

***Oblomov* – Retranslating a Classic  
Bridging the Time, Place, Contextual and Cultural Gap:  
An Account of Some of the Policy Choices Entailed by the  
Re-Translation of *Oblomov***

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There is a crucial and underappreciated distinction between the task of translating a hitherto unknown foreign language literary work for the purpose of making it available for the first time to readers in the target language, and that of re-translating a classic. In the latter case, translators expose themselves to, and indeed invite, not only comparison with previous translations, but also the haunting question of the very *raison d'être* of the new translation itself. For this reason, a re-translation is in a sense as much about the nature and quality of the translation as about the original work itself – something to which most reviewers remain oblivious or indifferent. It is this which adds an extra dimension of responsibility, vulnerability, and challenge to the task, and entails a number of daunting policy choices and judgment calls. This paper gives an account of just some of these, all of which confronted me in translating *Oblomov*.

Anyone bold and venturesome enough to undertake the task of translating – and especially *retranslating* – a foreign language classic sets his foot on a path strewn with these daunting policy choices and judgment calls, any one of which may lay him open to “second guesses” from critics who would have made the choice that he did not, the choice that he dismissed out of hand, or even the choice he never even thought of. The root of the problem in the particular case of *Oblomov* is that its author wrote for a vastly more homogeneous and narrow readership than does a contemporary translator of his work – especially into English. Add to this the fact that the culture gap between his Russian readers in the 1850s and the English speaking readers of his work in translation, wide enough even at that time, has now been widened much further by a whole dimension, that of the passage of time. Readers of *Oblomov* today are more than 150 years, or six generations, removed from the events and setting described by Goncharov.

### ***Which English?***

The English into which a translator of the 1850s would have rendered the original has by now splintered into a score of different “Englishes” used in various parts of the world. Of these, the two major contenders are still the British and American versions of the language.

I was born, brought up and educated in Britain, but my career has been in the U.S., so although I do not exactly bestride the Atlantic like a Colossus, I do have a foot on either side. This, like the two humps on a Bactrian camel, while supplying two sources of nourishment for his English, imposes on a translator into English an extra burden and responsibility, adding a whole extra dimension to his task. Indeed, in the course of my work I found myself envying translators into, say, Russian whose task, difficult enough as it is, is not compounded by the constant question: “Yes, but into which of two separate but equal *brands* of Russian?”

I constantly asked myself whether a given word, phrase or colloquialism would come across as too distinctively British for the American reader or, what is less likely, too American for the British reader. This divide also applies in some degree to the significant worldwide population which has acquired English as a second language either under British or American tutelage.

Once, of course, I had settled on a version, everything else, at least in the immediate vicinity, had to be consistent. At times, indeed, I had to force myself to sacrifice what were to me particularly felicitous solutions that were too identifiably American or British, in favo[u]r! of renderings which, while blander and less sparkling, were less likely to raise eyebrows, “earbrows,” or hackles on either side of the Atlantic.

One consideration which often tilted the balance in favor of U.S. usage is the fact that in the area of idiom and cultural exchange with the U.K., the U.S. is, by an overwhelming margin, a net exporter. As a result, British readers are far more familiar with and tolerant of American usage than vice versa. I cannot imagine seeing a mirror image of a comment of the following kind, found in *The New York Times Book Review*, in its British counterpart. Meg Wolitzer is reviewing *Good Women* by Jane Stevenson:

“...but the humor required to make them [the characters] engaging is weakened for American readers by the steady infusion of British vernacular and brand names.... Few of these

details are incomprehensible, but as they accumulate they distance us from Stevenson's wit."

Similarly, there have been British movies shown in the U.S. accompanied by subtitles because the regional accents of the characters were deemed too "foreign" for American audiences. I don't believe an American movie has ever been subtitled for British audiences.

With *Oblomov*, the problem hits you between the eyes at the very outset. In the opening paragraph, the translator has to decide whether Oblomov is lying down in his "apartment" or his "flat," thus setting an important precedent for his subsequent choices. These familiar everyday divergences, usually involving nouns, are, of course, only the tip of the iceberg. Happily, Oblomov's dwelling was a "walk-up." This not only spared the translator the "lift/elevator" issue, but also undoubtedly reinforced its recumbent tenant's reluctance to leave it.

Dialogue, of course, poses different and more difficult problems of this kind. The further down the socio-educational scale one descends, the harder it is to strike a balance between keeping the language natural and colloquial and maintaining Anglo-American neutrality. Once you have mediated the competing claims of, for example, "guys," "fellows," "chaps," and "blokes," you have committed yourself to far-reaching problems of consistency – not to mention the fact that the more quotidian the discourse, the more confoundingly class-ridden does British English become.

### *Which "vintage"?*

Another important translation policy issue which has to be resolved is that of the "vintage" of the target language. There is a school of thought which believes that it should be of the same vintage as that of the original. In the case of *Oblomov*, published in the 1850s, the desirable English would have to be that of Dickens – or Mark Twain, with whom he was roughly contemporaneous. I believe that the case against this thesis is overwhelming. First and foremost, the author's intent: Goncharov undoubtedly intended *Oblomov* to be read not only by those who shared his language and culture, but by *his contemporaries*, as indeed does almost every author without giving the matter a second thought. He certainly did not intend the language of his work to have the same quaintly outdated, and sometimes bafflingly and mystifyingly archaic,

impact on his readers in the Russia of the 1850s that it must now have on Russian speaking readers of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

While it is natural to assume that most authors, *if asked*, would welcome the prospect of their work being read by posterity, this question is unlikely to be in the forefront of their minds in the course of their work. A much higher priority is surely attached to the prospect of being published at all, and being read by their contemporaries. I know of no reason to suppose that Goncharov's motivation was any different in this regard. He did, however, express himself, and quite forcefully, on a number of occasions about the kind of potential readers he did *not* want to read *Oblomov*. He strongly objected to the idea of foreign readers having access to *Oblomov* via translation.

In "И.А.Гончаров. Собрание сочинений и писем в 8 томах. М.1952б т.8б с.379, Письмо С.А. Никитенко, Швальбах, 4 (16) июля 1868 года, he writes:

«Стасюлевич вчера указал мне в окне книжной лавки немецкий перевод «Обломова». Я терпеть не могу видеть себя переведённым. Я пишу для русских и меня вовсе не льстит внимание иностранцев. С Германией нет конвенции, а то бы Я не позволил.»

Ibid. Vol. 6. Extracts from Goncharov's letters to Hansen:

« Я никогда не только не поощрял, но, сколько от меня зависело, даже удерживал переводчиков от передачи моих сочинений на иностранные. Это происходило – частью, не скажу, от скромности (это было бы претензия), а скорее от – своего рода - застенчивости, от недоверия к себе, больше, кажется, от того, что все действующие лица моих сочинений, нравы, местность, колорит слишком национальные, русские, - и от того, казалось мне всегда, они будут мало понятны в чужих странах, мало знакомых, как и Вы справедливо говорите, с русской жизнью!» (12 марта 1878 г.) Ibid. С-Пб,2004, т.6, с. 455.

«Я даже думаю, что не только я, и подобные мне, но и такие крупные писатели, как Гоголь, Островский, как исключительно и тесно- национальные живописцы быта и нравов русских, почти неизвестных за границу, не могут быть переводимы на чужие языки без явного ущерба достоинству их сочинений. Ибо что, вне

этих картин и сцен быта, скажет иностранцам нового и яркого содержание их сочинений?» (24 мая 1878 г.) Ibid. С-Пб, 2004, т6, с.455.

« «Обломов» - до того русский тип, что иностранцам он покажется бледным, скучен, непонятен и незанимателен.» Ibid. ( 17 июля 1878 г.) С-Пб, 2004, т.6, с.473.

В письме к Н.С. Лескову:

«Всякий писатель – и не мне чета - линяет в переводе на иностранный язык: и чем он народнее, национальнее, тем он будет беднее в переводе. От этого я недолюбиваю переводы своих сочинений на другие языки». Ibid. ( 3 февраля 1888 г.) С-Пб, 2004, т.6, с.455.

Although he did not directly address the possibility that some foreigners might attempt to read *Oblomov* in the original Russian, I can only conclude from “Я пишу для русских и меня вовсе не льстит внимание иностранцев” that he would have been dead against it.

However, I find his objections to being translated narrow, blinkered, inconsistent, and indeed perverse, considering that his position on the civil service must have entailed a good deal of translating on his part. Apart from anything else, his strictures could equally well apply to his own access to foreign literature. Even though he was able to read, certainly French, probably German, and possibly even some English literature in the original, it is less likely that his acquaintance with the Latin classics, and still less the Greek classics, was at first hand. I don't know how fundamentalists who believe that the Bible is quite literally the word of God deal with the question of the language in which it was originally written, but for most of the rest of us, *including Goncharov*, we can access it **only** through translation. In all these cases, whether he read this foreign literature in translation, or in the original, he was nevertheless doing so as that very foreigner who, he claimed, would find these accounts of the life and culture of these чужие countries and periods непонятны.

I can only speculate that the vehemence of Goncharov's objections might have derived in part from his paranoid fear, amply attested in his “Необыкновенная История”, that the gang of conspirators master-minded by Turgenev might be even more likely to ensure that his works ended up in the hands of foreign plagiarists, if they became available in

translation. I would imagine that most authors, *if asked*, would say that they hope to be read by future generations, but I would doubt that they would project themselves so far into the future as to prescribe how, if at all, they would remedy the problems confronting those readers because of the inevitable obsolescence of the language of their works.

Goncharov's Russian speaking readers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are already distanced from the original by the time dimension; if English-speaking readers were confronted by an *Oblomov* translated into Dickensian English, they would be even further distanced by the *gratuitous* addition of this same dimension to the already formidable gulf of language and culture. Furthermore, even this doubtful advantage would be compromised by the fact that no native English speaker of the present day is a native speaker of Dickensian English. Any even relatively successful attempt to reconstitute or mimic it – or rather, an impressionistic facsimile of it which might pass muster with most readers – would only succeed in fatally undermining the author's intent (see p. 5 above). Paradoxically enough, it would also place readers of such an English translation under the very same disadvantage as 21<sup>st</sup> century Russian readers of Goncharov's *ipsissima verba* in the original Russian, namely that of having no choice but to read a literary classic in what is now an archaic and not entirely transparent and accessible version of their own language. Indeed, it has been claimed, not unreasonably, that, through Pasternak's 20<sup>th</sup>-century translations, Russian readers of Shakespeare have much easier access to – and a better understanding of – his works than contemporary English speaking readers and audiences of his plays. A successful effort to reproduce the language and style of Dickens, especially in terms of dialogue, would indeed be a *tour de force*, but a sterile one. It would be like playing a work for harpsichord on the guitar, or a dog dancing on its hind legs, a feat, however worthy of applause, which would only amount to a labored, and often a poor approximation of the real thing. The whole virtue and advantage of the translator's being a *native* and, it is to be hoped, expert, fluent, and versatile speaker and writer of the target language, would be wasted. No one writing in English today is a native speaker of Dickensian English.

### ***Why "oblomovshchina"?***

Of the many "policy decisions" and "judgment calls" made in the course of his work, the decision by this translator, after much reflection, to

render the original Russian *обломовщина* ["oblomovshchina"] by a clean break with hallowed tradition and what is in effect a transliteration – Oblomovshchina – clearly warrants some explanation. This decision was arrived at by a process of elimination, backed by a solid precedent for the accommodation, and even adoption by English, of *transliterations* of words of foreign origin. Examples from Russian include; "droshky," "troika," "sputnik," "dacha," "izba," "samovar" and the hybrid "refusenik." From other languages we have "pronto," "maestro," "cuisine," "chic," and the hybrid "chaise lounge" "gemütlichkeit," "schadenfreude," "blitzkrieg," "tycoon," "tai chi," and, more recently, "feng shui." No doubt the fact that they haven't had to crash through an alphabet or writing system barrier explains why it is that it is from the more accessible and familiar languages that English has welcomed so many visitors to the language, who come as tourists and end up as green card holders, and even naturalized citizens. It is therefore clearly more venturesome to sponsor or welcome a visitor from the far side of the Cyrillic barrier.

Traditionally, the Russian original has been translated as "Oblomovism" or "Oblomovitis." For whatever reason, neither of the other possibilities, "Oblomovhood" or "Oblomovness" seem to have been explored. "Oblomovness," although not very neat or slick, would, I believe, have been a closer approximation to the author's clear attempt to convey the key idea of the distinctive essence or quintessence of the Oblomov personality, his unique bundle of qualities, or what Oblomov is *about*, and also would not have been open to the same objections as "Oblomovism" or "Oblomovitis." What are these objections?

The suffix "-ism" is a suffix with a wide variety of uses. Its use with proper names narrows the range somewhat, but still leaves room for differences of meaning. One of its most frequent associations, as in the case of Marxism, Buddhism and Darwinism, indicates adherence to a set of religious, political, philosophical, or scientific theories, beliefs, or practices, founded or propounded by the individual to whose name the "-ism" is suffixed. As such, these formations yield a derivative with the suffix "-ist," as in "Marx-ist," "Darwini-ist" etc. "Oblomovism" does not fit in this category, and precisely because it is not a cult, doctrine, or a school which could have adherents or followers, it has never yielded the derivative, "Oblomov-ist."

If Oblomov *had* founded a cult, the nearest example I have ever come across of a character who might have had a claim to the title of

“Oblomovist,” or a disciple of the master, would be Alexandre, the eponymous and stubbornly recumbent hero of the French film comedy, “Alexandre le Bienheureux,” played by Philippe Noiret.

One good reason why the transliteration “samovar” has superseded the possible “close, but no cigar” alternative translations such as “teapot” or “kettle” is that they both fail to convey one or more of the elements of the nature of a samovar as a machine, as part of the decor, and, more importantly, the quintessential and distinctive Russianness of its role and function in the Russia of its time.

In such cases as “Spoonerism” and “Malapropism,” the “ism” is used to indicate a particular eccentricity or idiosyncrasy typified by the original bearer of the name. “Oblomov-ism” might come close to fitting this usage, were it not for one important difference; if “Oblomovism” means anything, it is *not* the single caricatured feature exemplified by Dr. Spooner or Mrs. Malaprop which makes them figures of fun. If Oblomov had been depicted as this kind of one-dimensional caricature famous for nothing but lying down all day long, as indeed he has become for many outside Russia who know nothing about him except his name, “Oblomovism” might have “made the cut.” However, Oblomovshchina is, if anything, a *syndrome*, but not a single *symptom* – and a complex, multi-dimensional bundle of characteristics and behaviors at that. Similarly, Charles de Gaulle was not just the long nose beloved of caricaturists, nor Charles, Prince of Wales, just a pair of big ears.

A third category would embrace terms such as Sadism, Masochism, and Daltonism. The first two might be described as aberrant practices or behavior; vices from a moral standpoint, or pathological conditions, from a clinical standpoint. Daltonism (color-blindness), like other diseases to which the discoverer or first famous sufferer has lent his name, is equally a pathological condition, although a physical and not a psychological one. So the use of “Oblomov-ism” to translate the Russian original would not only seem to be disqualified on all three counts, but there is also a further strike against it. The Russian language is, and has been, as hospitable as all other major European languages to abstract nouns formed by adding the suffix “-ism” to proper names, so that if Goncharov had wanted to call *Обломовщина* (oblomovshchina) *Обломовизм* (oblomov -ism), he might have chosen to do just that. He didn’t, so why should we? Clearly, it would not have done justice to his intentions.

The same applies to the suffix “-itis” which has a more clearly defined and narrower use. Classically, it has been used to form the names of diseases affecting different parts of the body. It is also sometimes used, by extension and often facetiously, to denote a state of mind or behavior akin to an obsession.

An illustration of the difference comes easily to mind. Although the writer of these words might fairly be diagnosed as a bad case of *Oblomovitis*, no one who has actually completed a translation of *Oblomov* could possibly be charged with *oblomovshchina*. Once again, however, like the “ism” in Spoonerism, “-itis” is almost always applied to one specific kind of addictive or obsessive behavior, not the very bedrock or quintessence of someone’s character.

Thus, “Oblomovshchina,” as a rendering of its Russian original, has the merit of not conveying inappropriate and misleading associations and overtones, of which the most treacherous is the simplistic notion that his creator is somehow merely holding up his hero, anti-hero, or protagonist to caricature or even ridicule. At the same time, the use of a transliteration is backed by a host of time-hallowed precedents.

### *Freud and Feelings*

*Oblomov* contains numerous references to and descriptions of the feelings, emotions, attitudes, and moods of its characters. More often than not, these attributions and descriptions are voiced by the author himself. This area of language places the translator in a particularly acute dilemma, since it constitutes a special case of the generic conflict or tension between the “dated” language of the original and the “updated” language into which it should be cast in order to be “faithful” to the author’s intent, while appearing perfectly natural to the contemporary target readership.

There is an interesting parallel between the lexico-ideological legacies bequeathed by Freud and Marx to the languages of the cultures which have been most eager to embrace them. In Russian, some words and notions contributed by Marxist ideologists (e.g., *zakonomerno*, *ob’ektivniy* and others) have trickled down into casual, everyday language and are used unselfconsciously by people with no thought of their ideological origins. The same has happened in English with the language of Freud. If the host of Freud-derived words and concepts were not all coined by the master himself, his many disciples and adherents have all contributed their bricks to this latter-day Tower of Psycho-Babel.

It is significant that a word like “frustration,” which is used spontaneously by English speakers everywhere without thought of its psychoanalytic origin, has always been a stumbling block to translators into Russian, and the standard received equivalent *razocharovaniye* while conveying the element of “disappointment,” fails to convey the crucial element of the pent up or “suppressed” rage of the impotent when thwarted in their desires by unyielding circumstances or superior power – a notion which, like “aggravation,” one would have thought in particularly great demand during the Soviet period.

Post-Soviet Russian is now particularly porous to transliterations from English and *frustratsiya* may now be finding itself a permanent home in the language. So, to the extent that the language that has trickled down from the psychoanalytical school, such as “complex,” “syndrome,” “hang-up,” and “inhibition,” is now standard and spontaneous usage in English, I have felt it appropriate to use many of these terms to convey feelings and emotions expressed by the characters in *Oblomov* or attributed to them by its author, but expressed in the terms appropriate to their time and place. For example, today in English, we are very free with our use of the word “guilt” to describe our own feelings; in Goncharov’s and, no doubt Dickens’s day, “guilt” was something that tended to be attributed to others by oneself or to oneself by others. The feeling no doubt existed, but was not described in that way. Thus, *stydy*, literally “shame,” appears at times and in context to be a feeling which we would more naturally describe as “guilt.”

Other uses of such terms which the reader will find in context in the translation include: “compulsion,” “self-esteem,” “repressed,” “depressed,” “psyche,” “pressure,” “impulse,” “achievement,” “agonize,” “vegetate,” “personality,” “suppressed” [feelings], “frustrated,” “sublimate,” fulfillment,” and “self-conscious.”

Whether the high tension and emotional disarray, amounting to hysteria, to which Olga found herself reduced by her one fleeting, fraught and far-from-consummated physical brush with Oblomov might in these more clinical and outspoken days be attributed, at least in part, to PMS is a matter of speculation. It is not for nothing that we now talk of the “chemistry” between man and woman, something which Goncharov would undoubtedly have spent a shortish paragraph attempting to describe with the rich vocabulary of highly evocative, even melodramatic terms for feelings and shades of feeling with which Russian is endowed.

*The Problem of "You" (Ты & Вы): Master and Servant*

One of the most fascinating aspects of comparative language study is the way in which, with respect to one and the same universal reality, one language feels it necessary to make distinctions which another language is content to do without. Spanish needs two versions of "corner" ["Rincon," "esquina"] – not to mention the verb "to be" ["ser," "estar"], where English has one. French has two words for "year" ["an," "année"] and "day" ["jour," "journée"]; English has one. Chinese has six or more words for different kinds of "uncle" and at least the same number for the different kinds of "carrying." Russian has two words for "blue." English, on the other hand, compared with other languages, is peculiarly rich in words for ambulation or getting from A to B on two feet ("amble," "stroll," "saunter," "sidle," "lurch," just to name a few). Other languages have to struggle to catch up by using adverbs or paraphrase. However, when it comes to the matter of "you," English, in comparison with almost all other European languages, including Russian, is truly the maverick, the odd man out. English alone struggles along manfully with but a single version of "you." Clearly where there is such a strong consensus on the other side in favor of *two* versions of "you," the distinction must be a useful, if not a necessary one.

One of the most appealing features of *Oblomov* is its humor and irony, humor ranging from glinting and subtle to something close to farce or knockabout, when Oblomov and his manservant, Zakhar, are on stage. Here the stumbling block of the British-American divide arises in a special way. There are two competing models available for the dialogue between master and servant. On the one hand, there is the Britain of Dickens with its landed gentry and its servants – the "upstairs-downstairs" model – where the relations between the two classes, and hence the language, of the exchanges between them, was clearly delineated, formal and cold to the point of frigidity. On the other hand, there is the land-owning and plantation-owning gentry of the America of Mark Twain and their slaves. The relations between slave and master in the U.S. and between serf and master in Russia in roughly the same part of the nineteenth century had much more in common with each other than either had with the British master-servant model of the same period. The former were marked by the same paradoxical blend of familiarity, even intimacy, often born in both cases of a shared childhood, and brutality and even outright cruelty.

Oblomov and Zakhar were, in a very real sense, family members. These bonds were strengthened further both by their shared roots in the ancestral Oblomov household and by the fact that by the time their story begins, they were the only surviving members of it, with memories they could share only with each other. Their master-servant relationship was complicated by their older brother-younger brother relationship where the servant was the older and the master the younger brother. Their mutual dependence was well-nigh total, although not necessarily symmetrical. If one was parasitic on the other, it would have been hard to say which was the ivy and which the oak. Like all cohabiting family members, they could each see right through the other's poses and artifices to their hidden vulnerabilities and knew instinctively which buttons to push in both attack and defense. The language of Zakhar's exchanges with his master could be impudent, even insolent to the very limits of insubordination, but it would have been unthinkable for him to have transgressed to the point of addressing him as "ty," or ever making him the subject of anything but a plural verb – another token of the proper deference. Equally unthinkable was the possibility of Oblomov ever addressing Zakhar as "Vy" or making *him* the subject of a verb in the plural. Thus, no matter how insubordinate the content, these lines were clearly drawn and never crossed.

English lacks the means of conveying this crucial notion, at least directly, but part of the art and craft of translation is to find ways of transferring the semantic and other charges carried by the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of the sentence in the original language to other forms and parts of the sentence in the target language. Thus, in British restaurants at least, waiters and waitresses, without realizing that they are instinctively and ingeniously solving what is in essence a knotty translation problem, will compensate for having to use the equalizing "you" to their customers, by resorting to such locutions as: "Were you wanting/would you be wanting another beer?" or "Would madam prefer the lamb?", and making the deferential verb tense or the switch to the third person do the work that the "vous" and the "vy" would be doing in *their* respective languages.

It was with some regret that this translator dismissed the possibility of using the closest available equivalent to the missing "vy," namely "yourself" or "your honor" [analogous to the Spanish "vuestra merced" which in the form of "Usted" has now become the standard form of the formal second person]. These were the forms traditionally

avored by Irish retainers of bygone times for *addressing*, as well as “himself/herself” for *referring* to their Anglo masters and mistresses. Doing so would have meant unaccountably and bizarrely placing the whole novel, lock, stock and barrel, in a nineteenth century Irish setting. The price was too high.

At one point in my career, this was a problem I was simply incapable of solving in a high pressure simultaneous interpretation setting. I was interpreting an extensive interview with Manuel Noriega from his Florida jail for ABC TV’s “20/20.” His interviewer was the young and attractive Diane Sawyer. Noriega started out circumspectly while he was feeling out and sizing up his opponent and used “Usted” in addressing her. Later, clearly feeling he had taken the measure of the opposition, he switched to “tu.” There was no way in the circumstances that I could convey to the English listening audience the subtle manner in which Noriega had now declared himself master of the situation. With hindsight I might have signaled the shift by initially translating “Usted” as “Ms. Sawyer” and then switching to “you,” when Noriega switched to “tu.”

### *Humor and irony*

Having pleaded guilty to the charge of Oblomovitis, I should perhaps attempt to justify it. *Oblomov* has been a favorite of mine for many years. When I first read it, I could not help being struck by the contrast between its status as a classic, and indeed a seminal masterpiece, in the literary pantheon of the Russian-speaking world and the relative ignorance and neglect of it in the English-speaking world. New translations of, for example, Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* seem to appear at regular intervals, not to mention the plays of Chekhov which it seems can no longer be staged without the billing “In a new translation by...” By contrast, there had not, to my knowledge at the time of undertaking the translation, been an English translation of *Oblomov* for some fifty years.

According to some authorities, every generation needs a new translation of the classics, but there are particular reasons why *Oblomov* deserves to be brought out of from the lumber room in which it has been moldering, dusted down, and infused with new life for the English-speaking reader. One of these reasons may have to do with a tradition unique to the translation of Russian classics into English. This tradition is that it has been considered natural and normal for them to be translated

by native speakers of Russian who may or may not possess a native mastery of English. In the case of *Oblomov*, I am aware of two English translations by native Russian speakers; David Magarshak (1954) whose version held virtually unchallenged sway in bookstores and libraries for a good half-century, and Natalie Duddington (1929). By contrast, English translations of classics from other languages seem to have been exempt from this tradition, and the works of Proust, Cervantes, Goethe, Omar Khayyam – and, of course, the Latin and Greek classics – which, if only by default, have been translated as a matter of course by native speakers and writers of the target language. One of the problems has been, I believe, that among other things, *Oblomov* is a masterpiece of humor, but not always of the kind that hits you over the head or elbows you in the ribs. “Mildness” is for Goncharov one of Oblomov’s besetting characteristics and it is by humor of the same mildness that the author invites the reader to join in his gentle but unremitting deriding of his hero, although Oblomov, of course, is too complete, fully realized, rounded and even tragic a figure *just* to be held up for our derision. It is this humor and irony which peeps shyly out of both the narrative and the dialogue which, if it has not defeated, has dampened and dented past attempts at translation by translators whose roots in the target language may not have been sufficiently deep.

***Magarshak, Sibelius, and “leading the witness”***

At the time when I was attempting to peddle the *Oblomov* translation, I even approached Penguin Classics who publish the Magarshak version, the only one which, since the 1950s, has been readily available in bookstores. Magarshak was a native Russian speaker who emigrated to Britain. I was quite surprised to get a reply from their then editor-in-chief, saying that they might be interested. Several years before, I had taken a look at their Magarshak version while browsing in a London bookstore, and for some reason, I felt impelled to write and tell her that part of my motive in attempting the translation myself was my feeling that *Oblomov* had been badly served by that version. Imagine my even greater surprise on receiving the following prompt reply from her, “I understand you perfectly; you need say no more.”

The Finnish composer Jean Sibelius is reported at a certain point in his career to have moved with his family to a house in the woods where he forbade the playing of the music of any other composer in order to avoid being influenced by it in his own work. Again, in the

course of peddling my translation, I had approached a London publisher who wrote back to say that unless I could convince him that there was something inadequate about the Magarshak version, he could see no good reason for publishing a different version. On embarking on my translation, I was at particular pains to follow Sibelius's example and strenuously refrained from looking at any previous translations. In the course of my career in interpretation, I had become acutely aware of the danger of allowing the suggestions of others to interpose themselves between myself and the item in the original language which I was faced with translating. It tended to have the same damaging effect as what lawyers call "leading the witness."

It was not until long after I had completed my own translation that I rose to the challenge thrown down by the London publisher, and took a longer and closer look at the Magarshak version, although I did not think for a moment that any shortcomings I may have detected would find favor in that publisher's eyes.

I have found that some American Russian literature scholars who are familiar with his translation are remarkably "soft" on Magarshak. My feeling is that part of the reason for this indulgent attitude is that what is in fact a serious insensitivity to the English language and English idiom in all its forms, manifestations and regional varieties, is charitably mistaken for "Britishness" – and a somewhat antiquated form, at that. This shortcoming is most apparent in his treatment of dialogue, which is such an important component of *Obломov*, as well as in his deafness to, or perhaps inability to convey, Goncharov's humor and irony, mild and subtle as it so often is. The end result is not so much that he [Magarshak] strikes the *wrong* regional, class, gender or generational register, but rather, that his characters end up speaking an English that no English speaker of any age, any time, any class, either gender, any region or generation on either side of the Atlantic has ever spoken. It is this consistently "not quite" English which is dismissively, but indulgently pardoned as a kind of *Masterpiece Theatre* English. But *Masterpiece Theatre* is at least faithful to the English of the crinolines, chambermaids, and horse-drawn carriages of the bygone England of Austen, Trollope, and George Eliot which it so lovingly recreates.

Looking through the Magarshak translation in response to the suggestion that I substantiate my criticism of his imperfect mastery of the target language, I experienced the same unease that I feel when I am watching a film in which an American actor is cast in a British role, or

vice versa, and I find myself sitting on the edge of my seat, anxiously wondering whether the miscast actor is going to be able to sustain the accent.

In order to illustrate how representative this kind of inadequacy or infelicity is in Magarshak's work, I offer the following examples which follow one another in fairly rapid succession, and were selected from a relatively short section of his text.

Quotations from the original Russian text (I.A.Goncharov) are taken from the edition published by Московский Рабочий. Moscow. 1981. Quotations from the Magarshak translation (D.M.) are taken from the Penguin Classics edition. 1954. Quotations from the Pearl translation (S.P.) are taken from the Bunim & Bannigan. New York edition 2006.

- 1) I.A.G. ( p. 20) "...мастер пыль в глаза пускать... D.M. (p.32) "...all he's good for is *"to throw dust in people's eyes"*... S.P. p. 17) ...*"he's always trying to create an impression."*

The Russian idiom and its *apparent* English equivalent do not quite correspond. For *"to throw dust in someone's eyes"* the O.E.D gives: *"to mislead by misrepresentation."* A frequent combination in D.M. is *"line of least resistance + insensitivity to target language"* – always assuming, of course, that, as a native speaker, D.M. is not likely to have misunderstood the original Russian.

- 2) I.A.G. (p. 17) *"Не подходи, не подходи! Ты с холоду."* D.M.(p. 17).*" Don't come near, don't come near! You're straight from the cold."* S.P. (p.18) *"Stop! Don't come any closer! You're bringing the cold in with you."*  
I.A.G (p. 21). *"Откуда вы?"* D.M. (p. 21) *"Where do you come from?"* S.P. (p.18) *"Where have you just come from?"*

Not quite as bad as *"whence comest thou?"*, but a fairly typical example of D.M.'s difficulty in handling the rich diversity of English tenses, compared with the meager handful of Russian tenses, as well as his difficulty in extracting himself from the *"gravitational pull"* of the original. Unfortunately, *"where do you come from"* is not just non-English, but the *wrong* English, suggesting that the speaker is inquiring after his interlocutor's origins.

- 3) I.A.G. (p.109) Все ахнули, и начали упрекать друг друга в том, как это давно в голову не пришло...” D.M. (p. 126) “They all gasped with horror and began reproaching one another *that* it had never occurred to them...” S.P. ( p. 103) “Everyone was “oo”-ing and “ah”-ing and starting to blame one another for not thinking of it long before . . .”

A non-English piece of syntax, swallowed whole and regurgitated from the Russian construction. You can “reproach” someone for something, but not “reproach someone *that*...”

- 4) I.A.G. (p.110) “Все дались диву, что галерея обрушилась, а накануне дивились, как это она так долго держится.” D.M. (p. 126) “They were all astonished that it should have collapsed, although only the day before they *were surprised* at its having stood so long.” S.P. (p.104) “They were all amazed that the gallery should have collapsed, when, only the day before they *had been equally amazed* that it was still standing after all this time.”

Once again one of the rich panoply of English tenses, in this case the pluperfect, which has to be *supplied* by the translator in order to respect the correct sequence of tenses.

- 5) I.A.G. (p. 111) “Иной раз в беде или неудобстве они очень беспокоятся, даже погорячатся и рассердятся...” D.M. (p. 127) “Sometimes when things went wrong, *they would take a great deal of trouble*, and even *flew* into a temper, and grew angry...” S.P. (p. 105) “Sometimes when there was trouble or things went wrong, they would get deeply involved and even get heated and indignant...”

Another “sequence of tenses” problem. Also “take... trouble” is quite an inappropriate and misplaced idiom here for беспокоятся

- 6) I.A.G. (p. 111) “Как, дескать, можно запускать или оставлять то и другое... D.M. (p.127) “How could *one thing and another* have been neglected so long?” S.P. (p.105) “How

could such things possibly have been neglected and left like this for so long?"

The logic of the author's thought is lost on the reader by this typically blinkered view of the translator's function; i.e., to translate the author's words and phrases simply in the order in which they come in the original, and leave it to the reader to complete the work of "processing" the material. D.M. does not appear to have a sure-enough grip on English idiom to realize that this "line of least resistance" approach to the Russian "и то и другое" is not the corresponding English idiomatic expression – or to know what to do about it, in any case.

8a) I.A.G. (p.112) "*Вообще* там денег тратить не любили и как необходима была вещь, но деньги за неё выдавались всегда с великим соболезнованием" D.M. (p.128) "*Generally speaking* they did not like spending money at Oblomovka, and however necessary a purchase might be, money for it was *issued* with the greatest regret."

S.P. (p. 106) They hated to spend money in any shape or form, and no matter how much they needed something, it was only with the greatest misgivings that they could bring themselves to part with the actual cash..."

8b) I.A.G. (p.113) "*Вообще* они глухи были к политико-экономическим истинам ." D.M. (p. 113) "They were, *generally speaking*, impervious to economic truths..." S.P. (p. 106) "They were, of course, totally impervious to economic truths..."

"Вообще" is an intriguing and deceptively elusive idiom in Russian and can only rarely be satisfactorily translated into English by the schoolroom/dictionary *apparent* equivalent "generally/generally speaking."

9) I.A.G. (p. 128) "Ну, как ваш сегодня, Захар Трофимыч? "Да, как всегда." D.M. "Well, *how is you master today*, Zakhar Trofimych? "*Just as ever*, doesn't know what he wants..." S.P. (p. 120) "So, what's yours up to today, Zakhar Trofimych? "Oh, another one of his tantrums..."

“Just as ever” is a typical example of D.M.’s “not quite” English, striking a false unidiomatic note for something like “the same as ever”/“the same as always.”

Once again, “how is your master today” sounds, however improbably, that the gatekeeper is politely inquiring after Oblomov’s health or well-being. Wrong register and wrong connotation in a context where servants left to themselves are prone to disparaging their masters.

- 10) I.A.G. (p.128) “‘Что же, он ругается, что ли?’ – спросил чей-то кучер” “Уж так ругается, что как только бог даёт силу переносить!” D.M. (p. 145) “‘He doesn’t *swear at you*, does he?’ – someone’s coachman asked” “He *swears something awful!* I don’t know how I can stand it! S.P. (p. 120) “‘You mean he gives you hell?’ asked one of the other coachmen.” “And how! God alone gives me the strength to put up with it.”

A reader relying on the D.M. version would probably come away with the impression that what offended and shocked Zakhar and his cronies was his master’s “bad language.” The issue here is whether Z.’s master “takes it out on him/dresses him down/bawls him out.” It would be as out of character for Oblomov to use foul language as it would for Z. and his cronies to be shocked by it.

- 11) I.A.G. (p. 128) “‘Так вот опозорить тебе человека ни за что, ни про что,’ – говорил он – это ему нипочём.” D.M. (p. 145) “...he’s quite likely to *disgrace* a fellow for nothing at all.” S.P. (p. 121) “Doesn’t bother him in the least to insult and humiliate someone for no rhyme or reason.”

Again, D.M. does not seem able to escape from the “gravitational pull of the schoolroom/dictionary *apparent* equivalent of the Russian (позорить). In English, one “disgraces” some individual, community or institution by one’s own bad behavior which reflects badly on them, as well as on oneself. In other words, “he *disgraced* his family by the conduct which landed him in jail.” You can’t “disgrace” someone by sheer vituperation, vilification, or abuse.

- 12) I.A.G. (p. 129) “Барин пять раз звонил” – прибавил он в виде нравоучения...”  
D.M. (p. 147) “‘The master’s rung five times,’ he added by way of a moral, ...”  
S.P. (p. 122) “‘The master rang five times,’ he added by way of admonition...”

Again the “line of least resistance” yields an English so misplaced as to baffle the reader.

- 13) I.A.G. (p. 135) “...привели Андрея, но в каком виде без сапог с разорванным платьем, и с разбитым носом или у него самого или у другого мальчишки.” D.M. (p. 153) “...they had brought Andrey, but in what a state! Without his boots, his clothes torn, and his nose bleeding – or the nose of some other boy.”  
  
S.P. (p.131) “ ...bringing Andrei with them, as his father had so accurately predicted, but an Andrei in a state of utter dishevelment; barefoot, and clothing all torn, with either Andrei or one of his companions sure to have a bloodied nose.”

Again “the line of least resistance,” this time under the “gravitational pull” of the original Russian syntax resulting in a syntactically aberrant English very close to one of those “dangling modifier” jokes: – “ *with his clothes torn... or [with] the nose of some other boy.*”

- 14) I.A.G. (p. 137) “На всю немецкую нацию она смотрела как на толпу патентованных мещан...” D.M. (p. 155) “She regarded the whole German nation as a crowd *patented, middle class* tradesmen . . .” S.P. (p. 133) “She looked down on the whole German nation as a bunch of stereotypical boors...”

Again, his ‘patented’ line of least resistance,” and the failure to complete the “processing” of the material (in this case transliterating without translating “патентованных”), thus passing on the responsibility for it to the reader.

Here “middle class” also conveys a significant misimpression, especially to his target audience, British readers of the 1950s, a great many of whom would have described themselves –proudly– as “middle class”!

It is all too easy to pillory a translation by seizing on an isolated error, or infelicity, but there are times when a single example is so egregiously incongruous that it raises legitimate doubt about the translator’s command of the target language. One of the most poignant moments in *Oblomov*, the parting – probably the last time they will ever see each other – between the motherless Stoltz, the only child, and his widower father, is reduced to the quaintly bizarre by this off-beat translation of

- 15) I.A.G. (p. 142) “‘Hy!’ сказал отец. ‘Hy!’ сказал сын. ‘Всё?’ спросил отец. ‘Всё!’ отвечал сын. “  
 D.M. (p. 160) ‘Well!’ said the father. ‘Well!’ said the son. *Is that all?*’ asked the father. ‘*All!*’ replied the son.  
 S.P. (p.137) “‘So!’ said the father. ‘So!’ said the son. “That’s it then”?’ asked the father. ‘Yes, that’s it!’ replied the son.”

While the father’s question is unidiomatic enough – or alternatively, entirely idiomatic, but with the wrong meaning, the word “all” in response, could only be expected out of the mouth of a music hall caricature of a Russian trying to speak English. An appropriate context for the correct idiomatic use of the expression: “Is that all?” would, for example, be what Oliver Twist might have said when he saw how little porridge he had been given for breakfast.

Earlier in this paper I made the following point: “It is this humor and irony which peeps shyly out of both the narrative and the dialogue which, if it has not defeated, has dampened and dented past attempts at translation by translators whose roots in the target language may not have been sufficiently deep.” It has, quite pertinently, been recommended that I back this contention with examples. Goncharov is, among other things, a master of the set piece. As I have said, Goncharov’s humor runs the whole gamut from near farce and knockabout, often in the form of dialogue, to the gentle but sustained and exquisitely targeted satire, often in the form of extended narrative – particularly in his depiction of life in *Oblomovka*. The minimalist approach of rendering Goncharov’s words, often “unprocessed” and virtually in the order in which they occur does even less justice to the

original when it comes to conveying and “processing” his irony and satire. Selecting individual words and phrases for comparison would not suffice for this purpose. Nothing short of setting forth the whole of some of these masterly sustained set pieces accompanied by various attempts to convey them in translation would properly reveal the degree of their success. However, such an exercise would take up too much space and unduly tax the attention and patience of the reader. However, I would refer the reader to some of the set pieces I have in mind by way of example.

- 1) Alekseyev aka Vassilyev aka Andreyev. I.A.G. (pp. 25-26). D.M. (pp. 37-39). S.P. (pp. 21-23)
- 2) The Letter. I.A.G. (pp. 119-121). D.M. (pp. 135-138). S.P. (pp. 112-114)
- 3) Oblomov’s Schooldays. (I.A.G. pp. 122-124). D.M. (pp. 139-40). S.P. (pp. 115-116)
- 4) Oblomov and the Snowballing. I.A.G. (pp. 126) D.M. (p. 143) S.P. (pp. 118-119).

Finally, *Oblomov* deserves to be much better known and more widely appreciated in the English speaking world because, through his creation of Oblomov and the world he inhabits, Goncharov has laid bare a quintessential, although sometimes latent element in the Russian national temperament which has touched a nerve in generation after generation of Russian readers – a quintessence to which Ilya Ilyich Oblomov has lent his name. It is not for nothing that this word, a syndrome to which one-word translations like “idleness” or “apathy” do scant justice, has become a byword, a legend lodged deep within Russian national folklore and consciousness – Oblomovshchina.

### ***Why a retranslation?***

One of my fellow contributors to this tripartite article has addressed the question of the need for, and the usefulness or value of retranslations of the classics. His arguments are essentially objective. My own reasons, however, are purely subjective and quite tangential to his case. I have no doubt that other translators of literature have also undertaken their work with no utilitarian considerations whatsoever in mind.

My translation of *Oblomov* was undertaken purely as a labor of love. It is a work which struck a deeply responsive chord in me. To put it

another way, *Oblomov* is a work I would love to have written myself. When I finished it, my feeling was that, although I could not claim to have given birth to it, I did feel that I was at least its midwife, if not its surrogate mother.

***A Motivation for the Retranslation. The Translator's Afterthought or Delayed Reaction Insight***

There is also a deeper-lying motivation which did not bubble up to the surface until long after I had completed the work.

There is a Russian folk saying that goes, “Своя рубашка ближе к телу.” I had tried for two or more years, with whatever success, to ferret out the sense, meaning and nuance of Goncharov’s work in slow and effortful motion. However, it was not until I came to read my own translation of *Oblomov* for the first time after the two or three years since its publication that I could feel the work not only closer to my skin, but even under it. I was finally wearing my own shirt! Reading the novel in a language which, when all is said and done, is still too foreign for its secrets to yield themselves up spontaneously and effortlessly to my alien grasp, I had the feeling that *Oblomov* was like a piece of music that I had previously only been able to play on a piano with a blanket covering the keys – keys which my fingers had never actually touched. Now, that blanket has been stripped from the keys, and it is almost as if one of the powerful but subconscious motives driving me to undertake the translation was precisely that this was the only way to experience more intensely in my own language, the raw, unmediated effect of a book which had made such a strong impression on me in what was to me a learned and acquired language, a language which was, and still remains, ineluctably чужой and was not, is not, and never shall be свой.

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