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## TRANSLATING THE UNTRANSLATABLE – POETRY OF THE 21TH CENTURY: A CREATIVE VERSION OF A TRANSLATION OR A NEWLY WRITTEN ORIGINAL?

**Abstract:** In the U.S., particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, the famous censorship trials took place in regards to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, William Burroughs's work was tried and then the poetry of Michael McClure. Many valuable works of literature were not translated in the U.S. for political reasons during McCarthy's era, however, it is worth mentioning that many books were not translated due to the ignorance or basic disinterest on the side of the publishers and their editors. This second reason I also found to be more than present in my own home country, Serbia; where many valuable literary works fail to get translated either due to a certain laxity or even purely commercial interests on the side of the publishers. The art of translating is a Promethean adventure, and whether they snatch fire away from the gods or not, the translators always risk being nailed to the wall for their difficult work. Renowned American poet and translator, Serge Gavronsky, claims that the act of translation is a process which teaches us how to read.

**Keywords:** use and abuse, translation, censorship, version, original, target language

A couple of years ago I was contemplating the possibilities of the particular problem which I had entitled at that time "Use and Abuse of Translations": there were several aspects to my line of thinking but I chose to develop and gather my reflections on particular topic (Use and Abuse of the translated works of art) under two specific themes. The first theme would embody the criteria of choice (eg. *how do we choose to translate specific*

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*literary works, under what special and temporal circumstances*) and the second one would deal with the possible censorship in translations and the censorship of the literary works in general. I lived in the United States for more than fifteen years where censorship took different, if not more subtle forms of expression than it took in so called Central Europe or Eastern Europe. In the U.S., particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, the famous censorship trials took place in regards to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, William Burroughs's work was tried and then the poetry of Michael McClure. Many valuable works of literature were not translated in the U.S. for political reasons during McCarthy's era, however, it's worth mentioning that many books were not translated due to the ignorance or basic disinterest on the side of the publishers and their editors. This second reason I found existent in my own home country, Serbia where many valuable literary works failed to get translated due to a certain laxity or even commercial interest on the side of the publishers.

Here I'm not speaking of an era where I was consulting my father's, often valid opinions of the painful era of our publishing, the years of OZNA's activities or those of the *Inform bureau*. I am not qualified to talk about that era because I had no access to the publishers' archives of that time, however, I do clearly remember the 1970s and particularly the 1980s in Belgrade where I started considering the translations of some major works of literature that belonged to the Anglophone studies. Unfortunately, putting the money factor aside (the payment of the copy-rights have always been a considerable factor to be taken into account with all publishers) I was forced to conclude that many state and private publishers did not even bother to open their eyes to the possibilities and negotiations with the foreign agencies concerning authors' rights- thus closing their doors forever to many valuable translations and translators who were making a real effort to bridge the worlds.

I assume that quite a few of my colleagues, some of them publishers themselves, would be eager to emphasize the role of money or the lack of it in their positive endeavors to furnish good literary translations. This is only partially true because I witnessed them paying the rights for the dubious translations of commercial authors such as Jacqueline Susan or Sheldon Rocklin thus catering to the lowest taste of their future readers. These publishers cringed systematically from my modest proposals to translate real works of literary art into Serbian, with the exception of Milan Komnienic

at Prosveta, who trusted my taste and signed with me a contract to translate Charles Bukowski, quite an unknown avant-garde author in the 1980s.

Somehow I slipped away from the original topic “Use and Abuse of translation” as I focused on the socio-political and economic moments in publishing houses of Serbia at that time. Perhaps I should have started discussing yet another anomaly, aesthetic in its nature and related to literary translations, and that one comes to my mind more often than other translating problems. This particular problem often occurs in translation and concerns the translators who once acquired a voice of the author they translated successfully-- they often pursue translating literary works quite different from the work of their cherished author, abusing the voice and the literary style of their “number one”. I remember a particular translator of Chekov who mastered the author’s voice to the extent that every translation of his into English sounded like Chekov. An American poet, Andrew Schelling, complained that by the time he finished translating the fifteenth century poet, Mirabai, his own verse became completely like her own and he couldn’t get rid of her influence for years! And about the art of translation he himself declared “I never underplay the risk of the translator’s work. It’s like crossing a heavily guarded border to bring back the contraband”.

Another American, Clayton Eshleman asserts that the art of translating is a Promethean adventure for a poet, and whether they snatch fire away from the gods or not, the translators always risk being nailed to the wall for their difficult work. American translator, Serge Gavronsky claims that the act of translation is a process which teaches us how to read. He is strictly against the abuse of translations as he claims that there is always a possibility in a translator to write his own work in which he could enjoy a possible dialogue with himself.

This may be true, as the translator has always a certain dialogue with himself while translating the autonomous authors, but on the other hand, Gavronsky also says that a translation should not be a dialogue between the author and his translator! He says that a translator should always copy down strictly the art of an author and the art of the original.

Many years ago, when I studied literature at the American university in Washington, D.C., I was asked, as a part of our homework exercise, to translate a poem of Anna Akhmatova from Russian into English. I was surprised to see that there were many different translations of that poem, very few of them accurate and even fewer of them beautiful- they almost made no poetic sense in English.

It was on that occasion that I started questioning translations, I mean the very possibility of translating any poem into a foreign language; many translators arrive at the same point in their work, but even at that time I was convinced that it was worth and noble effort. While translating Akhmatova into English what surprised me though was a certain similarity between Russian and Serbo-Croatian idioms, and not only in terms of the linguistic roots common to both languages but in terms of their sensibilities, *sensibility* being a key word in poetry. True, one can translate a linguistic structure of one language into another, however, mastery is to translate the entire sensibility of a certain poet and the historic mentality of his nation into foreign language different from one's own. This is how I translated Akhmatova's poem *Love*, written in a sonnet form:

It hisses like a snake, from time to time  
And swirls around a heart, ties itself into a knot.  
It cries like a dove, from time from time  
Never removes itself from a white window-pane.  
    It sparks through glittery icicles, from time to time  
It resembles drowsy flowers, from time to time  
What it does for sure is that  
It leads to peace and happiness.  
    It knows how to sob- in melancholy  
Followed by a violin player  
One could easily detect its terrible presence  
In some anonymous smile.

Anna Akhmatova is a literary pseudonym for Ana Andreyevna Gorenko, a literary lady giant who lived in Russia (1889–1966) who endowed with her creativity one of the most interesting literary periods in history, the period known as the Russian Futurism. She started writing lyrical poetry in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and became one of the founders of the movement entitled Acmeism in literature- she was like Emily Dickenson of Russia. She wrote very intimate, lyrical, passionate poetry as she fought for the clarity of language and style. She wrote so called discreet poetry- her emotions were only hinted at and in no way explicit, that is, just the very last line in a poem would contain a twist indicating the true meaning of the verse and what the poem was all about. Akhmatova did something in Russian poetry that wasn't done before her: to begin with- before the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the revolution in Russia, the huge country was a feudal formation with a strictly patriarchal society in which it was unthinkable for women to write

poetry. I mean if they did, they did not publish it, like in Japan- those courtly lady poets could only write in their bedrooms, boudoirs but not in public..

Anyways, Akhmatova had to break ice, and though she wrote in the tradition of Pushkin, she was the first woman poet to acquire a very specific voice. She was a great translator too, but an outcast of a sort, just like Emily Dickenson- not so much a willing self-willed outcast but the one who was made that way due to the Russian society's attitude toward women poets of that era. This particular patriarchal attitude toward women I will discuss a bit later when it comes to my commentary regarding the times of the creativity of the Yugoslav women-poets of my generation. These poets are great, but very often outcasts in a society which is still very patriarchal, male-dominated.

However, speaking of the Russian women poets, and here also comes in Marina Tsvetayeva, Zinaida Gippius and Bella Achmadulina, I have to say that they are some of the greatest poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21 centuries and perhaps, there is a very good reason for it. Women such as Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetayeva who formed movements in literature and left a tremendous impact on poetry in general, were in a great company. They were exposed to the most sophisticated theories of language and literature such as Michael Bachtin's, Roman Jakobson's or Victor Schlovsky's – they were in the company of the fellow-writers who were the originators of many linguistic and literary theories in Russia of that time. Marina Tsvetayeva (1892–1941) expressed some of these theories in her verse and also expressed some of that spirit of the time by writing critical essays on poetry and literature. She was also a translator and lived in many different countries; finally she committed suicide in her own country as the political oppression was so horrible in the Soviet Union during the reign of Stalin. However, whatever Tsvetayeva wrote was to express her personal and revolutionary revolt; she suffered a lot in her life but her poetry was neither pathetic nor sentimental; she was oppressed like Sylvia Plath or perhaps a revolutionary like the American poet Diane de Prima, so her verse is very upfront and rebellious.

Anyways, to get back to Serbian contemporary poetry and the Serbian women poets in particular! The poets I had translated into English such as Radmila Lazic, Ljiljana Djurdjic or Marija Knezevic, they were all heavily influenced by Anna Akhmatova and/or Marina Tsvetayeva. The reasons for this particular influence exercised on our poets are different- among these reasons I could mention the general availability or non-availability of the

Russian translations and their poetry books in former Yugoslavia, as well as the general state of reception of these books in it and in Europe in general, let us say, after the Second World War. We should bear in mind here that the federal republic of former Yugoslavia consisted of those respective republics and regions (now they are independent entities) which have been very traditional and extremely patriarchal with the exception perhaps of Slovenia. Most of the remaining regions which abandoned the federation by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were ruled by the Ottoman or Austro-Hungarian empires for many centuries in a socio-political atmosphere where women had no basic rights such as the right to vote, move freely outside their household, etc. Paradoxically, it was only in the Ottoman harem where they were taken as children that they were allowed to write poetry, however at the time when the country of Yugoslavia was first founded (1916–1918) the first foreign languages and literatures to be translated from included French, German and of course, Russian. This deliberate choice of languages belonging to either French or German that is, Russian literary traditions shifted a bit in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the geo-political interest in the world moved towards the dominancy of English language and the Anglophone expressions as such. Most of the women poets that I have been translating into English write in Serbian or Serbo-Croatian (to borrow the older name for the languages of the same root) and the eldest poet in this group was Desanka Maksimovic (1898–1993). She wrote highly lyrical, descriptive poetry, almost in a form of a prayer. She was highly indigenous, has had a school of poetry on her own, but she also read great Russian poets and theorists such as Alexander Blok, Pushkin and Pasternak, but also claimed Akhmatova and Tsvetayeva among her friends and profound influences. When the critics asked Frank O'Hara, a renowned American poet, who were the poets that influenced him the most he answered "Well, my friends, who else?"

The same was the case of Desanka Maksimovic's. All younger women poets born after the Second World War in Yugoslavia were influenced by Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetayeva and of course, Desanka Maksimovic. Their verse is sharp and cynical, skeptical about the world and its future and at the same time it is often endearing, precise and direct. The language of their poetry is rather vernacular than traditional; it is original in moods and with its sharp cuts and wild jumps it plays a shock, a surprise and a subterfuge on the reader. It is always a great challenge and a considerable effort on the side of a translator to render justice and accuracy to the translation of such poetry.

A few years ago, I was in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, I was translating Kathy Acker's novel "Don Quixote" and in the middle of the night I started screaming as I couldn't go on! I said "I can't do it, I couldn't do it"! it seemed completely impossible to me to translate the paragraph which I attempted to translate! Obviously I was facing a very difficult author and a difficult text to translate; as you may be familiar with Kathy Acker's texts, she often changes genders and personas in her books, she also mixes up literary genres, so the possibilities of translating her work are very limited or small. She really writes a long poem which reads like fiction or prose, and a translator faces a difficulty with her work, the same type of difficulty that one faces with Joyce, Djuna Barnes, or some other so called "fiction writers" who really write poetry but it sounds like fiction: I think, speaking of women writers- Gertrude is the best example of this kind of writing...

I started doing literary translations- from English to my mother tongue, Serbo-Croatian, and vice-versa, also translations from Spanish and Italian which I will not discuss today- fifteen years ago while I was studying Anglo-American literature at the university of Belgrade, and things at first seemed easy, so easy to me which was perhaps due to the fact that I did not choose my translations, I mean the originals, they were chosen by my teachers who kindly suggested all the translatable stuff to me... This question of choice of the text, the right choice is very important in translations but at that time I was not aware of it, and of that element which is called the *translatability* of a literary work. So I started translating P-O-E-T-R-Y, can you imagine?! Poetry is the queen or the king of all literary forms and genres. I was translating Pound, Ginsberg, Antonio Cisneros and Octavio Paz- I was very proud of myself as I did not question my translations. Today when I look back at those translations I turn red and try to forget about them, because the first thing that one learns about translations is that the word choice is not so important- as it also is, which goes without saying. This sentence sounds contradictory- well it is, and it is not- as the thing more important than the word-choice is the choice of the cultural context and references within languages, the one we translate from and the language of "arrival". We are aware that while translating a work of art, of literature, we are not only translating words, we are translating entire cultures into a different culture and here the "legibility" of the culture that we translate into our own, is extremely important.

A bad translation can destroy an original work of literature, like in the case of Michael Hamburger's translation of Rilke: we see that the words are

there, Rilke's poems are there, but in fact they do not render justice or beauty of the original. In his English translation the metaphysical meaning is gone, the music of Rilke's German is gone, so I was reading these two translated books, one in Serbian and the same original work translated into English and I felt lucky I had the Serbian translation made by Branimir Živojinović. I would have never read nor liked Reiner Maria Rilke had I only read him in English! However, a very interesting question or rather questions arise here- as to how much of poetry is really translatable into a foreign language. Instead of blaming dear Michael Hamburger for an inadequate translation, the question of the amount of translatability of a certain literary work is the first thing that a translator has himself to ask. We should forgive our excellent colleagues for certain omissions in their work, after all we have to have sympathy for their work as they take the most ungrateful job upon their shoulders, the one of translating the most difficult literary genre such as poetry.

So, the first question to ask was whether the original was translatable or not, and what criteria were the translators to use in order to get to the worthwhile translation of the original work of art. As I've already mentioned, word-per-word choice could not be used as a criterion, so in my particular case I would always opt for so called 'colloquial mind' in my translations of not only poetry, but fiction as well (here I have in mind my translations of Charles Bukowski, Kathy Acker, Lynne Tillman, Walter Abish and many other renowned authors writing in English.) Each of these translations had their different histories and different applications of the translating methods! Even in the case of Stephen King's "Carey", a novel which I had to translate for money and did not sign the translation because I did not want my name to appear in the book, even there I had to think up a translating method. Otherwise, as I have always liked challenge and I have always chosen to translate the challenging authors, meaning the books extremely difficult to translate either as to their linguistic intricacy, their style or composition. I've followed that old somewhat banal rule saying that "translations are like women- quite boring when faithful and when unfaithful, as they digress from the original- they appear beautiful".

While translating the prose of Charles Bukowski, I had to apply Serbian street language and an offensive jargon used in prison, so when my translation of the author's "Erections, Ejaculations and stories of an ordinary Madness" finally came out of print, immediately it was ready to receive a translating award; however, my conservative colleagues, translators from English and



the so called “Shakespeareans” took an umbrage with me. Not only that they did not like my translation but they also accused me of being unfaithful to Charles Bukowski. Indeed, and why so? Well, whenever the author exclaimed something like “Hey babe” or “Doll”, I would use in translation the Serbian street jargon and literally say “hey, pussy” or “hey little fish”, the terms we use for “babe” in Serbian. However, my translating misadventures encountered a certain understanding on the side of the Prosveta publishers who prompted me later to publish the first original dictionary of English Slang and jargon ever edited in Serbia. Now, it becomes clear why some literal or word-per-word translations sound boring – they do not follow the natural music and sound in a given language, and which is the worst outcome in this enterprise – instead of bringing us closer to the original, such translations detach us both from the author and the potential genius of his original.

However, a linguist may ask: is it really possible to translate a work of art as close to the original that we stop worrying about the copy and its value vs. the original? Could we keep the actual word choice while translating close to the words of the original? And how do we bridge the semantic gaps so that we stay with and in the original while remaining interesting, lively and accurate in our translation?

I’ve always thought and after some 45 years of translating experience that accuracy IS and WILL remain the key-word in all translation. However, we talk the real Art of Translation when we combine accuracy with creativity and imagination in a language that we translate the original into. These extraordinary fruits of translations are rare though but possible to encounter or to paraphrase George Steiner, great theorist and a translating genius who pertinently remarked that a possibility of faithful and brilliant translation exists but is difficult to achieve (“Tower of Babel”). I trusted Steiner and during my first year of studying in the U.S. I started a project of translating American poetry into Serbian, above all those contemporary poets who performed at the New York’s *St. Mark’s Poetry Project*. The anthology simply entitled NEW VOICES was published by the KOV press in Serbia in 1997, and though it gained quite a positive reception in the local press, I have to admit that the translations which I made had left quite a bitter taste in my mouth. I myself didn’t quite like all of the book I edited and translated, and yes, I still do think that Clark Coolidge and Armand Schwerner *sound* better in English than in my translations as the key-word here is sound; what I had gained in vocabulary or though while connecting their line-breaks, I lost in *sound*, that intricate music of their language which is English. The

music of a language is a very pertinent but often untranslatable element in poetry, even more difficult to fathom than all cultural references pertaining to one nation, the references which also tend to remain hardly translatable. In Armand Schwerner's "Tablets" one often hears the author's imaginary persona deciphering the Sumerian alphabet and at the same time exclaiming "Untranslatable"! The exclamation comes from the author who personally had a vast experience with translations and being himself a translator from French into English.

As I have already mentioned here, there are many impossibilities which arise in the process of translating literary works and particularly the genre we call poetry, but there are also many layers and levels of the said impossibilities- those which arise on a linguistic, stylistic or the syntactic scales of our work in progress:

- if we get the right meaning of someone's work, the music of the original language often slips away in translation and is gone, or
- if we get the music right and manage transferring the sound level into the *language of arrival* successfully then we often get detached from the original territory of the original! As the matter of fact, my "American Poetry Project" was not even as bad as my "Yugoslav Poetry Project" which I started doing with Charles Simic, born and raised in Yugoslavia some good two decades before me.

I started translating Yugoslav poets into English with an awareness of different obstacles which were about to get multiplied as many poets whom I chose to translate wrote in a Cyrillic alphabet and the alphabet itself had a definitive meaning, "a room of its own" in translations. The very shape of Cyrillic letters, be it in Russian language or in Serbian or in Greek also endows writing done in these languages with a particular flavor- it brings the writing to an ancient, iconic style, as Ouspensky would put it, the style which is untranslatable. I almost gave up on the idea of translating these poems, as I have given up on the idea of translating my own poetry into English. I told Joseph Brodsky once that I wrote poetry in English to which he said "Oh, really?", meaning that it sounded a little bit phony, but then he himself started writing in English as well. However, I dared not translating Serbian poetry into English for a long time due to numerous semantic differences between these two languages and it was really Charles Simic who encouraged me to translate poetry from my mother tongue into English. I believe the turning point arrived when I got encouraged by my own work and stopped feeling

inadequate and unhappy with it. It coincided with my translation of Vasko Popa's enigmatic poem entitled "Wolf's Land".

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## PREVOĐENJE NEPREVODIVOG – POEZIJA 21. VEKA: KREATIVNA VERZIJA ILI NOVONAPISANO DELO?

**Rezime:** U Americi, posebno tokom pedesetih i šezdesetih godina, pojedina dela su stavljana na sud cenzure, *Uliks* Džejmisa Džojlsa, kao i dela Vilijama Barouza i poezija Majkla Meklura. S jedne strane, veliki broj vrednih književnih dela ostao je bez prevoda u Makartijevoj Americi iz političkih razloga, dok sa druge strane mnoge knjige nisu prevedene zbog neznanja ili nezainteresovanosti izdavača i njihovih urednika. Čini se da je u Srbiji problem prevashodno bio ove druge prirode, pošto mnoga značajna književna dela nisu prevedena upravo zbog nemara ili komercijalnih interesa izdavača. Umetnost prevodenja je prometejski podvig, tako da prevodioci, bilo da otimaju vatru od bogova ili ne, uvek rizikuju da budu stavljeni na stub srama zbog svog teškog posla. Poznati američki pesnik i prevodilac Serž Gavronski smatra da je prevodenje proces koji nas uči kako da čitamo.

**Ključne reči:** Upotreba i zloupotreba, prevod, cenzura, verzija, original, jezik prevoda.