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Orientating the Reader: Ivan Bunin and the Émigré Eye. An Analysis of Ivan Bunin's Short Story *Graffiti*

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Овај рад представља покушај да се анализира стилистичка дихотомија индивидуалне изведбе у односу на колективни систем, посматрана према географској локацији и имену места. Узимајући опаску Џонатана Свифта о 'одговарајућим речима на одговарајућим местима' као полазну тачку, питање стила се разматра у односу на стварни процес читања и (унапред створено) знање које је читалац стекао из спољних извора. Примери су узети из песме Едварда Томаса *Adlestrop* и кратке приче Ивана Буњина *Граффити*, из оригинала и из једног превода на енглески. Аутор се нада да ће овим радом подићи свест о значају географских властитих именица у преводу и њихове 'стилистичке' функције.

✦ Кључне речи:
style, register.

If one is to simplify the whole shooting match and boil stylistics down to the phonetical, grammatical, and lexical features which distinguish a text, register, genre, or situation; if one is to argue that the whole debate hinges on the understanding of appropriateness or appropriacy, and that for everyone, the translator included, the choices that are taken have to incorporate criteria of *situation, occasion, subject matter* and *audience*, then one could do far worse

than take Ivan Bunin's short story *Nadpisi* (in English *Graffiti*) as an example of the problems, both temporally and linguistically in locating one's *audience*, and of providing them with a sense of *situation* and *occasion*.

That geographical orientation is not the easiest of things for the reader, whether in translation or not, is borne out by J. R. R. Tolkien's *Trilogy – The Lord of the Rings*, where both the author and subsequent

Middle Earth scholars and enthusiasts have attempted a graphical representation of the *Shire* and Frodo's wanderings to *Mordor* – something that recognizes the complexities of 'visually' locating oneself in a totally fictional setting. Nobody is asking the translator to draw maps, or even rough sketches, but Swift's remark on *proper words in proper places* can be taken to mean more than the business of politeness and register. It is of interest to consider the question of place names and translation. In the way that no particular work is devoid of a certain cultural and stylistic rooting, then equally little of world literature is so 'universal' in message to have no backcloth, no geographical markers, in short no setting. Novels unfold somewhere, and this in essence represents no problems, the reader of literature in translation invariably is looking for that very exotic reference point – *Last Tango in Preston* not being quite the same thing. With the translator of literature attempting to convey that very stylistic thing – *Last Tango in Preston* being definitely not the same thing.

Nadpisi is reflection upon the supposed banality, and pettiness, of 'ordinary' scribblers; upon those who have chosen to deface walls, mirrors, railway carriages to leave 'their mark', to escape the spatial and temporal limits of their existence to extend themselves beyond the 'stylistic' categorizations of their class and background. The story raises the interesting question as to whether style is linked to place; whether it is part and parcel of the physical location of the protagonists and their scribbling (here the mindless epitaphs of tourists) and whether there is any stylistic difference between the way something is written, where it is written and when it is/ was written. Iliana Vladova has pointed out in *Essential features and specific manifestations of histori-*

cal distance in original texts and their translations that

Like authors and translators readers are also connected to a concrete historical medium and concrete conditions that have shaped their consciousness, their aesthetic tastes and reactions and therefore also their ability to grasp a certain original produced within definite temporal parameters (Vladova in: Zlateva 1993: 16–17).

This is a problem of style and register, and one that ultimately boils down to class. As Bunin points out:

Имя Иванова, написанное на могильном кресте, конечно, звучит иначе, чем тогда, когда оно написано на садовой скамейке или в ресторане. А ведь, в сущности, все человеческие надписи суть эпитафии, поскольку касаются момента уж прошедшего, частицы жизни уже умершей (*Надписи*: 326).

Of course, the name Ivanov on a gravestone has a different ring from when it's written on a garden seat or in a restaurant. But, you know, at bottom all human inscriptions are epitaphs, inasmuch as they refer to moments which have already gone, to particles of a life which is already dead (*The Gentleman from San Francisco and Other Stories*: 99).

And when one examines it, if the message is the same and it is only the medium, in terms of the register and 'style' adopted, that alters meaning, that the message is all but identical, how is the translator, especially given the complications linked to he him-

self belonging to a particular age and style, choose a stylistic medium to convey the strength of ‘moments which have already gone, [...] particles of a life which is already dead’? In graphically categorizing ‘style’, one could initially think of the uncomplicated ‘black’ and ‘white’ division of *style* and *usage* into positive and negative blocks:

| Positive (+) | Negative (-) |
|--|--|
| good, rich, elegant, refined, careful, precise | bad, poor, crude, vulgar, sloppy, slovenly |

Yet this division into ‘good’ and ‘bad’, into ‘high’, ‘middle’ or ‘low’ is rather complicated when both temporally and spatially the translator, and subsequently the reader, is alienated from the original. For Bunin the matter is clear:

Они то длинны, то кратки, то горды, то скромны, даже чрезмерно скромны, то пышны, то просты, то загадочны, то как нельзя более точны, то без всяких дат, то с датами, говорящими не только о месяце и годе того или иного события, но даже о числе, о часе; они то пошлы, то изумительны по силе, глубине, поэзии, выраженной иногда в какой-нибудь одной строке, которая во сто раз ценнее многих и многих так называемых великих произведений словесности. В конец же концов все эти несметные и столь друг на друга непохожие человеческие следы производят поразительно одинаковое впечатление. Так что если уж смеяться, то следует смеяться надо всеми. В Риме в таверне написано: “Здесь ели и пили в прошлом столетии писатель Гоголь и художник Иванов”, далеко не седьмой, как изволите знать. А не сохранилось

ли надписи на подоконнике в Миргороде о том, что в позапрошлом столетии некто кушал однажды с отменным удовольствием дыню? Весма возможно. И, по-моему, между этими двумя надписями нет ровно никакой разницы... (Надписи: 324).

They may be long or short, proud or humble – even over-humble; they may be magnificent or simple, enigmatic or scrupulously precise; sometimes they are undated, sometimes they have dates which give not only the month and the year of an event but even the day and the hour; they can be banal or quite astonishing in their power, depth and poetry, which finds expression at times in a single line worth a hundred times more than many a so-called great work of literature. In the end, though, all these countless and so different human traces produce a strikingly similar impression. Consequently, if you’re going to laugh, then you ought to laugh at all of them. There’s a *taverna* in Rome with the words: “Here in the last century Gogol the writer and Ivanov the painter ate and drank” – not by any means your Ivanov the Seventh, as indeed you all know. And aren’t there inscriptions preserved on a window-sill in Mirgorod to the effect that in the century before last someone once ate a melon with supreme pleasure? It’s very likely. And in my opinion there’s absolutely no difference between these two inscriptions... (*The Gentleman from San Francisco and Other Stories*: 96).

So where does the difference lie? In taking Jonathen Swift’s remark upon ‘proper words in proper places’ with an understanding of ‘place’ as geographical location then

we are nearing the crux of the matter. For positive and negative evaluations of style have as much to do with who said them and *where* they were said as they have to do with the dictionary charged meaning of the word themselves. So where are we, and how do we 'access' the stylistic import of 'place'?

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The question appears at its most difficult in the stylistic evaluation of *obscure* geographical markers. What is the reader, and by necessity the translator to do with works where there is an abundance of *obscure* geographical markers, markers that are not ambivalently thrown into a work to add atmosphere, but rather constitute an important historical, recollective, or geographical reference for the author? After all nothing appears in a novel or short story by chance. Writers do not simply 'produce', they polish, perfect, pick and ponder every word, sentence, reference and possible innuendo. And if something is not there directly, consciously, then it refers to something unconsciously observed, yet ultimately important. The shutter of one's mind is not 'randomly' more or less open, those moments recorded are recorded, remembered and subsequently recalled for a reason. In a word nothing is left to chance.

He looked without interest in obedience to a stranger's direction, and it seemed to him that no particular interest attached to the squat grey-haired man walking alone up Bond Street. He couldn't tell that this was one of those occasions a man never forgets: a small cicatrice had been made on the memory, a wound that would ache whenever certain things combined – the taste of gin at midday, the smell of flowers under a balcony, the clang of corrugated iron, an ugly bird flopping from perch to

perch (Graham Greene *The Heart of the Matter*: 13).

The question relates to whether the reader should be 'given' a secondary, subjective helping hand in unearthing the significance of given 'locations', and here the translator's only resort is to footnotes or internal text elaboration, or whether the reader himself is to be expected to refer to dictionaries, encyclopaedias, atlases, if so inclined. Or maybe it should be taken that if one is 'perverse' enough to read literature in translation, one should know where they are talking about from the very start. The potential reader – his needs, aspirations and knowledge – is an extremely important consideration when translating.

The author, the translator, and the reader [...] all have their own concept of the information that is not just embodied in the original message, but inextricably bound to it. In the process of communication they enter into different relationships with regards to categories of space and time (in: Zlateva 1993: 14).

The fundamental problem arises, however, in the actual process of reading. The reading process can be paralleled to the process of watching vehicles move along a busy road. If one stands at a window that commands a view of a busy highway and one watches a car that passes one from left to right one's eyes appear to move smoothly because they are focused on the car. If one waits until there is no traffic and one pretends to follow an imaginary car as it moves from left to right then anyone observing one's eyes while one does this will say that the eyes move in a series of small jerks. The same is the case with reading. As one reads a line of print, from left to right, one's eyes

make a series of small jerky movements. This is caused by the eyes resting, momentarily, upon each word or group of words. Called 'fixations' they last for approximately a third of a second. Slow readers fixate upon every word in order to understand, efficient readers, however, have learned to widen their 'eye span' to take in written material more in terms of groups than single words.

We read faster than we think, by which I mean that our ability to process information appears to be much faster than our ability to reproduce, or retell that self same information. What a reader does and what a translator does are two totally different things. Though both read a text the former 'enjoys' the content, while the other chews over the said while juggling with form. The translator is dealing with questions of not simply *what* the author wrote, but has to answer *how* and possibly *why* the author wrote the said. One can easily read a passage written in a foreign language and con-

fidently feel that one has understood the entirety, yet to transfer this actively, by which I mean the process of finding equivalent words in *one's own language* – to actively *recount* – is in no way as easy. This is where the translator and the reader fundamentally differ. Not so much in language competency, but rather in the need to home in on detail. The reader can miss things that the translator's reputations rests entirely upon. Like a sapper a translator can make but one serious mistake. He must fixate more carefully, something that does not derive from 'reading inefficiency' but from the need to control the temptation to see texts purely in terms of wholes and parts.

An interesting example of a text where not only are geographical markers important, but in a way constitute the whole purpose of the text, is Edward Thomas' *Adlestrop*. A poem that was included within the nation's top one hundred poems in a BBC poll conducted in 1996.

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Adlestrop by Edward Thomas

Yes. I remember Adlestrop —
The name, because one afternoon
Of heat the express-train drew up there
Unwontedly. It was late June.

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat
No one left and no one came
On the bare platform. What I saw
Was Adlestrop – only the name

And willows, willow-herb, and grass,
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,
No whit less still and lonely fair
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang
Close by, and round him, mistier,
Farther and farther, all the birds
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.



Here we have but three geographical labels: Adlestrop – a village just inside the Gloucestershire border near Stow-on-the-Wold, and the two counties themselves – Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire. Granted, obscurer poetry is invariably read by the enthusiast, who on the whole has more than a passing acquaintance with the country and setting for a work, but can the translator take this for granted? Should not the translator ‘add’ to the force of his translation by explaining why *Adlestrop*, why *Gloucestershire* and *Oxfordshire*? Though one could equally ask whether *anyone* knows what Adlestrop means to an average Englishman given that Thomas died 85 years ago. What would an Englishman of today know about the associations of name and rural setting? Would he be able to list the characteristics of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire circa Thomas? Would he even know necessarily what a *haycock* is? And if he knew the name could he conjure up the image?

Edward Thomas in composing his most important work, for some a work that best captures the innocence of the English countryside pre-World War One, chooses consciously

His prose and poetry captures and records this world – a world that was to be destroyed for ever by the advent of the First World War. Without consciously prophesying, Thomas’ verse senses the passing of this rural world (*The Works of Edward Thomas* 1994: 10).

If the choice of countryside pre-World War I, and the selection of Oxfordshire, Gloucestershire, and Adlestrop is paramount to understanding the poet’s message then any potential translator should supply additional information explaining the said. In a word there would need to be

footnotes if only to explain where Oxfordshire, Gloucestershire, and Adlestrop are, and the rural nature, especially true in the era Thomas wrote, of the three. Without this the rural significance of the names is lost. As Thomas composed in the trenches of Flanders awaiting an almost certain death, so Ivan Bunin was to sit later in France condemned to the irretrievable sentence of exile. Both focused upon a world that was lost, and because of its irretrievability a world that was increasingly linked to the concrete names and places of their youth.

Then one evening the new moon made a difference ... At one stroke, I thought, like many other people, what things the same new moon sees eastward about the Meuse in France. Of those who could see it there, not blinded by smoke, pain or excitement, how many saw it and heeded? ... it seemed to me that either I had never loved England, or I had loved it foolishly, aesthetically, like a slave, not having realised that it was not mine unless I were willing and prepared to die rather than leave it...’ (*The Works of Edward Thomas* 1994: 11).

It is true that we read too quickly. To the point whereby we fail to notice detail. The translator reads slower, has to read slower, should read slower; for he has to make sense out of what appears to be to the reader a rush of seemingly unimportant detail. The job of the translator is to decide when detail is important and when it is not. Where to add emphasis and when to add additional explanation. When one reads a story, when one listens to a story, one concentrates on what is being told, on the content, while when a translator reads a story he is concentrating on the content as well as the form. In point of fact the transla-

tor not only reads slower, but several times; something endorsed by Nabokov who, in *Lectures on Literature*, not only raises the need to read a work at least twice, but asks the reader whether he notices those 'details' that were certainly not 'included' accidentally. Among the works selected we are asked questions to show the lack of 'care' taken while reading: what was the colour of the poison taken by Madame Bovary? And why is it important? Because Flaubert, seemingly in passing, had listed prior to her suicide the colours of the objects that surrounded her together with their emotional tone. Nabokov draws maps, plans, sketches – in an attempt to visually ascertain the writer's intention: which direction does Dr Jekyll take when walking down his street as himself, and which in the form of Mr Hyde? Does the second exit exist beyond the first, or behind the second corner, or could it belong to the property's façade? How far does Fanny's trap travel from Jane Austin's *Mansfield Park*? What are the colours, dimensions and degrees of cloud that feature in Dicken's *Bleak House*? All in all we miss things. Things the translator cannot afford to miss. For

...translators must reflect the dialectics of historical development, ideas, language, and artistic devices (Vladova in: Zlateva 1993: 15).

So how deep should the translator rummage in search for meaning?

Bunin's story *Graffiti* is the account of reflections upon the need for man to leave his mark in the banal form of etching his initials, a message, or some vulgarism upon the walls of the world. Its inclusion in a collection of short stories translated into English is of interest because it constitutes the most 'geographically cluttered' of the

pieces. On the whole Bunin's setting, be it Marseille or Moscow is secondary to the romantically recollective description of all-humanity. Yet here the names, and they are obscure, not only awaken the reader from the atmospheric induced sleep of stories like *Sunstroke* and *A Cold Autumn* but makes him ponder about the deluge of place references, both Western European and Russian.

We have the Rhine and the reference that:

Чувствительный немец свято чтит эти узаконенные путеводителями 'места с прекрасным видом', *schöne Aussicht*. И считает неременным долгом расписаться был и любовался Фриц такой-то (*Надписи*: 323).

"Every sensitive German religiously honours these 'places with a beautiful view' – *schöne Aussicht*, as the guide books categorize them – and considers it his inescapable duty to write his name: 'Fritz so-and-so was here'" (*The Gentleman from San Francisco and Other Stories*: 95).

And then the geographical location shifts:

Все мы засмеялись и, вспоминая некоторые крымские и кавказские места, особенно излюбленные расписывающимися Ивановыми... (*Надписи*: 323).

We all laughed and, recalling various places in the Crimea and the Caucasus which are especially favoured by inscribing Ivanovs... (*The Gentleman from San Francisco and Other Stories*: 95).

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And the Russian theme takes over:

Надписи на колоколе в заштатном городе Чернаве (*Надписи*: 324).

Inscriptions on a bell in the downgraded town of Chernava (*The Gentleman from San Francisco and Other Stories*: 96–97).

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Каракули карандашом на голубце возле одного святого колодца в непролазной глуши Керженских лесов “Поситили грешный Ефим и Прасковья” (*Надписи*: 324).

A penciled scrawl on the azurite beside a holy well in the impenetrable depths of the Kerzhenets forest: “visited by the sinners Yefim and Praskovya” (*The Gentleman from San Francisco and Other Stories*: 97).

Тысячи имен и инициалов на старых деревьях и на скамейках в усадьбах и городах, в Орле и Кисловодске, в Царском Селе и в Ореанде, в Нескучном и в Версале, в Веймаре и Риме, в Дрездене и Палермо (*Надписи*: 324–325).

Thousands of names and initials on old trees and on seats in country estates and cities, in Oryol and Kislovodsk, in Tsarskoye Selo and Oreanda, in Neskuchny and Versailles, Weimar and Rome, Dresden and Palermo (*The Gentleman from San Francisco and Other Stories*: 97).

Я глядел на эти надгробные паспорта в степях и пустынях, на Чернавском погосте и на Константинопольских Полях Смерти, на Волковом

кладбище и под Дамаском, где среди песков стоят несметные рогатые бугорки из глины в виде седла, в московском Донском монастыре и в Иосафатовой долине под Иерусалимом, в Петропавловском соборе и в катакомбах на Аппиевой дороге, на берегах Бретани и в сирийских криптах, над прахом Данте и над могилой дурочки Фени в Задонске (*Надписи*: 325).

I’ve gazed on these sepulchral passports in steppes and deserts, in the Chernava graveyard and in the Constantinople Fields of Death, at the Volkovo cemetery and outside Damascus, where countless saddle-shaped, horned hills of clay stand out amid the sands, in Moscow’s Donskoy Monastery and in the Valley of Jehoshaphat near Jerusalem, in the Peter-and-Paul Cathedral and the catacombs along the Appian Way, on the shores of Brittany and in Syrian Crypts, over Dante’s remains and over the grave of an idiot called Fenya in Zadonsk (*The Gentleman from San Francisco and Other Stories*: 97).

Do we, the readers, need to know where Chernava is? Is it of importance, and here in relation to the philosophical message behind Bunin’s story, to know the size, tree type and climatic location of the *Kerzhenets forest*? The English text provides no explanation either in footnotes or a commentary to aid the reader in geographically locating himself. There is equally no explanation as to where Moscow, Versailles, Dresden and Palermo are. Maybe we should know, or maybe it is simply not important where they are. Bunin being fully aware that most people have difficulty in writing in the names of the major cities of their own country let alone those of Europe or the world.

Yet is Bunin's choice deliberate? Does it possibly contain the significance of the colour of the poison in *Madame Bovary*? Is anything ever random? Should the translator take the trouble to track down these places, to at least put his mind at rest that they exist, or are merely the fictional fancies of the writer? And it is Bunin himself who asks the questions posed by this paper:

Казалось бы, зачем они расписались? И что мне в этой Прасковье в этом Ефиме? (*Надписи*: 326).

I might well have asked why they wrote their names, and what that Praskovya and that Yefim meant to me (*The Gentleman from San Francisco and Other Stories*: 98).

In the way that we might ask why Bunin chose the names for his own short story. Could the names have been replaced by others? Can we start to talk of geographical names in the same terms we do of *realia*?

Realia (from the Latin *realis*) are words and combinations of words denoting objects and concepts characteristic of the way of life, the culture, the social and historical development of one nation and alien to another. Since they express local and/ or historical color they have no exact equivalence in other languages. They cannot be translated in a conventional way and they require a special approach (Sider Florin *Realia in Translation* in: Zlateva 1993: 123).

And if we can then is there anything that can be done to make them more accessible to the reader in translation? Or does it actually matter. The reader is invariably reading at a speed that does not allow him

to ponder the significance of detail. Instead he merely registers that a name was foreign, but how foreign, from where and what its significance is, is lost with the next 'fixation'. As Bunin's hero notes:

Нет, надписи на зеркалах меня ужасно всегда трогали. Трогали и инициалы на скамейках и деревьях, вырезанные тоже по случаю того что когда-то "была чудесная весна" и "хороша и бледна, как лилея, в той аллее стояла она". Тут опять то же самое: не все ли равно чьи имена чьи инициалы, – Гете или Фрица, Огарева или Епиходова, Лизы из "Дворянского гнезда" или ее горничной? (*Надписи*: 326–327).

I have always found inscriptions on mirrors terribly moving! In the same way as initials on seats and trees carved to commemorate the fact that "*It was a wonderful spring,*" that "*Like a lily, white and fair, Among the trees stood she.*" Again that's just the same. Does it matter whose are the names or the initials – Goethe's or Fritz's, Ogaryov's or Epikhodov's, Lisa's (from *A Nest of Gentry*) or her maid's? (*The Gentleman from San Francisco and Other Stories*: 99).

It is almost as if the geographical locations here constitute the style. The contrast between the lofty and the banal, the high and mighty and the low and insignificant. That the reference to the obscure is in contrast to the citing of well-known place names. That in Bunin it is to display and explore the very same questions posed by use of synonym. Here place names constitute the register of contrast for literary style. The question is not whether the choice of synonym or syntactic structure results in a

change in meaning but whether the choice of location does. A choice that results in the same prejudices as the inappropriate choice of word. As Bunin's 'little old senator' asks:

Вас приводит в негодование проявление пошлости обывательщины как говорят в подобных случаях дерзость мещанина прикладывающего свою руку всюду где он ни ступит?

– В негодование я не прихожу, – сказала дама, но что надписи эти в до-

статочной мере противны, не скрываю (*Надписи*: 325).

'Are you aroused to indignation by this display of banality, or vulgarity as people call such things, by the impudence of the ordinary citizen, putting his mark wherever he goes?'

'I'm not indignant,' said the lady, 'but I won't deny that I find these inscriptions rather repulsive' (*The Gentleman from San Francisco and Other Stories*: 97).

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резюме

Σ **Ориентация читателя: Иван Бунин и наблюдательность эмигранта.**
Анализ краткого рассказа Бунина *Надписи*

Статья представляет собой попытку анализа рассказа Ивана Бунина *Надписи* в свете знаний потенциального читателя по географии.

Автор статьи показывает сложность процесса географической ориентировки читателя, воспринимающего – как в переводе, так и в подлиннике – тексты, язык которых не является для него родным. Автор задается вопросом, какова моральная ответственность переводчика за указания, даваемые читателю, а следовательно – за то, что он ведет читателя в каком-то определенном направлении.

Путем анализа самого процесса чтения, а также роли, какую в работах отдельных переводчиков и литературных критиков играют примечания и карты, автор надеется указать на различие между актами чтения рядового читателя и профессионального переводчика. Это различие приводит порой к необходимости селективного подчеркивания того, что (естественно, субъективно) считается переводчиком существенным.

Этот отбор заметно влияет на способность читателя сосредотачиваться и наблюдать. Он также приводит иногда к возникновению резко отличающихся друг от друга вариантов одного произведения.

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