Reading (With) Translators: Agency and Exegesis in Translation and Retranslations

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About a year ago, I was half-listening to a BBC podcast, when I stopped dead. The quantum physicist, Carlo Lovelli, mentioned that time passed differently at our head and our feet (faster at our head); my mind was blown and every time I walked somewhere I became over-conscious about the time my head was experiencing, and then furtively would look at my feet: those slowcoaches! I’d been thinking a lot about time and movement in two novels: Kafka’s *The Castle* and Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*; specifically, about how different translators coped with the aesthetic construction of time, while being themselves creatures of time, and who were, in a way, time-travellers. In other words, just like my head and my feet, different times were at work at once in my sense of time as a reader. Today, I want to focus on two passages from each of the novels, both concerned with movement and the passing of time. The first describes Anna’s journey on the train from Moscow back to St. Petersburg, after she has first met Vronsky and when she thinks she has escaped from a dangerous *coup de foudre*; and the second is a passage from the “Waiting for Klamm” chapter of *The Castle* I want to argue that re-reading these passages in different translations profoundly changed how I understood the workings of these novels; what they were doing as I was reading them, what pulse and rhythm – or, rather, whose pulse and rhythm, I heard.

“What really seduces the average reader,” Nabokov writes, “is the gift Tolstoy had of endowing his fiction with such time-values as correspond exactly to our
sense of time” (141). In other words, we follow the characters in what seems like real time – a sense of time stretched out and constructed in fiction, via the different consciousnesses of the different characters, deliberately to keep in time with the reader reading (and our own constructed sense of time, according to the quantum physicists). “Tolstoy’s prose keeps pace with our pulses,” Nabokov adds, “his characters seem to move with the same swing as the people passing under our window while we sit reading his book” (142). This is a radically modern element of Tolstoy’s prose; like Joyce and Woolf (both of whom he influences), we see characters’ thoughts change in conjunction with how they move. The threat of the train (often rather tritely and facilely symbolized as oncoming, murderous modernity) is not mechanization, but speed; Anna’s thoughts change speed and reflection when the train starts up and moves; the rushing motion of the train affects her mood and decision-making and we see it in syntactical changes in the passage. It’s a very timely and contemporary dilemma; as our interaction with technology, specifically smartphones, is literally changing how we think and our ability to reflect, to take time.

In Constance Garnett’s 1901 translation, Anna settles in the sleeper carriage, surrounded by several women, a sleeping “invalid lady,” a “stout, elderly lady” with her feet tucked up, two “other ladies” and her servant, Annushka who begins to doze. In this feminized space, Anna takes out “a paper knife and an English novel” (115) but “At first her reading made no progress.” This short declarative sentence, with its temporal marker and a slightly odd passive voice, is followed by two long sentences with several clauses [Example 1]:
We hear and feel the train beginning to move in the temporal and sequential conjunctions, “then,” “and” as they build up semantic steam (polysyndeton), then intensified, in the second sentence, by the insistent repetition of “the same” – you can hear the pistons and the steam engine gather speed and settle into a rhythmic speed that also articulates frustration. What begins, though, with an enervating “the same” noises and snow and quick changes of temperature, then settles into a softer vision of “the same passing glimpses of the same figures in the twilight and the same voices” and then Anna takes agency of her actions – she not only begins to read but “to understand what she” reads. The train’s movement is phenomenologically disruptive – the heightened sounds, sights and touch (snow and heat) – and initially prevents her from reading, an activity to pass the time.

But it also affects how she then reads, and the impact the “English novel” has on her [Example 2]:

We hear not only what she’s thinking, but also how she’s thinking; her impatience with the limits of fantasy is effected by the speed of the train (its rhythmic movement felt in the repetition of “if she read that ... she longed to”). The potential of any soothing empathy from the pages of a novel is disrupted by the “distaste” of the pattern of her thoughts which bring her mechanically through possible different lives, but serve to reflect back on the mundanity of, and lack of possibilities in, her own. But the novel brings her directly back to the heart of her discomfort and frustration. She thinks about how the hero of the novel has “attained his English happiness, a baronetcy and an estate” and strongly wishes she could join him there; a sudden passionate thought that immediately turns dark [Example 3]:
We can hear the rhythm of the train in the repetition of a key word in the novel – that’s repeated throughout the novel: “shame” and the repetition of “remember” and “memory” – the rhythm of the train, its tempo, affects the recursiveness of her thinking and the anxiety thus invoked. She moves from the fictional hero and the disembodied thrill of imagined adultery to the (fictional) hero, Vronsky, who, of course, she will follow, later in the novel, to his fancy new estate, exiled from society. The act of reading in her head has changed velocity because of the place of reading, the train (her feet?); her mind moving from the book to the recent past and to the present. The passage gets even more delirious; she feels hot and presses the knife to her cheek that cools her down – the violent repeated image of that knife, used to tear through the material, but also, fictional, book, brings a direct connection to the danger of over-romanticization, its deadliness. The tempo increases until the train stops; Anna steps out into the snowstorm and there, there on the platform is Vronsky, who has followed her from Moscow. Her passion, ignited by the book, was also fueled by the tempo in which she read; she remembers, but she doesn’t reflect. She doesn’t want “to follow the reflections of other people’s lives” when she’s reading and she can’t reflect on her own – something, cognitively that great books should allow us to do. She’s distracted by a different pace, a different pulse.

One of the recent re-translators of the novel (2015 Yale UP), Marian Schwartz, includes a short, but illuminating introduction, in which she argues that the use of repetition “makes the reader dwell on [the] consequence simply by giving him more words to read and in this way making him spend more time on the idea”
in other words, here, in this passage, the train and velocity speeds up Anna’s recursive thoughts, but, at the same time, the repetitions and parataxis slow us down as readers; we take in (as Nabokov suggests) Anna’s reading as we read [Example 4].

It is interesting, here, that Schwartz uses the male pronoun for the projected reader of Tolstoy’s prose; it struck me particularly because the English translations of Anna Karenina either have been made by women (including Schwartz herself) or by women in spousal pairs (Garnett, Louise Maude, Rosemary Edmonds, Rosamund Bartlett, Larissa Volokhonsky, Schwartz). If we think of the translator as a Slow Reader – an intensified form of reader, a “highly attentive reader” attuned to the “complex literariness” of the text (Wright 110) – it bring us to the question of gendered time that is one of the overlooked themes and material of the novel and integral to the translators of it. In this passage, Anna has the time to read; when she is outcast from her marriage and society and living on the fine, but socially imprisoning, estate she dreams of from the English novel, she becomes an inveterate reader and, toward the end of her short life, finally, a writer. For all of Tolstoy’s views on women, the novel is really important in thinking about the texture of women’s time to think, to reflect, and to create – time often cut short by the duties of the family. [This is likely because of the influence of his wife, Sonya, because they were her concerns.] At the same time, the industrial advances in the nineteenth-century, alongside increased female education, enabled a female leisure class that read voraciously and, inevitably, created deep anxieties in the patriarchy of female affectability- hysteria was directly connected to reading fiction (Flint 58) and there
were even warnings about women reading on trains as “the eyes and the head usually become confused” (Bowman (1857) quoted in Flint 105).

The real danger was women getting an education; Garnett was in the first generation of women attending Newnham College, Cambridge and excelled there; she worked after as a librarian in a public-circulation library (a place central to women’s education). Her son, David, who would become a novelist, records a lovely moment of identification with his mother as he watches her read and translate Anna Karenina - he:

would watch the changing expressions on her face, eager, frowning, puzzled or amused. The Russian words were translated not only on the foolscap sheet of paper in front of her, but into English features of flesh and blood. Her face was so expressive that I could guess at the emotional tension of what she was reading (Garnett 133).

It’s a beautiful encapsulation of the translator as reader, and of the visceral impact of the translation, literally moving through the body, intellect and emotions of a translator – the “Russian words” metamorphosing into “English features.” It’s also a lovely evocation of a little boy watching his mother, reading his mother, and taking joy and meaning from the observation. He is not the center of her universe as she works but he’s enlivened and intrigued by the fictional universe playing on her face as she’s absorbed in her work; a different form of maternal love. It’s their home; the home of writing, invention, imagination. And it’s how we read translators in the translations, too.

For, we can hear Garnett reading in this passage – hers is the only translation that italicizes the “he” in Example 3 (the pronoun is not italicized in Russian). We can hear the texture of her reading; in her italicization, she directly connects the
hero of the English novel with Vronsky who “ought to feel ashamed” thus emphasizing the first fictions of falling in love. It makes the second, non-italicized “he” quite moving when she wonders why either he or she ought to feel ashamed (and yet she does as she moves through her memories). When she was translating this in 1900 (and her son was watching her), Garnett had built and bought a house – from her translation earnings, and encouraged her husband, Edward, to embark on a life-long affair with the artist, Nellie Heath (she encouraged Nellie, too, and they were close). In 1893, she had left her infant son with Edward and travelled to Russia alone to meet Tolstoy, with letters from the revolutionary assassin, Sergei Stepniak, sewn into her clothes and possibly his book, and undeclared famine relief funds, in her bag. While Anna’s carriage in the novel is fully female, Garnett describes a carriage full of furred Russian men and a French hairdresser who “unable to contain his wonder” kept declaring she was travelling alone. “‘Avec?’ enquired the Russian expressively. ‘Non, c’est étonnant – seule!’” (Garnett 116). (With you? No, it’s astonishing – alone!). Janet Malcolm’s recent defense of Garnett painted her as a Victorian bluestocking steeped in Trollope and Eliot, who – correctly in her view – plainly translated Tolstoy’s basic, transparent prose. (“Whose side are you on?” she demands of her readers, the side of translators who use “awkward contemporary-sounding English” because “Tolstoy himself wrote in awkward Russian” or someone like Garnett whose translations give “pleasure and understanding.”) It’s the worst kind of translation criticism, a zero sum game based on a total misreading both of the radical and utterly modern Garnett and the radical and utterly modern use of style and time in Tolstoy’s aesthetics.
By the time we get to the 20th century, the carriages have stopped moving but the prose hasn’t. In Kafka’s *The Castle*, in a chapter called “Waiting for Klamm,” K. climbs into Klamm’s stationary carriage to wait for the man he’ll never meet. Because he does so, Klamm refuses to come out and the horses are taken away, the carriage left stationary. One of the recent re-translators of the novel, Mark Harman, was delighted in the “piquant coincidence” of this chapter heading (1998a, 181) that had been left out by Max Brod in his editions but reinstated in the 1982 German critical edition (“Das Warten auf Klamm”), because Harman, a Beckett and Kafka scholar, of course heard the resonances of *Waiting for Godot* and was re-reading Beckett’s *Trilogy* in order to aid the voice of translation in Kafka’s *The Castle*. Harman argued that, although Beckett had claimed not to have finished reading *The Castle*, disliking its “steamroller” style, it had clearly influenced some of his writing, especially in the *Trilogy* (ibid.).

I want to look at the final passage of the chapter, in which the carriage is definitively not moving [Example 5], the coachman is moving away, the lights are going out, but the language is moving (with K’s thoughts) implacably forward: steamrolling, as Beckett might have it. It’s one long sentence with semantic repetition of certain words and, at the beginning, in German, a resonant soft and hard “s” sound – in Harman’s translation, sibilance and the hard “c” sound. Kafka not only tells us that the coachman is slowly dismantling everything but also, through euphony and punctuation (commas, em dashes), he slows us down as readers; the passage turns and speeds up when K. stops following the coachman with his gaze (partly because the electric lights are turned off) and at the conjunction, “but,” and
at the moment he starts contemplating freedom as a correlative of waiting: “but as if he were freer than ever ...”; we can hear his heart beating at the pulse and speed of his thoughts by the end in the repetition of “nothing ... nothing ... this...this...this” / “nichts ... nichts ... diese ... dieses ... diese.”

Harman’s translation is lovely and its length and paradoxes (waiting and freedom) are enunciated in rhythmic clauses that convey the coachman’s movements and K.’s thought pattern, but also seem to bear witness to Beckett (especially that second half of the sentence): “nothing more senseless, nothing more deperate, than this freedom, this waiting, this invulnerability.” The push and pull between enervating isolation and the need for contact – the bridge between which is language, desperate and freeing in its textuality – is also echoed in Harman’s translation of “wem hätten es leuchten sollen?” as “for whom should they have shone?” a seeming allusion to John Donne’s famous meditation that “no man is an island”: “never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” K., as Kundera points out, is not suffering from isolation, but from a “violation of solitude” (in Beckett, the violation of solitude is often imaginary, the intrusion of memory); his time in the sleigh is one of the few private moments he has in the novel, hence a sense of freedom but also – since he wants to be connected – a sense of desperation (1993: 111, his italics).

Harman explicitly decided to keep Kafka’s “frugal punctuation” and the “extraordinarily long” paragraphs, long “even by the standards of literary German” as he felt “Kafka’s decision to embed the dialogue in the narrative and to omit most punctuation except for commas and an occasional period lends his prose a
breathlessly modern tone” and immediately connects this to Beckett (Harman 1998: xxi). Although the narrative can be confusing, he argues that it is Kafka’s use of language that keeps the “relentless momentum” going (xxi): “Kafka holds us in thrall through a startling combination of breathless intensity and ironic – and at times even drily humorous – detachment” (xxii).

We can see a slightly different approach in Anthea Bell’s recent translation of *Das Schloß* (2009) in which she divides the last sentence of “Waiting for Klamm” into three sentences. Bell says in her introduction that she “would have liked to have set out this translation in the modern English manner, with new dialogue beginning on a new line” to show how “useful [it is] to remember how much of *The Castle* is told through the mouths of the characters” but that this would not “have been in accord with the usual tradition of Kafka translation” or with the aims of the new Oxford Classics re-translations “which is to follow the layout of Kafka’s manuscripts” (xxx-xxxi). Notable in her remarks, is the apparent pressure to not produce a domesticated version “in the English manner” of the novel and her valid point that in fact it might be revelatory to do so (in terms, at least of dialogue). There is a case to be made to have a translation “in the English manner” *alongside* a translation like Harman’s not simply in order to make Kafka more accessible to English-language readers but to think about what difference it makes to read the long paragraphs and long syntax, what it might mean. Bell does decide to slightly domesticate this last sentence in dividing it up. We still have the long opening scene with the “driver” fulfilling his tasks, locking up, but then there is very decisive end to the first sentence – K. feels “all contact with him had been cut, and he was more of a free
agent than ever.” Between that realization and the next sentence is a decision marked by the period: “He could wait here ...” and be free “why, they hardly had a right even to address him.” Another pause and then his rational thought: “But at the same time ... he felt ...”. Bell's K. is a much more actively rational creature than Harman’s; decisive and clear-thinking – a change in characteristics put into effect by small changes in punctuation. It is also a less humorous portrait, a more tragic portrait of K.’s grandiloquence, perhaps arrogance, and knowing hopelessness.

What Beckett opened up for Harman, it seems, is the humor in the relentless, bleak but funny (in the obsessive back and forth, the paradoxical, cyclical clauses of waiting and cognitive movement) and it is something that was revealed to Beckett, perhaps, in his reading and apparently negative reaction to Kafka [Example 7]. In a passage that considers movement and time, exterior and interior to ourselves and that enacts time (slowly and speedily), we can see other times at work – Beckett as reader of Kafka, Beckett the writer, Harman the reader of Beckett and Harman deliberately inserting Beckett's time (influenced by Kafka) back into Kafka. Harman chose to end his translation of The Castle in the middle of a sentence (as it is in the manuscript) because he felt that readers, now familiar with postmodern writing, were ready to read this moment suspended in time, when yet another Castle villager – the coachman’s old mother who is reading by the fire - is about the embark on a Castle story (“she said ...”), these stories that supplant time in this strange village.

What translation exposes is that literature is not teleologically temporal: we come across different books at different times and bring our own time of literary
knowledge to what we read. As readers we exist in our own time continuums – the
time we take to read, what we read when, how quickly we read, what era of
translation we read, how we re-read at different times of our all-too-mortal lives.
The phenomenology of time and movement in literature has been pinpointed as a
modernist (post-Einstein) aesthetic in which “the ‘how’ of mimesis” is foregrounded
rather than “the question of its ‘what’” (Ricœur 1984, 153) but, in fact, the
momentum of rhythm is at the heart of oral literatures – the how-ness, if you like,
connected to the now-ness (excuse the pun!). We can see it in the pre-modernist
post-modernist Anglo-Irish Laurence Sterne’s Sentimental Journey (1768) in which
he blames his swaying sentences (decrying the lack of light in the Enlightenment!)
on the movement of his static, unhorsed, one-person carriage: “the see-saw of this
Desobligeant” (Sterne 2003, 8). As he works himself up into an orgasmic conclusion,
two Englishmen peek in, wondering “what would occasion its motion” – and clearly
hoping it would be something naughty.

“’Twas the agitation, said I coolly, of writing a preface” (11).

In the 1850s, a young artillery officer began translating Sterne’s book into
Russian, at night, during the Crimean War: Count Leo Tolstoy.
Bibliography:


