

Translating Sorokin/Translated Sorokin

*Vladimir Sorokin, Jamey Gambrell, Tine Roesen, Andreas Tretner,
Dirk Uffelmann and others*

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*Transcribed from a Russian audio recording by Zarifa Schäfer, translated
into English by Tine Roesen, edited by Tine Roesen and Dirk Uffelmann*

Dirk Uffelmann

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

I have the honour of opening this roundtable discussion of Vladimir Sorokin's works. Let me briefly present the participants. The most important participant is, of course, the writer himself, Vladimir Georgievich Sorokin, the brightest representative of contemporary Russian literature, a postclassical classic of (post-)Conceptualism, who emerged from Moscow's artistic underground and has enjoyed particular fame since the scandalous campaign launched in 2002 by the *Idushchie vmeste* (*Walking Together*) organization and directed against the novel *Goluboe salo* (*Blue Lard*, 1999). We are immensely happy and grateful that Vladimir Sorokin was willing to come to Aarhus and participate in this roundtable discussion and in the launch of the Danish translation of *Metel'* (*The Snowstorm*, 2010). I expect that it will be extremely interesting for us to hear how an author whose poetics has been described using the term "nevinnyi medium" (innocent medium; I.P. Smirnov) will now perform as a talking object: an object of translation, an object in the hands of translators.

From New York we welcome Jamey Gambrell, who has produced English-language translations of “A Month in Dachau,” *Ice Trilogy*, *Day of the Oprichnik*, as well as short stories and excerpts from various works by Sorokin, and who is now planning to translate *The Snowstorm*.

Tine Roesen, co-organizer of this conference, has translated *Day of the Oprichnik* and *The Snowstorm* into Danish. The latter work will be presented to Danish readers tonight, in the author’s presence.

Andreas Tretner from Berlin has translated *Ice Trilogy* and, to use his own expression, the *Snowy-Sugary Trilogy* (*Day of the Oprichnik*, *Sugar Kremlin*, *The Snowstorm*) into German.

Each of the three translators has formulated a series of questions that have arisen while translating Sorokin, and these questions have been circulated to all panellists, including Vladimir Sorokin. It is now my task to present these questions in some kind of logical order. We would like the first part of the discussion to involve the panel only, while in the second part we will open up the discussion by inviting questions from the conference participants.

Vladimir, to what extent have you acquainted yourself with translations of your texts, and what are your thoughts on this “return,” in a foreign language, of texts that are “yours and not yours,” texts that you wrote in what is already a “foreign Russian”?

Vladimir Sorokin

First of all, I would like to greet you all and to thank the organizers very much for the invitation. This kind of conference only happens once every 15 years for a writer. Thank you!

And thank you, Dirk, for the question. You know... I once flew out of New York together with Tat’iana Tolstaia, this was about 10 years ago, and she told me that in a collection of her short stories that was about to come out in English—a language she knows very well—she had discovered 100 semantic mistakes. So I asked her: “What can you do?” and she said: “Well, nothing really!” It is probably such a complicated question and so dependent on the personal, psychosomatic nature of the writer’s relationship with his own texts in a foreign language that there can really be no principles here. I will just try to be honest with you about my own views. For me it began in 1986, when *Ochered’* (*The Queue*, 1983) was translated into French, *La queue*. It was translated by a very young and

inexperienced translator. I do not speak French, so I had no problems. You must remember how it was at that time, the very fact of having the novel published in Paris, first in Russian with the publisher Sintaksis, and then in translation... However, afterwards various people began to discuss the translation, to say that it was, well, not impeccable. Then I noticed... Well, as you know, the whole of *The Queue* is held up by an often extreme extension of dialogues and roll calls. Anyway, it turned out that, through the efforts of the publisher and the translator, the text had been shortened by a third. Of course, nobody had thought to ask the author about this. The bold translator actually managed to persuade me to let the same publisher have the novel *Tridtsataia liubov' Mariny* (*Marina's Thirtieth Love*, 1982–84). That went even more badly. You will remember that the novel ends in an elaborate, extremely long quote from *Pravda*. This ending was effectively shortened by 70 percent, and this was something I actually noticed (laughter) and was seriously dissatisfied with. The translator blamed the publisher; the publisher blamed the translator, arguing that it would allegedly not be understood by French readers. And here my relationship with them ended, both with the translator and with the publisher—which, by the way, went bankrupt. But then other things happened, and the second translation of *The Queue* was into English, the work of a very experienced philologist, Sally Laird. That was a really good translation, everybody says so. However, as far as perfect translations are concerned, they do not exist, because a translation always depends on the contemporary linguistic environment. For example, an American publisher may say that, when he reads this translation now, he finds the spoken English already somewhat outdated. It has fallen behind contemporary language.

That was how it was in the beginning. Now my books have been translated into more than 20 languages. Recently, *Day of the Oprichnik* came out in Ukrainian, in Hebrew and in Greek. This autumn it will be published in Chinese. There is no doubt that it is an absolutely magic act for me to lie down on a couch with one of my own books in another language and become engrossed in reading. Certainly, these acts always make me wonder once again about the very phenomenon of whether it's possible to translate someone else's thoughts into another language. Whether it's possible to translate one context into another. The difference between a good translator and a mediocre one is that the mediocre one trans-

lates the words while a top-class translator searches for the contextual equivalent. It's like the difference between an amateur and a professional in chess. The amateur sees the separate moves, but the professional sees the whole field and the entire process. He does not think in moves but in positions. I can tell you in all honesty that, unfortunately, I only read two foreign languages: English and German. Somehow, I can actually assess these translations, although it's quite difficult when you are not a native speaker. As for other languages, there is this amazing phenomenon where you begin to interrogate other people about a new translation of your books, and, judging by their reactions, you can actually form your own opinion. I believe that this is a perfectly acceptable practice. Usually everybody will notice if a translation is really good. As they will if there are 100 semantic mistakes... (laughter)

Andreas Tretner

I would like to ease the psychosomatic pain a little bit: I'm sure there's a difference between a bad and a good translation, but it is not a fundamental one. In my opinion that is, of course, a thankless task. As you yourself, Vladimir, have said so nicely, the author and his readers form a community of literary drug addicts. But then we translators play the rather dubious part of the dealer, who, willy-nilly, contaminates and adds some unknown substance to this wonderful drug. This is simply the essence of translation and the fate of the author. As I see it, it is in fact possible to draw a positive conclusion from this. This may be some kind of self-defence after years of experiencing with this pain, but nevertheless I insist that a translation is nothing more than a pianist's performance of a composition. I perform your text, and maybe someone else will perform it later. Another way of putting it is that I stage your text...

Vladimir Sorokin

The stage is something else...

Andreas Tretner

Yes, but it's still a performance of a text. As translator I am forced to take some fundamental decisions which may only conceal or moderate the absolute topos, the absolute truth of the untranslatability of the literary text as such. So, maybe we shouldn't worry so much?

Vladimir Sorokin

I remember a saying by Dalí about art as such, that nobody knows what it is, yet mankind cannot do without it. We are talking about a process that we cannot do without.

Dirk Uffelmann

Yes, as Jacques Derrida said in a conversation with Natal'ia Avtonomova, Valerii Podoroga and Mikhail Ryklin, in 1991, during his first and, of course, last visit to the USSR: "Translation is impossible, but translation exists." I would like to complicate the question even further and ask the translators how they dealt with the challenges of translating Sorokin's texts, primarily those written in the 2000s. Did you perhaps experience something comparable to what Sorokin's first translator into German, Thomas Wiedling, described during the Sorokin conference in Mannheim in 1997. Wiedling complained: "[...] buchstäblich in einem Akt physischer Unterwerfung mußte ich mich selbst befähigen zu sprechen wie der Autor. Falsch: eben nicht wie der Autor, denn da hörte ich keinen auktorialen Schöpfer mehr sprechen, da tönte nichts als eine anonyme, darum aber vielleicht umso mächtigere Sprache. Eine Sprache, die eine Macht repräsentierte, welche keine Freiheiten zuließ beim Übersetzen. Jene Sprache [...] mußte ich irgendwo vorfinden, um sie dann nachsprechen zu können."

Tine Roesen

Those are big words! I guess I have a more concrete, practical approach to the job. I have not had these types of thoughts about translation as a physical submission. Or maybe I have, after all? I wouldn't like to translate the *Ice Trilogy*, for I feel it would be too...

Vladimir Sorokin

Cold...

Tine Roesen

Yes, let's say, too cold for me. So maybe this is my way of avoiding submission. It's difficult to explain. With other texts, I feel that there is some kind of mutual understanding, so that I may actually translate without being submissive.

Vladimir Sorokin

Perhaps this is a stupid fantasy on my part, but I actually think it's a good thing if there is no authorial voice in the text. Thomas Wiedling, meanwhile, had another view on this. I think that every translator deals with this problem in his own way, as with someone else's psychosomatics, when he chooses to identify or not to identify with the author.

Jamey Gambrell

I would like to discuss what the difference is between translating Vladimir Sorokin and translating other Russian writers, including the classics of the nineteenth century? I believe that the classics live their own, independent lives. They have been translated into various languages so often—for example, there now exist ten different translations into English of *Voyna i mir* (*War and Peace*). But does the fact that the author's voice is either present or absent influence our approach as translators? I believe that the absence of an authorial voice sets us free in a certain sense, but simultaneously creates other difficulties. For the author may create other, seemingly entirely sincere voices in his text. There are a lot of voices in Sorokin's texts. Consequently, the translator's job is multifaceted. You need to be able to break yourself up into different personalities, different tones, different voices and different contexts. And, of course, this is sometimes very difficult, but on the other hand it is also in some sense a freedom. Where the authorial voice is present and seemingly sincere, then it is much easier to stray away from this voice, to fail to do justice to the original. Whether this is good or bad is another question. But of course, as Vladimir also said, the context is very important.

Vladimir Sorokin

I sympathize with all my translators, of course. Truly (laughter).

Dirk Uffelmann

Among all these different voices, some are, of course, problematic. Andreas wanted to ask whether the German translator should think of Goebbels when translating the word "goida!" in *Day of the Oprichnik*.

Andreas Tretner

It is, to some extent, a rhetorical question, of course.

Dirk Uffelmann

But let's hear Vladimir on this. Vladimir, you have always been concerned with the negative "Wahlverwandtschaft" between post-totalitarian Russia and post-totalitarian Germany (for example in *Hochzeitsreise*, but also in *Blue Lard*). What would you think of meeting the language of Goebbels in a German translation of *Day of the Oprichnik*? And, to Jamey and Tine: in the US and in Denmark there is no such linguistic inheritance such as Victor Klemperer called *Lingua Tertii Imperii* or Soviet newspeak. Has this absence eased or complicated your efforts to translate the language of *Day of the Oprichnik*?

Vladimir Sorokin

I believe that this exclamation "goida!" should be associated with ancient Russia, the ancient Slavic world. The myths and propaganda of the Third Reich are, in my view, another world. That is, after all, the world of Europe, which is different from ancient Russia. I would not use the language of Goebbels, but my opinion represents the Russian side of the matter. It's very interesting for me to hear the German side. If the Goebbels idea entered Andreas' head, it must be perfectly correct.

Jamey Gambrell

Allow me to remark that the Germans, especially those from East Germany, who know the language of the Soviet period in Germany—and this is also true for other "Communist" languages, like Chinese or Polish—those who have this experience may also have a language to apply, if not to *Day of the Oprichnik* then to other examples of Sorokin's more "Soviet" works, the works where there is a play on Socialist Realism. The English or French translator, however, does not have this tradition to turn to, and that is why 40 pages from *Pravda* becomes absurd. Well, 40 pages of this is absurd in any language, but this kind of language actually existed in East Germany and China, whereas there never was an English equivalent.

Andreas Tretner

My question was not aimed at the historical trauma, but simply at the attempt to find suitable linguistic sources. I have two points to make.

First, my experience from working with *Day of the Oprichnik* was that the "carnival" going on there, the travesty, made me wonder if such an

association necessarily had to be avoided. Even if it shouldn't be overstated, should it really be ruled out? For example, when Komiaga reproaches his colleague, who's reading the *Secret Tales*, by reminding him: "we're guards," he uses the expression "okhrannaia staia," the direct translation of which is of course "Schutzstaffel." Should this word be avoided or are its associations permitted, after all?

Second, interestingly enough, I realized—not consciously in *Day of the Oprichnik*, but more gradually, in *Sugar Kremlin*, and especially after working on *The Snowstorm*, which I have just finished translating—that in this case I found my inspiration in a totally different part of our literature, and that was the Biedermeier literature of the nineteenth century, the writers of the Restoration period. This period was full of rather trivial genres, books for children, for the family, various sorts of calendars, and all of it written in an authoritative, didactic style. As for the relevance of this literature to *The Snowstorm*, this was also a surprise to me. In Germany we are all acquainted with Adalbert Stifter (1805–68), everybody knows him. He was the culmination of Biedermeier, and in many aspects actually went beyond it. One of his works, *Die Mappe meines Urgroßvaters* (*My Great-Grandfather's Notebook*, 1841), includes a brilliant "snow" text. The scenario is parallel to *The Snowstorm*: a district doctor going to see patients, travelling in a sleigh, it's snowing—although it's ice that's falling rather than snow—there is some kind of disaster. Stifter is, of course, different from Sorokin, but his story also has a coachman, and I stole from Stifter the way the doctor, when mentioning his coachman's name, uses the definite article. He says "der Thomas," as if he is an object, his beloved object. This is a very interesting device, and I use it in *The Snowstorm*, where Perkhusha's German name is "der Krächz."

Vladimir Sorokin

That's extremely interesting.

Tine Roesen

I would say that not having a Danish *Lingua Tertii Imperii* has rather complicated the process of translation. The Danish language is in a certain sense too "cosy" for *Day of the Oprichnik*. So it was quite difficult to translate it. As for the word "goida!" I initially wanted to keep it as "goida!" because of the way it *sounds*, and it's hard to find a similarly

ominous-sounding word in Danish. However, in the end my brilliant editor hit upon the word “hep!,” which is a cheer of approval, but at the same time not a “cosy” word, at all. So we decided on this, and also since “goida!” would not be understood by Danish readers.

Jamey Gambrell

In English “goida!” became “hail!”

Ilya Kukulin

“Heil!”...

Dirk Uffelmann

Maybe “Heil” is actually one word to avoid in the German translation.

Vladimir Sorokin

Concerning the “Schutzstaffel,” I would, in fact, like to ask whether younger generations of Germans know what this is, what “Schutzstaffel” means?

Andreas Tretner

They certainly know the abbreviation SS.

Vladimir Sorokin

Yes, of course. But I remember meeting Germans of my generation in the 1980s, and they did not know. They knew the abbreviation SS, but did not know that it refers to “Schutzstaffel.”

Jamey Gambrell

I don’t speak German, what does it mean, exactly?

Vladimir Sorokin

Literally speaking, “okhrannaia staia.”

Andreas Tretner

Concerning “Heil,” this word also existed before Hitler. It was a form of praise and submission, especially used to greet Kaiser Wilhelm. In Germany, we might also think of Lortzing’s comic opera *Zar und*

Zimmermann (Tsar and Carpenter, 1837), about Peter the Great. Here, the Dutch mayor van Bett, together with his choir, praise a man they believe to be the Tsar with the song “Heil sei dem Tag, an welchem Du bei uns erschienen.” This is another layer within the word, an inoffensive one, so there is a history to this word.

Jamey Gambrell

In English, “hail!” is apparently unproblematic, although in the context of *Day of the Oprichnik* it does seem to resonate with something more, and not only with imperial kings etc. It used to mean simply “hello!” as in “hail, hello, well met!,” a translation which, incidentally, I also made use of in *Day of the Oprichnik*. It’s an example of an expression that used to have a positive meaning, for example as a greeting among fellow noblemen, but gradually acquired a negative meaning, becoming an expression used to greet someone as an idiot.

Dirk Uffelmann

I would like to direct our attention towards the readers. The astute reader will sense in Sorokin’s texts the presence of many different, intertextual layers, be that Pushkin or Stifter. How can this doubleness be conveyed to the non-Russian reader, since it is not openly parodic or satiric, but still, as Tine Roesen has formulated it, “not entirely serious”? What can be done with this doubleness?

Vladimir Sorokin

Well, this is a question to be answered by the translators.

Jamey Gambrell

I think the answer depends very much on the specific signals. For example, in *Day of the Oprichnik*, there are a great many very different poems, almost all of which allude to a specific Russian writer. These writers are not known to the reader, unless he is a Slavist. In every instance it must be rendered in an appropriate way, and it’s very difficult to formulate a general approach. For me it was especially challenging to translate the narcotic trip of the oprichniks, the dragon Gorynych, since it is written as a bylina, a genre which does not exist in English. In every instance the translator has, first of all, to get a very good grasp of the original.

Tine Roesen

My general approach to these poems was nevertheless to exaggerate the solemn style, so as to signal to the reader that the verses may be very well written, but they are not meant as serious poetry. All the same, it was not always understood. One reviewer of the Danish translation of *Day of the Oprichnik* wrote that she did not like the bad poetry, that is, she did not realize the doubleness, but expected the poems to be truly “poetic.”

Jamey Gambrell

In all the many reviews of the English *Day of the Oprichnik*, there was not a single mention of the poems. So maybe I did well.

Vladimir Sorokin

I think this must be because you yourself began as a poet, didn't you?

Jamey Gambrell

Well... not as that kind of poet.

Dirk Uffelmann

The question is not only whether critics complain about a certain lack of poeticity, but whether they understand anything at all. In his questions for this workshop, Andreas Tretner expressed a concern about the less astute, foreign reader. What if the translator did everything s/he could to underline the doubleness, but the simple-minded foreign press deciphers grotesquerie as realism and, with its stereotypically orientalist gaze, regards the world created by Sorokin's texts as an example of “The Wild East”?

Andreas Tretner

This was something I actually experienced in connection with *Day of the Oprichnik*. The thought that maybe the translation did indeed play some part in this reception really frightened me. I had feared this reception and done everything I could to prevent it through my choice of translation strategy, which aimed to make the travesty and the carnival clear. However, I do not think these mental stereotypes can be defeated. Interestingly enough there were actually two variants of the stereotypical reception. The translation came out during the 2008 presidential elec-

tion in Russia, so there were a lot of reviews, around 100. Some of them concluded that this was what it was like in Russia, only a little twisted, but basically they saw the work as confirming that Russia would soon become a monarchy. Other reviewers were outraged by this very prospect, seeing it as the author's intention to convince them that this was what it would be like in 20 years' time, accusing the author of responding to Western stereotypes. So these receptions mirror each other.

Vladimir Sorokin

In Russia, the reception of *Day of the Oprichnik* was also quite diverse. For example, the young, Russian orthodox patriots of the Iosif Volotskii Centre published a review on their website, saying that at last the liberal Sorokin had described Russia as it ought to be. Then, when the book came out, my friend, the historian Boris Sokolov, said that he had the impression I had written it as some kind of magical charm, to prevent this development. Four years later, however, he said: "You know, judging by recent events, I think it was, after all, a prophecy." I am afraid that the number of people saying that everything is now developing just like in *Day of the Oprichnik* keeps growing. So maybe this book is not the best example to illustrate the question of translation and foreign reception.

Jamey Gambrell

I think there was also recently an article by the British Slavist Rachel Polonsky in *The New York Review of Books*, saying that *Day of the Oprichnik* was indeed a prophecy and something like an idealistic description of the current situation in Russia.

Vladimir Sorokin

I would like to pose a question to the translators and to everybody here. We are now discussing what is possible in a translation. As far as I know, in most languages there is still no translation of *Finnegan's Wake*. So my question is whether some works of literature may be fundamentally untranslatable. To me this is an open question.

Dirk Uffelmann

What should the translator do, asks Tine Roesen, with fundamentally untranslatable references, for example, the frequent mention of the magpie

(*soroka*) in *The Snowstorm*, a possible allusion to the author's surname?

Tine Roesen

My question is quite particular, compared to the big question posed by Vladimir. I don't think the answer to my question would be a very good answer to his.

Vladimir Sorokin

In theory, everything may be translated. On the other hand, there are also certain contextual limits to the foreign reader's understanding.

Igor' Smirnov

Concerning magpies, the proper translation would involve also translating the name of the author into Danish.

Tine Roesen

Yes, that was my problem. In *The Snowstorm* the coachman Perkhusha is often compared to a bird, and very often to a magpie: he has "a magpie's head" (*soroch'ia golova*), a magpie's mouth (*sorochii rot*), he turns his head "like a magpie" (*kak soroka*). My question to Vladimir is: should the translation pay particular attention to this bird?

Vladimir Sorokin

No, no (laughter).

Tine Roesen

These are not allusions to the author's name?

Vladimir Sorokin

No, no, not at all...

Dirk Uffelmann

Does anybody have an answer to the big question?

Ilya Kukul'in

I think that what is untranslatable is what is called genre memory. For example, in Sorokin's story "Gubernator" ("The Governor," 2010), the songs

performed in the rehearsal where the governor is present can be translated so that it is funny, but it is extremely difficult to evoke in foreign readers the same associations with aesthetic ecstasy mixed with disgust that our memory of Soviet quasi-folk variety songs from the 1960s and 1970s triggers in us.

Vladimir Sorokin

These are contextual limits.

Ilya Kukulín

These are contextual limits pertaining to the psychological context. The literary context, I believe, can be grasped and rendered somehow, but it is more complicated with the psychological. It may be rendered by other means, so that the general feeling comes close, but not by the same stylistic means that the author used.

Jamey Gambrell

I would like to say that the psychological and literary contexts cannot be separated here. The translator's problem is that he may succeed in translating something to humorous effect, but the reader's laughter will not be the same kind of laughter. It may be an "English" laughter, evoked by other associations or simply because something sounds ridiculous. For example, nowadays nobody writes in metres in English, so if the translated text has too many metres, if it is written in iambs, then this is in itself funny.

Vladimir Sorokin

Is there any example of a particular novel which may be considered untranslatable?

Nariman Skakov

I believe that Sasha Sokolov's novel *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom* (*Between Dog and Wolf*, 1980) is untranslatable.

Vladimir Sorokin

Yes, of course. That is absolutely true.

Nariman Skakov

I have a question for the translators. Are not annotations or commentaries a possible way out? What are your views on annotated editions? I think that *Norma* (*The Norm*, 1979-1983) should be translated, and it should then be an annotated, academic edition, just as is being done with Beckett's works now, actually. As the author, how would you, Vladimir, look upon an annotated translation of, for example, *The Norm*? And do the translators on the panel ever use any references, annotations or the like?

Ellen Rутten

Would you allow me a follow-up question to the author: how do you look upon annotations in general? We've already talked about translations of *War and Peace*—well, nowadays they normally appear in annotated versions, in the sense that the French is translated. I am talking about translations within the original rather than translations into foreign languages. Would you be happy with a publication like that, with translations within your novel? Knowing that this would change the process of reading...

Vladimir Sorokin

I think that it's perfectly fine to have annotations in academic editions. You all remember Nabokov's translation of *Evgenii Onegin* where the commentaries make up several additional volumes. Some of my things are rather hermetic, while others are really quite transparent, like, for example *The Snowstorm*. And in the latter case I would like the annotation to be minimal.

Martin Paulsen

I would like to suggest that the question is not so much whether translation is possible, since in one way or another everything may in principle be translated. The question is whether translating a work of literature will be worthwhile if the initial context will not be grasped at all. If it is obvious that this work was written in a completely different context and that in translation it will not be perceived in the way it was conceived by the author.

Vladimir Sorokin

Nariman just mentioned Sasha Sokolov. *Shkola dlia durakov* (*A School for Fools*) came out in Germany in the 1970s in Wolfgang Kasack's translation. It is also a very complicated work. As far as I've been told, the translator interrupted his work on the book several times. He would swear terribly, open the window and throw out the book, saying that this was it. However, he always returned to the work and in the end it turned out to be a rather good translation. So this may be the price to be paid when you attempt to translate the context.

Andreas Tretner

I would like to support Martin Paulsen's more pragmatic but also, I believe, more reasonable approach. I would state the point quite bluntly: once translation as such is impossible, everything is translatable. The ultimate translation does not exist but translations do. It is very difficult to draw any lines beyond that.

Jamey Gambrell

Once translation exists, it was, is and will be.

PeterDeutschmann

Vladimir, you are regarded—and we all, probably, fully agree with this—as an ideal literary medium. Thus my question: have you never thought about producing translations of foreign literary works?

Vladimir Sorokin

Whether I would like to translate something? The Slavacist Georg Witte, who, together with Sabine Hänsen, has translated various poems and texts by our conceptualists down the years, summed it up very aptly when we spoke once: at some point he had begun to find it quite difficult to continue working on this, since the translator had to possess a certain modesty. Modesty is crucial here, right? Human modesty, it seems, as well as modesty in regard to your share in the text that is the outcome of your efforts. Probably, my innate immodesty has so far prevented me from taking up this activity. Although a lot of writers in fact began as translators, Dostoevsky for example.

Marina Aptekman

I would like to comment on Ellen Rutten's question about annotations. Maybe our problem is that nowadays we want to be able to understand everything, although we are not supposed to. For example, in *The Snowstorm* or in *Sugar Kremlin* some words are printed in italics and I do not understand these words. But this is part of the game of these texts. In contemporary English-language multicultural literature this feature has also become quite popular. Consider, for example, the significant number of Bengali expressions in the writing of Pulitzer Prize-winning Indian-American novelist Jhumpa Lahiri or the use of Russian words in the work of the Russian-born American authors Gary Shteyngart and David Bezmozgis, where you find expressions such as *do svidaniia* printed in italics which remain untranslated, and there are no annotations. I think much of the so-called linguistic pleasure of the reading of those works is actually connected to the fact that the American reader does not understand these expressions.

A question to Vladimir: in the third part of the second trilogy (if you allow me to call it thus), that is, in *The Snowstorm*, you completely change the language. Suddenly Old Slavonic is replaced by nineteenth-century Russian. On the one hand, this is very interesting to me as a philologist, and I would like to know why you decided to do this. On the other hand, how should the translator proceed if s/he wants to translate the three works as parts of the same whole, how can s/he play on this transition, in which Old Slavonic becomes the language of Pushkin and Chekhov, and *should* s/he play on it?

Vladimir Sorokin

I'm sorry, Marina, but I'm actually against grouping *Day of the Oprichnik*, *Sugar Kremlin* and *The Snowstorm* in some kind of trilogy. These are, after all, very dissimilar texts, although the action seems to take place around the same time. That is why there is no trace of Old Slavonic in *The Snowstorm*. The language in this book is from the end of the nineteenth century, it's purely some kind of Chekhov-Bunin-like language. And it does not develop. It is a given, a certain language with a particular intonation, and it rides along as they make their way forward, all the way to the end. The reason for this is that, in my opinion, this is the appropriate

style for this particular situation and it would be impossible to describe it in any other language. It is the author's voluntary choice.

Marina Aptekman

If it is the same temporal reality, how can two different languages co-exist? If it is the same temporal reality, as you say, how can two different languages exist in the same temporal reality?

Vladimir Sorokin

But they are, after all, different books. I think that the most important thing for any narrated story is appropriate intonation. Imagine if Nabokov's *Lolita* had been written in the language of *The Gift*, for example. That would have been an extremely banal and boring novel.

Marina Aptekman

So the language pertains to the situation rather than to the historical period?

Vladimir Sorokin

Yes, of course.

Marina Aptekman

In view of this, how do the translators go about their work?

Jamey Gambrell

It was already a question of intonation when we discussed our approach to various contexts and words, to the existence of "the language of Goebbels" in German but not in Danish or English. Understanding of a literary work's intonation is extremely important. This understanding may sometimes be experienced as almost magical, as some kind of inner process which is probably beyond description.

Tine Roesen

We may not have Goebbels, but we do have a Danish Tolstoy. Everybody in Denmark knows the Tolstoy translations from the 1940s, and I had this in mind when I translated *The Snowstorm*. This style was there to grasp.

Vladimir Sorokin
And Chekhov?

Tine Roesen

We also have Chekhov translations, but Tolstoy is better known. So in this instance it's possible to play on the classic translations.

Dirk Uffelmann

I would like to bring up an intriguing and fantastic question from Jamey, which also gives me the opportunity to conduct a small survey: do any of you, translators, readers, researchers, ever dream in the language of Sorokin?

Mark Lipovetsky

All the time!

Tine Roesen

I worked very intensively on the translation of *The Snowstorm*, and I believe I did sometimes dream in its language. At least, Perkhusha was certainly in my dreams.

Jamey Gambrell

My remark was meant in a somewhat broader sense. Tine mentioned that she would not like to translate *Ice Trilogy*, as she would feel a kind of personal incompatibility. I do not think she would like to translate *A Month in Dachau* either, which I myself did. As we know, there used to be quite a lot of terrifying episodes in our author's texts, and although they were perhaps "not entirely serious," although the style was the main point and although all this was just "letters on paper" (as, for example, with the brotherhood in *Ice Trilogy*)—nevertheless, when you sit down and begin to translate all this into your own language, it is difficult to keep a distance. We translators are filters: the whole text passes through us, although it is not our text. As Vladimir said, talking about the required modesty, it's not our text. Vladimir wrote it, we are just filters, but the language of the text and everything that goes on in it influence us, and maybe even change us. The same thing may of course be said about the reader of the text. Anybody who reads a lot of works by Sorokin or by

another powerful author may experience some influence on his perception of language, and not only while he is reading, but more profoundly. It also influences our visual perception. Although Russia may be a nation of words and not of images, still the image also has its say.

Dirk Uffelmann

Yes, I greatly look forward to the day when a student tells me that s/he decided to study Russian having read Sorokin in translation. Many previous generations of students, and that includes me, will say that Dostoevsky's *Prestuplenie i nakazanie (Crime and Punishment)* had that effect on them.

Andreas Tretner

I do not want to appear a cynic, and I hope the translation profession does not make me a cynic, but I still think that there is professionalism involved. The job is not unlike that of an emergency doctor or a criminal investigator—who also see terrible things. For my own part I can assure you that it is much more painful to translate a bad text than a terrifying text.

Jamey Gambrell

And yet, not any journalist can actually write about the war in Iraq or Afghanistan, and journalists who did just that are now being seriously examined for the effect of this experience on them, for post-traumatic stress. So among these types of professionals there are also various reactions.

José Alaniz

There is also another metaphor for translation. The Russian translator Grigorii Kruzhkov once said that the process of translation is a kind of coitus, it has its own erotic and the ensuing birth is of course that of the finished translation, which then has the traits, the genes of both its parents: the writer and the translator.

Ilya Kukulin

The notion of untranslatability which Vladimir talked about is not a static notion but a dynamic one, since translations also have an influence on the reader and the reading community, and through this the limits of

untranslatability may be slightly shifted. I once asked Jukka Mallinen, who translated Sorokin into Finnish, how he had translated the final pages of *Marina's Thirtieth Love*. He said that he had found a language analogous to the *Pravda* Russian style in the newspapers of the former Karelo-Finnish SSR. Contemporary Finnish readers, however, related to this style in a completely different way from the Soviet Finns. Russians remember *Pravda*, but in Finland this kind of language—although it is there as a ready-to-use language—is regarded as exotic and therefore requires a psychological resetting.

Jamey Gambrell

I believe that would also be required in contemporary Russia.

Ilya Kukulín

Yes, of course.

Vladimir Sorokin

Nowadays it is a fossil language.

Ilya Kukulín

Yes, and with time it will become even more so. That is why the untranslatability of Sasha Sokolov or other authors is not absolute but relative. It somehow demands a response from the reader and from the translator. Moreover, some translators simply love to solve unsolvable tasks. In German literature there is the untranslatable writer Reinhard Jirgl, a former GDR dissident. However, Tat'iana Baskakova translated him into Russian exactly because this was an impossible task. So now this impossible German language which Reinhard Jirgl created in his works also exists in the form of an impossible Russian language created by Baskakova's efforts, and has already become part of Russian literature.

Jamey Gambrell

The untranslatable James Joyce himself said that, since it had taken him ten years to write *Finnegan's Wake*, the reader ought to spend as many years reading it. However, as a translator I know for sure that it often takes much longer to translate a work than the author spent writing it.

Ilya Kukulin

The translator has to manually construct all those connections which the author has created straight off.

Dirk Uffelmann

Even if the translators have spent a great deal of time meticulously constructing their “foreign Sorokin,” I propose leaving the author the final word to conclude our discussion.

Vladimir Sorokin

Дай Бог что-то напишется и переведется.