



Broj 3 / Književno prevođenje / Joyce Ellen Turner - Running With a Trot: Editing a Poem in Russian and Kyrgyz by Turusbek Madilbay

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Introduction: What Can be Learned from Editing a Trot?

In fine-tuning Turusbek Madilbay's rough dictionary translation (a 'trot') I became convinced that a good match between writers and editors or translators is essential. I imagine it's tempting for a writer to throw up her hands, to abdicate responsibility and let the publishing houses use their stock translators, but I recommend that creative writers learn about the process of translation in order to find the best partner for putting their work into another language. The responsibility must never rest solely with the translator, who is always working with limited information and within temporal and fiscal constraints. It's always, to some degree, piecemeal. I hope it's not a breach of publishing protocol to read reviews of work by, and to solicit samples from, several literary translators, and then choose among them. A beginner will do the job more cheaply, but will the skill be there? Do not leave the job to chance.

My spotty linguistic background was well-suited to working with a trot. I have never achieved true fluency in a language besides my native English. I have, however, studied academically, at one time or another, French, Ancient Greek and Latin. I have achieved a certain linguistic flexibility from them well as from tourist phrases which I have learned in Spanish, Italian, Greek, Turkish and Arabic. When vocabulary and grammar fail me, I can at least spot word roots and cognates. (I credit Latin teachers' use of Caesar's ciphers for my irrational belief that no overheard phrase in a foreign tongue can be as mundane as 'I think the pickles are on the next aisle' but instead must be, in significance, on par with an aphorism about crossing the Rubicon.)

Background: International Translation Workshop 181:205

Exactly how *does* one become paired with a trot, instead of with a foreign-language text? The answer in my case has an interesting history; it is a result of decisions made in the 1960s to create as much cross-cultural interaction as possible in a short amount of time. Two historically-intertwined programs at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, Iowa, have drawn thousands of emerging writers from across the United States and the world at large. Founded in 1936, the Iowa Writers' Workshop (IWW) was the first college program in the United States to offer master's degrees for creative writing. Across the country and the world, it has become a much-replicated model. The International Writing Program (IWP) was founded in 1967 by one of the IWW's former directors, Paul Engle, and his wife Hualing Engle.

Shambaugh House, the Queen Anne building which houses the IWP, is on the east side of North Clinton Street. The Victorian-style Dey House, another repurposed former private residence which is the home of the IWW, faces the IWP from the west. With these programs less than a minute apart by foot, and the MFA-granting Translation Workshop program on campus as well, it's easy for lovers of language to cross paths, and nearly impossible that they won't. A popular academic offering for IWW students and others is the course entitled 'International Translation Workshop 181:205.' Its online description reads:

[It] pairs off writers from abroad... with writer-translators from the University of Iowa to create new works of poetry and fiction in English... Students don't need to be fluent in another language to participate; they only need to be excited by the prospect of working closely with a writer whose native language is other than English.

In designing it many years ago, IWP Director Paul Engle found a pragmatic solution to the challenge of fostering collaboration between people of different linguistic backgrounds. As a former director of Iowa's Translation Workshop, Daniel Weissbort, writes:

[the course] was intended to bring together 'people with creative talent (who, in some instances, may not even know the language being translated) with a poet native to the language. Together they attempted a version in

English which tried to be partly as imaginative as the original... Paul Engle had pioneered, through the Translation Workshop, this 'tandem method' of translating poetry (*Translation: Theory and Practice: A Historical Reader*, pg. 612).

Today course 181:205 still accommodates Paul Engle's 'tandem method', but now many students are in fact multi-lingual. The texts to be translated remain the poems, short stories, novel excerpts, and screenplays written by the visiting international writers, who arrive each August for three-month residencies. These writers, who numbered 38 in 2010, have published a minimum of one book and are expected to devote their time to their personal creative projects. They don't enroll in academic courses, but are encouraged to work on a short-term basis with students in 181:205.

Meeting Turusbek Madilbay: The Challenges of a Trot

Our professor's description of match day was correct - it *was* like a high-school dance, and miscommunication and rejection were in full swing. The elegant wood-paneled reading room in Shambaugh House echoed with the chatter of anxious students and nervous international writers. Since I'd read selections from writers' works posted on the IWP website, I had tentatively planned to work with Alan Cheresov, a Russian novelist, or Miloszc Biedrzyzski, a Polish poet. Alan politely told me he was looking for someone who actually knew Russian, but poor Miloszc just fled mutely across the room (twice) when, middle-aged and dressed-up, I lumbered hopefully toward him, smiling broadly but obviously unable to speak Polish. The towering Icelander, Sölvi Björn Sigurdsson, likewise wanted someone who spoke his native language. Paul Engle's bronze bust seemed to watch the proceedings with concern.

A solidly-built man in his fifties sat in a chair planted by the door. The IWP bio sheet identified him as Turusbek Madilbay, from Kyrgyzstan. I had not read his work. He smiled a wallflower's hopeful grin, flashing a row of bright gold front teeth. We spoke, haltingly, respectfully, the way one does when the gulf between language and life experience puts the superior at an embarrassing disadvantage. Turusbek asked me to put his Russian trots into smoother English. I immediately agreed. I felt a bit let-off-the-hook. How hard could it be to edit a trot?

“Granted, some literary theorists consider it a waste of time to consider biographical information. As anyone with a writer acquaintance knows, there is a danger in reading too much into a personality...

It must be rare to meet the writer whose work one is translating or editing: often the geographical distance is too great, or the work is from an earlier era and the writer is deceased. When I saw the poem "Rain" in its original languages, the Cyrillic letters seemed part puzzle, part hieroglyphics. In the absence of understanding the Russian or Kyrgyz languages, I tried to understand the poet himself. To what degree, if any, was his work concealed behind masks? If it was densely layered, achieving more than a superficial appreciation might be difficult for me. Editing the trot to retain such complexity would be even harder. Ever the student, I considered what I could learn.

Coming from a landlocked Asian country, a former Soviet republic, was he operating from literary assumptions I'd never encountered? If so, perhaps understanding them could send my own work in a new direction. As I met with him to discuss the trot, as I watched him reading his own work at the IWP, I was trying to find his artistic wavelength. Granted, some literary theorists consider it a waste of time to consider biographical information. As anyone with a writer acquaintance knows, there is a danger in reading too much into a personality. But I had little else to work with. Was Turusbek an academic poet, tinkering with language and theory, cultivating intertextual references unintelligible to few outside the Ivory Tower, or an earthy type, inspired by breathtaking pastoral scenes in his home country?

He fell between these extremes. His own intellectual channels, formed a decade or so before mine, sculpted in rivers across the world, nevertheless bore some of their curves, some of their gentle striations. He had translated Mark Twain, Guy de Maupassant, Paul Verlaine and many others into the Kyrgyz language. His short poem "Three Old Men" (not included here) addressed the intellectual obligations passed down to us by Leonardo da Vinci, Leo Tolstoy and Rabindranath Tagore. He had a fatherly, mature air; he was clearly not a young poet merely eager to make a name for himself, but was deeply concerned with the fate of his country and his people.

I felt protective, therefore, of his poems' sincerity. They weren't linguistic puzzles. Nor did they demand multiple readings to unlock layers of meaning. To help pinpoint word stresses, I later made a recording of Turusbek reading his work. Only in the final line of "Rain" did his tone of voice contain irony, and it was gentle, not bitter. My main challenge, then, became to preserve the appropriate tone when addressing such serious subject matter.

Letting Go of the Idea that a Perfect Translation Exists

Essays we read for class, "Postface" by Daniel Weissbort and "Anonymous Sources: A Talk on Translators and Translation" by Eliot Weinberger, provided our introduction to the questions one often asks when delving headlong into translation. The book by Eliot Weinberger and Octavio Paz, *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei: How a Chinese Poem is Translated* (1987), offered critical commentary on multiple translations of a short poem. Having read these, I quickly relinquished my naive notion that there is a perfect correspondent text in each language to the parent one, a shimmering Platonic ideal to approach but never reach, akin to shortening the distance in Zeno's paradox. Going between languages is a complex undertaking. Most important, it seems, is to remain calm once the complexities and nuances of the field of literary translation emerge. As in any endeavor, one learns by error. A beginner's mistake, which I'm not sure I avoided entirely, is to pick a simple word which does the job of a longer phrase, but which inadvertently changes the rhythm, speeds up the poem just where the poet intends us to linger and admire. A similar mistake is to add too many words or syllables and slow the poem in the wrong place. Or to reduce the hard-won epiphany to a mere platitude.

In observing our translation class struggling with texts from multiple languages, I concluded that the pragmatic American quest for efficiency can most certainly be one of the most insidious threats to artistic expression. Art operates on a different level than the workaday world. Likewise, in another era, a different cultural value, not efficiency but some other trait reflecting a different world-view (extreme piety, strict utilitarianism, etc.) would most certainly attempt to dominate and require the utmost vigilance against itself.

It seems that one should also make sure a translator understands the finer conventions of the field, whether it be poetry, fiction or non-fiction, so as not to undermine them by neglect and reduce the quality of the writing. And, conversely, wouldn't a *better* poet-translator find it difficult to resist the temptation to improve? Or change drastically, to make a hybrid beast, a sort of Gordon Lish / Raymond Carver construction? I wondered what problems Turusbek confronted as he worked out his trot.

The Trot: by Turusbek

RAIN

The drops of rain are falling and falling: 1
Maybe it is true - in the refuges of paradise 2
Someone cries looking on the Earth, rending by tears the heart of the planet. 3
Maybe it is true - all of us are guilty, 4
We too have made a mess with our sins. 5
And our world clock has struck as it promised: 6
We perceived the world, but we have forgotten about conscience 7
And it sobs and it calls us to march out 8
convening the people by trumpet voice of sufferings. 9
The ship of the universe is floating further and further, 10
Promising to all of us the happiness in the future... 11
Our planet, as if a small boat in infinite space, 12
As if that Noah's ark, floating to the Promised Land, 13
And we, living on it, are similar to future inhabitants of eternal paradise 14
saved from the Flood. 15
Only something prevents us to reach there: 16
Whether sins with which we made a mess, 17
Whether lost somewhere conscience. 18
And we each time find ourselves on the brink of an outspread precipice, 19
lifting up our hands to the sky, 20
And we ask mercy of the one who cries for all of us somewhere there. 21
He cries for the lost human values, 22
He cries for the downtrodden human lives, 23
He cries for shame, about which we have forgotten, 24
He cries for honour, which we have betrayed, 25
He cries for love, which we sold off, 26
He cries for kindness, which trails along the ground, 27
He cries for a song, still not sung, 28

He cries for a string, still not brushed, 29
 He cries for feelings, still not expressed, 30
 He cries for words, still not spoken, 31
 He cries for sorrow, still not touched, 32
 He cries for the pleasure still not understood, 33
 He cries for the leaves, still not fallen, 34
 He cries for the bunches of grapes, still not matured, 35
 He cries for the well, early dried, 36
 He cries for the plough-land, still not touched by a plough, 37
 He cries for the dew which has not had time to evaporate, 38
 He cries for a meadow, never mowed, 39
 He cries for a bird, not yet singing a song, 40
 He cries for a call, not achieving its object, 41
 He cries for a palm, lifted up to the sky, 42
 He cries for eyes, sad from melancholy, 43
 He cries for children, early orphaned, 44
 He cries for the widows, not having happiness, 45
 He cries for the old men, forgotten by their children, 46
 He cries for the men, killed on the war, 47
 He cries for the city, all in ruins, 48
 He cries for the settlement, flaring in a fire, 49
 He cries for the peoples, disappearing from the earth's surface, 50
 He cries for the countries, destroying each other. 51

 And the drops of rain are falling and falling... 52

Editing the Trot: The Process

The poem "Rain" is more philosophical than imagistic or confessional. It does not cloak itself behind impossibly obscure references which put the speaker at odds with the reader. The fact that Turusbek chooses the very grandest of canvases, the entire Universe, is admirable in its ambition. One student who workshopped my edited trot phrased the tone as 'high church,' comparing it to the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. I agree that the poem seemed influenced not only by the Bible, but by the sweeping vistas and free verse of Walt Whitman, and I was determined not to reduce it to anything smaller and more knowable.

The original trot was Turusbek's work. Interestingly, lines 1-21 were written in Kyrgyz; lines 22-52 in Russian, creating an effect I thought couldn't be reproduced in English. My first draft included very few changes because I was afraid of altering the poet's voice. Encouraged by Turusbek and my class, I became bolder. To distinguish the two languages, a professor in workshop suggested I put the first part in elegiac meter. Easier said than done!

Working on the second draft, which appears in this paper, I double-spaced the trot and scanned the meter. I pasted the poem to a blank document and highlighted words or phrases where readers had suggested changes. In most cases I humbly took their advice, conceding I might be over my head, and others might indeed know better. Perhaps I *could* create couplets for elegiac meter. I wrote out the main words in each line (fall, drops, rain; true, paradise, refuges; etc.) and looked for rhymes. After a fair amount of struggle, I had this:

/ - - / - - / - - / - -

Raindrops and raindrops are falling and falling so

/ - - / - -

maybe it's true that in

/ - - / - - - / / - / - -

Paradise's refuge oh so far yes so very far

- - / - - / - - / - - / - - / - - / - - / - - /

There is someone there looking on Earth, as he melts with his tears not gone

Not only was this very time-consuming, nothing rhymed, and the lines resembled lyrics from a disco song. Backing out of this dead end, I returned to my classmates' suggestions. I was both charmed and alarmed to see my own voice appearing, to see the poem's energy retained but its style becoming more contemporary - and these changes felt enormously transgressive, like breaking a law.

Adopting the most radical suggestion, I dropped the initial pronoun 'he' from lines 23 to line 49 because the shape of the 'c' in 'cries', and its hard consonant sound, resemble the falling of rain (and tears). Some of the incantatory sense was sacrificed, however. A big challenge was the poem's multiple metaphors: paradise and its refuges, the planet's heart, the global clock, the trumpet voice, the ship of the universe, Noah's ark. I eliminated the trumpet reference in the interest of reducing the number of metaphors. However, this removed the dramatic allusion to Gideon's trumpet. When possible, I used contractions - in line 2, for example - because without them, the poem's slow pace detracted from the ideas and images. I was handicapped by knowing none of the linguistic characteristics of Kyrgyz and Russian, and so I worked with full knowledge that a fluent translator could make better, more informed choices, and I wondered from time to time what those might be.

Assuming a target readership similar to the demographic of my classmates, who were well-educated students in their 20s and 30s, I adopted some phrases which would appeal to the young: 'global' instead of 'world' in line 6 (this also removed the repetition of 'world' in line 7), 'ripe' for 'matured' in line 35, 'field' for 'plough-land' in line 37, 'response' for 'object' in line 41, 'hesitating to sing' for 'not yet singing a song' in line 40.

Another change was 'burst into flames' for 'flaring in a fire' on line 49. But the question remains: if 'flaring in a fire' gets the sense across, and if it has the added benefit of alliteration, and is more visual (and more dramatic, verging on melodrama) was I justified in making this change in the interest of a phrase familiar to the American ear? It seems that the closer language approaches the vernacular, the less it is likely to be misunderstood, but the less likely the reader will pick up on the signal that the author is being reverent.

Another example of the agonies of choice: I could have retained Turusbek's repetition of 'still' in lines 28-35, but the string of negation might feel soporific in English. Plus, the word 'still' is a static term, enhancing the effect of a lack of motion. But perhaps, upon reflection, that momentary paralysis was intentional and I unwittingly destroyed that effect. And this is precisely what I found to be of such value in participating in the course: the understanding that it's impossible for a translator not to make such human choices, and that if a writer wants to maintain control, he should find out the degree to which the translator takes liberties such as these. Is it important to make the register as 'young' as possible, or would a more standardized vocabulary wear better, and prevent it from becoming dated?

The reader can judge:

Final Edited Version

Rain

The drops of rain are falling, falling 1
Maybe it's true - in paradise, that refuge 2
Someone looks on Earth and cries, his tears melting the planet's heart. 3
Maybe it's true - we are all guilty 4
We too have made a mess with our sins. 5
And the global clock struck as promised. 6
We saw it coming but forgot our conscience 7
And the clock sobs and begs us to go forth 8
Assembling the people with a suffering voice. 9
The ship of the universe is floating farther and farther, 10
Promising to us all happiness in the future... 11
Our planet is like a small boat on an endless sea 12
Like Noah's ark, floating to the Promised Land, 13
And we, living on it, resemble future inhabitants of eternal paradise 14
Saved from the Flood. 15
But something prevents our reaching it: 16
Either the sins with which we made a mess 17
Or conscience, which we lost, somewhere. 18
And each time we find ourselves on the brink of an outspread precipice 19

Lifting our hands skyward 20
We ask for mercy from the one above who cries for us all. 21
He cries for lost human values, 22
Cries for downtrodden human lives, 23
Cries for shame, about which we have forgotten, 24
Cries for honor, which we have betrayed, 25
Cries for love, which we sold out, 26
Cries for kindness, which drags on the ground, 27
Cries for a song, still unsung, 28
Cries for a string, unplucked, 29
Cries for feelings, unexpressed, 30
Cries for words, still unspoken, 31
Cries for sorrow, still not soothed, 32
Cries for pleasure, not understood, 33
Cries for the leaves, clinging to the branch, 34
Cries for the bunches of grapes, not yet ripe, 35
Cries for the well, lately gone dry, 36
Cries for the field, untouched by the plough, 37
Cries for dew, still on the grass, 38
Cries for a meadow, never mowed, 39
Cries for a bird, hesitating to sing, 40
Cries for a call, with no response, 41
Cries for a palm, lifted up to the sky, 42
Cries for eyes, sad from melancholy, 43
Cries for children, orphaned young, 44
Cries for the widows, without happiness, 45
Cries for the old men, forgotten by children, 46
Cries for the soldiers, killed in war, 47
Cries for the city, all in ruins, 48
Cries for the settlement, burst into flames, 49
Cries for the peoples, lost from the earth, 50
He cries for the countries, destroying each other. 51

And the drops of rain are falling, falling... 52

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