

Children's Books in Translation

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...ce upon a time — August 1976, in fact — the International Research Society for Children's Literature held their third symposium at Södertälje in Sweden, to discuss the translation of children's books. Of those who read papers, some were educationalists, some librarians, some university lecturers, a couple of publishers; one or two were also practising translators, and I wish there had been more of them. Some produced diagrams and statistical tables, some had theories of children's literature in general and the translation of it in particular, some had what amounted to sociological theses, some got down to brass tacks and looked at actual translated books, and I wish there had been more of them too. Afterwards the members of the Society sumably went home, and I hope lived happily ever after.

This book*, the Proceedings of the symposium, is the product of their discussions on that occasion. It prints fifteen papers in English; it's a point worth noting that, with the exception of two North American speakers, we have here discussions in translation which are themselves translations, and I'll be returning to it shortly.

Reading the volume I was torn both ways. It's good to see a subject which interests one deeply discussed seriously like this, but there are moments in some of the papers when solemnity gives over from seriousness. Understandably, they are a mixed bag. Let me get the thing that bothers me off my chest first: I find it rather distressing, though perhaps inevitable, that political attitudes figured so large. Maybe we cannot or should not discuss politics and children's literature apart — I'm not offering an opinion either way on that — but politics itself has a language of its own, and it is up to the reader of some of these papers to decide if there is real meaning underneath the political language if it's pure cotton wool. Given that the papers have also been translated, either from Swedish or another language into English,

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or maybe from another language into Swedish and then into English (there's no indication which, in the case of non-Swedish speakers), there may well be more than one layer of translation involved in the English versions here.

Also, the politics do tend to distract people from the point at issue. Take Jörg Becker of West Germany. I don't know that he is living happily ever after, because he didn't sound at all happy at the time of the symposium. The gist of his paper on "The Internationalism of Children's Books" is that East and West are ganging up on the Third World. On co-production of children's books: "Financially strong businesses in the capitalist West cooperate with state-run businesses in the socialist countries, jointly contributing (at the cost of the peripheral countries) to the regulation of the world market price for highly-developed technological products." Lars Furulund of Sweden also comments upon the co-production phenomenon, but with sobering reference to literary rather than political values: to the bland trivialization that may result from an ostensibly admirable idea. That strikes me as more relevant to the actual question of translation.

Jörg Becker was also upset to find Ladybird Books in Nigeria. "Posing as game or hobby books, language or cook books, they propagate the typical virtues of the English middle-class: boy scout organization, how I feed my canary, playing tennis, barbecue in the garden, etc. . . . In the face of the poverty-stricken children in the Third World," he comments, *à propos* these and other European books such as traditional fairy tales, "they represent a wicked cynicism." Well, no one claims Ladybird Books to be great works of children's literature, and they've certainly come in for a good deal of sociological hammering of recent years, and in Nigeria they may certainly seem incongruously out of place . . . but wickedly cynical? Anyway, he can't really fault Ladybird Books on that canary: canary-fancying is a good traditional British working-class hobby.

However, the East German and Russian contingents sounded very happy indeed. I'd be depressed by the standard adulatory jargon of the East German papers, but for the fact that I've seen really good novels for young people from East Germany. I expect a fair amount of self-congratulation is inevitable from the U.S.S.R. Incidentally, it would do all of us outside that huge conglomeration of countries good to read an informative little paper here by Yuri Yarmish, concerning translations from and into Ukrainian. With its mentions of the Turkmenian,

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Georgian and Estonian languages, it's a salutary corrective to the westerner's automatic mental reaction to the words "Russia" and "Russian" as monolithic concepts.

It is Igor Motyashov of the Detskaya Literatura publishing house who is Eastern Europe's main spokesman in this book. He is paternalistic and proud of it. "The supreme concern of the state as publisher is not to make a profit, but to educate properly and rear the younger generation. Hence, it takes care to see that what children read is in good taste and of good quality." He suggests four criteria as guidelines in selecting books for translation, and this is where I do feel language — the language of politics and the language of translation — may get in the reader's way.

To work backwards to the vital and really tricky one, Criterion Four is political. "This expresses the attitude of the publisher and the translator to the existing political situation, their willingness, or, conversely, unwillingness openly to side with a progressive policy that actively refutes racist, militarist, chauvinist, royalist, clericalist, neofascist, neocolonialist, anti-communist, antisocialist and antidemocratic ideas and views." A fine resonant condemnation; I can even add to it — "sexist", or is that a source of potential trouble only in the West? Criterion Three is moral: "We think inarguable the fact that any children's book should inculcate industry, honesty, respect for one's seniors, a spirit of self-criticism and self-demand, tolerance, and a sense of civic responsibility." Criterion Two (educational) contains a semantically interesting definition of the term "progressive": "As a character forming agent it [a children's book] should be progressive, that is, not conflict with the commonly accepted moral and ethical norms." But here, in Criterion One, is the term one would really like defined: *aesthetic*. "By aesthetic criteria we mean that the book should be in good taste and accord with the child reader's aesthetic requirements. As this yardstick is unquestionably common to all mankind, it may be taken as the principal one." So far, so good. "It does not permit of a lop-sided pandering either to adult tastes, which may prove to be overly la-de-da, or to juvenile tastes which, usually being inadequately developed, are content with something crude and primitive." Then what about the unquestionably common yardstick, I asked myself as I read; can't mankind be trusted to know what's good for it after all, then? I suppose I am being frivolous. I don't mean to be. I take the practice of the craft of translation very seriously: it is an absorb-

ing business, and makes one determined to get at the real meaning of the words as used in context. That is why I'd like to know precisely what Mr. Motyashov means by that large term "aesthetic". Translation, where one is working constantly with language, is the last field where one expects to come upon jargon. Jargon abounds everywhere, no doubt, but let us translators follow Dr. Johnson's advice and clear our *minds* of cant. The school my own sons attend, upon its metamorphosis into a sixth-form college, lost a Library and gained a Resources Centre. But at least the books are still there.

And the most interesting papers in this volume do get back to the books themselves, stimulating a working translator like myself to form questions, to agree or disagree, but certainly to think. That includes Mr. Motyashov's paper: I may not agree with him that the "constrictions" of the Western book market make it vastly inferior to the Soviet publishing world, but he makes one want to ask questions, to find out what he really means. And to look at actual books and their translation.

Take the vital point, for instance, made by Richard Berger of Austria in his short but eminently sound and sensible paper. "Children do not care where books come from, they do not read them *because* they are foreign books, as adults often do, but regard them as stories of adventure, fantasies, and so on, just as if the books were originally written in their own language." Precisely. This fact has a good deal of bearing on the question of adaptation in translation, which comes up again and again in the various papers: to what degree may one legitimately adapt in translating books for children and young people?

Both in theory and practice, this is a most delicate area. I had better declare my own position at once: any conscientious translator will of course stay as close to both letter and spirit of the original as possible, but especially in translating for children I feel that if a clash should arise, then the spirit of the work must take precedence, or children will not read it. An adult may say: this is alien to us but foreign and interesting. A child may just lose interest. Of course any necessity for adaptation may vary from book to book, and from age group to age group, but I would rather — with the author's permission, needless to say — adapt than lumber a text with footnotes.

I think I differ here from Carmen Bravo-Villasante, in her lively paper. "In our opinion," she writes, "works in which . . . doubts and problems arise should be provided with footnotes and a preface in which the author sets the work against the back-

ground of the society and culture in which it is written." She would have the backing of Helen Painter, of Kent State University, as quoted here by Birgit Stolt: "She [Helen Painter] therefore recommends as aids to comprehension notes, aids to pronunciation, explanations of important foreign words and terms."

Carmen Bravo-Villasante cites an example: it seems that the standard Spanish translation of *Alice in Wonderland* has changed tea and biscuits to "chocolate con picatostes" thickened cocoa with a sort of fried bread. The English version was adapted to Spanish customs by the translator because in earlier times, before it became fashionable to drink tea in the English manner, tea was only given to sick people in Spain." Well, the change certainly falls oddly on English ears. And without knowing more of the merits or otherwise of the Spanish translation as a whole, one can hardly pronounce. But if Alice's tea and biscuits fell oddly on young Spanish ears, may it not have been better for her to get familiar cocoa and fried bread, rather than tea and biscuits served up with a helping of footnotes? Aren't authors of children's books (and subsequently their translators) hoping to entertain, not just instruct and edify? See Dr. Johnson again, and his sensible recommendation for a boy's education: "I would let him at first read any English book which happens to engage his attention; because you have done a great deal when you have brought him to have entertainment from a book. He'll get better books afterwards." Also prefaces and critical apparatus. I think they are very seldom in place in imaginative literature for young people in translation.

The whole matter is fraught with complexity; one cannot lay down hard and fast rules. Torben Weinreich of Denmark and Göte Klingberg of Sweden are the authors of papers printed in this volume who really do grasp the difficulties, the fluctuating nature of the entire translation process. The translator is constantly adjusting, putting out mental feelers, so to speak, before making that little leap of the imagination with which one hopes to convey the author's meaning as faithfully as possible in the language of translation. Carmen Bravo-Villasante knows all about this; as a fellow-translator of Otfried Preussler's fine novel for young people, *Krabat* (published in England and the United States as *The Satanic Mill*), I warned to her description of finding in the book the same problems she had found in translating Hölderlin, Heine and Goethe, of maintaining "the idiomatic balance and the literary 'tension'." Beautifully ex-

pressed, and I expect that, like me, she also learnt a lot about the way water-mills work, in the process of translation, since Preussler set his folk-derived fable of magic against a background of finely realized detail concerning the day-to-day running of a mill, and one has to understand such matters fully in one's own language before starting to translate.

Some of the most interesting and enjoyable passages in the whole volume deal with comparison of translations: always a fascinating subject, at least to translators. (I turn frequently, for fun and to remind myself of the necessary self-discipline of a translator, to the examples of comparison between original and translation, or between translations, in George Steiner's magnificent *After Babel*, ranging from "The Owl and the Pussycat" to the words "Fiat lux" from the Book of Genesis.) Here, we have Jörg Becker making the best point of his whole paper in a comparison of different — very different — German versions of a paragraph from *Pinocchio* (quoted from a talk by Ragni Maria Gschwend). Mae Durham is good on comparative English translations dating from 1930 and 1959 of Kästner's *Emil and the Detectives*. Birgit Stolt's whole paper is highly readable and interesting in its exploration of the way in which Astrid Lindgren's Emil becomes 'Michel' in Germany — apparently for fear of confusion with Kästner's Emil — and of various ways in which people have tried to prettify passages of Lindgren's work. She has another illuminating piece of comparative translation from Edith Unnerstad's *The Spettekake Holiday*.

Mae Durham, like Carmen Bravo-Villasante, is a practising translator, or rather in her case a reteller, since in her account of her work on Latvian and Japanese folk tales, she described her work on the *sound* of the original languages, trying to get the same effect in English, the material having been roughly translated for her. I said at the start of this review I wished there had been more translators represented in this book; this is not just because of the professional interest one feels in other people's methods of work, but because I feel working translators could have helped answer some of the questions frequently put by the authors of the papers. Perhaps there were translators at the symposium who made verbal contributions at the time. For instance, there's a recurrent question: can translators, often working under pressure, keep up a good literary standard? The answer to this one is that no freelance translator can afford not to keep up standards, whether working under pressure or not. Quite apart from the strong motive of professional pride, any

freelance is paid only for actual work done, and it *must* be of good quality: must give value for money, so to speak. I think I prefer to work that way.

This brings up another point which recurs from time to time in the book, but which seems to receive little practical attention from the authors of the papers: the choice of children's books for translation. Like the matter of maintaining standards, it involves the relationship between publisher and translator, who, in this country at least, is very likely to be the publisher's reader of a foreign title too. Several of the authors of papers here mention, rather vaguely, "consultants", or suggest the drawing up of lists of books to be translated, what importance should be attached to what factors in the drawing up of such lists, etc. So far as my experience goes, it's simpler and more prosaic than that. Publisher A makes contact with Publisher B, perhaps initially at one of the big book fairs, perhaps just by repute, perhaps through an agent. Publisher A sends book out to Publisher B, who in turn sends it out to a reader, who may well be a potential translator of a book in the language concerned — and who is going to be very careful indeed over assessing the literary quality of the book, its suitability for that particular publisher's list, its likelihood of appealing to the children it may eventually reach.

It is quite a responsibility to recommend a book to a publisher who may not be able to read a word of it himself or herself. The publisher, in turn, no doubt assesses what he or she knows of the reader/translator's inclinations and capacity for judgement, as well as the actual report on the book. Not much is said in the Proceedings of the Symposium about the relationship between author, publisher and translator, which appears to me an important one in the ultimate production of a translated book. Igor Motyashov and his Ukrainian colleague Yuri Yarmish, as publishers themselves, are the exceptions to this comparative lack of interest in the publisher's role.

Obviously my own reactions to this collection of papers is subjective, both personally and professionally. I found it a provocative, sometimes provoking book: woolly in parts, stimulating in others. I'm glad to have read it. Even when one disagrees with some of the opinions expressed, it's good to think that, as an addition to the growing body of critical material on children's literature in general now published, there is a book on the subject of that literature in translation in print.