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PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION: ON TRANSLATING MANDELŠTAM'S PROSE INTO
ENGLISH

On April 7, 1929 Izvestia printed an article entitled "Torrents of Hackwork" /Potoki Xaltury/ in which the following statement about translation appeared:

The quality of translation in any country is a direct index of its cultural level. It is just as significant as its statistics on soap consumption or the percentage of literacy.

/p.284/426/1

The following July Na Literaturnom Postu published an article entitled "On Translations" /O Perevodax/ asserting:

The translator is a powerful interpreter of the author; he is fundamentally uncontrolled. His unwitting commentary seeps into the book through a thousand cracks.

/p.291/435/

Osip Mandelštam, the author of both articles, was as deeply concerned with "the level of culture" in the Soviet Union as he was troubled over the question of the preservation of culture. By 1929, having spent a significant part of his life translating western European literature into Russian, he recognized the need to persuade the Soviet Writers Union that better working conditions were as essential for translators as for other artists of the word. This could only be done by recognizing translation as an art, thereby elevating the professional status of the translator.

For Mandelštam the problematics of translation were very broad. Translation was perceived not merely as a matter of "interpolation", but involved, as he said, the ability to "switch over" from one "independent speech system", to another, and the "creation of an independent speech system based on foreign material".

/284-5/427/

Mandelstam's continued interest in the problematics of translation as the art and the act of interpreting other cultures is expressed even in his last and most unique effort in literary prose, Conversation about Dante. The subject matter of this "conversation" between Mandelstam and his interlocuter, Andrey Bely, ranges from problems of understanding a foreign culture to translating and interpreting it for posterity. Indeed, this "conversation" is essentially an attempt to explicate the process of reading, translating and interpreting Dante for the Russian reader.

Now what does this mean for the American or English reader and translator of Mandelstam's prose? Above all, the translator must be aware of the writer's complexity, specifically, of what Mandelstam terms "philological" sensibility?

Let us look at a few instances in the Journey to Armenia, now available in at least three good English translations².

The first section of Journey to Armenia, subtitled "Sevan," records the pleasures of contemplation, of emotional excitement, as well as the pleasure of the experience of the descriptive act as Mandelstam's keen and sensitive mind responds to aspects of life and death, nature and art, archaeology and philology perceived for the first time, or as if for the first time, because of the cultural context which "kept repeating to me: now stay awake, don't fear your own age, don't be sly." /p.349/

In this section there is a passage which reads:

In addition the island is literally paved with the fiery red slabs of anonymous graves, some sticking up, others knocked over or crumbling away. /p.345/

An Armenian scholar was shocked at the translation because she said that what was meant here were Armenian "votive stele," not gravestones. Examples of such votive stele are to be found incorporated into the actual construction of Armenian churches as well as in the sanctified areas immediately surrounding those churches. They are not gravestones common to Western churchyards. Since this looked like a significant mistake in translation, I returned to Mandelstam's text. However, it was he who was mista-

ken, not his translators. His text reads;

Krome togo, on bukval'no vymoščen ognennoryžimi
plitami bezymjannyx mogil-torčaščimi, rasšatannymi
i krošaščimisja. /p.138/

Now what is the translator supposed to do? Correct Mandelštam and satisfy the knowledgeable Armenian scholar and, by the way, give additional symbolic significance to the mysterious spiritual quality already abundant in the text? Or should the translator merely translate an instance of Mandelštam's ignorance of the facts, indeed of the culture he so loved and admired?

The answer here is obvious. It is not the translator's role to teach Mandelštam more facts about Armenia; however, a footnote is definitely in order. Indeed, this is not actually a problem of translation although it may be taken as such by readers familiar with the subject matter.

More serious for us as translators of Mandelštam are problems of perspective or focus. Mandelštam's fascinating excursus on perception and the viewer, which appears in the section of Journey to Armenia subtitled "Frenchmen," is worth consideration. I quote the English here for what is most significant is not the translation per se but the approach, Mandelštam's method.

Standing before a picture to which the body heat of your vision has not yet adjusted, for which the crystalline lens has not yet found its proper accommodation, is like serenading in a fur coat behind storm windows.

Only when you have achieved the proper equilibrium and only then, begin the second stage of restoring the picture, its cleaning, the removal of older coats of varnish, of the external and most recent barbaric layer. This is the stage which unites the picture with sunny solid reality.

With its extremely subtle acid reactions, the eye, an organ which possesses its own acoustics, intensifying the value of the image, exaggerating its own accomplishments to the point of offending the senses over which it makes a great fuss, raises the picture to its own level, for painting is much more a phenomenon of internal secretion than of apperception, that is, of external perception.

The material of painting is organized so that nothing is lost, hence its distinction from nature. But

the probability of a lottery is in inverse proportion to its feasibility.

And it is only now that the third and last stage of penetrating the picture begins -- confronting the idea behind it.

Now the traveling eye presents its ambassadorial credentials to the consciousness. A cold treaty is then established between the viewer and the picture, something on the order of a state secret.

/p.365/161-2/

First of all, it must be emphasized that Mandelstam says here with reference to the audience or viewer of paintings is equally applicable to his conception of the reader's approach to literary texts.

He first warns the audience against being overawed by art. Calm selfconfidence is recommended instead. On the other hand, he cautions us: the "eye" is a "noble but stubborn animal." Thus a willingness to adjust one's vision or focus is required before the evaluation process can begin.

Second, after the proper "equilibrium" is established, the audience must be prepared to find some reality behind the illusions, forms and images through which the artist expresses himself most fully. Art must not be considered as something totally isolated from its context or from its primary impulse.

Third, since the eye or mind of both artist and audience "intensify the value of the esthetic image," the audience must understand that a process of internalization is set in motion before the full "meaning" of a work of art can be realized.

Finally, the last stage of penetrating a work of art can take place: "the confrontation of the idea behind it." This stage requires the establishment of a "cold treaty" or a "state secret" between the viewer and painting, or between the reader and the text.

In other words, something mysterious governs the audience-text or reader-text relationship which is mutually understood and accepted. It is therefore not merely a matter of preception which is involved in viewing art or reading a text, but rather a process of interpretation, a method of obtaining the proper focus, which involves particular adjustments and individual responses for each work of art.

What is more, it is the very nature of that mysterious, mutual interplay of reader and text which distinguishes art from reality and the esthetic process of perception or focus from ordinary, routine perception.

Now that the reader is prepared not to be overwhelmed by Mandelstam's art, and has been warned against hasty evaluations; now that the reader's eyes and ears have been sensitized and he has achieved the requisite equilibrium to focus in on Mandelstam's art, it is necessary to look more closely at his text. Our example is the last chapter of Journey to Armenia³.

It is most important for our purpose to be able to identify the elements of translation which determine the meaning of an entire paragraph or even an entire section or chapter of a work. The last chapter of Journey to Armenia is subtitled "Alagez," the name of the volcano visible from Mandelstam's hotel window in Erevan. Alagez serves as the controlling metaphor of this section.

Out of context, the first sentence, "Ty v kakom vremeni xočeš', žit'?" could be translated in several ways. Lexical problems involve the noun, "vremja" and the verb, "xotet'." For instance, "vremja" can mean: "time" in the sense of "epoch", "age", "period"; it can mean "season" in the sense of spring/winter or "Time/Season" as in Ecclesiastes: "a time to be born ... a season for everything." Moreover, "vremja" as a purely grammatical term has the meaning of "tense."

In this instance, Mandelstam the literal "philologist," the poet-philologist, inspired by the philological and archaeological riches of Armenia, to him the cradle of culture and civilization, chose the philological or grammatical meaning of "vremja" as his primary meaning.

Indeed, his answer to the above question: /2/ "Ja xoču žit' v povelitel'nom pričastii buduščego..." tells us to translate the first sentence with "vremja" as "tense."

But what about the verb "xotet' " ?

First of all, it means "to want, desire," it involves volition.

Secondly, in answer to the question, "čto xočeš'?", it implies "choice": What choice would you make ?

And third, it can be translated as "like": What do you like ?. That is, "xotet'" indicates volition and choice based on pleasure /likes and dislikes/ as opposed to necessity /needs, obligations or imperatives/.

Hence, the following possibilities are open to the translator:

"What tense/time do you want
like to live in" ?
would you choose

Mandelstam's "answer" to the question helps to narrow down the range of possibilities; however, the poet opts not for a simple past, present or future tense, but for a tense and mood based on ideological, symbolic and esthetic principles. His option includes all three meanings associated with "xotet'": "choice," "want/desire" and "like," as well as the sense of futurity contained in "would like" as opposed to the pure present tense form "to want immediately."

As we read further, we notice that physically the poet Mandelstam, the author of Journey to Armenia, is functioning in the present, but that ideologically and esthetically he is already living in the future, contemplating, fantasizing, creating and transforming contemporary reality, real life into his "ideal" - the "what ought to be."

Hence, the translator's problem: how to convey all three meanings of the verb "xotet'" and still produce satisfying English prose ? I tried to meet Mandelstam's requirements by inserting all three English verbs in the first three sentences. Of course, this meant moving beyond literal translation or what Mandelstam called "mere interpolation" in his essays on translation, thereby introducing the translator's "unwitting commentary" or interpretation into the text.

I believe this is justified by Mandelstam's rather complex poetics in which themes and images develop as they combine with each other and transform each other, moving back and forth from the plane of physical and ideological reality to the plane of metaphysical and symbolic or esthetic meaning. Language — that is, words, nouns and verbs — is the medium and the mediating factor in this movement because the poet is, above all, a

"philologist" in the most literal sense of that word, a "lover of the word" /philia + logos/. His primary creative impulse is his literal "philological sensibility".

Since in Journey to Armenia, "choice" is a major ideological as well as esthetic theme, I made a conscious decision to translate the first appearance of "xotet" as "choose", the second appearance of "xotet" as "want" and, taking advantage of the impersonal verbal constructions opening the third paragraph and the continued implied presence of the verb "xotet", to introduce the verb "like," indeed, to repeat "like" three times. /See /1/, /2/, and /3/ /.

Furthermore, in translating the verb "xotet", an interpretive decision had to be taken as to how to convey the symbolic and ideological meaning contained in the philologist-poet's fundamental theme -- the theme of "tense" which reinforces the theme of "choice."

Since futurity is contained in his "answer", in /2/, in the introduction of the theme of the imagined "ideal" world, I decided to introduce that sense of futurity immediately, that is, in the opening question, in /1/, through the auxiliary verbal form, "would."

Thus, the translation process necessitated determining lexical and verbal equivalents as well as logical and ideological equivalents to clue the English reader into the complex, multifaceted implications of the text.

Hence /1/, the translated question: "What tense would you choose to live in?" rather than: "What tense/or time do you want to live in?"

And /2/, the more emphatic answer involving both choice and volition: "I want to live in the imperative of the future passive participle -- in-the "what ought to be."

It is now possible to turn to paragraph /3/ which provides an explication and explanation of the poet's "choice".

I like to breathe that way. That's what I like.
It suggests a kind of mounted, bandit-like
equestrian honor. That's why I like the glorious
Latin "Gerundive" -- it's a verb on horseback.

Logically, this paragraph demands the English verb "like", the third possible meaning of "xotet," even though "xotet" itself is not used here.

Although "xotet" is implied in the excited, intense, staccato voice hurrying to explain and defend Mandelštam's answer, that verb is now replaced by the even stronger word for "like" -- "nraivit'sja" -- thereby introducing the sensual theme into this section, the theme of "pleasure." Thus, "like" /"nraivit'sja"/ is repeated in conjunction with the development of the "philological" theme. Indeed, the static concept of "tense" /presented in /1/ is transformed into the active "verb on horseback," the glorious Latin Gerundive." The theme of "pleasure" begins to dominate.

In paragraph /4/, all the incipient themes merge into the poet's theme, the theme of the poet's function. The ideological theme of "choice", the "philological" theme of "tense", and the sensual theme of "pleasure" merge through the expanded, more elaborate and more abstract explanation of the poet's function. The poet is carried away /literally and figuratively/ by his feelings of "pleasure," inspired by his recognition and realization that the esthetic function dominates over the ideological... the fantasizer is transformed into the poet.

/See /4/ ... /

The simple prose of paragraph /5/ clarifies the abstract metaphor, momentarily bringing both the poet and the reader back down to earth, to the world of contemporary reality in preparation for the final metaphorical leap which establishes the controlling image of this section, the volcano, Alagez, and links it to the various forms of the noun, "tjaga" /pull, attraction, gravitational pull/, and the verb, "tjanu'sja" /to be drawn, lured, attracted/ emerging in this section and the preceding section. The image of Alagez -- representing the "poet's calling" -- adds mystical and metaphysical meaning to the "philological" theme, reinforcing the idea of the "philologist" - poet as the bearer of culture through the ages.

Although there is not space to analyze this central metaphor, it should be noted that the last line /8/ of the Journey to

Armenia contains the force of the Latin Gerundive, -- "I must ride around some other ridge" /poslednjaja mysl': Nužno ob'exat' kakuju-to grjadu/, -- again calling the poet from a static state of mind /sleep/ to an active status /horse-back riding or creating poetry/.

The "tjaga" of the Armenian language /see /A/ /, the "čuvstvo pritjaženija goroj" or "sixth sense" /see /D/ /, the "povelitel'nja glagol'naja tjaga" of the Latin Gerundive /see /4/ /, and his sense of being "pulled" towards Alagez /ja tjanulsja -- see /7/ /, reinforce the poet's confidence in his "calling": the poet as the bearer of culture through the ages.

Returning to the problematics of translation, then, the translator is similarly obliged. He must respond to his calling -- to similar imperatives to understand and explain and express the text. Indeed, he must take one step further: he must make sense of the original text but in his own language, in the "creation of an independent speech system based on foreign material".

Уш. Аштарак

Ваше письмо на восемнадцати листах, исписанное по-черком прямым и высоким, как тополевая аллея, я получил и на него отвечаю:

Первое столкновение в чувственном образе с матерней древнеармянской церкви.

Глаз ищет формы, идеи, ждёт ее, а взамен натывается на заплесневевший хлеб природы или на каменный пирог.

Зубы зрения крошатся и обламываются, когда смотришь впервые на армянские церкви. /А/ Армянский язык - неизнашиваемый - каменные сапоги. Ну, конечно, толстостенное слово, прослойки воздуха в полугласных. Но разве все очарование в этом? Нет! Откуда же тяга? Как объяснить? Осмыслить?

/В/ Я испытал радость произносить звуки, запрещенные для русских уст, тайные, отверженные и, может, даже, - на какой-то глубине постыдные.

Был прекрасный кипяток в жестяном чайнике, и вдруг в него бросили щепотку чудного черного чая.

/С/ Так у меня с армянским языком.

/Д/ Я в себе выработал шестое - "араратское" - чув-

7.Ashtarak

I have received your eighteen-page letter, completely covered in your straight and tall hand, straight and tall as an avenue lined with poplars. Here is my answer:

My first sensual encounter with the materiality of an ancient Armenian church.

The eye sees form, an idea, and anticipates it, but it stumbles instead upon the moldy bread of nature or upon a stone pie.

The teeth of vision crumble and break up when you encounter Armenian churches for the first time. /А/ The Armenian language cannot be worn down: its boots are of stone. Naturally, its word is thick-walled, its semivowels layered with air. But is that all there is to its charm? No! Then, whence its attraction? How can you explain it? Understand it?

/В/ I experienced such joy in pronouncing sounds forbidden to Russian lips, mysterious sounds, out-cast sounds, and perhaps, on some deep level, even shameful sounds.

There was some magnificent boiling water in a pewter teapot, and suddenly a pinch of marvelous black tea was tossed into it.

/С/ That's how I felt about the Armenian language.

/Д/ I have cultivated a sixth sense in myself an "Ararat" sense.

тво приключения герой.

Теперь куда б меня не занесло, оно уже незрительно, и останется.

УШ. Алагез

- /1/ Ты в каком времени хочешь жить?
- /2/ - Я хочу жить в повелительном причастии будущего, в залого страдательном - в "долженствующем быть".
- /3/ Так мне думится. Так мне нравится. Есть верховая басмаческая, конная честь. Оттого-то мне и нравится славный латинский "герундивум" - этот глагол на коне.
- /4/ Да, латинский гений, когда был жаден и молод, создал форму повелительной глагольной тяги, как прообраз всей нашей культуры, и не только "долженствующая быть", но - "долженствующая быть хвальной" - laudatura est - та, что нравится ...
- /5/ Такую речь я вел с самим собой, едуци в седле по урочищам, кочевникам и гигантским пастбищам Алагеза.
- /6/ В Эривани Алагез торчал у меня перед глазами, как "здрасьте" и "прощайте". Я видел, как день

I can feel the mountain's gravitational pull.

Now, no matter where fate may lead me, it already has a speculative existence, and will accompany me forever.

8. Alagez

- /1/ What tense would you choose to live in ?
- /2/ "I want to live in the imperative of the future passive participle - in the 'what ought to be'.
- /3/ I Like to breathe that way. That's what I like. It suggests a kind of mounted, bandit-like, equestrian honor. That's why I like the glorious Latin "Gerundive" - it's a verb on horseback.
- /4/ Yes, the Latin genius, when it was young and greedy, created that form of the imperative verbal traction as the prototype of our entire culture, and not only "that which ought to be" but "that which ought to be praised" - laudatura est - that which pleases us...
- /5/ I carried on the above dialogue with myself as I rode horseback through the natural boundaries the nomadic territories, and the vast pasturelands of Alagez.
- /6/ In Erevan. Alagez stuck up before my eyes like "hello" or "goodbye". I saw how its snow-covered crown melted from day to day and how, especially in good weather, in the mornings, its tinted slopes

ото дня подтаивал его снеговой гребень, как в хорошую погоду, особенно по утрам, сухими гребнями хрустели его нафабранные кручи.

/1/ И я тянулся к нему через тутовые деревья и земляные крыши домов.

Кусок Алагеза жил тут же со мной в гостинице. На подоконнике почему-то валялся увесистый образец черного вулканического стекла - камень обидан. Визитная карточка в пуд, забытая какой-нибудь геологической экспедицией.

Подступы к Алагезу не утомительны, и ничего не стоит взять его верхом - несмотря на 14 000 футов. Лава заключена в земляные опухоли, по которым едешь, как по маслу.

Из окна моей комнаты на пятом этаже эриванской гостиницы я составил себе совершенно неверное представление о Алагезе. Он мне казался монолитным хребтом. На самом деле он складчатая система и раз-

crunched like dry toast.

/1/ And I was drawn towards it, over the mulberry trees and the earthen roofs of the houses.

A piece of Alagez lived right there with me in the hotel. On my windowsill, for some reason, lay a heavy specimen of the black volcanic glass-like rock known as "obsidian". A ponderous calling card left behind by some geological expedition.

The approaches to Alagez are not fatiguing, and it is no trouble at all to reach the top on horseback, despite its 14,000 feet. The lava is contained in earthen blisters, along which you can easily ride.

From the fifth floor window of my Erevan hotel room, I formed a totally mistaken picture of Alagez. I saw it as some monolithic ridge. In actual fact, it is a folded system which gradually opens up. proportionately to the rise, the accordion of diorite rock untwists itself like an Alpine waltz.

And what a capacious day fell to my lot !

Even now, when I think back on it, my heart throbs. I got tangled up in it as in a long robe pulled out of one of the trunks of my ancestor Jacob.

вивается постепенно, - по мере подъема, марманка диоритовых пород раскручивалась, как альпийский вальс.

Ну и емкий денек мне выдал на долю!

И сейчас, как вспомню, екает сердце. Я в нем запутался, как в длинной рубашке, вынутой из сундуков праотца Накова.

Легок сон на кочевьях. Тело, измученное пространством, теплеет, выпрямляется, припоминает длину пути. Хребтовые троны бегут муравами по позвоночнику. Бархатные дуга отягадают и некочут веки. Пролежни оврагов выкрамываются в бека. Сон мурует тебя, замуровывает. Последняя мысль: нужно объехать какую-то граду.

Sleep is easy in nomad camps. The body, exhausted by space, grows warm, stretches itself out, and recalls the length of the journey. The paths of mountain ridges run like shivers along the spine. Velvet meadows burden and tickle the eyelids. Bedsores of the ravines hollow out the sides. Sleep immerses you, walls you in. Lest thought I must ride around some other ridge.

FOOTNOTES:

- ¹ All quotes refer to the following volumes unless otherwise noted. English citations are taken from Jane G. Harris, Osip Mandelstam: The Complete Critical Prose and Letters /Ardis, 1979/; Russian citations are from G.P. Strive, Osip Mandelstam, Sobranie sochinenij v trekh tomakh /Inter-Language Literary Associates, 1971/, II. The first citation is from the English text, the second is from the Russian.
- ² Clarence Brown, "Journey to Armenia," Quarterly Review of Literature, XIX, 3-4 /1975/, Jane G. Harris, Osip Mandelstam: The Complete Critical Prose /Ardis, 1979/, Sidney Monas, Osip Mandelstam: Selected Essays /University of Texas, 1977/
- ³ See appendix.

PROBLEMY PRZEKŁADU: O TŁUMACZENIU PROZY MANDELSZTAMA NA ANGIELSKI
Streszczenie

W artykule przedstawione zostały pokrótce wybrane problemy translatorskie, z jakimi zetknąć się może tłumacz podejmujący się przekładu skomplikowanej twórczości współczesnego pisarza. Blżej nasświetlone zostały następujące kwestie: /1/ rola tłumacza i jego obowiązki jako pośrednika pomiędzy dwiema kulturami, /2/ usuwanie przez tłumacza "błędów" w tekście, /3/ interpretacja translatorska vs "zwykła interpolacja" tekstu. Wskazane kwestie przekładowe zilustrowano przykładami z angielskich tłumaczeń prozy Osipa Mandelsztama.