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Summer 2020

## Notes On Translation In The Slavic Field In The Last Twenty Years

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### Recommended Citation

Sibelan E.S. Forrester. (2020). "Notes On Translation In The Slavic Field In The Last Twenty Years". *Slavic And East European Journal*. Volume 64, Issue 2. 184

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-russian/283>

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# NOTES ON TRANSLATION IN THE SLAVIC FIELD IN THE LAST TWENTY YEARS

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Sibelan Forrester, Swarthmore College  
AATSEEL President, 2007–2008

Translation has always been part of our field, and it is one of the ways our field interconnects with the literary world. Even if we ourselves do not become translators, our students do. Translators can have various motives, besides the honoraria:

- at a minimum, translating the words or bits of discourse that we are citing or analyzing in a piece of scholarship;
- wanting to teach something to students who do not know the language;
- wanting to bring new or neglected authors into world literature;
- and as a subset of that: wanting to present writers whose identities or backgrounds may make them especially interesting to North American readers and students. We may both respect the established canon of the language we work from, and also want to influence the status of writers whose work we think has not been adequately valued locally.

Looking at Slavic and East European studies today, I see signs of increased support for translators and translations. In our various professional associations, the ATA (American Translators Association) has vibrant groups of literary translators, some of whom pay their bills with technical or legal translation; the 2019 conference of ALTA (the American Literary Translators Association) was attended by translators from Croatian, Czech, Polish, Serbian, Slovak—and Uzbek!—as well as a significant contingent working from Russian. There has been a recurring series of valuable translation panels at ASEES, and a translation workshop for many years now at AATSEEL itself: in 2020 it was organized by Ainsley Morse, and the text to play with was part of the autobiography of Archpriest Avvakum. Many of us have seen evidence that hiring committees and committees on promotion and tenure are taking translation more seriously as part of a candidate's dossier—as work that combines scholarly and artistic elements.

Things a fan of translation might notice: for many poetry translators, there

has been a move back to metrical regularity. If not “congruent” translation, at least recognition and (re)production of patternedness, according with the position of metrical or rhyming poetry in the home tradition. Another and more general shift takes place as works go out of copyright, making it possible for new versions to appear. Even for nineteenth-century classics, earlier translations that seem no longer usable are revised for new editions or are retranslated. Publishers see that money is to be made on the classics, especially of Russian literature, which is often taught (in translation of course) outside of Russian or Slavic departments.

Once you have multiple versions of a work, you can teach it in quite different ways. Anyone who now teaches the best-known works by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Bulgakov, and even Zamyatin can engage students who don’t know the original language in questions of translation—and comparing versions can stimulate new kinds of scholarship for us as well. The wealth of choices also imposes a new set of obligations: people want to know which one you would recommend. And fair enough, when there are so many and we are the specialists. The potential for comparing and contrasting different versions opens up possibilities for our own scholarship as well.

A few years back there were about twenty published translations of Pushkin’s *Evgenii Onegin* listed in WorldCat: the work has emerged as something like Dante’s *Inferno*, as poets and others compete to make their own versions of a long and very challenging work. The translators of *Onegin* are not just striving to convey the music and indeed the genius of the original, but taking it as test of mastery.

I’ve noticed too a growing body of really, really good versions of Tsve-taeva—who is not at all an easy poet to translate into English.

Importantly, also, there is more translating being done from other Slavic and East European languages into English. The end of the Cold War **finally** meant more attention to the entities that had been subsumed or obscured by the USSR and the “Eastern Bloc”—and now Svetlana Alexievich is a Nobel Prize laureate. Just from Polish, recent Nobel Prizes in Literature have honored Wisława Szymborska and Olga Tokarczuk. The prizes get wide publicity, and no author can be considered for them if their work doesn’t exist in good translations. Thanks to translators like Clare Cavanagh, Bill Johnston, Jennifer Croft and Antonia Lloyd-Jones, Polish literature must clearly be seen as not merely a literature with major writers, but as a major literature in itself. I intentionally stress Polish here because I don’t work on it myself—and yet I know about these people and their work. Translations by SCHOLARS provide deeply knowledgeable versions and feed right back into the scholarship of the translators and their own and other people’s teaching.

North American graduate programs are producing exciting young scholars who have linguistic cred not only in Russian, but in other languages as well, and who are qualified to do serious work with these literatures. Literature may

not weigh as much as economics or politics in the public imagination, but it sure is a more painless way to get people more familiar with places they have never visited and histories they don't yet know. This is true even if some of the translations go out of print without (yet) stimulating a re-translation — and this is more often the case, unfortunately, with the less-commonly-translated East European languages.

For undergraduates, we should note, translation (especially legal, technical, medical, and in all the fields connected to localization) can offer an obvious way to turn an interest in language and verbal talent into a paying job.

In conclusion: we often hear that only 3% of book publications in the U.S. every year are translations. In fact, no one actually knows whether that is true, but I can confidently say that it has been an exciting couple of decades to track developments in the translation of Slavic and East European languages.