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Yorick's Whiskers: The Poetics of T. Tolstaya's Small Prose and its Translations into English

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Abstract

The objective of the study is to educe the particular features of T. Tolstaya's small prose. Her texts are characterized by a high density of literary meanings and great complexity of literary structure. The article explores the correlations between these two phenomena by analyzing the short story "Yorick" and its translation into English. We uncover the literary meanings of the text, which are formed by means of a number of global cultural contexts (biographical, historical, literary, and mythopoetical). We also study the form that they take in Tolstaya's literary discourse and provide a comparative analysis of the discursive literary techniques used by the author and their rendering by the translator. Both the analysis technique and the materials presented in the article can be used in teaching literary translation to students of Russian or English.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary studies have shown that small prose has a number of structural and semantic features, such as a high semantic load, structural density of the text, a high degree of topic variation and extreme intertextuality (Kapinos, 2013). According to E. Kapinos, such fiction can be best analyzed by applying the methods of

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“micropoetics” that may give a detailed view of the text. Included in “micropoetics” are linguistic poetics (Babenko 2007, Klimovskaya 2009, Lipgart 2007, Panova 2003) and cognitive poetics (Stockwell, 2002; Tsur, 1992). Each of these currents is represented by a range of varying approaches to the study of literary texts.

One of the brightest examples of contemporary small prose is the short stories by T. Tolstaya. They have garnered popularity both among Russian and English-speaking readers. Up to date, five short story collections and the novel “The Slynx” have been translated into English.

The complexity of Tolstaya’s post-modern small prose, its active use of semantic word structure and its associative potential, make such texts exceptionally difficult to translate. The peculiar language of Tolstaya’s works has been termed a “dense network” (Goscilo, 1996) or a “complex ornament” (Frolova 2011). It is our goal to discover what discursive means are used by the author and the translator for (re-)creating the particular word meanings in Tolstaya’s small prose.

2. Material

The material for the study was the short story “Yorick” by Tatyana Tolstaya (Tolstaya, 2007) and its translation into English by Jamey Gambrell (Tolstaya, 2005).

3. Method

In order to study the conceptual, imagery, and discourse levels in all their complexity, we developed a methodology that unites the methods of linguopoetics and cognitive poetics. The principal method is the stylistic experiment developed by L.V. Scherba and improved by A.M. Peshkovsky and L.S. Vygotsky (Klimovskaya, 2014). Additional methods are componential and distributive analyses of the lexemes used in the text. The specificity of the story made it necessary to apply a comparative analysis of lexical semantics, discourse structures, and imagery schemes of the story. Intertextual analysis was used to reconstruct various conceptual planes of the text.

One of the central notions that we use in our analysis is the notion of actualization, first introduced in (Mukarzhewsky, 1967). Literary actualization is based on a deviation from the linguistic norm. As a result, the word or the phrase actualized acquires an additional, *literary* meaning. As a fruit of the writer’s efforts, the linguistic matter is transformed in her works, creating the *discursive literary form*. The latter is defined as a system of neutral and transformed words and phrases with their additional meanings (Klimovskaya, 2009). This system can achieve a very high degree of complexity. One of the tasks of the present study is to (partially) uncover this complexity.

4. Discussion

The short story “Yorick” occupies roughly 4 pages. The storyline is a chain of the narrator’s childhood memories about her grandmother Natalia Vasilievna – a real beauty – who, after the Revolution, fled to Europe on a steamboat and in the 1920s came back to Russia with her little son. A peculiar feature about the narrative structure of the tale is that the narrator takes two positions at once: that of a child, whose immediate reactions to the events are clear to the reader, and that of an adult, taking a more distant and evaluative stance, at the same time telling the story itself.

By introducing a child’s point of view (which Tolstaya often does in her prose) Tolstaya motivates the strengthening of the subjective stance. Nevertheless, the subjective stance is in dialogue not only with the adult’s position, but also with a multitude of other positions that are introduced intertextually. As E. Goscilo notes, Tolstaya’s subjectivized narrative form, along with the myth and the intertext, provide her stories with an intrinsic polyphony (to use M. Bakhtin’s terms). At the same time, they permit the writer to promote the language of the texts as the protagonist itself (Goscilo, 1996). The highlighting of the language takes place due to Tolstaya’s effort to find the right words and the right literary form.

4.1. The associative principle of textual progression

The interplay of different “voices” in “Yorick” is provided by a special discourse structure, which is organized along the principle of consecutive associative semantic progression of the text. The gist of the principle is that the direct logical connection between utterances and their elements is replaced with an associative connection. This happens due to the vast usage of metaphorical and metonymical mappings. It leads to the weakening of syntagmatic connections and the strengthening of paradigmatic connections between the units of literary form – words and literary images.

The flow of associations (to which the aforementioned principle refers) is initiated by the whalebone, “fished” by the narrator from the button tin standing on the windowsill. The whalebone turns out to be a piece of the narrator’s grandmother’s corset – a pre-Revolutionary fashion relic (hereafter we give the English translation by Jamey Gambrell, unless stated otherwise. The Russian lexemes in the analysis are taken from the original story by Tolstaya, 2007).

The corpses of tiny objects, shells of sunken islands. One that constantly surfaced, fell to the bottom, and then surfaced again was a dull-white, bony blade, good for nothing. Of course, like everything else, no one ever threw it away. Then one time someone said, “That’s whalebone, a whale whisker.”

Whalebone! Whale whiskers! Instantly, monster whale-fishes came to mind, smooth black mountains in the gray, silvery-slow ocean sea. In the middle of the whale—a fountain like the ones at Petrodvorets, foamy water spouting on both sides. On the monster’s face—small, attentive eyes and a long, fluffy mustache, totally Maupassant. But the encyclopedic dictionary writes, “Teeth are found only in so-called ‘toothed-W.’ (dolphins, narwhals, sperm W., and bottle-nosed W.), which feed mostly on fish; the whiskered, or baleen W. (gray W., right W., rorquals), has horny formations on the roof of the mouth, plates mistakenly called ‘bones’ or ‘whiskers,’ which serve to filter plankton.” Not true, that is, they’re not only for filtering. As late as 1914, a seamstress sewing a stylish dress for Grandmother <...> grabbed a handful of “bones” that came from the mouth of a gray W., or perhaps it was a right W., or maybe even a rorqual, and sewed them into Grandmother’s corset, and Grandmother circulated with great success, wearing under her bust, or at her waist, slivers of the seas, small pieces of those tender, pinkish-gray palates, and she passed through suites of rooms, slim and petite, a decadent Aphrodite with a heavy knot of dark-gold hair, rustling her silks, fragrant with French perfumes and fashionable Norwegian mists <...> (Tolstaya, 2005).

In the Russian text the associative principle of textual composition is effected by using metaphorical and metonymical connections between different meanings of the same word. When translating into English, the translator has to look for other discursive means in order to recompense the difference in the systems of the two languages.

For instance, the associative connection between the *whalebone* (in Russian, lit. *whale moustache*) and *Maupassant’s moustache* is based on the semantic structure of the Russian word “us”, which can be applied indiscriminately to whalebone, animal’s whiskers and a person’s moustache. The English “whalebone” has a different origin (*bone*) and is not used to refer to an animal’s whiskers or a person’s facial hair. With the aim of re-establishing the original semantic connection the translator uses a number of different lexemes that form a chain: *whalebone* (corresponding to the Russian “kitovyi us”) – *whale whiskers* (“whiskers” used to denote the bristles of an animal and, in an old-fashioned way, the hair growing on a man’s face) – *moustache*. The evidence for the translator’s perception of the associative connection between the *whale – pet – person* is his usage of the metaphor *the monster’s face*. In the Russian original, this chain of associations is manifested by the metaphor *mordachudy-yudy*. *Chuda-yuda* being a mythical monster in Russian folklore, the word *morda* can only be used in relation to animals in its direct meaning.

Thus, due to the fact that the translator could not make use of the semantic structure of a polysemous word, he decided to keep the original transitions in the chain of associations by transforming the metaphor and placing hyponyms in close proximity.

The associative connections in the story are organized not only in linear fashion. They also create interaction between remote fragments of the story. We will illustrate it with two examples. In the first, the associative connection is kept in translation, in the second, it is lost.

(1) The associative connection between the whale, the man and the pet which we had mentioned earlier is actualized once more in the story's final: *our very own, personal, gray, right, rorqual, our poor Yorick*. This semantic convergence allows Tolstaya to portray different entities in one image: the whale, the pet (be that a favourite animal or a favourite jester, as in Hamlet), the close friend and the literary character. The high pathos in the fragment is achieved via the introduction of the whale into the personal space of the narrator and the reader. It is done by using personal pronouns and the adjective *personal*. The semantics of *personal* and *very own* is strengthened in the Russian text by the use of the diminutive suffix in the word *polosatik*, absent in the English *rorqual*. By way of mutual correlation, the concrete images form a general image of a mortal creature that lives while its memory lives on in the recollections of other people and is transmitted through stories, both oral and written.

(2) In the beginning of the fragment about the whalebone, a special formula from Russian fairytales is used to refer to the whale: *chudo-yudo, ryba-kit* (lit. *miraculous whale-fish*). The semantics of miracle is made manifest once more at the end of the story in the metaphor *chudesnyecherepkivremeni*. In the English translation the *miracle* semantics is altogether absent from the whale's nomination (*monster whale-fishes*) and from the periphrasis referring to whalebone – *stunning skull shards of time*. It should be mentioned, however, that the translator preserves the wordplay on the word *cherepki*, which can mean shards or the diminutive of skulls, thus preserving the allusion to the skull of Yorick in Shakespeare's "Hamlet".

4.2. Conceptual layers of the story: the intertext and the myth

The associative principle of textual composition allows the author to achieve the high concentration of complementary senses that are created by the various contexts serving as background to the story.

The **biographical context** is the most evident in the story. There is every reason to suppose that the story is dedicated to the life of Natalia Vasilievna Krandievskaya-Tolstaya (1888-1963), Tatyana Tolstaya's paternal grandmother. The fact that the heroine's name coincides with the name of Tolstaya's grandmother points to this most convincingly. It is this context that is foregrounded by the subtitle, introduced by the translator: *Uncovering the bones of a grandmother's past*.

The biographical layer forms a part of a vaster **historical context**. Through the story of her grandmother, Tolstaya models the history of the country and its people, putting it into the historical and cultural context of the Revolution. The events in the story are projected into their historical context by coordinating the literary image of "the last steamship", on which Natalia Vasilievna fled from "grapevined, bohemian Odessa", with the so-called Philosophy Steamer – the forced exile of the intellectual elite who refused to recognize the Soviet government in 1922-1923. It is not said in the text when Natalia Vasilievna's emigration began, the reader knows only when it ended – in 1923. The concrete date strengthens the aforementioned parallel without disrupting the biographical basis of the event told in the story (N.V. Krandievskaya was in emigration from 1918 to 1923) (Chernov, 2008). The presence of the biographical and historical layers imbue the story with facticity, and allows some of the scholars to classify "Yorick" as an essay (Lyubeznaya, 2006).

The atmosphere of 1920s Russian culture is formed with citations from **literary works** of the epoch. There are citations from emblematic works of literature: the beautiful Natalia Vasilievna "passed through suites of rooms, rustling her silks, fragrant with French perfumes and fashionable Norwegian mists". Compare with the poem "The Lady Unknown" by A. Blok: As to a rendezvous inscrutable / *Asilken* lady darkly moves. / She slowly passes by the drunken ones / And lonely by the window sits; / And from her robes, above the sunken ones, A *misty* fainting perfume flits (Blok, 1921). There is a citation from a then-popular frivolous song: "The blue orb goes round and round / Round and round above our heads / It goes round and round and wants to fall down / And the suitor wants to snatch the young lady" (Biryukov, 2006), which appears at the end of the story: "the suitor wants to snatch the young lady, ... and the world circulates, whirling, spinning, wanting to fall". The English version of the story gives close equivalents to the lexis that creates these intertextual links. Although it is not completely clear whether this decision on the part of the translator was motivated by his intention to preserve the intertextual links, an English reader well-acquainted with Russian culture could readily infer the links from the translated text.

Apart from the limited literary context of 1920s Russia, a powerful conceptual layer is formed by **world literature**, which is interwoven in the text both overtly and covertly. For instance, Maupassant's name provides the opportunity for the story to be read through the lens of the works by the French writer of the XIX century. It is known that Maupassant preferred the genre of the short story. He followed the principle of portraying the protagonists' acts instead of their thoughts or feelings. This principle is also at work in the story "Yorick". The whole of grandmother's life story is told through "facts" and "acts" in one sentence. The closing phrase of that passage can also be viewed as an intertextual manifestation: "To retell a life you need an entire life. We'll skip it." It can be viewed as the quintessence of Maupassant's famous passage: "To tell everything is out of the question; it would require at least a volume for each day to enumerate the endless, insignificant incidents which crowd our existence" (Maupassant, 1909).

The relationship between "Yorick" and Shakespeare's tragedy "Hamlet" is complex. The title of the story immediately sets up the Shakespearian background. We do not, however, find in the text of the translation any archaic lexemes that would underscore this background. What we find is an extended "graveyard" metaphor which manifests itself via a network of lexemes and phrases in the text, such as *a communal grave; the corpses of tiny objects; as the paper died, the hooks fell to the bottom of the grave; lived a radiant, short life; skull shards*. As Hamlet walks through the churchyard, uncovering various skulls, so the narrator in "Yorick" digs through the "graveyard" of buttons and other things. The whalebone she finds is a metonymical replacement for the whale, which, by way of mapping the jester's skull onto the whalebone, becomes the new "Yorick".

Tolstaya's monologue in her description of the whale, "poor Yorick", is parallel to Hamlet's monological description of Yorick, the king's jester. Note the enumerative character of Shakespeare's description: *"a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy; he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; ... Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment"*. Tolstaya's characterization bears a high degree of similarity: *"how he dove, how he wasn't on his guard; those baleens, those horny formations, those so-called whiskers or bones; poor Yorick, didn't even eat fish, he didn't wrong any fishermen, he lived a radiant, short life*. The tender attitude of the narrator towards the whale is consonant with that of Hamlet towards the jester. Another interesting parallel can be traced in that Hamlet, at the end of his monologue, sends Yorick to a lady who uses paint to beautify herself. In Tolstaya's story, a part of Yorick-the-whale is taken to make a corset to make grandmother look more beautiful.

The biographical, historical and literary layers of the text highlight the fourth layer – the mythopoetical one. The actualization of the mythopoetical layer in literary texts enriches them with universal meanings by coordinating their textual worlds with universal mythical models and including them in the global cultural system.

1. For example, the tale of the grandmother's destiny can be read as a myth of a primal ancestor going through the ritual of initiation, a ritual of death and rebirth. It is the model the story follows: the protagonist crosses a body of water, visits the "other world" and comes back not only with a new appearance, but also with a new social status – Natalia Vasilievna is transformed from a young girl into a woman and a mother after she has been initiated into a new, post-Revolutionary society.

According to the mythopoetical code, by putting on a corset the heroine puts herself into the mouth of a monster (the Russian word for *whale*, *kit*, comes from the Greek *κῆτος*, lit. *sea monster*). It is as though she was held between its whalebone teeth, but when she comes to Petrograd in a skirt, she is finally free. Interestingly, the same image of corset as the mouth of a monster can be found in the metanovel "The Glass Snail" by M. Pavic (Pavic, 2000; see the short story "Corset"). The time of writing of both stories is practically the same, which makes it difficult to tell whether the coincidence is due to intertextual influences or is a reflection of the general mythopoetical basis of the texts.

The mythopoetical motive of initiation correlates with the historical context of the story. In the 1920s, the intelligentsia were sentenced to be sent out of the country on the so-called "Philosophy Steamer". This sentence replaced the previous one, which had been the death penalty. Thus, the steamship journey is associated with going to the other world, or death.

The realization of traditional mythopoetical schemes in "Yorick" is complemented by allusions to particular cultural myths, such as the Ancient Greek myth about Aphrodite (*a decadent Aphrodite with a heavy knot of dark-*

gold hair – of grandmother) and the Middle Age Eastern European myth about the three whales that the world stands on (*it stands on three whales, and splits away from them*).

All the mythopoetical meanings that exist in the imagery of the story are fully preserved in the translation. It should be noted, however, that the myth about the three whales is not a universal one (Berezkin, 2007) and is virtually unknown to the English-speaking world. This is convergent with the absence of such an image in H. Melville's "Moby Dick" (Belikova, 2004). The translator uses word-for-word equivalents in the text, leaving it to the reader to explore the symbolic meaning. As a result, this particular mythopoetical meaning can only be perceived by a reader thoroughly familiar with Russian culture and folklore.

5. Conclusion

In the course of our analysis we have discovered numerous literary meanings that form interwoven conceptual layers. The author rises up through the historical and cultural parallels from a biographical story to the philosophical problems of contemporary culture. This rise is manifested in the multi-layered structure of the text. The mythopoetical scheme of initiation – death and subsequent rebirth – serves as the general scheme for embodying all the literary meanings of the story.

The literary meanings of the different levels of abstraction are correlated in "Yorick" by the principle of association. The same principle lies at the foundation of the discourse structure of the story. The literary techniques used by Tolstaya are often based on metaphorical and metonymical mappings between both words (located both closely and distantly) and the senses of one word. When the senses between the English and the Russian words do not coincide, the translator uses the technique of putting together two English words that contain the necessary senses. By using this technique, the translator succeeds in keeping most of the connections in the discourse structure and in communicating the complex literary meanings that interact in the story.

The present approach to literary translation can be used in lessons and workshops that include translation practice. Before translating a literary text, the students will have to perform an analysis similar to the one in the current article. This analysis may also prove useful for the evaluation of an existing translation in terms of adequacy or equivalence. Their degree would depend on the similarity between the components of the original text and its translation. We believe that incorporating such an analysis into educational practice will improve the quality of students' translations and increase students' awareness of textual complexities.

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