Maxim Gorky's World Literature Project

Lessons from the Past

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Résumé : Ma contribution souligne l'importance du projet de littérature mondiale de Gorki (1918-1924) dans lequel la traduction occupe une place spéciale. Elle souligne aussi le pouvoir de la connaissance des langues. Des exemples illustrent le sens des initiatives de Gorki pour répandre les idées révolutionnaires, construire une nouvelle littérature et accueillir la théorie de la traduction dans l'édition juste après les événements de 1917 en Russie. Je présente aussi des éléments de discussion pour éclairer la transformation et le développement ultérieur de son projet de littérature mondiale au cours du XX^{e} siècle.

Mots-clés : Traduction, littérature russe, littérature mondiale, théorie de la traduction, monde de l'édition

It is commonly known that the three Russian revolutions that took place in January 1905, February 2017 and October 1917 were catastrophic events with huge tragic consequences. However, understanding the role of the intelligentsia in these events has never been easy and straightforward. My modest contribution to this chapter will focus on just one episode in the history of Russian revolutions, which is connected with Maxim Gorky's World Literature project.

A number of Russian artists, writers and poets welcomed revolutionary events and actively took part in them because they perceived possible transformations as opportunities to change humans' existence for a glorious future in which people can be masters of their life. This group of people was under the influence of Nietzsche's ideas, in particular his cult of the *Übermensch* (or *Superhuman Being*). The best illustration of their feelings can be found in the following extract from Lunacharsky (1875-1933), the People's Commissar of Education in the first Soviet government:

> "Dear artist, widely open your mind", – I declare – "do not miss your happiness: you are the observer of great events purely by a stroke of fate;

> think, think carefully, watch using all your strengths, change these splashes of never-before-seen lights on the facets of your individuality, break down with burden, die for literature, as now literature itself is your goddess, who demands from you to do an imaginative analysis and synthesis of these mind-blowing and larger-than-life events!" (Lunacharsky, 1906: online - my translation AP).

Maxim Gorky (1868-1936), the first proletarian writer, shared Lunacharsky's vision and introduced his literary project – a new publishing house called World Literature – to the cultural life of Soviet Russia in 1918[1]. His plans were extremely ambitious: a series of popular editions of the classics which consists of 1500 volumes, 320 pages each. The idea was to re-translate the classics of world literature published between the French Revolution and the Bolshevik Revolution for the new reader whose background belonged to the class of industrial and agricultural workers. At that time the former Russian Empire was ruined, there was a civil war there, with hunger and death everywhere, but the World Literature (1918-1924), a publishing house under Gorky's patronage was in full swing.

Behind this gigantic enterprise was also Gorky's idea to provide jobs for his fellow writers who did not have any other means to support their families. Additionally, his project had started to contribute to the development of translation as a scholarly activity. Tyulenev argues:

> "Besides the editing and publishing activities, VL[2] initiated several ancillary cultural processes, among which its Studio of literary translation is especially remarkable. In the Studio, the theory of literary translation was taught and workshops were organized by such experts as Blok, Gumilev, Chukovsky, Gorky, Zamiatin, Lozinskii and others. The theoretical findings of the Studio have been recorded in the book Principles of Literary Translation published within the VL project (in two editions); the practical result was a considerable number of experienced translators who graduated from the Studio and who became a great help to the VL publishing house" (AG X, 1(1964, 20-21) cited in Tyulenev, 2016: 16).

Chukovsky (1882-1969) and Gumilev (1886-1921) are mentioned among experts in the quotation above. They were the authors of *Principles of Literary Translation* (1919), a brochure which had two sections dedicated to translating prose (written by Chukovsky) and poetry (written by Gumilev). Perhaps Chukovsky's contributions

[1] Gorky may be or may be not familiar with *Weltliteratur* (or *world literature*), Goethe's neologism of 1827, but knowing Lunacharsky's active participation in the establishing of the World Literature publishing house, it is possible to suggest that he has been responsible for suggesting its name which signals the tradition and heritage of great literature. In the contemporary world, at the beginning of the 21st century, it is possible to see the growing interest for Goethe's concept. There is evidence of its development in the English-speaking world (for more information see Damrosch, David (2003) *What is World Literature?* Princeton University Press) and in France (for example, Barbery, M., Jelloun, T. B., Borer, A., Brival, R., Condé, M., & Daeninckx, D. (2007), "Pour une littérature-monde en français", *Le Monde*, *16*).

[2] VL is the abbreviation of Vsemirnaia Literatura which is the translation of 'world literature' in Russian.

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to establishing, maintaining and developing the Soviet school of Translation Studies are well known: his book *Iskusstvo perevoda* (in Russian) had many versions, its 1964 edition was translated by Lauren G. Leighton and published in 1984 under the title *The Art of Translation: Kornei Chukovsky's A High Art.*

However, Gumilev's contributions to Translation Studies are less known in the West. He suggested the nine commandments for the translator of poetry and strongly believed that they would be better carried out as the list was a little bit shorter than Moses' principles.

To him the poetic elements of the original that every translator should leave unchanged are the following:

1. number of lines,
2. metre and measure,
3. alternation of rhymes,
4. enjambement,
5. the type of rhymes,
6. the style of the vocabulary,
7. types of comparison,
8. distinctive devices, and
9. shifts of tone (Gumilev, 1919/2013: 97).

Gorky's World Literature project was stopped in 1924, but his initiatives and beliefs were later maintained and developed by other publishing houses in the former USSR, in particular by Progress Publishers which was established in 1931 and where the author of this article had the great pleasure to work in the 1980s. A comparison of these two publishing houses might be a subject for another article, but here it is appropriate to mention that Progress Publishers had the same educational function as Gorky's World Literature, but with a much stronger ideological function. It will not be an exaggeration to say that it became one of the successful examples of the use of soft power abroad by the Soviet government.

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