

Book review:

***Interlitteraria*. Vol. 21, No 1 (2016). Belletristic Translation: a Means of Cultural-Spiritual Dialogue or a Tool of Acculturation?; Miscellanea. University of Tartu Press, Eesti/Estonia, 2016. [Interlitteraria. Том 21, кн. 1 (2016), Художественият превод: средство за културно-духовен диалог или инструмент за акултурация? ; Miscellanea.]**

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Interlitteraria is the peer-reviewed journal of the Chair of Comparative Literature at the University of Tartu and the Estonian Association of Comparative Literature. In the words of its editors, *Interlitteraria* “aspires to be a point of contact between East and West, North and South”, since it is being published in a “minority country”, located in a European “border” zone, i.e. “periphery”. As seen from distance *Interlitteraria* is functioning successfully as a “mechanism, translating external communications into the internal language and vice versa”, or simply “genuine mechanism of dialogue” (as the late head of the Tartu School of Semiotics Yuri M. Lotman (1922-1993) would characterize the essence of any “border”). In September 2015 in Tartu was held the international conference *Belletristic Translation: a Means of Cultural-Spiritual Dialogue or a Tool of Acculturation?* organized by the Estonian Association of Comparative Literature as a contribution to the studies in this field. The *Thematic section* of this summer issue of *Interlitteraria* consists of reports of the conference and, as promised by the editors, will continue to the winter issue. The selection presented in this issue gives an insight into the diversity of the problematics of belletristic translation as well as some of its universal characteristics, providing both synchronic and diachronic analyses of this issue’s central topic.

Volume 21 (2016) of *Interlitteraria* opens with a look into historical translation practices in the article *Doing God’s Work: The Missionary’s Task of Translation or Who Makes the Best Jesuits: Comparatists, World Literature Scholars, or Real Jesuits?* by Dorothy Figueira. This paper deals with the sixteenth-century Jesuit order and their policies in Asia, more specifically their “construction of Confucianism and the manufacture of the figure of Confucius” through interpretations of the Chinese classics. A curious twist comes when, analyzing the so called “Jesuit policy of accommodation in Asia”, the author takes the aspirations of this prominent Catholic order “as precursors for the tasks we seek to perform as Comparatists and World Literature scholars”. And what connects these two – a

Jesuit and a literature scholar (except for the comparative approach) – is a veritable model: “like the Jesuits in China who sought to package Confucius, we seek to package the world by contextualizing form and argument, canonizing a body of work, producing creative readings and projecting a vision onto the foreign Other” (p. 6). After all, such analysis takes us at the principle of translation or at the translation as a principle. Thus, it depends on the translator how much *packageable* one world is. And that is really and truly a tall order.

With the following two articles, the volume goes into the methodology of translation historiography. The first one, “*The Translator Must...*”: *On the Estonian Translation Poetics of the 20th Century* by Elin Sütiste and Maria-Kristiina Lotman, tries to present a comprehensive register of the prevailing ideas that guided the late 19th and 20th century literary translation in Estonia, as seen in writings about translation, i.e. reviews, articles, etc., along with examples from real translations. Only then, it becomes clear that “predominant ideal of translating verse and prose has been that of the artistic translation, especially since the end of the 1920s” (p. 17). In theory, this ideal is worded simple, but in fact it represents a difficult task: “a literary translator is expected to (“must”) first understand the author and the work translated and, second, convey it in such form that is regarded adequate” (p. 31). And again, it is all about the translation principle, but this time – about some principles in translating, both verse and prose; about transfiguration of translation, i.e. transformation of the world itself, as far as the translator is responsible for *packaging* (contextualizing, canonizing,... etc.) *the world*.

The second article in methodology of translation historiography, *Method and Theory: On the Compilation of a Collection of Texts in Estonian Translation History*, by Katiliina Gielen and Klaarika Kaldjärv introduces a current project and its attempt to map the “Estonian translation history through metatexts on translational issues”, i.e. writings about translation by translators themselves, and also by editors, and other intellectuals, “close to translation throughout Estonian literary history”. The reason for collecting translational thought into one compilation, according to the authors, “lies in the importance of translation for Estonian culture” (p. 35), both diachronic (for being a “minority country”, located in a European “periphery”, which in a sense owes its cultural progress to the models from the West and the East) and synchronic (for bearing in mind the future of a minor language and translation in a globalizing world). As a kind of synthesis of the two preceding articles, such an all-embracing fresco of Estonian translation history is a peculiar attempt of *packaging the theory of translation*. And that, *per se*, is translation.

Translation of poetry is the focal point of the next pair of articles. The first one, *Fetching Poems from Elsewhere: Ciaran Carson’s Translations of French Poetry*, by Miriam McIlpatrick-Ksenofontov, is about the renowned Northern Irish poet and translator Ciaran Carson. It is probably

not so strange if a writer, well known for his experimentation with language, form and genre, is also an unconventional translator. And this exactly is the case of Ciaran Carson and his unusual interpretation practice that blurs the distinction between translating and writing, which he manifested recently in his three volumes of French poetry in translation: “sonnets by Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Rimbaud; prose poems by Rimbaud; and poems by Jean Follain”. Here Carson’s approach is assessed in the light of poetics of translation of Henry Meschonnic (the French poet, linguist and theoretician of language, author of “Critique du rythme”), according to which translating would be “producing new poems in English, which do in English what the originals do in French”. As underlined by the author, the outcome of such translator’s approach is truly curious and discusses correlations like: “originality and derivation; writing and translating; the subjectivity of the translator; and the relationship between original poem and new poem” (p. 51). It is tempting here to theorize further upon such analysis, moving from particular to general, problematizing the boundary line, which each translator encounters (or transgresses...) – that sanitary cordon or space of dialogue between the principles of translation and personal creative impulses, i.e. between interpreter and author, or simply between translation and creation.

The next paper, *Intended Fallacies: Lowered Horizons, Ideological Inversions and Employed Intimacy. Translating Judita Vaičiūnaitė’s Early Poetry into Russian*, by Gintarė Bernotienė, tells about the case of Lithuanian poetess Judita Vaičiūnaitė (1937–2001) and the translations of her early poetry into Russian. This turns into a proper occasion for discussing the Soviet translation practices of the 1960s, taken as a whole. According to the author, they are typical of the nature of the Soviet literatures. Since the “intentional rewriting, expurgation and ideological remakes of the authorial text were considered normal” (p. 67), or simply regular occurrence, then the Soviet literatures in general, and the Soviet translation practices in particular, represent merely a function of the Soviet political doctrine. Bad practices of the amateur translators were in the service of the wicked censorship institutions, and vice versa – the maleficent censorship was in favour of the bad practices and incompetent interpreters. It is telling that Vaičiūnaitė never spoke in public of these controversial in many ways translations. An equivocal act of self-censorship, as paradoxical resistance to the censorship itself. The case of Vaičiūnaitė, vis-à-vis the previous article, is indicative of what happens when the interpreter transgresses some principles of translation, withal without being guided by personal creative impulses – a powerful illustration of wicked translation.

Translation of prose is in the centre of the couple of articles that follow next in the volume. Firstly *Translation of Anatole France’s L’Étui de nacre in Russia: Reception and Perception* by Natalia Nikitina and Natalia Tuliakova, explores the reasons and tendencies in the remarkably multiple series of translations of France’s renowned *Mother of Pearl*. In late 19th and first half of 20th century

Russia translations of this particular France's work appeared twice for the whole cycle, and up to sixteen times for some parts of it, with new issues appearing each half a year at times. These are facts that definitely deserves attention. Successively the authors of the article examine: the translation theories and practices – first in Russia, and later in USSR when artistic translation as a predominant ideal of translating undergoes some deviations; the reasons behind such a flood of translations like – “the popularity of foreign literature on the whole and French fiction in particular” (p. 82), and also the fact that Anatole France was regarded as the most distinguished French writer of the time, awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1921. Further, the authors continue with reflections on the theories of translation, together with a comparative analysis of the various existing translations of the work of France. Such abundance is partly explained by the complexity of his multi-layered text, which according to the authors, “has resulted in a constant search for a perfect translation”. Except for the evolving theory of translation, analysis inevitably notes political and social changes in the country during this period. In short, conclusion is that “the existing translations tend to demonstrate a significant decrease in ambiguity, inherent in France's cycle” (p. 79). And in a sense, this is what people call *lost in translation*.

The following article analyses a case, which is loaded with a message completely opposite to the previous one. *Found in Translation: The Reception of Andrei Ivanov's Prose in Estonia* by Anneli Kõvamees is dealing with the most well-known Estonian Russian-language writer, Andrei Ivanov (b. 1971), and the reception of his prose in Estonia. The author analysis, based on articles on Ivanov's prose published in Estonian literary magazines and newspapers, focuses on his most debated books and hence – major topics, such as “alienation, the question of belonging and intertextuality”. Although his main characters, defined by some critics as men “between”, “existential outsiders” and “people who belong to the cultural periphery” (p. 103), apparently fail in their attempt to make sense of existence, Ivanov's role of mediator and promoter obviously works. With regard to him, being “a man between” is loaded with meaning or simply makes sense, since his works contributed considerably for relocating the Estonian Russian literature “from the periphery into the spotlight” (p. 104), thus expanding active cultural horizons and motivating an ongoing discussion on some essential topics, such as “the definition of the Estonian literature”, but also “the position of Estonian Russians and the Estonian Russian-language literature”. Paradoxically, most of Ivanov's works has been translated in Estonian – sometimes even first published as translations in Estonian. And so, in the words of the author, “it may be said that he has been found in translations”. It is then worth saying here that synonymy is beautiful as far as *novels* communicate with modern readers and offer “a novel perspective on society” (p. 104).

Focusing on similar problematics the *Miscellanea* section gives actually a broader sense of this *Interlitteraria* issue on translation. Paradoxically, speaking of translation, i.e. of *bearing across*, one inevitably crosses beyond the topic of translation. In *The Author Ransoming the Reader or Vice Versa? The Case of Karen Blixen*, Ieva Steponavičiūtė centers on the author-reader relationship, and more precisely the case of the Danish classic Karen Blixen (also known by her pseudonym Isak Dinesen) who wrote both in English and in Danish. Two extremes in her reception are distinguished here – “the paramount interest in her person and life”, on the one hand, and “the new-critical and post-structural rejection of her biography”, on the other. The article discusses texts, such as *Babette’s Feast*, *The Young Man with the Carnation* and *Deluge at Norderney*. In search for the balance between those extremes, it traces the presence of the fictional construct of the author and the storyteller in her texts, then it demonstrates how Blixen’s texts empower the reader’s freedom and imply that reception as part of the artistic act. I would generalize it this way: interpretation is translation of meaning and vice versa – meaning of translation is interpretation.

The next article in *Miscellanea* section, *Pour une poétique du nom de personnage (Prolegomena to a poetics of the character’s name)* by Samuel Bidaud, is centred in naming fictional characters, proposing a veritable poetics of the character’s names. The works selected for the purpose of the study are mainly by writers of modern times. The author chooses two seemingly opposite to one another approaches to the subject of his research: “from an autonomous point of view”, on the one hand (which resembles a diachronic-like way of research, as soon as the character’s name “reflects a personal, a social, a physical, a generic, a geographical, an autobiographical or a referential characteristic of the character”); and “from a structural point of view”, (which is rather synchronous-like way of research, since it “consists in studying the names of the characters” within the same text, “comparing them to each other” (p. 115), extracting their thematic role), on the other. Attention is paid also to the problem with translating the characters’ names. And so, examined both diachronic and synchronous, through interpretation and translation, deciphered thus in depth, names can be quite talkative. To name means to categorize, and to humankind categorization means survival. Interpretation of the names is actually as ancient as the Book of books or even much more. So this issue proves to be a huge field of study.

In the article that follows, *Rehepapp and Robin Hood: Tricksters or Heroes?* by Paul Rüsse and Karita Nuut, characters with celebrated names remain in focus while studying the elusive differences between the archetypes of *trickster* and *hero*. Comparison here goes between the Estonian Andrus Kivirähk’s novel *Rehepapp ehk november* (2000), and J. Walker McSpadden and Charles Wilson’s *The Adventures of Robin Hood and His Merry Outlaws* (1891). Rehepapp (usually rendered as Old Barney), who is constantly tricking Vanapagan (Old Devil), is one of the oldest and most renowned personages in Estonian folklore. And Robin Hood is the famous medieval outlaw hero we

all know, perched on the edge between historical chronicles and folk tales on Albion. However, neither Robin Hood is nothing but mythological character, nor Rehepapp is purely demonic and comical counterpart of a hero. According to the authors, “the interaction of the two types is much more ambiguous... Albeit to a different degree, these personages possess traits of both the trickster and the hero but play somewhat different roles in their respective societies” (p. 130). Sophisticated and contradictory coexistence of these archetypes could be detected in each one of this notorious pair of trickster-heroes or hero-tricksters. What really distinguishes these characters is the society that created them. Not exclusively but in its major part it is probably a matter of society, so to speak. Which reminds me the words of Oscar Wilde, this brilliant cynic, who was presumably right to say that *it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors*.

A literary discussion would most likely remain incomplete and stranger to literary art without steeping in the topic of the strange. Therefore, in *The Uncanny Robots of Pilot Pirx: Stanisław Lem’s Tales* Dominika Oramus considers some aspects of science fiction. The article discusses a common theme in the works of Lem, which has (almost) become a binding motif in contemporary science fiction – “the motif of the robot”, as seen “in four of his short stories from the Pilot Pirx cycle: (...) *Terminus*, *The Hunt*, *The Accident* and *The Inquest*” (p.142), and also *The Mask*. Initially the paper briefly describes how the so-called “Lemology”, i.e. a veritable “minor branch of literary studies” (p. 143), evolved in Poland, and how actually Western criticism was the catalyst of this rather not anticipated development. Referring to both Polish and foreign critics the author portrays the display of this “robot motif”, as seen in the Pirx cycle, crossing successively important topics, such as “personification”, “adaptability”, and “madness” of the character. As the author herself concludes, “Lem’s fiction dealing with robots is thus inscribed within the American and European tradition of confronting the human being and its artificial simulacrum on psychoanalytic grounds” (p. 155). And so it becomes visible how different critical traditions contribute to the fully understanding of the text. As I said above, interpretation is translation of meaning and vice versa – meaning of translation is interpretation. Thus strange becomes less strange or simply shared strangeness, when strangers translate some strange stories to each other.

The last but not least article in this *Interlitteraria* issue, *The Placement of Lucian’s Novel True History in the Genre of Science Fiction*, by Katelis Viglas reveals a peculiar translation of past to future strangeness. The ancient Greek Lucian of Samosata (b. About 125 CE) is considered as one of the earliest novelists in Western civilization, “well-known for his scathing and obscene irony”. There is a fictional narrative among his works, which is called *True History*, defined by experts as a genuine novel. There he parodies Homer’s fantastic tales, Thucydides’ History, also philosophers, political figures, etc. Lucian undermines the values of the classical world by satirizing the scientific knowledge

and rational experience, thus “creating a literary model”. “Through a continuous parade of wonderful events, beings and situations as a substitute for the realistic approach to reality”, he actually appears to be a forerunner of modern literary themes like voyages in the outer space, extraterrestrial life, etc., nearly two millennia before Jules Verne; let alone his fictional characters, reminiscent of the creatures from paintings of Hieronymus Bosh, associating his works with twentieth century Absurdism. Lucian enormous impact on the history of literature is not uncharted fact, but this paper is filling a gap “pointing out the specific characteristics that would lead to the placement of *True History* at the starting point of Science Fiction” (p.158). A couple of these features are emphasized here: “first, the operation of ‘cognitive estrangement’, which aims at providing the reader with perception of the difference between convention and truth, and second, the use of strange innovations (‘novum’) that verify the value of Lucian’s work by connecting it to historicity”. Here I would interpret what I said previously, stating that synonymy is even more beautiful, as far as an ancient *novel* speaks to modern readers offering a *novel* perspective on future society. This is how interpretation works and this is substantial.

As can be seen, *Interlitteraria*. Vol. 21 No 1 (2016) covers a wide range of issues of poetics and reception, but presented selection, in the words of the editors, converges “on the question of how one world – individual or collective, real or imaginary – connects to another that operates with a different set of values and meanings” (p. 5). After all, it is about the principle of translation or translation as a principle. And it always depends on the translator how much converging one world is. That is a tall order.

In his commentary to the first American edition of a Balkan novel in early 2000s, the English translator suggested that writers of small, linguistically isolated nations often have an overwhelming need to write about life in that particular small nation, perhaps as a way of helping to validate and reinforce the nation’s very existence¹. This statement is undoubtedly true. But I doubt it tells the whole truth. Minor themes go beyond minor literatures, as well as major themes are not enclosed within major literatures.

Similar to most of the *Interlitteraria* authors, I come from “a minor, linguistically isolated nation” with a “small” literature, located in the European “border” zone, i.e. “periphery”. And I know that there will be “small” literatures, languages and nations until they perceive themselves as such. Moreover, because the coin has two sides, the problem of “small” literatures, if any, is not solely within them, but also in the one who sees them, or rather sees them not. Just like some small silhouettes of men, you happen to watch from a distance. They are who they are, doing what they are doing – but

¹ M. Biggins, *Against Ideologies: Vladimir Bartol and Alamut*. In: V. Bartol, *Alamut*, Ljubljana, Sanje, 2012, p. 429.

you are the one whose mind raises the questions: Who are those people over there? And how would I find out? Coming closer would make those silhouettes larger and clearer. Once you reach them, you meet people like yourself, and yourself is probably the most tempting object to explore nowadays. But the way to yourself goes through the Other. In short, this is called curiosity. And to mankind curiosity means survival – a spiritual one.

This vision is everything but new. Just like translating. Anyway, you never know where insight could come from. Each new translation represents an opportunity. That is why a “small” literature, written in a “small” language, matters; that is why comparative literature and translation matters.