

Language and cultural translation: Robert Burns in Russian

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The extraordinary popularity of Robert Burns in Russia and in the former Soviet Union is surprising, as Russia and Scotland share neither a cultural nor a historical background. Nevertheless, there is hardly any other foreign poet who is as admired and beloved in Russia as Robert Burns. Russian readers have enjoyed his poems and songs in translations since the nineteenth century when the first translations were made. Collections of Burns's poetry still sell millions of copies and his songs can be heard on TV and in famous Russian films.

Burns could have never achieved such popularity in a foreign cultural milieu without successful translations. Starting in the nineteenth century, when the first translations introduced Robert Burns to Russian readers, Russian and Soviet translators continued translating Burns throughout the twentieth century. Burns's apparently insignificant place in Russian literary consciousness in the nineteenth century contrasts strongly with his reception in the Soviet Union, which reached its climax on the celebration of the 200th anniversary of Burns's birth in 1959.

This paper analyzes translations of Burns made in the Soviet Union, where the whole translation process differed greatly from that in democratic societies. It was governed by an institution of censorship and strict centralization. Since the establishment of the communist regime in the Soviet Union, the authorities had regulated all forms of literary expression, including literary translations. Powerful control over information and reading restricted the public's access to world culture. An ideology enforced by the Soviet state as the official standard for art and literature was called "socialist realism"¹, which imposed a system of strict rules about appropriateness and adaptation to the regime's demands. According to the standards of propaganda, literary works were supposed to intentionally direct a reader to ideological doctrines. As an important part of ideological education, literature had to show the new reality of a socialist world, represent the leading role of the working class, and promote social progress. To achieve complete control over literary production and publishing, all of the established literary trends and associations as well as existing writers' groups were

¹ A new literary program, invented in 1934, with the purpose of defining each aspect of literary works written in the Soviet Union, including themes, style, prefaces etc. The term "social realism" was also used later to define monumental art in the Soviet Union.

abolished. In 1932, a centralized writers' organization under the firm control of the party and state, the Union of Soviet Writers, was established.

One of the ideologically-influenced aims of literature in the Soviet Union was to introduce to Soviet people foreign authors who were supporters of the communist regime. Therefore, foreign narratives were often changed and adapted in Soviet translations. Those works which could not be properly rewritten were simply not translated, but Robert Burns was lucky. Soviet critics had no doubts about him; he was called "a progressive poet of the revolution" and the process of his canonization in the Soviet Union started. His poetry was pronounced acceptable and useful for a new communist ideology. Only ideologically corrected translations were missing.

This task was assigned to Samuil Marshak (1887-1964), whose name became inseparable from the name of Burns. Marshak translated altogether two hundred and fifteen poems by Burns, the most extensive collection of Burns translations made in the Russian language until the present time. Marshak was undoubtedly one of the most brilliant Soviet translators and it is thanks to him that Burns achieved such extraordinary cultural dominance, but Marshak's interpretation of Burns's poetry suffered from severe ideologically influenced transformations, including intentional deletions and omissions. Above all, Marshak's translations expose the problem of social class distinctions, criticize monarchy and religion, intensify the sentiments of freedom and citizenship, and promote democratic issues and sympathy towards common people.² In Marshak's translations, analysis of ideological dimensions at a micro-stylistic level shows that they were influenced both by lexical choices (deliberate selection or avoidance of certain words) and by grammatical choices (substituting defining generic nouns for less specific pronouns, avoidance of agency by using passive structures, etc.).

Translations of culture-bound elements are essential for transferring not merely the message but also the culture of the original. According to Hagfors, the use of culture-bound elements, such as proper names, food items, measures of length and currency, and historical figures, is "one way of demonstrating not only in which culture the story is set but also creating an atmosphere that reflects the values prevalent in that culture and period of time" (2003: 188). Hagfors also stresses that translating a book is a special challenge because the translator and the publisher have to decide whether "they want to imply these same values for

² In the nineteenth century, most of Burns's love and nature lyrics were translated but his satires, democratic lyrics which contained appeals to the sentiments of freedom and citizenship, patriotic songs, and ironic epigrams remained unknown to Russian readers.

the target text readers, or whether they want to make adaptations to the text in order to fit it better into the target culture” because their decision “will define the text’s ‘destiny’ in the target culture” (2003: 118).

In the Soviet Union, the domesticated translation method prevailed. A domesticated translation ideal had been resorted to as a means of erasing every shred of foreignness and thus protecting and developing the national language and identity as well as representing a certain picture of foreign culture which was important for ideological purposes. The decision in favour of domesticated translations had a number of reasons dependant on the special status of foreign literature in the Soviet Union. First, one of the prevailing ideological purposes of literature in the Soviet Union was to popularize foreign literature and to make it comprehensible by the lowest levels of society. Such engagement was supposed to raise the cultural level of the masses, as, according to a patriotic slogan of the post-Stalin era, the Soviet people were “the most given to reading in the entire world”. Translated foreign literature was viewed as an essential and enduring part of literary education and therefore had to be properly translated. Consideration of the low background knowledge of “mass” readers who were hardly expected to recognize linguistic and cultural differences in translation, as well as the obligatory enlightening pathos of literary works, became the ultimate problems faced by Soviet translators. Literary work in the Soviet Union became a “matter of mass consumption”. For that reason literary translations made in the Soviet Union were often equipped with numerous comments, prefaces, footnotes, and explanations.

As Marshak closely followed official ideological guidelines, his translations often include intratextual glosses³ (explanations given inside the text) used to clarify specifically Scottish cultural items or historical persons to readers who were unfamiliar with Scottish culture. Thus, the title of the poem “To a Haggis” was translated “Ода Шотландскому пудингу Хаггис” (*Ode to the Scottish pudding Haggis*). In the poem “The Answer” Marshak invented an explanation in the line “T’wad please me to the Nine”, translating “Nine” as “музы” (*Muses*). To the title of the poem “Elegy on Peg Nicholson” was also added an explanation “Элегия на смерть Пег Николсон, лошади священника (*Elegy on the death of Peg Nicholson, the priest’s horse*). The same thing happens in the epigram “On Fergusson”, which was translated “К портрету Роберта Фергуссона, шотландского поэта” (*To the portrait of Robert Fergusson, a Scottish poet*).

³ Extratextual glosses (explanations given outside the text) were an obligatory part of each literary edition published in the Soviet Union.

In cases when Scottish place names and Scottish traditions and cultural objects could not be properly explained, they were simply deleted. For instance: “Scotch mile” in the poem “The Auld Farmer’s New-Year Morning Salutation to his Auld Mare, Maggie”; “brooses” (a traditional ride from the church to the house of the groom, typical of Scottish wedding ceremonies) from the same poem; “erlay”⁴ (a neckerchief, a traditional part of Scottish dress) and “a bonnet” in the poem “The Ploughman”; “black cockades” (worn by royal soldiers) in the poem “The Battle of Sherra-moor”; “Kilbaigie” (whiskey) in “Jolly Beggars” and “hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys and reels” in “Tam O’ Shanter” which were translated as “шотландские пляски” (*Scottish dances*). The title of the poem “My Heart’s in the Highlands” was translated “В горах мое сердце” (My Heart is in the Mountains), while the title “Answer to the Guidwife of Wauchope House” was shortened, “Ответ на письмо” (Answer to the Letter) (Kaloh Vid 2011: 148)

One of the most prominent strategies used by Marshak was *the strategy of deletion* which resulted in almost complete omission of any mention of Scotland in his translations. It can be understood from the translator’s point of view because sometimes mentioning foreign names makes the comprehension of a poem more difficult for the reader and demands additional comments. As Christiana Nord points out, just a quick glance at the translated text can reveal that translators do all sorts of things with names, such as substitute, transcribe and omit them (2003: 182). Obviously, the presence of foreign names in a translation brings with it the risk of creating a linguistic barrier for readers. According to Tymoczko, the referential function of the names presupposes their “recognizability” and “memorability” because they must “in some way be memorable so as to serve their function as indicators of unique objects” (1999: 225).

The problem is that the omission of Scotland became a characteristic feature in Marshak’s translation. The word Scotland was usually replaced with “родина” (*homeland*) and “страна” (*country*). The events mentioned in the poems could happen anywhere, at any time, so that the reader could more easily identify himself with them. As a result of this translation policy, Robert Burns, national poet of Scotland, became an international poet who struggled for human rights and glorified the democratic spirit all over the world, not just in Scotland. It should be noticed that this decision is one of the most contentious because this misrepresentation destroys the idea of Burns as the national Scottish (specifically Scottish) poet. Love and care for the motherland, images which were very important for the proper

⁴ Eraly also appears in Ramsey’s poem “The Gentle Shepherd”: “He falds his o’erlay down his Breast wi’ care” (I,II, 41). Eraly is described in James Mitchell’s book about Scottish country dress in *XVIII Memories* (264).

comprehension of Burns's poetry, are missing in Marshak's translations. Burns was no more just a Scottish but a world poet. The main reason for this social demand is hard to explain. Probably, as a European country and a part of Great Britain, Scotland was also considered a capitalist county, which should be omitted.

In the poem "The Ploughman," Saint Johnson is not mentioned and in the last line of the poem "John Barleycorn" "And may his great posterity/Ne'er fail in old Scotland", Marshak erased "Scotland", destroying the originality of the poem based on numerous songs and ballads about John Barleycorn, popular in English and Scottish folklore.⁵ Scotland is not mentioned in the translation of "MacPherson's Farewell", "An' there's no a man in all Scotland" (16). In the poem "The Twa Dogs" in the line "For Britain's guid his saul indention" (148), the word Britain was replaced with "country". In the same poem the very first line, "T' was in that place o' Scotland's isle", was deleted.

The names of Scottish rivers, lakes, cities and countries are also omitted. Thus, translating the lines "For lake o' thee I leave this much-loved shore/Never perhaps to greet old Scotland more! (35-36) ("Lines written on a Bank-note") Marshak used the expression "край родной" (native place) instead of "Scotland". In the poem "Elegy on Peg Nicholson" the name of the river Carin is cut out; only the "river" is mentioned, "But now she's floating down the Nith/And past the Mouth o' Carin" (56-58). The name "Leith" is not mentioned in the translation of the poem "Go Fetch Me a Pint o' Wine". In the poem "Rattlin, Roarin Willie" in the line "As I cam by Crochallan" (17), Crochallan was replaced by "город" (city) and in the poem "There Was a Lad" the place "Kyle" is not mentioned in the first line. In the poem "When Wild War's Deadly Blast was Blawn", Scotland was also erased in the eleventh line "And of fair Scotia, hame again". The same thing happened in the poem "The Answer" in which Scotland is replaced with страна (country) in the line "The 'poor auld Scotland sake'" (54). In the poem "The Ronalds of the Bennals" there is a phrase "My coat and my vest, they are Scotch o' the best" (44). The word "Scotch" disappears in the translation. In the song "Contented Wi' Little, and Cartie Wi' Mair" in the line "Wi' a cog o' guade swats and an auld Scottish sang" (4) the word Scottish was cut out (Kaloh Vid 2011, 146-147).

Often, in dealing with cultural elements, Marshak's translation adopts the strategy of localization/absolute universalization, which means that the translator attempts "to anchor a reference firmly in the culture of the target audience" (Davies 2003: 72). Obviously, Marshak

⁵ Burns's direct source was probably a poem from a book of folklore published in 1781: "There came three merry men from the east/And three merry men were they/And they did sware a solemn oath/That Sir John Barleycorn they would slay" (Laing: 1985, 64-66).

considered expressions typical of the English cultural background incomprehensible to Russian readers. Undoubtedly, this decision created a sense of familiarity and helped Russian readers to enter the magnificent world of Burns's poetry. On the other hand, an almost complete omission of cultural items can hardly serve for learning about foreign cultures, times and customs. Marshak's substitutions extend to the smallest details of Russian cultural life. Thus, he uses both Russian measures of length and monetary units, Russian clothes, music instruments, etc.

Examples of absolute universalization include the poem "The Battle of Sherra-moor" in which "tartan trews" was translated "клетчатые штаны" (*chequered pants*); in "The Ronalds of the Bennals" the word "laird" was translated "помещик" (a typical Russian expression for a *landlord*); farls in the "The Holy Fair" becomes "лепёшки" (a typical Russian food made of corn) and "pence" was translated "монетка" (*small coin*); "coat" in the poem "To J.S." was replaced by "кафтан" (a typical Russian item of clothing, a kind of coat); instead of "fiddle" in "Rattin, roatin Willi" the word "скрипка" (*violin*) was used; "guineas" in the poem "The Ronalds of the Bennals" were converted into "монеты" (*coins*): translating "lang Scotch ells twa" from the poem "Death and Doctor Hornbook", Marshak used a typical Russian archaic expression for a measure of length "косая зажень"; "cutty-stool" in the poem "Address to the Tooth-Ache" was translated "pillory". "Hallowe'en" in the poem "Tam Glen" was translated "праздник осенний" (an autumn holiday), in the same poem "breeks" were translated "штаны" (trousers). In the poem "Answer to the Guidwife of Wauchope House" "plaid" was translated "пестрый плед" (colourful blanket) (Kaloh Vid 2011: 149).

There is no doubt that most of Marshak's translations are changed to the extent that it is more appropriate to call them adaptations. My main argument is that in Marshak's translations of Burns's poems, we talk about the privilege of ideas above other aspects of translation. His translations clearly presented norms and value descriptions which included promotion of official Soviet doctrines according to the newly established canons. However, it should be noted that the undeniable literary quality of translations made in the Soviet Union raises the question of the potential to combine literary value with purely ideological formations. In spite of obvious ideological changes, Marshak's translations have become canonical and have remained the best translations of Burns into Russian for almost half a century.

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