

PROBLEMS INVOLVED IN TRANSLATING ORAL FOLK POETRY:
THE RUSSIAN BYLINA

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Unfortunately, the problems involved in translating oral poetry cannot be divorced from the whole multitude of difficulties associated with the collection and study of oral folklore, problems which the folklorists haven't solved adequately among themselves. Before even attempting to present the various specific problems involved in translation, it is important to recognize that perhaps the most important problem stems from the fact that most folklore has in the past collected by anthropologists whose main interests in writing down oral literature has been "to portray the basic structure and functioning of the socioeconomic system whose cultural products and projective expressions interest us." This statement, from Melville Jacobs' text, The Content and Style of an Oral Literature: Clackamas Chinook Myths and Tales,¹ points to the chief difficulties present when folklore is preserved and translated primarily for the cultural values it reflects, i.e., as a key to the nature of the society in which it originates.

Jacobs, whose book is a basic text in some courses in oral folklore, introduces his text with a discussion of the problem of translation, which, rather than being an original approach to translating oral literature, as he intended, is nothing more than a rehashing of the old translation method; this disregards the basic nature of the genres involved, and creates a prose narrative out of the fragments, supplementing any and all cultural explanations within the text.

Jacobs reasons that most non-Western oral literature is not read by a large number of people because "the themes are foreign," because "the personalities of actors in the stories are unfamiliar...the humor feels bizarre...its narrators usually delivered relatively bare bones of their stories, while the native audience immediately filled in with many associations and feelings which a non-member of the group could not possibly have";² because of all these reasons, some more valid than others, he has decided that he must "present the stories more vividly and intelligibly than they would be in a bare translation."³ This translator has taken a very dangerous, and potentially destructive, direction, and the translator of oral literature might well be wary of his self-proclaimed motivation, namely, "to explore in the direction of finding a more revealing procedure for presentation of an oral literature, so as to supplement the bare dictations which dominate the archives of folklore."⁴

One should be extremely wary of anthropologists who translate oral folklore, for they are too often ready to sacrifice the poetic and esthetic nature of this material as oral literature. No one can blame anthropologists for being interested in the social and cultural values found in oral literature, nor the historian for being interested in the historical material, nor the mythographer for his interest in the mythical element, etc., but both they and their readers should be aware of

the limitations of their translations as literature.⁵ To many of these people, genre is not of significant interest and we shouldn't be too surprised when many of them translate epic poetry, ballads, songs, tales, etc., all into narrative prose. It remains up to people in literature to show the sophistication inherent in the various oral genres by producing translations that maximize the poetic elements of the originals. When Claude Levi-Strauss has long since proved that "primitive" societies are at least as sophisticated in their selection, use and organization of words as "civilized" societies, it is disturbing to read such books as The Oral Art and Literature of the Kazakhs of Central Asia, in which the author makes continual use of pejoratives, as for example when he characterizes the use of epithets (whose use he doesn't seem to value or understand in the context of the genre) as "stereotyped cliches."⁶

Turning to the specific problems involved in translating oral literature, and concentrating on those elements of difficulty not usually found in the translation of written literature, it might first be noted that ideally the translator should also be the collector of the original oral material; thus he would encounter the basic problems of the folklorist in recording and preserving the content and form of the literature as well as the cultural context and audience response to the performance. The last two aspects (cultural context and audience response) may or may not play a role in the translation, depending on the approach of the translator. In oral epic poetry, for example, it has been suggested⁷ that the performance is often dependent upon and varies with the response of the audience, and if this dramatic interaction is a part of the original, it may well be important to the translator in determining the nature of the genre, and thereby the form of the translation. Other extra-literary problems relate to understanding the language dialects used, the culture and society which produced the oral genre, as well as the culture which preserved it and from which the material has been recorded.

Specific literary problems exist in determining the nature of the original genre and finding an equivalent in the target language culture; in determining whether an oral literature can and should be translated into a written literature, and if the latter then whether it is best rendered in a dialect of the target language, the literary language, or an archaic form of the literary language; which variants should be chosen for translation and whether they should be translated as they exist, with the variations caused by the personality and preference of the narrator, or whether an ideal composite of the variants should be made (as has so often been done in the past); whether one should try to reconstruct variants when the oral literature has been recorded at a time when the art was already in a state of decline; whether in oral epics an attempt should be made to make a sequential narrative of variants based around episodes in the lives of important folk heroes and to thereby comply with the literary tastes of the Western reader, i.e., to attempt what was done with the Gilgamesh epic, for example; and whether one should attempt to translate cultural values by incorporating the explanations in the target language text. These are only a few of the important problems to be considered in the translation of oral literature.

The genres of Russian oral literature are usually denoted as folksong, folk ballad, folktale, folk drama, spiritual poem (duxovnye stixi),

and the epic poem (bylina). A great deal was written before the Revolution and after concerning these various genres but the theoretical and practical problems of translation connected with them have not found very articulate expression because most of the material has never been translated into other languages, and that which has appeared in English was rendered as narrative prose, for the most part. No attempt has been made to recreate the genre, metre, rhythm, etc., of the originals, and even less attention has been paid to some of the other more intricate problems of translating oral literature.

Even in Russia the bylina suffered in the nineteenth century on the one hand from those who didn't recognize the nature of the genre and retranslated the poetry, which was not recognized as poetry since it didn't fit the literary canons of the time, into simple prose tales which eliminated many of the repeated epithets and parallelisms for which the collectors had no esthetic appreciation, and on the other hand from the poets who attempted to translate the poetry into the literary language with a Western system of poetics.

Translation is made more difficult by the fact that even today there is a great deal of violent disagreement about the exact nature of the bylina, the significance and meaning of various passages, and the importance of various devices inherent in the oral nature of the genre. Just a few years ago a fierce battle raged in the prestigious Soviet journal, Russkaja Literatura, between those that were determined to interpret the bylina as exact and accurate history and those who rejected the various simplistic historical interpretations and preferred to see in the bylina not a "reflection of actuality," but rather a "refraction of actuality," with the vital nature of the genre determined by that refraction, which is art.⁸

Since the bylina represents an oral art in decline and since there are no examples of this genre's former supposed pure state, there is little agreement as to the exact nature of the meter, for example. When the bylina was originally discovered the folklorists and critics knew it was a poetic genre by listening to it and yet couldn't determine the nature of the meter. For many years it was simply considered to be blank verse, until it was finally determined to be accentual verse with a fixed number of stresses per line, where the number of unaccented syllables is not of great importance. It is now generally accepted that the byliny have three stresses per line with a dactylic ending,⁹ but there are those who maintain that it has four stresses (variously placing the fourth stress on the last or first syllable of each line).¹⁰ The matter is complicated by the fact that we have two large collections of byliny made at the end of the nineteenth century but with the information on their oral performance being more impressionistic than scientific.

One of the important problems in this genre, which makes for extreme difficulty in translation, is frequent modification of stress so that, for example, the word bogatyr with stress on the final syllable is often used at the end of the line as a dactyl, bógatyr, or with an ending, bogatyrja. In other cases, what would normally be an iambic ending is modified in the oral performance by dropping the final accent, something that cannot readily be conveyed in a written translation. The translator is thus faced with the choice of ignoring the stress modifications (forced accents) or attempting to find a substitute for

it in the target language. The stress modification seems to result primarily from the fact that each narration of a bylina is a creative act in which the narrator creates, or recreates, a certain episode in the life of a bogatyr, using the well known legendary subject matter as well as the poetic devices of epithets, assonances, parallelisms, stylized introductions and endings, etc., resulting in a unique work of oral literature at each recitation. Whenever the narrator is in the position of not being able to make a dactylic ending, he, or she, resorts to modification of stress as a last resort. The translator thus has the task of deciding whether to make his version better than the original or to insert an equivalent weakness in his poetic structure.

Since the byliny were preserved only in the dialects of northern Russia and not in the literary language, translation necessitates a decision whether the original should be translated into an equivalent dialect of the target language, such as Ozark hillbilly English, or into some variation of the literary language. Since we have no recently living oral epic poetic genre in English, it is often difficult to find equivalents for various devices, such as the epithets and stylized passages, and so the translator is forced to either go outside the genre, to rely on the devices of the literary epic, or to look to the genre in another language (as in resorting to Homeric epithets as substitutes for use in the target language version). An equivalent epithet which is native to the cultural traditions of the target language is obviously a better translation than a simple literal one.

It is known that the repetitious epithets and formulaic phrases, as well as the parallelisms, assonances, alliterations, and stylizations, were to a large extent mnemonic devices used by the narrator for ease of performance, but they also had poetic value which is violated when a translator eliminates them in order to avoid monotony and to speed up the narrative. At present, modern sensibility in poetry is sympathetic to stylizations and repetitions in the epic manner and when the translator is also a sympathetic poet the results can be extremely good, as in Auden's translations of the Icelandic sagas.

The repetitions also have the function, through variation, of indicating the progression of action, i.e., of time. It has only recently been noted what an important role the Russian imperfective verb plays in the creation of an expanse of time in the bylina,¹¹ a function reserved only for this single genre among the various forms of Russian oral folk literature, a fact which translators must consider in the target language version.

One of the most difficult problems in the translation of the bylina is the choosing of variants. Since the repertoire of each narrator is determined by his own personality and interests, since he often remakes his heroes in his own image, and since each narrative performance results in yet a different variant, the translator must make a selection either on the basis of subjective esthetic values or some other criterion. He must decide whether to translate the sequences of a single narrator, thereby maintaining a certain unity of style in the narrative, or whether to combine variants from various narrators in creating a narrative sequence, with the accompanying jarring juxtapositions that this can cause when one narrator interprets his hero as a pious man versus another narrator whose bogatyr may be a fierce, adventurous,

sexually active fellow. In addition there exists the possibility of making a composite text from all of the existing variants with all the extra difficulties and responsibilities that that creates for the translator as creative artist. Though this is most likely the origin of the *Iliad*, Russian epic poetry hasn't yet found its Homer. The composites that have been recreated in English are poor in quality and are done in prose. The major barrier to poetic translation seems to result from the essential difference between English and Russian-dialect, the latter language being free to readily create various words and syllables which have only phonetic value and for which English has no equivalents in the literary language.

The ideal in translating oral literature of transferring not only the mythic content and the poetic structure, but also the narrative performance and audience reaction, into the target language context will always remain an unreachable goal, but a goal towards which the minimal translation efforts in oral literature should be directed. In addition, criticism in the field of literary folklore must "drive toward recognition of patterns of expectation inherent in the esthetic style of the genre or the group, and thus provide both an analytic and predictive tool for handling traditional materials."¹²

The translation of folklore, particularly oral poetry, from other languages into English is still at a primitive and haphazard level, the quantity and quality of translations still lagging behind those which have been done and are being done in the Soviet Union and Germany, for example. More attention must be devoted to bringing together folklorists, linguists, literary critics, and poets with the translators, with the aim of maximizing the transference of source language oral literature into the target language.

NOTES

¹ Melville Jacobs, The Content and Style of an Oral Literature: Clackamas Chinook Myths and Tales (Chicago, 1959), p. 1.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 2.

⁵ One of the few perceptive articles regarding this important problem is Roger D. Abrahams, "Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore," Journal of American Folklore, 81 (1968), p. 143.

⁶ Thomas G. Winner, The Oral Art and Literature of the Kazakhs of Russian Central Asia (Durham, N.C., 1958), p. 69.

⁷ Jacobs, p. 5.

⁸ V. Propp, "Ob Istorizme Russkogo Eposa," Russkaja Literatura (Leningrad, 1962), No. 2, p. 87.

⁹ B.O. Unbegaun, Russian Versification (Oxford, 1956), p. 104.

¹⁰ Y.M. Sokolov, Russian Folklore (Hatboro, Pa., 1950), p. 309.

¹¹ D. Lixačev, "Vremja v Proizvedenijax Russkogo Fol'lor," Russkaja Literatura (Leningrad, 1962), No. 4, pp. 42-47.

¹² Abrahams, p. 144.