

INFORMATIONS BIBLIOGRAPHIQUES
ET LEXICOGRAPHIQUES

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL AND
LEXICOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Brian James Baer. *Translation and the making of modern Russian literature.* New York-London-Oxford-New Delhi-Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2015. 224 pp.

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This book is a valuable, original and significant contribution to the history of Russian translation and takes up an entirely different, refreshing perspective. Translation was extremely prolific but often subject to severe censorship in the Russian, Soviet and Post-soviet discourse. By discovering the constructive and deconstructive potential of a translation, Baer assigns it a crucial role not only in the process of a better understanding of the original, but also in the processes of the development of a national literature and of constructing a contemporary Russian identity that the author sees as a multilingual, hybrid, split between the empire and the nation as well as between the West Romantic Cult of originality and Russian endeavours to be freed from Western influences.

The book clearly exposes the importance of translation as one of the essential concepts in the understanding of how Russian literature and identity, in various epochs, from the nineteenth century to the Post-soviet period, was constructed and de-constructed, thus moving a translation from a peripheral and submissive to a central and leading position – an approach which is still considered revolutionary in contemporary translation studies.

In each chapter, a cluster of carefully chosen fictional works is subject to close reading and reframed with insightful theoretical embellishments. Illustrating various theoretical approaches drawn from the research with the analysis of seminal works of Russian fiction from different periods makes the current study highly interesting and informative not only for translation scholars but also for lay readers interested in the subject.

The author starts by discussing the undeniably important role of translations in constructing national identity and laying the foundation of national Russian literature with a civic poetry established in the nineteenth century by the members of the Decembrist revolt, for whom translating French poets was a way to introduce a highly politicized poetry largely unknown in Russia until then and to evade censorship by employing various “hermeneutic strategies” to create an oblique Aesopian language enriched with signals, codes and cues that could only be deciphered by “shrewd, sophisticated” members of certain interpretative communities. Through a lexical analysis of several translations, Baer demonstrates how with “speaking through translations,” the Decembrists used various strategies meant to help the readers to disentangle what was to remain unnoticed by censors. The author also assigns an important function in establishing civic poetry in the nineteenth century Russia through translations under conditions of censorship to paratextual materials, namely to biographies, while also briefly covering the beginnings of the tradition of prison translations.

The author continues exploring the history of establishing Russian national literature and identity, characterized among other concepts by multinationalism and multilingualism, by introducing the concept of *mistranslations* as the authors’ instrument with which to respond, to resist and even to criticize the Tsarist Russian and the Soviet Union’s colonial tendencies. In the chapter framed in the context of post-colonial criticism, the author draws the readers’ attention to the literary device of using or eliminating foreign languages in the original works, moving on to deliberate mistranslations in two Russian novels by which the authors Lermontov and Roziner, express their attitude towards colonial oppression; in Lermontov’s case towards Russian colonization of Caucasus and in Roziner’s towards the Soviet concept of friendship of nations. The difference is that while in Lermontov’s novel the focus is on several mistranslations of lexical items, Roziner takes up the concept of mistranslation as a key element of the plot. Exploring the form of resistance expressed by means of mistranslations, Baer comes to the conclusion that it enables the authors to critically “speak back” to the Empire.

The following chapter discusses mistranslations and the construction of an identity as a non-stable, flexible entity in the elusive space between the nation and the empire, this time employing psychoanalytical assumptions, i.e. Freud’s concept of *parapraxis*, speech errors that are believed to reveal what is in a person’s unconscious. Baer focuses on the use of foreign words and the inability to recall their meaning, or in other words, their untranslatability. As in the previous case, the analysis comprises two canonical literary works, Dostoyevsky’s *Peasant Marei* and Iskander’s *Pshada*, one from the nineteenth century and another from the Soviet epoch, both deconstructing the ideas of Romantic nationalism expressed through the main protagonists’ disability to recall or recognize the correct meaning of

foreign words. In Dostoyevsky's work, the identity is repressed, while in Iskander's, it does not exist anymore. A diachronic perspective allows the author to logically follow the continuity of the construction or deconstruction of the Russian national identity, focusing on the concepts of repressed foreignness and otherness.

Continuing the conversation about the contemporary Russian identity, which was in many ways born in translation, Baer raises an important question about women's experience in translating, both in practice and in fiction, in Russian cultural discourse. Taking Dostoyevsky as a starting point, the chapter then focuses on three contemporary Russian novels that expose the problem of translation not as a primarily female practice, passive and often submissive from a Western perspective, but by deconstructing the Romantic concept of original authorship, by presenting the translations as polyglossic and an "alternative form of authorship" in the frames of a moral general debate on imitation and originality. Baer skilfully chooses examples from nineteenth century and Post-soviet epoch literature, thus broadening the borders of interpretation.

Translation was an alternative method of authorship for those who could not get their works published in the atmosphere of strict Soviet censorship. Baer takes up the term "de-authorization", through drawing on Foucault's and Burt's new ideas about approaching censorship not strictly as a "repressive activity" and instead talking about the transformative potential of translation as alternative authorship – in this case enabled by censorship. The outburst in translation practice that marked the Soviet epoch and the consequent constructing of identity could not have happened without certain ideological and censorial constraints, as for some talented writers, translating became the only means for mental and creative survival.

In what follows, Baer shifts from the Soviet to Post-soviet era, focusing on the translation of gay literature into Russian, especially on translations of Wilde and the "packing" of his literature in paratexts. The focus here is not only on translation practices summarized as russification, extreme domestication and aesthetization of Western gay literature and signified mainly by apolitical agendas and suffering; but also on the, in most cases, manipulative interpretation of gay literature in introductions and accompanying texts.

The last chapter takes into account an English "mistranslation" of Ulitskays's *Daniel Stein, Interpreter*, a contemporary Russian novel, as post-modern and manifesting an elusive, plural, unstable identity, while Baer sees the novel as a manifestation of a stable Post-soviet identity and the main protagonist as "thoroughly inscribed" in Russian tradition and culture. This statement is supported through the interpretation of the homosexual subplot, which, in Baer's opinion, resembles a typical Russian attitude towards gay culture as egoistical and narcissistic, as opposed to Western views. The English translation fails to reflect on this

point as well as on the construction of the Post-Soviet identity and the celebration of national limits to pluralism, but rather interprets the novel as a classical example of post-modernism and hybridity. *Misreading Russia* opens the question of misleading interpretations of translations and its consequences.

Baer has created a convincing, well-researched, unique and engaging study of the specifics of the role of translation in the formation of Russian national literature and identity, undoubtedly interesting and inspiring not only to Slavic scholars but also to any reader who is interested in a different and innovative approach to the significance of translation. The spiritual, scientific, practical and scholarly merits of this book perfectly complement one another.