children's Books in Translation
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Once upon a time — August 1976, in fact — the International
Research Society for Children's Literature held their third sym-
posium at Södertälje in Sweden, to discuss the translation of
children's books. Of those who read papers, some were educa-
tionalists, some librarians, some university lecturers, a couple
of publishers; one or two were also practising translators, and
ish there had been more of them. Some produced diagrams
and statistical tables, some had theories of children's literature
general and the translation of it in particular, some had what
pointed to sociological theses, some got down to brass tacks
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
their discussions on that occasion. It prints fifteen papers
I at the time, and — for English-speaking readers — prints
them in English; it's a point worth noting that, with the excep-
tion of two North American speakers, we have here discussions
translation which are themselves translations, and I'll be re-
ading it shortly.

reading the volume I was torn both ways. It's good to see
objections one deeply discussed seriously like this,
but there are moments in some of the papers when solemnity
is over from seriousness. Understandably, they are a mixed
lot. Let me get the thing that bothers me off my chest first: I
find it rather distressing, though perhaps inevitable, that polit-
ical attitudes figured so large. Maybe we cannot or should not
politic children's literature apart — I'm not offering
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
ide 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,
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 Fürungal of Sweden also com-
ments 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, bar-
becue in the garden, etc... In the face of the poverty-stricken
children in the Third World," he comments, apropos 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 incon-
gruously 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 adulat-
y 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,
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, antischolarist and antidemocratic ideas and views.”

A fine resonant commination; 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-
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 Offried Preussler's fine novel for young people, Krabat (published in England and the United States as The Satanic Mill), I warmed 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 Kätner'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 Kätner'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 Spettacake 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.