

Both Are Primary: An “Author’s Translation” Is a Creative Re-creation*

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Recently we have heard the “phenomenon of bilingualism,” or, more simply put, of bilingual writers who translate their own works, being discussed with amazement, as though this were something new in the history of the universe. A few years ago *Friendship Among Peoples* [Druzhba Narodov] presented a round table discussion on this subject in two of its issues (1980, nos. 5 and 6), with comments by Anar, T. Besaev, A. Kim, V. Koz’ko, and Ch. Guseinov. There is no question that there is much of interest to be said on this subject and that the discussion has a practical basis. A practical basis in author’s translating their works from their native language into Russian, or, as it’s sometimes called, their *second native language*. A practical basis here lies in authors who have a clearly expressed ethnic character writing in Russian without losing that non-Russian ethnic [natsional’nyi] character. Drutse, Sangi, Sanbaev, Ebanoidze, Farkhadi, Pulatov, Alimzhanov, Suleimanov, Lebrereckht, the Ibragimbekov brothers... We have only to mention any one of these names in order to have no doubt that we have before us writers who have realized their artistic gifts in Russian but who are in every way-in the whole fabric and structure of their works-associated with their native ethnic culture. However, the question arises-or rather, a whole set of questions arises... If the “fabric of the text” is Russian, where is the “native culture”? And on the contrary, does the Russian linguistic fabric affect the psychological character of such a book? Or is the language simply a mechanical form into which one can “pour” any ethnic content one might wish? At the present level of scholarship on ethnic cultures, you won’t find a single reasonable philologist who would give serious consideration to such a simplified view of the matter. Can we now really say that the old notions about language being the primary element in the literature are no longer in effect?

No, let’s wait a bit before consigning such notions to the history books. And let’s remember after all that the phenomenon we’re talking about here did not just appear recently. Let us recall that such famous writers of the past as Lutfi, Novoi, Babur, Uvaisi, and Nadira created in two languages. They created their works in Farsi and Uzbek. And splendid works they were. Sadriding Aini was a bilingual writer-he wrote with equal ease in both Tadzhik and Uzbek. Khamza Khakimzade Niiazi also wrote in these two languages. And this is if we limit ourselves only to the Central Asian region without trying to extend our discussion to Latin or Arabic or-“at the other end of the earth”-to English, French, or Spanish; for it isn’t only the Spanish, French, or English who have expressed themselves in the past (and still do today) in these languages... That is, it isn’t only we who find this phenomenon in our own country or think about it.

And so, if language is not simply a mechanical form but a complete organism, isn’t there some law as to which language may be used for a given creative purpose? In that case we must define more precisely what sort of a creative purpose we are dealing with. It would be nonsense to

* Russian text © 1984 by Druzhba Narodov. “Obe-vedushchie: ‘Perevod avtora’-tvorcheskoe peresozdanie,” Druzhba Narodov, 1984, no. 3, pp. 243-48. English version published in *Soviet Studies in Literature. Regionalism in Soviet Literature: Bilingualism and Literary Translation*. Vol. XX. (4), (pp. 67-79). New York: Sharpe Inc., 1984.

imagine that Navoi preferred Farsi in some cases and Uzbek in others because one language or the other was “better” for a particular project. It is more logical to assume, rather, that Navoi chose to write in a given language depending on the audience he was addressing in a given case.

However, this simple answer doesn’t even enter the heads of some Western culturologists. They view the matter differently, seeing the bilingualism and multilingualism of contemporary authors as a sign that cultural differences are being effaced. According to them, a person who has a native command of two languages is disoriented, living on the border between two cultures, “marginal, “belonging to neither of the two cultures, remaining “at the outer limits” of each of them, without any essential understanding of the nucleus of either culture. As a result, so the adherents of such theories believe, a person who has a native command of two languages becomes alienated spiritually.

But such notions are not as abstract” or innocent as it may appear. “Sovietologists” who take this view assert that writers from the non-Russian ethnic groups in the Soviet Union who have decided to write in Russian are essentially expressing doubt about the vitality of their own language. This is why they have shifted to Russian. But Chingiz Aitmatov refutes such false conclusions when he says, “When people abroad speak about the Russification of our ethnic cultures which is supposedly taking place, we reply that this is slander and reflect a lack of knowledge about our life. Our Kirghiz literature and its many writers, our striking and unique painting and sculpture, our ballet with its great dancers, Kirghiz opera, Kirghiz theater, contemporary Kirghiz professional music, and Kirghiz cinema all arose under Soviet power. All this was born under the direct influence of Russian culture. And we are taking greater pride in these achievements than in anything else on earth. And together we’re creating a single Soviet literature and art and serving the unified ideas of the party and the Soviet people.”

In analyzing the phenomenon of bilingualism, our ideological opponents speak of a weakening of ethnic consciousness, of the effacement of cultural differences. We, however, in interpreting the very same phenomenon, speak of a strengthening of ethnic consciousness, of an increase in cultural distinctiveness, and of a new level in their interrelationship. In other words, Chingiz Aitmatov writes in Russian not because he doubts the power of his Kirghiz and Russian, because he wants to address *both the Kirghiz and the Russian reader*. And he addresses the Russian reader in Russian while remaining a Kirghiz writer. The problem of translation in the broad sense of the word is the problem of re-creating a text so that the Russian reader receives Kirghiz literary art and senses the breadth of the language of another culture through Russian.

How does bilingualism arise?

Above all, through the “author’s translation.”

Chingiz Aitmatov believes that “A true work of art which finds a response in the hearts of the writer’s compatriots and gives his readers aesthetic pleasure must appear first of all in the native language of his own ethnic group. We can find evidence for this in the experience of many writers, in the experience of many literatures. However, there is nothing absolutely constant in life... Our country has gained experience in bilingualism in literature. This experience tells us that the best route is through a knowledge of both languages. I know writers who speak and write equally well in two languages. I can also offer the example of my own writing. I write my books in both Kirghiz and Russian. If I write a book in Kirghiz, I then translate it into Russian, or vice versa. And it gives me enormous pleasure to carry out this work in both directions. This inner work on the part of a writer is extraordinarily interesting and leads, in my view, to an improvement in his style, to an enrichment in the imagery of his language.”

Both languages—both his Russian and his Kirghiz—are improved in this double process. “The language of a people,” Aitmatov emphasizes, “is a phenomenon, a value with general meaning. Every language is the achievement of the genius of a people as a whole. We have no right to scorn

any language, no matter what people it belongs to, no matter what its level of development. Under the right circumstances every language is capable of improvement, both through inner development and through direct and indirect enrichment from the cultural heritage of other languages of the world. Each of us has a civic duty to the people to whom we owe our existence, to those who gave us their greatest treasure, their language.”

These words by the remarkable writer Aitmatov are essential to our understanding of the problem we are examining here. But the main and decisive value for us is in his practice as a writer.

The works of Chinghiz Aitmatov in two languages offer us rich material for thought about the dialectic of contemporary bilingualism and about some of the main aspects of the concept of the author’s translation.

In creating a text in Kirghiz, Aitmatov has his Kirghiz reader in mind. There is unique emotional timbre to the realization of the author’s concept; the verbal devices are associated with the specific traditions and expectations of the reader.

Aitmatov does not translate his works into Russian mechanically but, on the contrary, takes into consideration the structure of Russian culture, “the expectational horizons” of the Russian reader. Often there are considerable differences between the Kirghiz and Russian texts, and they are to be expected, since there is not and cannot be any mechanical similarity between the Kirghiz and Russian *contexts* of any given word, of any given artistic construct. The literary and aesthetic perception of a reader raised in the traditions of Russian prose is substantially different from that of a Kirghiz, an eastern reader. Chinghiz Aitmatov understands this very well.

For a long time he did not feel able to take the risk of translating his own works. A Dmitrieva and A. Drozdov translated his works. “If Aitmatov had been a bilingual writer twenty years ago, there would have been nothing for me as a translator to do with his works. I translated his first two works, *The Rivals* [Soperniki] and *Dzhamilia*, while *The Camel’s Eye* [Verbliuzhii glaz], *The First Teacher* [Pervyi uchitel’], and *The Red Apple* [Krasnoe iabloko] we translated together. Beginning with *The Maternal Field* [Materinskoe pole], Aitmatov began to translate his own works. I felt that there was no longer any need for me to interfere as a translator.”¹

Let us take a look at the novella, *The Maternal Field*. The Kirghiz title, *Samachy zholu*, means *The Milky Way*, or literally *The Straw Seller’s Road*. The Russian title loses in terms of pungency and exoticism but gains in depth because of the connotations in Russian of the words “mother” and “field.”

The Kirghiz literary scholar Ch. Dzholdosheva writes in reference to this change of title, “In re-titling his novel *The Maternal Field* instead of *The Milky Way* or *The Straw Seller’s Road*..., Aitmatov not only gives greater emphasis to the image of the mother of the earth but also places the image of the mother of Tolgonai on an equal footing with it... The image of the straw seller’s road, of the Milky Way, is the main leitmotif in the Kirghiz version, but in *The Maternal Field* this image is somewhat muted. We have here not simply a change in the story’s title but a recasting of the work as a whole, which is also reflected in the structure of *The Maternal Field*.”

The work’s cosmic plan is reduced, while the lyric side is enhanced. The Kirghiz original begins with a dialogue between Tolgonai and the mother of the earth. The Russian translation begins with the author speaking: the narrator describes the appearance of the work’s main heroine, Togonai, and writes of her native Kirghiz land and the natural surroundings. It is as though he is preparing the reader, leading him into the literary situation, putting him in the proper mood, getting him ready for the story.

While in the Kirghiz version elements of everyday colloquial language are important, in the Russian version the characters speak in strictly standard language. While in the Kirghiz version the compositional emphasis is on dialogue, and sharp stylistic changes, contrastive juxtaposition of

places, the dramatic action play an important role, in the Russian translation monologue, unity of intonation, and single psychological melodic line are more important.

In the Kirghiz original we find the following dialogue:

“Do you remember, earth, the day when a letter came from Kasym?”

“How could I forget, Togonai. As soon as you came out of that street, despite the snowdrifts and irrigation ditches, letting your horse gallop freely, you found out right away. And you immediately rode over to bring the good news to your daughter-in-law and younger son, who were spreading manure on the field...”[My translation.-M.D.]

Here is the Russian version of that scene:

“The day came when a letter arrived from Kasym. I jumped onto my horse and galloped off, without watching where I was going, across the irrigation ditches, through the snowdrifts, with the letter in my hand. Aliman and Dzhainak were spreading heaps of manure, and I cried out to them as I rode up, ‘Suiunchu, suiunchu-good news!’”

Formally speaking, the Kirghiz original is a dialogue between two persons. But in fact this is not really the case. The voice of the earth is actually the voice of Tolgonai, or rather, as M. Poliakov has stated, it is an inner monologue. “... it is as though the internal action were a communication for the character’s own sake, and a special language is created for this inner monologue, for the seemingly closed process of communication.”² Tolgonai’s consciousness of herself is made into a dialogue. In essence, she asks herself questions and answers her own questions. But the author “breeds roles,” brings the drama “out into the open.” Tolgonai’s own language is sharper, more mischievous perhaps... Here’s an example (again, I am giving a literal translation from the Kirghiz original):

“It’s true-at that time you were the barefoot daughter of a farm worker, with your hair worn simply. Although you didn’t wear silk, you were so beautiful by the time you came of age. You had an untouched look; you were well-built and attractive. As you walked, you gazed at you shadow. Even your shadow in the morning was just like you –well-built and light of step.”

In the Russian version this episode has a completely different intonation. The vividly communicative colloquial lexicon is replaced by a “retreat into the self,” and the heroine’s world is revealed through an inner monologue, which is smoother and calmer.

“What was I at that time? The barefoot little daughter of a farm worker, of a dzhatakchi. My grandfather remained a plowman because of debts, and this was passed down through the family. But even though I never wore silk dresses, I became a fine girl. And I loved to gaze at my shadow. You walk along and look back, just as though you’re admiring yourself in the mirror... I was really beautiful, I was.”

The language is “calmer,” but what an amazing sense of sincerity, of an extremely natural gesture from within!

The Kirghiz original is “open.” It draws the reader in through a constructive dramatic play with different aspects, with paradoxical responses.

“Never mind, Tolgonai. There’s no point in crying now. After all, that was crying of a completely different sort. A person only cries like that once in his life. Why are you crying? Stop crying. Weren’t your dreams realized after all? Tell me honestly-who was happier than you?”

“You’re right. Under the new system, Suvankul and I grew up by our own efforts. You yourself know how spring and fall we never put down our ketmen’...”

The Russian version is “closed,” “turned in” on the character’s own soul, and depends on the traditions of Russian lyric prose.

“And now I’m remembering and crying for some reason. How stupid of me. After all, when I cried before it was for completely different reasons. A person only cried like that once in his life. . And hasn’t our life actually turned out as we wanted it to? It was. Suvankul and I created

this life with our worn hands, we worked hard, not putting down our ketme' in summer or in winter."

The 'texture' of the two passages is the same. What, then has changed? The intonation. The "psychological composition."

Tazret Besaev, one of those taking part in the discussion of the problem of the "author's translation" in *The Friendship among Peoples*, has noted, "I like the works of such talented writers as Ch. Aitmatov, I. Drutse, V. Bykov, and others. However, I must admit that the term 'author's translation' is something of a mystery to me. It somehow doesn't fit. I don't see the real meaning in it. For me, an author's translation is the same thing as a re-creation, as creating a work anew." Anatolii Kim is of the same opinion, and with complete justification, in our view. "What we probably have here is the result of a particular creative process-what I might compare not to a musician's art in performing someone else's work but rather to improvisations by a composer on one of his own pieces. This makes it possible to introduce various shift of access, additional nuances, or a somewhat different development of particular theses, which is usually what happens with improvisations. But the main thing remains constant-the essence of what the author wanted to say. And he only wanted to say what he already said in his original composition, and now, in "performing" the work, simply introduces the additional material required by the structure and culture of the language in which the work is being "performed." A talented author's translation is always an event. It is a manifestation of the artist's generosity, his diligence. And it is always a new thing of value... Thus an 'author's translation' can be created on the basis of a work written in the writer's native language or of one which has not been written down, 'directly,' skipping the state of writing it down. But the primary creative impulse in such cases always contains a unique sense, understanding, and perception of the world which is expressed by the verbal and symbolic essence of the writer's own native language. Each of us has this fundamental essence within him, and it is so basic to our life and times that it cannot be measured in any logical manner. This fundamental essence holds sway over us, and we must place our trust in it."³

Anatolii Kim is right. It is difficult to define this fundamental essence. But we cannot help but sense it, especially when we examine the various stages of a writer's art. In his earliest work Aitmatov expressed his individuality very clearly and uniquely in his Kirghiz writings. Later the author's Russian language works began to appear - *Farewell, Gul'sary!* [*Proshchai, Gul'sary!*], *The White Steamship* [*Belyi Parokhod*], *Early Cranes* [*Rannie zhuravli*], *The Skenbald Dog Running along the Seashore* [*Pegii pes, begushchii kraem moria*], and *The Waystation in the Snowstorm* [*Burannyi polustanok*]. Today, we may say with complete assurance that Aitmatov is equally expressive, individual, and unique in both languages. Although not in the same way! Ch. Guseinov has remarked that a writer can be unique only in one language - either in his own "native" language or in Russian. In my view Aitmatov refutes this notion. It seems to me that *Farewell, Gul'sary!* expresses the psychological cast of the Kirghiz people much more clearly than any other book written in Kirghiz. However, language, too, is not indifferent to artistic structure. In the Russian-language novella a complex whole arises internally in which one senses a particular "bilingual" consciousness. The two principles together provide a dialectical unity through their interaction, which can be defined as the present of the Kirghiz soul in Russian culture. In the novella *Farewell, Gul'sary!* we can perceive the unique features of both the Kirghiz and Russian peoples, and in this amalgam the component parts cannot be distinguished. Here we really do sense (as Aitmatov himself has said) a general process of the joining of ethnic cultures. This interaction also gives rise to an additional source for the inner development of each facet, and thus a new whole is created which is continually enriched. The novella *Farewell, Gul'sary!* is an ideal version of the author's creation - of which the translator and theoretician O. Kundzich once dreamed when he noted that one must translate in such a way that the author seems to write in Russian while remaining a representative of his own people.

If only it were physically possible for a writer to create versions of his artistic concept in different languages... But this is an extremely rare, indeed, exceptional situation. However, it is also of primary importance, since it reveals the profound laws according to which a literary translation is created, a translation which is a re-creation of the original. This is a task which entails great risk on the author's part.

A writer's style is always authentic and organic. We may say – paraphrasing a certain philosopher – that no matter where a writer goes, his “I” always follows him, his style. This is really so. But even so, we can see differences: the Kirghiz versions of Aitmatov's prose are colorful, vivid, dramatic, while the Russian versions are calmer, more profound, lyrical... These are two aspects of a single author's style, different audiences of a single artistic “message.” The Kirghiz language is characterized by graphic pictoriality and a wide range of vivid colors. Although fewer colors are used in the Russian version in comparison to the Kirghiz version, this is not because they are lacking in the Russian language but because the author wishes to respond to the inner needs of the Russian reader. This is also the reason for the greater terseness of the Russian version. This was true even with the reworking of *The Straw Seller's Road* into *The Maternal Field* – the novella was shortened. And we found the same thing to be true – only in reverse – when *Farewell, Gul'sary!* was translated into Kirghiz and the work became somewhat longer.

But here is an instance of a completely different order – the novella *The Skenbald Dog Running along the Seashore*. Here we find ourselves in the unique world of the Nivkhi. This represents a new level of complexity in Aitmatov's works – he is creating a work involving not two but three different ethnic groups, three peoples, the Kirghiz, the Russians, and the Nivkhi. The novel *Waystation in a Snowstorm* also involves three different ethnic elements: Kirghiz, Russian, and Kazakh.

But what is the most important element in such cases?

First of all, the content itself is of unquestionable importance. It is of great significance what sort of content – not only in terms of plot and narrative line but also psychologically speaking – inspires a writer. The source of the writer's inspiration depends on the work's content. Here is testimony from the author himself. “When I was writing *Dzhamilia*, I thought about my heroes' feelings - in the Kirghiz language. With the novella *The Little Popla...* [*Topolek*], on the other hand, it was completely different. The sequence of events and the heroes' experiences were laid out in my mind in terms of Russian idioms from the very beginning, and therefore I wrote the work in Russian. This is a remarkable manifestation of how language is not simply “form” which is completely unrelated to “content” but rather serves as the immediate reality of the artistic thought, in which the ethnic is inseparable from that which is real and vital. And this also the core of translation – the language in which a work is written is not simply a “skin” in which the organism...is “whapped,” or if it is a “skin,” then one which entirely composed of nerve endings which are linked to the core of the organism, to its inner structure. A Kirghiz writer writes in Russian about the life of the Nivkhi. He describes the life of the Nivkhi through the medium of the Russian language, describing it faithfully and accurately. Why in Russian? He has two possible instruments of communication in this case – Kirghiz or Russian. And it is Russian which enables him to penetrate more deeply into interethnic life, to understand and perceive all details of the spiritual interaction among the peoples of our country. It also helps the writer to move beyond the limits of the Kirghiz ethnic outlook and become an international writer of his great homeland.

Chinghiz Aitmatov has not made it his purpose to create an ethnographic picture of the life of the Nivkhi in a work of literature. In terms of its inner structure, his novella is a unique effort to solve general moral problems, to express the essence of human unity on the background of the eternal grandeur of the sea, the sky, the earth, to show the beauty of self-sacrifice. In this particular artistic system, the Nivkhi represent “the human race.” Therefore, it is precisely the Russian

language which is called on to contain and transmit this drama – the language of international contact and communication.

In creating a non-Kirghiz reality through a work of literature, Aitmatov at the same time embodies the fate of his own people. Or more precisely, he joins together the cultural and linguistic norms of both peoples, carefully utilizing and making available to his readers all the riches amassed and registered in both the reality described in this particular case and in the language through which that reality is described. And moreover – as is always the case! – we sense in Aitmatov the richness of the Kirghiz spiritual heritage within which this meeting of cultures occurs. Moreover, an extremely complex psychological link is set up – Russian-Kirghiz-Nivkhi or Russian-Kirghiz-Kazakh – creating the work’s particularly acute stylistic palate. This is what produces Aitmatov’s acute, unanticipated, sometimes paradoxical style. Indeed, despite the fact that the description of the life of the Nivkhi is presented with extreme clarity in the work, we nevertheless sense, particularly in the way the tale is constructed stylistically, that this is not a work by a Nivkhi writer; here we sense Aitmatov especially clearly as a writer whose cultural heritage has developed on Kirghiz soil but has been enriched by the values of world culture, and in particular of Russian culture. The writer’s gifts display here not only a breadth of vision and depth of understanding of human life but also a feature which is extremely important for us – a vital receptiveness to the spiritual structure of another people, an unusual sensitivity to their psychology, an amazing ability to switch over to the manner of another ethnic group.

Aitmatov’s bilingualism is organic to his talent. It reveals an important aspect of his artistic “I”; and therefore in his laboratory the “author’s translation” is not simply a mechanical repetition of an already created text but a new and profoundly thought through version of it, taking into consideration the ethnic context of the new group of readers.

Aitmatov’s path toward the global, universal subject matter of *Waystation in a Snowstorm* is not a path “from above,” not from the “heights” of abstraction, but rather a path from below, through the thick of social, psychological, and ethnic reality, through an understanding of the dialectic of the life of other peoples, a patch toward recognition of the general laws of human existence as a whole. For humanity is a system made up of ethnic organisms. There is no other humanity.

I will conclude with a quotation from A. A. Potebnia, which runs as follows: “A person who speaks two languages shifts the character and direction of his thought as he shifts from one language to the other, and shifts them in such a way that the effort of his will...changes the course of his thought and then affects its subsequent course only indirectly. This effort can be compared with what a switchman does in switching a train over to another track.”⁴

But if we are to speak of switches, rails, routs, and the motive forces of bilingualism and authors’ translations, then continuing Potebnia’s metaphor, I could say that literary translation in general, and an author’s translation in particular, is not when one route is “primary” and the other only “secondary.”

Both are primary.

Notes

¹ From a letter of 20 March 1980 from A. Dmitrieva to the author of this article.

² M. Poliakov, *Voprosy poetiki i khudozhestvennoi semantiki* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’), 1978.

³ “Chto takoe ‘perevod avtora’?” *Druzhba narodov*, 1980, no. 5.

⁴ A. A. Potebnia, “Iazyk i narodnost’.” In *Estetika i poetika*, by A. A. Potebnia (Moscow: Iskustvo, 1976).