

“SOVIET” ROBERT BURNS - IDEOLOGICAL ADAPTATION OF BURNS’ POETRY IN THE SOVIET UNION

Natalia Vid

University of Maribor, Slovenia

1. Introduction

After the October revolution in Russia, the Soviet government began enforcing a new ideology called “socialist realism”¹ as the official standard for art and literature². According to the new ideological propaganda, literary works were supposed to extol the improved lifestyle for communist society in the Soviet Union, to elevate the common worker by presenting his life, work, and recreation as admirable, and to present a negative picture of the miserable life of workers and peasants in capitalist countries. In other words, its goal was to educate the people in the goals and meaning of Communism. Art produced under socialist realism was supposed to be realistic, optimistic, and heroic. Its practice was marked by strict adherence to party doctrine and to conventional techniques of realism.

Under Stalin's leadership, writers served as the "engineers of human souls" and produced novels, short stories, articles, editorials, critiques, and satires within a restrictive framework in which they strove to glorify Soviet society and socialism.

In 1932 the Union of Soviet writers was established, and all other existing writers' groups were banned. At the First Congress of Soviet Writers in the summer of 1934 Maxim Gorky³, the head of the Union, for the first time introduced socialist realism, which soon became obligatory in all cultural fields. To be a writer now meant to be committed in public to promoting the Soviet project.

The First Soviet Writer's Congress completed the process of nationalizing literature, begun after the October revolution. The existence of a single overarching ideology, concentrated in the leading newspapers and legitimated by the totalitarian power of the state became a chief feature of Soviet society.

Among others, one of the most important aims of this program was to introduce the foreign authors to Soviet people as exponents of the communist regime and offer them newly adapted interpretations of famous literary works⁴. Soviet critics considered most world-famous artists to be the spokesmen of a socialist regime. Their works had to be interpreted as communist manifests in which an individual's protest against capitalism was put in first place. 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.

Henceforth, literature and the arts lost some of their public identification with civil society and gained a formal place in the official culture of the Soviet era. Writers and artists had to accept the metamorphosis of public discourse itself and were forced to work under strong pressure from the Soviet communist regime. Those authors who quickly adjusted themselves to the regime's demands were highly praised by Soviet critics and in the newspapers. There was no longer any way within the public discourse to represent (or even imagine) a writer who was not an enthusiastic supporter of the system without designating him or her a public enemy.

The authority of non-professional commentators to discuss the arts became inherent in the limitless executive power of the Soviet system: Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin and other leaders commented freely on art's subjects, hardly distinguishing their personal tastes and judgments from official pronouncements. This kind of intervention began with the Soviet era and was common nearly to the end of it, but the Stalin era was its golden age.

After the Revolution the foremost Russian artists were forced to emigrate. It was a great tragedy for national culture. Those who for various reasons refused to leave the country had either to accept the communist dictatorship in art or to give up working. It took about 10 years (1922-1932) before the project put an end to “the art of the bourgeois past”. Every single attempt to change the direction of the main trend was suppressed and the guilty artist rigorously prosecuted.

It is interesting, even horrifying, to see how ideology exerts pressures on literary translation. Literary texts are subjects to a pattern of shifts, mutations depending on the viewpoint or ideology of the author. This paper focuses on the dilemma of a translator who finds that his/her ideology contradicts the author’s, or when he has to adopt techniques that differ from those of the author. Poems by the Scottish poet Robert Burns perfectly exemplify how ideology is compromised in literary translation for several reasons:

- His poems were translated by one of the best-known and most talented translators in the Soviet Union, Samuel Marshak, who also translated Shakespeare.
- Marshak’s translations were widely popular in the Soviet Union. They are still considered to be the best translations of Robert Burns’s poetry into Russian.
- They offer a clear picture of ideological deformation of literary texts.

2. “Soviet” Robert Burns

The new ideology imagined art as a vehicle for education or, alternatively, as an instrument of class war. Social realism became a powerful mechanism by which the leaders and supporters of the Stalinist system enlarged the domain of their moral and intellectual claims. Pressure on writers to sanction the official image of Soviet society increased, and it was clear that previous translations of Robert Burns made in the nineteenth century could no longer fulfill the new aesthetic function of literature. New translations of Burns’ poetry would have to include a positive revolutionary hero, heroic acts, optimism, references to communist slogans, and so forth.

Thus, the *Literaturnaja Gazeta* (a new Soviet literary newspaper) published several articles about Burns in which his humanist pathos was highlighted. His poems were deemed admissible and were to be commensurate with new communist demands. However, the new critical establishment was not satisfied with the old translations of Burns’s poetry made before the October revolution by Shepkina-Kuprina because they did not sufficiently stress the spirit of nationality and Burns’ democratic views. There was a call for new translations to present Robert Burns to Soviet readers in a more appropriate way. This task was assigned to S.J. Marshak.

Samuil Marshak (1887-1964), a famous dramatist, a successful poet, political satirist and state propagandist, magazine editor, author of children's books and a close friend of Gorky became the only official translator of Burns’ poetry in the Soviet Union. He was one of the few Soviet translators educated abroad, at the University of London. In England Marshak studied not only philosophy and English language but also Scottish dialects, traveling around the country and collecting Scottish folk ballads and songs. The key to the success of his translations lay primarily in the sense of the languages, Russian, English and Scottish dialects, which he possessed to such a high degree. He returned to Russia two years later, in 1914, and devoted himself to translations. Besides Burns, he translated William Blake, Rudyard Kipling and William Shakespeare.

Marshak⁵ started his work on Robert Burns' poetry in 1930, and his first book was published shortly after the end of the Second World War, in 1947. Burns' poetry, as well as Shakespeare's sonnets⁶, became his life task, to which he devoted twenty years of hard work. In 1959, in an article published in the magazine *Kultura i ziznj*, Marshak proclaimed that he was honored to have become an official translator of Burns' poetry and that his translation work remained unfinished (Marshak 60). In fact, Marshak continued to translate Burns' poetry until his death in 1964. The last book of Burns' translations, published after Marshak's death, contained 215 poems⁷ and has remained the most extensive summary made in the Russian language until the present time.

The most important features of Marshak's translations are the following:

- He eschewed dialect expressions. One reason was, of course, the fact that Marshak wanted to purge Burns' poetry of its Scottish coloration;
- He never mentioned God or anything connected with religion, even names from the Bible. Soviet ideology did not accept any kind of religion. There was no translation of poems with religious motifs, except satire;
- He idealized the images of beggars and robbers;
- He never translated those poems addressed to the poet's friends if they belonged to the aristocratic circle because a "Soviet" Burns could not retain any connections with the upper classes;
- Poems devoted to the current political situation in Scotland and England were ignored. Obviously, Marshak wanted to weaken the Scottish folk spirit in his translations. This is a sad fact, because these poems belong to the most extensive and the most original part of Burns' literary heritage.

A prime example of such strategies occurs in the poem "For a' that and a' that", where the philosophical conclusion of the original about the fact that man's dignities do not depend on his position and fortune was transformed into a typical communist slogan: "The poor are those who possess all moral priorities". The last line in the poem, "The rank is but the guinea-stamp / The man's the gowd for a' that!" (Burns 7-8), was translated, «Богатство штамп на золотом, но золото мы сами» / "the fortune is just a stamp on the gold, but we are the gold ourselves" (Marshak 8). This nuance in the translation is not easy to see: "the man" and "we ourselves" means almost the same but the full context created by Marshak stresses the main idea that "we, the poor, resist the rich". The original title of the poem "For a' that and a' that" was translated, «Честная бедность» / "An Honest Poverty".

Another example from the same poem shows how carefully it was adapted to a new ideological scheme. The last line, "A prince can make a belted knight / A marquis, duke, and a' that" (Burns 17-18), was translated, «Король лакея своего назначил генералом» / "a king made his servant a general" (Marshak 32-33). Instead of the word "knight" the word "servant" was used. Marshak wanted to stress that a king could not have knights but just servants. The original Russian word «лакей» / "lakej" used in the translation could have a humiliating meaning and means here "a lick-spittle".

Additionally, the images of beggars and the poor in Marshak's translations were idealized. For example, in the poem "The Jolly Beggars", the word "mountebank" was translated as a «клоун» / "clown" but in the original poem it was used as a "swindler":

Observ' d ye yon reverende lad
Mak's faces to tickle the mob?
He rails at our mountebank squad –
It's rivalry just i' the job. (Burns 110-114)

Marshak thus changed the original characteristic of the image with just one word. Beggars are not robbers but just honest, amusing fellows.

However, the best example of the canonization and making heroes out of beggars and swindlers is the poem “Macpherson’s Farewell”, in which a highway-robber is transformed into a national hero and a revolutionary. This poem was changed almost completely. The lines, “Farewell, Ye dungenons dark and strong / The wretch’s destinie!” (Burns 1-2), were translated, «Привет, вам тюрьму короля, где жизнь влачат рабы» / “Hello, the prisons of the king, where slaves suffer” (Marshak 1-2).

The translation omits such adjectives as “wantonly”, “dauntingly”, “rantingly”. The main occupation of the hero, a robber, has been changed into “war”:

Oh! What is death but parting breath?-
On mony a bloody plain,
I’ve dar’d his face, and in this place
I scorn him yet again! (Burns 24-28)

The first line was translated: «В полях войны среди мечей встречал я смерть не раз» / “In the fields of war, among swords, I meet death many times” (Marshak 16-17). The original idea was completely changed because the Soviet Robert Burns could not glorify robbers and beggars.

When Burns makes fun of aristocrats and sometimes of the church in his satirical poems Marshak omits the address in the first person if the author talks about religious feelings. For example, in the poem “To a Louse, On Seeing on a Lady’s Bonnet at Church”, the last line is changed. Instead of “What airs in dress an’ gait wad lea’e us, and ev’n Devotion” (Burns 45-46), «О, как бы стали мы терпимы и скромны» / “We would become more modest and patient” (Marshak 45) was used. The poet who was pronounced to be a democrat and a communist could not talk about any feelings connected with religion in the first person. I have already mentioned that the new communist government tried to destroy everything connected with the church and did not accept any kind of religion.

A similar sleight-of-hand can be observed in the translation of “For a’that and a’ that” where the first line in the couplet has been omitted on account of the presence of the word “pray”:

Then let us pray that come it may-
As come it will for a-that-
That sense and worth, o’er a’the earth,
May bear the gree, and a’ that (Burns 30-34)

Another instance occurs in the poem “To a Mountain Daisy, on turning one down with the plough, in April, 1786” in the lines “Till wrench’d of ev’ry stay but HEAV’N / He, ruin’d, sink” (Burns 45-46), the word “heaven” was cut out.

A further significant characteristic of Marshak’s translations is the omission of any mention of Scotland. 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. But the omission of Scotland became a

characteristic feature of Marshak's translations. The events mentioned in the poems happen "nowhere", so that the reader could easier identify with them. The poet of Scotland became an international poet who struggled for human rights all over the world, not just in Scotland. This misrepresentation destroys the main idea of Burns as a national Scottish (specifically only Scottish) poet. Love and care for the motherland, images which were very important for the proper comprehension of Burns' poetry were missed. Burns was no more just a Scottish but a "world" poet. In the translation of the poem "Scots wha hae", for example, it is impossible to understand that the main idea is an appeal to the Scottish king. He is not even mentioned in the translation.

In the poem "Lines written on a Bank-note", "For lake o'thee I leave this much-loved shore / Never perhaps to greet old Scotland more!" (Burns 35-36), Marshak translated «родина» / "motherland" instead of "Scotland".

The translation of the poem "Elegy on Peg Nicholson" contains the lines, "But now she's floating down the Nith / And past the Mouth o' Carin" (Burns 56-58), where the name Carin is cut out: only the «пека» / "river" is mentioned.

In the poem "Go fetch me a pint o' wine", the name "Leith" is not mentioned in the translation:

The boat rocks at the pier o' Leith,
Fu' loud the wind blows frae the ferry,
The ship rides by the Berwick-law,
And I maun leave my bonny Mary. (Marshak 44-48)

The translation of Burns' "Jolly Beggars" does not mention the Scottish pipe, and "Syne tun'd his pipes wi' grave grimace" is translated, «Он прохрипел свои куплеты» / "He sang his songs with grave grimace".

Something similar happened with the poem "The Answer", in which the fourth line is translated, «Одной мечтой с тех пор я жил, служить стране по мере сил» / "The only dream of my life is to serve the country as long as I could" (Marshak 54). The word »country« is used instead of Scotland:

Ev'n then a wish...mind its power
A wish, that to my latest hour
Shall strongly heave my breast:
That I for poor auld Scotland sake
Some useful plan, or book could make,
Or sing a sang at least. (Burns 51-56)

In the same poem Burns says that he is proud because he is Scottish:

No nation, no station
My envy e'er could rise:
A Scot still, but blot still
I knew no higher prise (Burns 61-64)

Marshak chose to translate this as if the words "Scot" and "peasant" were synonyms: «Шотландской, крестьянской породой был я горд» / "I am proud because of my Scottish, peasant nature" (Marshak 75-76).

Although, the poem "The Tree of Liberty" was inspired in reality by the French revolution, Burns meant just a potential future revolution in England, not the word revolution as it was interpreted by Marshak:

Syne let us pray, auld England may
Sure plant this far-famed tree, man,
And blithe we'll sing, and hail the day
That gave us liberty, man (Burns 41-44)

Marshak translated the first line: »Забудут рабство и нужду народы и края, брат« / »The nations and places would forget about the poverty and slavery, brother»(Marsak 45-46).

4. Conclusion

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the process of establishing a new interpretation of culture and literature started. This new movement had profound effects on Russian literature. On the positive side, writers were now free to write as they pleased and about what they pleased without fear of reprimand or prison. They now had open access to foreign literatures and the possibility of publishing their writings abroad. But there were also negative repercussions to the new freedom.

The absolute monopoly of Marshak's translations and his whole concept of Burns' poetry were strongly criticized. Many translations by different poets which had been written before but could not be published became well-known. The only problem was a new interpretation. In the time of the Soviet Union, a very clear conception of Robert Burns' poetical heritage was formed and remained unchanged for many years. There existed no alternative conception which could illuminate other features of Burns' poetry (not just those acceptable to Soviet critics), and readers constantly associated Burns with the old communist regime, old canons and old rules. This caused a process of negation and demythologization of Burns by the new criticism, which was driven by a total denial of Soviet culture.

Nevertheless, Marshak's translation remained the best translations of Burns for almost half a century (1940-1980). He created an adequate, and for Russian culture, an acceptable image of Robert Burns. Unintentionally, Marshak caused a serious problem for future generations of Russian translators of Robert Burns. Attempting to avoid comparison with Marshak's translations, which were called "a second original", and wishing to reach Marshak's level, a new generation of translators was induced to use different techniques and to search for alternative possibilities. This was a difficult task because to learn from a master means to compete with him. These words were prophetic for those translators who wanted to beat Marshak.

Works Cited

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Notes:

¹ This was a literary program invented in 1934, expressly to define 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.

² The founder of socialist realism was pronounced Maxim Gorky (*Mother*) but examples of a correct socialist realist approach included also *Chapaev* (1923; translated 1935) by Dmitry Furmanov, *Tsement* (1925; *Cement*, 1929) by Fyodor Gladkov, and *Razgrom* (1927; *The Nineteen*, 1929; also known as *The Rout*) by Aleksandr Fadejev. The most notable of these works was *Tikhii Don* (1928-1940) by Mikhail Sholokhov. This four-volume epic depicts life among the people known as the Cossacks from 1914 to the civil war. It was published in English in two volumes: *And Quiet Flows the Don* (1934) and *The Don Flows Home to the Sea* (1940).

³ In 1933, Maxim Gorky published an important article, “On Socialist Realism”.

⁴ On the proposal of Lunacharskij (the first “narkom prosveshenija”), each literary work written by a foreign author and published in the Soviet Union had to contain a special preface which explained the “correct” meaning of the work to Soviet readers. This should be considered as a part of ideological pressure.

⁵ The fact that Marshak’s translations of Burns’ poetry became an outstanding literary sensation supported his election as honorary president of the Burns Federation in Scotland.

⁶ Shakespeare’s sonnets were translated by Boris Pasternak, the author of *Doctor Zivago*, but because of his enormous success in the West, Pasternak was suppressed and hunted in Russia. His translations were forbidden and he remained in the shadow of Marshak until the end of Perestrojka.

⁷ R. Burns. *Izbrannoje v perevodah Marshaka*. Moskva, 1964.