

WHAT IS TRANSLATION FOR?

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In translation circles, a great deal of time and energy is spent in discussion of the rules and styles and theories of translation.

These discussions are fun and what is more they have a terrific literary pedigree. But they assume that another discussion has already been undertaken, and undertaken knowledgably, which I think in most cases it has not. What I would like to hear, as a complement to but also as a predecessor to "theories of translation," is theories about or at least

a discussion of what ought to be translated. Why this and not that, why now and not later? Most of all: What will it bring to the host country or literature that it does not yet have?

For the most part, advocates for books in translation appeal to intranational commercial and critical success and then to transnational aesthetic categories. "The book was greeted with great acclaim and even commercial success in Country X," says the advocate. "It won the X Award for Literary Greatness in 2012."

"Furthermore," the advocate will continue, "I like the book very much."

There is nothing wrong with this reasoning, and certainly a translator must admire and, ideally, love a book in order to translate it. But to me it leaves out some of the most important considerations.

What is the place of the writer in the literary field of the home country? What contribution can this writer make to the literary field of the target or host country? It's important to understand that the answers to these questions will often be different: a writer can be a marginal figure in his home country and become a vital figure in another country. More often, of course, the reverse is true.

Let's take Russian to American literary translation as an example. In Russia there is a great Pynchon imitator named Viktor Pelevin. He is one of the more interesting novelists of the post-Soviet era; his *Generation P* is the most important novel of the Russian 1990s. He is the only Russian novelist whose new novels I always read. And yet *Generation P*, about a cynical advertising executive in the go-go Russian 90s who comes into contact with an old Babylonian deity, who then helps him write his ad copy even as he undermines his belief in what he's doing, made hardly any impact in the US. And why should it have? We have thousands of our own Pynchon imitators here, from the great David Foster Wallace to MFA students you will never hear about. An American reader would truly be crazy to read *Generation P* instead of *Infinite Jest*.

Another Russian writer who has had and will continue to have zero impact in the US is Boris Akunin. Akunin is an erudite professor of literature who in middle age started to write detective novels about a late 19th century aristocratic crime solver named Fandorin. These are wonderful pastiches of Sherlock Holmes. For Russian readers of the post-Soviet era, they have recreated a kind of faith in themselves, in their country to produce entertaining literature, and in fact in their countrymen, at a time of total chaos and demoralization, to solve crimes. To think! Akunin is not only a bestseller in Russia, he is a beloved figure, and rightly so, and in the opposition protests in 2011 he emerged as a leading and reasonable opponent to Vladimir Putin.

But the American reader has no need for him. An American reader did not doubt, or believe in, or care, about whether a Russian could solve a crime. Akunin was published in the US, and no one cared.

What are some successful translation projects that can be pointed to? One is Roberto Bolano. Bolano was well-known in Latin America before his death, but he was not, as far as I know, a literary superstar along the lines of Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Mario Vargas Llosa. No one was going to be nominating him for the Nobel Prize. And yet Bolano has been a tremendous success story in the United States in the 2000s. Part of the reason for his success is the same reason that he was popular among Latin American writers of his generation and younger: his prose and plots deliberately deflated and drained of the rhetorical excesses of his predecessors. He hardly ever uses figurative language and there are no magic angels in his work. The American reader can sense that this is a different kind of Latin American writer. But this is a minor matter. What really makes Bolano exciting is that he returns some of the romance of literature, of travel, of the road, to the very country that had given it to the rest of the world in the form of the Beat writers of the 1950s. This romance had become too freighted with the literary and political excesses of the Beats for an American writer to make much more than ironic use of it. But it passed clear and pure and distant (via translation) to a young Bolano in Santiago and Mexico City.

A similar story can be told about a Russian writer I recently translated, Kirill Medvedev. Born in 1975, Medvedev translated Bukowski into Russian; afterward he began writing his own Bukowski-inflected free verse, as well as, eventually, political and literary essays. Bukowski, like the Beats, is an inheritance that most American writers would be fearful of claiming--whereas a Russian writer need not be so constrained. Yet he is filtering Bukowski through a particular lens--that of an urban, education Muscovite whose family has been impoverished and endangered by the 1990s free market "reforms." So this is one contribution Medvedev makes to American culture: he brings Bukowski back in. But a second and to me more significant contribution is political. Medvedev concluded early in his poetic career that he would try to be totally, unwaveringly consistent, and align his poetic practice with his principles, and this led him at a certain point to break with the Russian literary scene and to stop publishing his work through ordinary channels. In Russia, this gesture was considered quixotic; in the US, where writers spend so much time (but also, I'd argue, not nearly enough time) worrying about the fate of reading, publishing, etc., it's been understood as exactly what it was: a pure political gesture in a time of increasing compromise. No American writer has done such a thing. To bring this into English--the gesture, its context, its explanation--was for me a small but real contribution to American letters.

Since this panel is sponsored by a French organization, I'd use as my final example Michel Houellebecq. I don't know Houellebecq's status in France. In the US, his work has had a tremendous effect. No one has been as serious, and as funny, about contemporary sexual relations as Houellebecq. Writers associated with sexual themes in the US tend to subordinate them to some other story--sex is made to stand in for some other form of either liberation or obsession. Houellebecq has been the only writer to take sex on its own and consider it historically as the final domain (as he called it) of capitalist expansion into private life. For numerous reasons, no American writer was capable of doing this. Houellebecq however has shown the way.

There is no intrinsic value to a translated text. To the contrary: a text from a rich, flexible Russian (to take my translated language) into a standard, publishable English loses probably 30 percent of its worth. The only reason to inflict this on a reader is that the original contains something that simply does not exist in English. As translators we should begin to learn to talk about what that something may be.