

*Filtered through the Iron Curtain:
Soviet Methodology for the Canon of World (Foreign)
Literature and the Latvian Case*

As a prologue I will quote a passage from an interview with Prof. Jüri Talvet published in *The Estonian Literary Magazine* (ELM 2011). Explaining the concepts of 'world literature' and 'foreign literature' in the Soviet period, Prof. Talvet says the following: "In the Soviet Union, 'foreign literature' meant primarily Western literatures – those literatures across the border. In the fifteen 'fraternal republics', Russian literature was not considered as 'foreign', because it was considered 'our own'. (---) Nobody could possibly cover world literature as a whole, so we are teaching world literature as understood by Goethe and the German Romantics: it is national literature that has transcended or has the potential to transcend the national borders." (Ib. 13)

As we know the Iron Curtain kept the Soviet reader well protected from almost everything that was happening in western society. The concepts of twentieth-century foreign literature were distorted and details provided were extremely scanty. Literary production, including translations, was subordinated to the state, occupying a formal place in the official culture of the Soviet era. As Susanna Witt who has written about totalitarianism and translation in USSR has said: "To the field of translation studies the Soviet case generally provides rich material for the discussion of topical matters linked to issues of "translation and power," "translation and ideology," "translation and empire," etc. In particular, Soviet practices developed within the field of indirect translation, producing such paradoxical entities as "original interlinear trots" and "secondary originals," supplies new perspectives on such key concepts as source language, target language, authenticity, and translational agency". (Witt 2011: 168)

As a result, the whole translation process in the Soviet Union differed greatly from that in democratic societies. It was inevitably influenced by censorship and strict centralization. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) held a monopoly on the dissemination of all information in the USSR. Generally speaking, everything that did not fall under the officially accepted program was forbidden. As Witt says, "It is clear, though, that the concept of

culture planning “from above” needs some further elaboration. Apparently, such planning was not necessarily initiated by official organs at the level of concrete action. “From above” the state established a framework and created a demand for translated texts of a certain type”. (Ib. 164) And my assumption is that world literature that was given access to in Latvian in the Soviet period had to go through a double filtering. The main one was done in Moscow and the second one by the local Latvian authorities.

My research will focus on foreign literature translation and publication in Latvia behind the Iron Curtain. Crystallizing crucial questions concerning the relationship between “foreign” and “one’s own” in the specific context of Soviet culture, translation provides an interesting case both as practice and as object of discourse. It is important to note that foreign literature in translation in Soviet times was divided into two – the literature of socialist countries and the literature of capitalist countries. This overview will focus on the latter. It is mostly based upon the study of the Latvian National Archives although for the broadening of the context some research and publications done by other scholars in Russian archives will be used. The archive collections my research is based on are the following:

1. The Latvian SSR National Publication, Printing and Book Commission (1963–1988), often referred to as the **Press Commission**. One of its functions was to control the content and bias of published literature. By studying their files in the Latvian National Archives, one can verify facts already known, as well as ascertain examples and subtleties of the strategies employed in the publication of foreign literature.

2. Concrete examples can be found in the Latvian SSR (MP) Publication Printing and Book Commission, *Liesma Publishers*, archive. In 1965, the fiction editorial board was divided into two – the translated fiction and the original fiction editorial boards. It must be acknowledged that in this archive there are gaps in the recent period. Materials from the period between 1980 and 1990 are, for the most part, classified as *IZSLĒGTS* [terminated], meaning that they do not exist any more. They exist only in the *Pastāvīgi glabājamo lietu aprakstā* [existing saved description] but not in reality. Therefore I will concentrate mostly on the 1960s and 70s.

The tactics of translation and publication

It is noteworthy that all foreign books translated into Latvian had been published in Russian in Moscow by publishing houses such as *Иностранная*

литература, Прогресс, Гослитиздат 2–5 years earlier. The delayed translation and publication in Latvian was recognized as a shortcoming by the editors of translated fiction in their annual reviews. Of course, these last were meant for institutional use and became publicly available only after the 1990's.

Beginning from 1965, the main problems encountered by the Latvian publishing houses subordinate to Moscow were:

- 1) The speed of publication of translated works was restricted by the fact that **works could be translated only if they had been previously published in Russian.** This was acknowledged in 1968 and again in 1975. (LVA 478–11–61) It took a long time to publish works and they were dated by the time they reached the public. Permission from the author was also required prior to translation which extended publication dates and thus, books were frequently not published within planned time frames. Here, original texts in the source language would be produced *after* their “translation” into Russian, a practice which prompts a new paradoxical term: the “secondary original.” (Witt 2011: 164)
- 2) A balance between Soviet and foreign writers was usually maintained but starting from the 1960s foreign works generated a greater profit and the balance marred. Although in 1977 the balance between foreign/non-foreign works was found acceptable, the **ratio between capitalist and socialist countries' literature was deemed excessive** and unacceptable. (LVA 478–20–707) Of course, the winner was capitalist literature because of better profit margins. But nevertheless the editorial staff was reprimanded by both the Moscow and Latvian authorities for such a lack of balance.
- 3) **Obtaining the original text for translation was a problem.** Individual translators would provide the original texts. (LVA 478–20–707)
- 4) **It was not possible to read and assess systematically the large amount of foreign literature** sent in by the various foreign agencies. (LVA 478–20–707) The received texts were in their native languages but there were not enough translators to read all the works. Somehow the assessment had to be done, to avoid sending back works that would later be required for translation and publication.

As Brian James Baer, editor of the book *Contexts, subtexts and pretexts: literary translation in Eastern Europe and Russia* (2011) states, “Translation under communism was largely shaped by the tension between xenophobia and internationalism. On the one hand, Soviet Russia did much to promote the translation of world literature into and out of Russian. [...] On the other hand,

the regime exercised censorship at virtually every stage of the publication process". (Baer 2011: 7–9)

Copyright and piracy

Often, however, translations of Western novelists were made of books originally published before 1973, when the USSR signed the Universal Copyright Convention (UCC). Consistently one of the world's largest producers of works in translation, the USSR before 1973 was also, from the perspective of Western publishers, the world's greatest literary pirate. In the pre-copyright years, only a small number of authors – primarily socialist or communist ones – were paid for their work, and payment frequently took the form of unconvertible ruble accounts which could be spent only in the USSR. The secret document about foreign authors' royalties is interesting as it shows the sums, in rubles of course, allotted for royalties. For example, 29,900 rubles were assigned for royalties in 1977 for Latvian publishing houses. (LVA 140–1a-18)

Soviet officials were saying they were unwilling to contribute to the power and wealth of the exploitative, capitalist publishers. More practically, they feared lost revenue through imbalance of trade, and pointed to their long-standing tradition of "free translation", honored as a way of disseminating creative work throughout the multilingual USSR.

After 1973, foreign authors enjoyed the same rights under Soviet copyright law as their native counterparts, but works created before that date remained unprotected. The free availability of earlier titles may consequently explain the scarcity of more recent Canadian, American and European works in Soviet lists.

Some important details of the translation and publishing process

The Press Commission's archives with their yearly publication plans have little to offer with regard to the study of foreign literature publication (as opposed to national literature). The section, **translated capitalist authors**, is without notes, even though, 15 to 25 books¹ were published annually.

During the Soviet period publishers would preface western translations with **introduction and/or afterword** that would "ideologically" prepare the reader for interpreting the text and explain the "correct" meaning of the work to Soviet readers. This should be considered as a part of ideological pressure. For the most part, these prefaces were simply translated Russian prefaces but it was

¹ Of translated prose works were usually between 15,000 and 60,000 copies were published.

noted by the Latvian publishers that Latvian professionals should be more involved in the work.

Sometimes, however, it turned out to be more of a risk if the local nationals were allowed to preface works. For example, the reviewer of Wolfgang Koeppen's (1906–1996) novel, *Death in Rome* (orig. *Der Tod in Rom*, 1954) in Latvian translation (1967), censures the writer of the preface, Dz. Kalniņa, for characterizing one of the protagonists as “impotent in all aspects”. (LVA 140–1a-15) By today's standards such a view would not elicit much attention but her interpretation, although couched in internationalism, was deemed daring and the author was strongly criticized.

Some of these prefaces, however, were too overdone. Herbert George Wells's (1866–1946) science fiction books *War of the Worlds* (1898) and *The Sleeper Awakes* (1899) were translated and published in Latvia in one book (1970). In the preface, a Latvian author writes that “the famous writer's imagination does not manage to reach the level of Lenin's scientific dreams”².

Foreign literature as exponent

There were two ways how foreign literature was interpreted by the Soviet regime:

- 1) as supporting the communist regime,
- 2) as exposing capitalist decline in contrast to the Soviet way toward perfection.

One of the most important aims of this program was to introduce foreign authors to Soviet people as supporting the communist regime and provide new interpretations of famous literary works. Writers' biographies and their literary works were adapted and even changed according to this new scheme. Those works which could not be properly adapted were put on a black list and forbidden. Ideological influence does not contradict the essence of literature until the moment it starts to dominate literary context or intentionally direct a reader to ideological doctrines. Unfortunately, ideological dominance was one of the main criteria that defined the translation process in the former Soviet Union. For long years there was a formula for literature and art, that is, society had to be shown as moving toward perfection, their message had to be optimistic; and the party line had to be followed closely. To provide contrast with these works, selections from foreign literature were translated to portray

² Preface written by one of the translators, Z. Inesis in: Wells, H. G. *Pasaļu karš ; Kad Gulošais mostas*, Riga, 1970.

the way in which capitalist societies were falling into decline. Books were selected for translation “not so much for their literary worth as for their utilitarian importance in terms of the historical moment” (Brown & Brown 1954: 6). A great number of foreign works were chosen for publication because they expressed revolt, social protest or sympathized with revolution.

An interesting note in the archival materials is that short commentaries were provided about several foreign authors or their works in annual plans for publishing. They reveal the typical Soviet interest in the working class, the rejection of the USA, class struggle, capitalist world’s tragedy. For example, notes of the books published in 1971/1972 (LVA 140–3–29/31/36/40) read as follows:

- The anti-fascistic German writer Günther Weisenborn (1902–1969) and his book *Memorial*; autobiography by the young Italian writer of the working class Vasco Pratolini, *La costanze della ragione*.
- Robert Penn Warren, American, writes about a capitalist country’s tragedy.
- The American Gore Vidal, *Washington DC*, machinations of the USA electoral system.
- The Irishman Sean O’Casey *I Knock at the Door*, about Queen Victoria and the struggle against England.
- The Frenchwoman Edmonde Charles-Roux, *To Forget Palermo*, about two worlds, old Europe and America (advertising, cruelty).

Adapted interpretations

As part of the ideological confrontation between the two superpowers, the Soviet regime condemned racial inequality, prejudice and oppression, and promoted sympathy and respect for the “mistreated” African-Americans. As a result, the representation of African-American characters is often significantly altered in Soviet translations of American fiction in order to attribute to the oppressed minority greater dignity and to expose the hypocrisy of American democracy. In other words, a translational tactic is employed in order to present a “positive” image of African-Americans in the eyes of the Soviet reader by removing the dialectical markers of inferiority. (Dmitrieva, www)

There is a study “Ideological Translations of Robert Burns’ Poetry by Tatiana Shchepkina-Kupernik in the Soviet Union” that reveals how Robert

Burns became a 'people's poet' in Soviet Union but his poetry was also changed and adapted according to the newly established ideological demands. Translations of Robert Burns perfectly exemplify how ideology is comprised in literary translation for several reasons:

The most important features of Soviet translations are the following:

- Absence of dialect;
- Omission of mentioning God and, in general, any religious context including the names from the Bible, as Soviet ideology did not accept any kind of religion;
- Idealization of the images of beggars and robbers;
- Softening of erotic context (Vid 2008: 343–351)

Another example shows a different transformation of a text. American writer Truman Capote's (1924–1984) unusual, reportage style 'non-fiction novel' book *In Cold Blood* (orig. 1965, in Russian 1966), was translated and published in Latvia in 1982 by *Avots Publishing*. Capote's sensational work had been translated into Russian considerably earlier and was published by the Soviet Writer's Union monthly periodical for foreign literature *Иностранная литература* (1966, 2–4). The Moscow censors allowed publication only after the translation was thoroughly "cleansed" ideologically. Automobiles are removed in many places from the text, especially if they belonged to farmers. The barometer and telescope are removed from the desk and there is no mention of the owner having a bachelor's degree from the University of Kansas. Latvian translation that was done directly from English (not Russian!) is complete and without funny marks of censorship thereby confirming the new features and freedom of the 1980s. It shows 1982 as the beginning of an era with different rules.

Informal notes and stories of failures

The Latvian archive also has **informal documents**. These are the translated fiction editor's *Productivity Assessment Protocols*, reflecting **meetings with librarians, students, university staff and ordinary readers**. In part, these protocols reveal genuine concerns and wishes of the readers. Here are some excerpts of what readers had to say in 1965 (LVA: 478–11–5)

- “Works are needed about space travel and adventure.”
- “I think we don’t need J. London. We need Mark Twain, O. Henry, Poe is much requested.”
- “Faulkner, Steinbeck, modern English authors are needed.”
- “There is demand for spy literature, science fiction literature. Young people and elderly people alike read spy stories. Conan Doyle, Hugo, Wells, Scott’s historical novels, Dumas’s *The Three Musketeers* are also requested.”
- A pioneer leader: “I would like that Latvian readers would be familiar with Goethe’s poetry, Robert Burns, Petrarch’s poetry, Heine. I am eagerly looking forward to Stendhal’s Complete Works.”

Of course, over the years these wishes were fulfilled. These requests reflect both liberalization characteristic of the period, as well as the historical tendency of the average reader’s preference for historical novels, adventure and science fiction books and detective stories.

Another interesting detail in the Latvian case is the annual editor’s review which also assesses successes and failures for each year. More of my attention is given to failures. Here are two examples retold:

- 1) The worst book of 1970 was the *Selected Contemporary French Poetry* (Mūsdienu franču dzejas izlase “Es tevi turpinu”). The editors erred in allowing Maija Silmale write the **objective introduction, which disoriented the readers**. For this mistake the editorial board received a reprimand from the Press Commission. This instance reminds the editorial board that the book content must be carefully scrutinized and that working with translated texts, **problematic questions should be answered by referring to the Russian edition**. (LVA: 478–11–61)
- 2) This example and quote from document is not directly connected with capitalist countries but it particularly refers to colleagues in Estonia: “In 1969 the biggest mistake by the editorial board was in connection with Mats Traat’s (1936) poetry compilation *Līdzsvars* (Equilibrium). The book’s editor Laimonis Kamara (1934–1983) made the mistake of including poems which had never been published before in books or even magazines. A compilation of poetry of this type cannot be published and therefore the book had to be re-edited, resulting in losses

to the publisher. Re-editing resulted in a delayed publication and the publisher had to pay the author extra fees causing unforeseen losses." (LVA: 478–11–61)

I will have a closer look at the first example, *Selected Contemporary French Poetry*, edited by Maija Silmale. It shows a conflict between rules "from above" and initiative "from below". Genuine translation from existing source texts in principle provided pragmatic possibilities similar to those discussed here. In conclusion, I will examine a case of culture planning "from below," displaying how a translator, Boris Pasternak, was able to pursue his own ideological and artistic goals by stretching the space in between. (Witt 2011: 165) Maija Silmale was officially harassed since 1970. She was arrested at the beginning of 1971, as a dissident. After protests by French and Swedish newspapers, she was released. *Selected Contemporary French Poetry* included over 100 poems by 22 French poets and gave a good overview of much of French modern poetry. Among those included were Rimbaud, Valéry, and Apollinaire up to the modern avant-garde poets Emmanuel, Pichette, Bosquet and Bonnefoy. About one third of the works were translated by Maija Silmale. Her sensitively written preface and biographical notes provide a good insight into French poetry in general. Of course the selected works did not include such poets as Mallarmé or Claudel. While Soviet-era censorship enhanced the status of literature, in general, and of translated literature, in particular, the fact that translated literature was, as a general rule, less closely monitored than original writing, made it into a vehicle for expressing alternative, if not openly oppositional, views. On the whole, there was not very much western poetry translated during the Soviet period (censors were wary of "western influences" and these were more difficult to uncover in poetry.)

Belated Kafka, Joyce and others

Braver intellectuals, sometimes feigning naivety, already in 1968 were asking why the master works by Proust, Kafka, Joyce, Claudel and others were not available. The Latvian writer J. Laganovskis, after being allowed to travel to Poland for the first time, childishly delights in works not translated into Latvian, such as Friedrich Dürrenmatt's (1921–1990) comedy *It is Written* (1947). Revealing are E. Lukjanskis' thoughts in *Jāuzraksta stāsts*³ [To Write a

³ Published in Soviet Latvian cultural periodical *Literatūra un Māksla* 3.2. 1968.

Story]: “Perhaps the story could be based on interior monologue? A stream of consciousness that would fix in detail every vibration of the soul? This way of presenting material is very close to me, but I will be reproached for being influenced by Joyce. Then I have to laugh, but in truth it is depressing. I would very much like to read this Joyce, I just don’t know where I could get even one of his books. The Hell with it! No searching for forms! Our own tried-and-true realism, a simple plot, a thinly veiled idea and the ever popular “Happy End!”.” (Ekmanis, 1969: 3–19)

It has to be assumed that neither Lukjanskis nor Laganovskis, who apparently became familiar with *Ulysses* in the Polish translation by Polish detective writer Joe Alex (real name Maciej Slomczynski, 1920–1998), knew of the masterful Latvian translation of *Ulysses* by Dzintars Sodums (1922–2008), done in exile, published in 1960 (*Ziemeļblāzmas Publishing*, Sweden).

A similar example, that by now has become a popular myth, is the following story: after completing his second novel, Alberts Bels read the above mentioned Latvian translation of *Ulysses* and subsequently fell into depression for several weeks. Bels had previously not read Joyce and had independently developed a stream of consciousness style similar to Joyce’s but which would now be criticized as an imitation. This anecdotal situation illustrates the absurd barriers which hindered the development of Latvian literature. Sodums’s translation was published in 1960 but this masterwork, as well as others printed in the West, was legally available in Latvia only to the few select “ideologically correct”, or illegally circulated in the underground in limited copies which were difficult to obtain.

It seems that there is a wide and fruitful field for literary scholars, social sciences and culture and translation studies to work continue working on problems of translation and power as well as translation and ideology, and look through the history of translation in the Soviet republics as colonized parts of the USSR. Finally, the historical fact of communism in the twentieth century did much to construct a common field of translation, producing the interrelated phenomena of extensive government-sponsored translation and strict censorship of translation. Literary translation in the Soviet Union may well be the largest more or less coherent project of translation the world has seen to date – largest in terms of geographical range, number of languages involved and the time-span; coherent in the sense of ideological framework (allowing for fluctuations over time) and centralized planning. (Witt 2011: 149) As the research of Latvian history of translation shows there are questions

about state censorship, editorial departments, literary criticism etc., to analyze the practices of these institutions which had impact on the final product.

Abbreviation

LVA=Latvijas Valsts arhīvs (The State Archives of Latvia)

Explanation of the system of numbering: 1- the number of archives stock, 2 – the number of archival entry, 3 – the number of the file

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