become a form of self-exploration, self-exegesis, or metacommentary. Rather than providing a simulacrum of the original text for readers who are ignorant of the source language, they can be described in terms of what Mikhail Epstein, drawing on the dialogical philosophy of Mikhail Bakhtin, has theorized as “interlation.” In Epstein’s words:

With the spread of multilingual competence, translation will come to serve not as a substitute but as a dialogical counterpart to the original text. Together they will comprise a multidimensional, multilingual, “culturally curved” discourse. Bilingual persons have no need of translation but they can enjoy an “interlation,” a contrastive juxtaposition of two apparently identical texts running simultaneously in two different languages—for example, a poem by Joseph Brodsky in the Russian original and in English autotranslation. Interlation is a multilingual variation on the same theme, where the role of “source” and “target” languages are not established or are interchangeable, and one language allows the reader to perceive what another language misses or conceals.8

Typographically, the ideal presentation of an “interlation” is a bilingual en face edition showing the two versions of the text side by side. This is the solution adopted by Andrey Gritsman for his “parallel poems” published in his volume View from the Bridge. The only other self-translating Russian poet who resorted to this typographical layout was Nabokov in Poems and Problems. Nabokov’s attitude was quite different from Gritsman’s, however. Even though he published his self-translated poems in a bilingual edition, Nabokov’s intent was hardly to achieve an Epsteinian “interlation.” Rather, the juxtaposition between source and target text underlines the unbridgeable gap between the two versions, since, following Nabokov’s own theory of translation, the Russian original can never be truly recovered in the English rendition. In its inevitable failure, the “ruined” English text validates the primacy and canonical sanctity of the Russian original. By contrast, Gritsman’s approach does not privilege either variant. Both the Russian and the
English versions exist as “parallel poems” with equal rights. While Nabokov’s bilingual edition reveals a frustrated quest for equivalence, in Gritsman’s case the difference between original and translation is a fully intended and welcomed embodiment of transnational fluidity.

Aside from Gritsman’s View from the Bridge and Nabokov’s Poems and Problems, a bilingual edition showing the original and self-translated text on facing pages is also available for Tsvetaeva’s Mólodets/Le Gars (Moscow: Ellis-Lak, 2005). The trilingual edition of Kul’man’s poetry by the Russian Academy does not present the parallel versions facing each other (which would have been difficult to realize, given that three languages are involved), but at least the Russian, German, and Italian texts are included within the covers of the same book. By contrast, locating the parallel Russian and German versions of Kandinsky’s self-translated poems is an extremely cumbersome task. A bilingual parallel edition of Brodsky’s poems in Russian and English has never been realized either. But if we follow Epstein’s thinking, it would probably be a good idea.

In the contemporary intellectual climate, “innocent” self-translation has become problematic in the same way that the concept of equivalence has been met with increasing suspicion by translation theorists. Nabokov’s skepticism about translatability has become a widely accepted tenet of translation studies, albeit without Nabokov’s gloomy conclusions. Rather than the impossible creation of a transparent simulacrum of an original text, translation is now understood as the creative rewriting and multiplying of potential meanings. In that sense, a self-translator is forced to grapple with his or her own multiple identities, which may not always be reducible to a common denominator. Mikhail Epstein explains the sea change in attitude toward language and translation as follows: “Translation as the search for equivalence has dominated the epoch of national cultures and monolingual communities, which needed bridges of understanding more than rainbows of cocreativity. . . . With the globalization of culture and the automatization of literal translation between languages, it is untranslatability (and nonequivalences among languages: truly Bakhtinian polyglossia) that reach the foreground.”

Does an audience for such writings exist today? Over the past thirty years, we have witnessed an unprecedented global dispersion of Russian speakers over three continents, leading to the emergence of a new generation of bilingual or multilingual “diasporic” Russians dwelling in the countries of the “Near Abroad” as well as in Israel, Germany, the United States, and elsewhere. The “postmonolingual condition” that is affecting a growing number of today’s global population and creative writers has ushered in an era of transnational mobility and linguistic mixing. In his 1979 interview with John Glad, Brodsky speculated that it was “entirely possible that in twenty or
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thirty years there will be people for whom [producing poetry in multiple languages] is completely natural. “10 We have now reached the age that Brodsky invoked in his prediction. Will the emergence of ever more deterritorialized communities lead to an increase in bilingual creativity? If so, the self-translating poets discussed in this book may provide a glimpse of a perhaps not too distant future.