Dissidence and displacement: translation theory through the work of Natalya Gorbanevskaya

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Dissidence and Displacement: Translation theory through the work of Natalya Gorbanevskaya

By

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Abstract

The purported thesis is intended to aptly discuss the ways in which the particular work of Natalya Gorbanevskaya is able to be translated through the lens of a Daniel Weissbort and how through a full understanding of certain theories allow for certain notions of displacement and loss to traverse cultural boundaries through the act of translation. After a brief introduction, it is important to discuss the necessary background information and its relation to the task of translation before moving into an in-depth analysis of the poet’s work to argue how this displacement is visible through her translated work, before concluding about the purported difficulty in translating the work of Gorbanevskaya due to the nature in which Weissbort must address the translation of such notions through a thorough understanding of theory and her life.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

However transparent a translation of a piece of work may appear to the reader, and even perhaps to the translator, the act of translation is never neutral. Whether intentionally or not, the translator in the act of rewriting a piece will inherently bring their own viewpoint, ideology, aesthetic or sense of poetics to the task, and this will be present in the translated work itself. Each move present in the translated work acts as a form of displacement from original language and culture to the target language and culture. Such displacement is evidenced in the work of Natalya Gorbanevskaya, emphasized through the many linguistic, physical, and emotional displacements she experienced over the course of her life. Beginning with a discussion on translation theory, and the way translator transparency affects the translated work, one can use this knowledge alongside the life and works of Gorbanevskaya to understand the strong and perilous correlations between displacement, transparency and translated work. The likely reception, and function, of the translated piece in a given socio-cultural situation will be affected by these unseen biases or preferences on the part of the translator. Cultural biases and power dynamics will be present in any translated work, and there will be additional dialogue, power relationships and cultural shifting as the translated work is received and known in different languages, and geographical locations.

The translator’s process and preferences become a funnel or filter through which one culture interacts with another. In the process of rewriting, the translator may well introduce new cultural references, different poetic or musical devices including rhyme scheme or rhythm, or different linguistic perspectives. Through language and the act of translation, the culture of the original piece can exert influence on the culture of the target language. This influence is
addressed through the perception of the original culture in the target cultures world. The way in which an audience views a work is not black and white. Itamar Even-Zohar uses this knowledge as a basis for his poly system theory. In essence, literature itself should studied alongside the various socio-cultural forces that encompass it. Translation should be moved away from the individual texts in which it exists, and instead the study of translation should be within the socio-cultural realm in which it functions. It applies directly to the notion of cultural influence in the act of translation. Since Even-Zohar believes the work should be studied and translated as a whole, the original work will have some form of push on to the target languages culture. This becomes evident through the use of culturally bound words that appear in the translation. Specifically, if one was to look at the German language, they have a variety of words to describe such complex feelings and emotions that apply specifically to them and their culture; take for example the German word Sehnsucht. Roughly translated Sehnsucht equates to longing, but the word can apply to so much more. C.S Lewis perhaps best expanded upon a translation through his variation: an inconsolable longing for that which we know not what. Through the lens of C.S Lewis, American culture was able to experience this feeling at a level in which it exists in the German (source) culture. It is this kind of translation work that Even-Zohar relates through the poly system theory; an avoidance or escape from the concept of equivalence of the 60’s and 70’s through a non-prescriptive definition of said equivalence.

This brings us to the temporal or historical effects of translation and how each should be considered in relation to the effects on the translator and the work itself. The translator has certain decisions to make regarding whether to “update” elements of an existing or older piece of work. Obvious examples include translated references to technology or elements of culture that have been invented in the decades since the original piece was written. When the piece being
translated is centuries to millennia old, any translation inherently represents some sort of updating into the modern version of the target language. This is relevant, for example, to the act of translating from Anglo-Saxon to modern English. There will be cultural references in the original that are too obsolete to have a correlation to a more modern translation. This kind of historical disconnect is one of the ways that translators need to navigate the creation of new meaning in the pieces that they filter into a new, modern language. Just as in the aforementioned example, this applies for translations of modern works to and from languages with a large cultural divide. The correlation between translation from one modern culture to another with a large cultural difference makes it difficult for the translator to create that strong navigation into the target language. This especially applies to Gorbanevskaya and her work through her own cultural isolation. Gorbanevskaya was removed from her home culture and yet still wrote on a such a level regarding her home culture and the effect it has had on her and the Russian society as a whole. Her work must be viewed from a lens of Russian culture through the Great Purge and must be properly correlated to a target audience that may or may not have a deep understanding of life at that time. Therefore, it is important that the translator apply this poly system theory to address the large disparity between the source and target culture, whilst remaining in the realm of what can be considered as a strong, fluent translation.

The illusion of visibility or invisibility occurs through the ways in which the translator is able to intervene in the foreign text. What is generally considered as “greater fluency” (fluency being the way in which a translator makes the work appear as if the work originated in the target language) makes for a relatively more invisible role for the translator; often times translated works with a high fluency value (as attributed by the publishers) are marketed better because a reader is not forced to consider anything outside of the norm for them; there needs to be no form
of critical thinking or understanding of the source languages socio-cultural underworkings in regards to the work because with this type of translation everything makes sense in the target languages socio-cultural climate. This in turn supposedly leads to a more prominent voice and presence for the writer of the original text. But since this is based solely on publisher/public interest, due to the inherent marketability of the translated work because of the less challenging nature of the “fluent” translated work, Venuti argues that to market this type of translation as the “good translation” denotes and detracts from translation work as a whole and its relation to the sources socio-cultural norms and the original writers work as a whole. Venuti notes that literary criticism relating to translation judges the more-visible translators quite harshly. This all ties into the above marketability of various translated works. In order to secure consistent paying work in the realm of translation Venuti notes that one must effectively coincide with the publisher, especially as the price per translated word drops as time passes by, therefore most critics deride works that cannot easily assimilate into the target languages cultural understandings. In essence to be visible is to be difficult as, certain linguistic and cultural concepts from a source language might do more to confuse the target languages audience, impacting sales at the cost of the originals writers work, vision, and meaning of the piece. Invisibility is associated with fluent translation, which is critically associated with being elegant, flowing well, and the target language moving with grace. In this aspect, the level of invisibility of the translator affects the experienced relationship between translator and original author, as it is interpreted by the reader. In the public realm, an invisible translator has the effect of shining a spotlight on the original author and amplifying their voice and authority in a different language and a different culture. A more visible translator has greater visibility through the choices made throughout the translated work; and can be seen to be having more of a dialogue or conversation with the original author.
This conversational nature may be more apparent when there is significant historical, geographical or cultural distance between the original work and its translation.

More visible, less fluent translation is often criticized for being awkward or clunky; “there is even a group of pejorative neologisms designed to criticize translations that lack fluency, but also used, more generally, to signify badly written prose: ‘translatese,’ ‘translationese,’ ‘translatorese.'” (Venuti 2). Venuti moves to criticize the issues translators face within their own community through the aforementioned neologisms in its relation to what is considered a “fluent” translation. Venuti insists upon how this “flawed” community of translators that lack fluency are actively working in the favor of the original author, as opposed to those moving towards “fluent,” “crisp”, or “elegant” translations. In his next sentence he goes on to expresses when it comes to an English translation a “fluent translation is recommended for an extremely wide range of foreign texts—contemporary and archaic, religious and scientific, fiction and nonfiction.” (2). Effectively, Venuti argues against the assertion, that in order to market an English translation of a work in question, the best way is to circumvent each aspect of the source language and culture; to make the translator completely invisible so that (once again) the audience feels comfortable enough in their understanding of the work. As such, the question of contemporary idioms or slang in modern translations is a tricky one in relation to translator invisibility, fluency and the durability of the translated text. English-language slang that is dated to the specific era of the translation has the effect of, essentially, date-stamping the translation. Of course, a time-specific reference could be present in the original text, and then the translator must choose whether to keep that historical reference, with explanation if necessary, or whether to update it to a culturally recognized reference point.
The function of translating is fundamentally different to that of authoring or creating an original work. Venuti emphasizes this point through an idea from William Trask; talking of how the act of translation differed vastly from that of standard creative writing; when writing a novel you are catering the content to your own experiences, whereas he sees translation as more of a “technical stunt.” He continues “I realized that the translator and the actor had to have the same kind of talent. What they both do is to take something of somebody else’s and put it over as if it were their own. So in addition to the technical stunt, there is a psychological workout, which translation involves: something like being on stage.” (Honig 1985). The translator as actor finds a way to interpret and perform the original author’s words for a new audience in a different space and place. The actor brings craft and interpretation to the technical challenge of executing the author’s words and intentions; their task is not like that of a playwright. A further analogy exists in music, where a historical composer has left behind sheet music to be performed for a live audience. The musician performer has some creative agency in their interpretation and performance of the musical score – for example, how they phrase certain sections of music, or add articulation, or select tempo within a given range. However, they are not writing the music as they perform it and tend to remain true to the score and the composer’s written intentions as they use technical ability to interpret that written document in the context of a live performance.

The invisibility of the translator – or actor, or musical performer – is not complete, and can be deceptive. While translation involves a subsuming of the translator’s personality and voice, these cannot be completely repressed or made invisible, as the musician and actor exist in the physical realm; it is this physicality that renders invisibility impossible. Likewise, the actor or musician’s personal choices greatly affect the audience’s experience of the work. In translation, or in the case of live theatre or music, it is unusual for the audience to have access to the original
text – the script, score or original-language prose – and so the audience or reader experiences the “performance” or translation as their interaction with the work. Flad argues for the audibility or visibility of the translator in the new work, specifically in the case of the German translation market. The specifics of any language into which a work is translated allow for diversity, richness and nuance to the translation that can be lost or limited if the translator is trying too hard to remain invisible or transparent in the process. (Flad 40-41). In the case of Gorbanevskaya, the typical American has no access to the Russian culture and language in such a way to understand her work. It is only through the agency of the translator that the typical American could gain access to her poetry. As such, the creative choices of the translator serve as our guide to the original score, or script of Gorbanevskaya’s poetry.

In addition, as Bassnett discusses, poetry is extremely difficult to translate, even if the translator extensively studies the era and the language of the poet, because poetry contains so much imagery and other figurative language that one image may represent multiple meanings. For example, Bassnett discussed that in order to accurately translate poetry, a translator must recognize the linguistic, literary/aesthetic and socio-cultural or historic references the author is using in her poetry (75).

A brief consideration of poetry in translation highlights the connections between language and specific geographical place, in addition to linguistic and historical culture. Most notably, poet Gorbanevskaya was a translator, writer and dissident who was politically imprisoned in a Soviet psychiatric hospital and then spent much of her professional life in exile. Following her release she was “expelled from the Soviet Union, taking up residence in Paris” (Gorbanevskaya xiii). Her physical and political displacements can be understood as affecting the ways in which she interacted with, and used, languages in relation to her own identity.
Specifically, I am to prove that English-language translations of Gorbanevskaya’s poetry – carried out by translators other than the author – highlight the ways in which translation affects meaning and identity as it relates to time, place and culture. Gorbanevskaya can be seen to have experienced multiple forced displacements and the thesis uses those experiences to address the meaning and identity that each of those displacements had on her poetry and her poetic voice as a whole. A punishment term in a psychiatric hospital acted as the first displacement, this from her home, as she was seen by her country, and her homeland as dissident and needing to be punished for her apparent disapproval with Soviet government policies left her alienated and lost. Followed by her exile from Russia it is no wonder that her poetry, and her poetic voice, are clearly affected by the displacements; translations of her work must engage with the fact that these were written from a place of exile, and often written about a Russia that the poet had not physically seen in the years since she left.

In a way, the translation of her poetry into English involves another displacement -- her work in translation likely conveys a potentially different poetic voice and tone than her Russian original work. In this poetry, as in all translation, the different languages involved have typically different syntax, rhythm and overall sound. The alphabets used may be completely different, and the slang idioms or linguistic shortcuts in the original language may take much longer to translate on the page in the target language. It is this sort of work and difficulty between the languages that creates a problem with the metaphorical and literary aesthetics. More than that, because of the nature and circumstances of her life, Gorbanevskaya’s work has undoubtedly been affected when she is translated from Russian into English and other languages. The purpose of this thesis is to document how the notions of displacement and loss she faced were able to transcend the cultural boundaries of her native language into the target language by a thorough
understanding of her life and experiences through the lens Daniel Weissbort: a primary source for her English translations. The next chapter will discuss the background of the poet and Chapter Three will discuss how translations have the ability to either celebrate the author’s work or take away from it.
CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND

Gorbanevskaya’s poetry comes from a place of deep pain, disassociation and exile. She, like many authors, wrote from experience. She spent nearly all of her adult life in exile, and never returned to live in the Soviet Union. Her poetry has been translated into several different languages, and while Gorbanevskaya’s poetry is considered to be sparse and spare, it nevertheless is full of imagery, pain and desolation, which makes it all the more difficult to translate.

Biographical Information

In order to even begin to understand the importance of translation in the life and work of Gorbanevskaya, it is important to understand the poet and the times she found herself in. For this reason, the historical context of Gorbanevskaya’s life needs to be discussed, in order to paint as full a picture of the poet as possible.

Natalya Evgenyevna Gorbanevskaya was born on May 26, 1936 in Moscow, at the height of Stalin’s Great Purge, in which millions of Soviet citizens were imprisoned, tortured, or starved to death. Her father was a casualty of World War II, and she never knew him. Her mother was a librarian, who cultivated in Gorbanevskaya a love of books and poetry. As she grew older, she began looking for books to read to expand her world. She began to study philology and learned to play with the words in the Russian language. She also learned Polish, because at the time of her childhood, there were many more books and writings in Polish that were acceptable to the Soviet government than there were in Russian and they were the books least subject to censorship. Gorbanevskaya yearned for freedom from censorship, just like her mother before her. (Hoover 158).
Gorbanevskaya attended and graduated from Leningrad University, with a major in technical writing and editing. She worked in libraries, she wrote biographies, and she translated scientific and technical information from Russian to Polish and vice versa. She was married and had two small children. (Proffer 5). In 1968, she began to create, contribute to, and edit the first publication of the *Chronicle of Current Events*. The *Chronicle* was considered a *samizdat* publication, which meant that it was published as an underground publication of forbidden writings, as Vladimir Bukovsky stated, “*Samizdat*: I write it myself, edit it myself, censor it myself, publish it myself, distribute it myself, and spend jail time for it myself” (141). At the time, this in and of itself was perilous as speaking uncensored under Stalin could lead a complete departure from any form life she had cultivated thus far.

Despite the risk, Gorbanevskaya began her work at *The Chronicle* by researching prison sentences, letters home, and secret trials of fellow artists and writers in Moscow: she worked with others as well to create an unofficial publication detailing the horrors and unreported violations of civil rights and liberties by the Soviet government against its citizens. The publication became so popular that Gorbanevskaya and others who created the *Chronicle of Current Events* decided to publish it as often as they could on a regular basis. Their work covered over 400 trials and people who were able to get a copy of the *Chronicle of Current Events* read about searches, arrests, trials both secret and non-secret, living conditions in prisons and camps all over the Soviet Union and government crackdown on measures against protest and dissent — at least for the duration of 1968; despite a constant harassment from the Soviet government. The writers and collaborators named their first five issues the Human Rights Year in the Soviet Union to mark the anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. The chronicle was copied 10 to 15 times, which were then copied, recopied and passed around
until the editions fell apart (Suslensky 234). There was a distinct importance in her work with *The Chronicle*, as it ties back to that yearning for freedom of censorship instilled into her throughout her learnings and influences from her mother.

While her work with *The Chronicle* helped to get the dissident voices out to the masses, it was not enough to combat the claustrophobic feeling imposed by the government onto its citizens. Gorbanevskaya had to do more, and as such became engaged in protest against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August of 1968. This invasion by the Soviet Union followed the reforms within Czechoslovakia that were begun by Dubček, the First Secretary. Dubček wanted to give additional political and economic freedoms to his citizens. In addition, the suggested governmental changes within Czechoslovakia unnerved the Soviet Union, which invaded the country and instituted curfews and prison time for dissenters. Gorbanevskaya found herself in a time of war; a political war against an unfair government that only fueled her drive to speak against the corruption. She used this, among many other life events as a well from where she wrote, and it helped to shape the essence of her poetry. Four days after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, a group of demonstrators, including Gorbanevskaya, participated in a demonstration on Red Square in the heart of Moscow, in which eight individuals held up signs with slogans such as: (trans: Smith)

- “We are losing our best friends"
- “Long live free and independent Czechoslovakia”
- "Shame to the occupiers"
- "Hands off the ČSSR"
- "For your freedom and ours"
• "Freedom for Dubček" (Smith 156).

All seven of the protestors were beaten and arrested, including Gorbanevskaya, who was holding the sign that read “For your freedom and ours”. Five of the seven quickly stood trial, but Gorbanevskaya was tried separately, as she had a young baby with her at the time of her arrest. After her trial, Gorbanevskaya was sent to a psychiatric prison for two years in 1969 and diagnosed with sluggish schizophrenia (see Chapter 3); she was repeatedly tortured, but to what extent is unknown. These experiences shaped Gorbanevskaya, and the well from which she wrote, and in doing so continued to fuel the fire she had for political dissent. She made the decision to have her two young children stay with friends, in effort to continue acting as a voice to the silenced masses: although she had upset the Soviet government through her poetry, which was seen as skirting the lines of revolution, the government did not imprison her or force her to spend two years away from her children until 1972. This was likely an effort to maintain some form of stability in their lives, as her work for the people could, as mentioned before, take her family down a treacherous path and I cannot imagine her wishing that upon anyone not willing to walk the line themselves. She was reunited with her children and her dissident friends, but was exiled again by her government in 1975, and forced to relocate to Paris, where she continued her career writing poetry, translating other writer’s works in Russian, Polish Czech, Slovak and French and putting together materials from other dissidents within publications (Todd and Hayward 21). One of her dissident chronicles was published in 1970 as Red Square at Noon in English by one Alexander Lieven. He translated Gorbanevskaya’s work from her French writing, but the novel was not published in Russian until 2007 (Todd and Hayward 22).

Gorbanevskaya continued to live in Paris until her death in 2013, although she regularly traveled to other parts of Europe, and she even participated in a commemoration of the 1968
demonstration in Moscow in August of 2013, a few months before she died. Although she and the other protestors were jailed for the demonstration, they were released after protests from the international community (Martin 1).

**Historical Context**

Gorbanevskaya was only one of many literary talents in a long line of scholars, artists, musicians, and activists who were persecuted by the Soviet government. The Soviet purges of the 1930s through the 1960s became notorious for their lack of coherence, people had no idea where or when they might be arrested.

As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn recalls:

> And how we burned in the camps later, thinking: What would things have been like if every Security operative, when he went out at night to make an arrest, had been uncertain whether he would return alive and had to say good-bye to his family? Or if, during periods of mass arrests, as for example in Leningrad, when they arrested a quarter of the entire city, people had not simply sat there in their lairs, paling with terror at every bang of the downstairs door and at every step on the staircase, but had understood they had nothing left to lose and had boldly set up in the downstairs hall an ambush of half a dozen people with axes, hammers, pokers, or whatever else was at hand?... The Organs would very quickly have suffered a shortage of officers and transport and, notwithstanding all of Stalin's thirst, the cursed machine would have ground to a halt! If...if...We didn't love freedom enough. And even more – we had no awareness of the real situation.... We purely and simply deserved everything that happened afterward”

(13, Gulag Archipelago).
People fear for their lives and their freedom during these raids and trials, Gorbanevskaya among
them. It was impossible to know how or when you could be swooped up by the government in an
attempt to silence the dissidence. The issue being that these officers had no regard for the people
they were displacing, and even worse no fear of these people. Gorbanevskaya wrote passionately
about themes of exile, displacement, and loss because of the effect these men had on her. The
context supporting this is ever important if one is to garner the full effect of her work, and it has
to be addressed. Solzhenitsyn understood what the government was doing to these people, and he
wanted to express his disgust and sorrow over how each situation was handled, over the loss that
could have been, and the loss the occurred.

Gorbanevskaya was hardly the only literary figure who spent time in a labor camp or
psychiatric ward because she was critical of the communist state. Among her social circle of
literary friends alone, Anna Ahmatova was prohibited from publishing her poetry, and her
husband was executed, purportedly because he knew and condoned her writings. Marina
Tsvetaeva, another Russian poet, in grief over her imprisonment, and hearing of the execution of
her husband and the starvation death of her daughter in a state-run orphanage, committed suicide
(Almahasheer, 1).

In fact, Russia has a long history of subjecting its literary figures to exile, imprisonment
or death: juxtaposed with the punishment and persecution is the celebration and deification of
good writers, such as Pushkin and Tolstoy. Shishkin (1) noted that in the 18th and 19th centuries,
when Russia celebrated writers and poets, they also allowed a window into a writer’s paradise of
personal freedoms, self-determination, and creativity that made being ruled by a czar very
difficult, as increasingly, the czars stifled any such notions of creativity or self-determination.
The Communist takeover also did not espouse creativity or freedom in its people, and quickly
moved to squash dissention. Even in the 21st century, because Russia has coalesced around a new leader, and reverted back to earlier patterns such as imprisonment or outright murder of its dissenters and artists, notable artists such as Pussy Riot found themselves imprisoned simply because they dissented or spoke out against the government, especially because they have linked the current leader of Russia, Vladimir Putin, to the murders of journalists and other artists with the tacit agreement of the Russian orthodox church (Luhn 1).

Gorbanevskaya used many themes in her writing, all of which revolved around the notion of dislocation, displacement, and disenfranchisement, with isolation acting as an effective subcategory of dislocation. As Almahasheer pointed out, Gorbanevskaya in effect experienced two periods of dislocation. First, she was isolated and imprisoned in a mental institution because of her participation in the protest against the Soviet occupation of Russia. She was separated from her family, friends, and associates. Second, Gorbanevskaya was forced to leave Russia after her release from the mental institution and was never again allowed to live in the Soviet Union/Russia. Although Gorbanevskaya contributed to publications and political magazines, as well as literary publications, partly in order to retain her Russian identity, she was permanently displaced from her homeland (1).

Gorbanevskaya’s life in exile, as well as her imprisonment, are well illustrated in her poetry, which reflects the horror of exile and permanent displacement from a female perspective, as well as an assessment of trauma inflicted on women by men within her homeland. The poet also writes about the “separateness” of essentially becoming stateless, as she did not really have a country until she was granted Polish citizenship in 2005. Almahasheer also commented that Gorbanevskaya is unusual among poets, as she not only a poet who has had her work translated, but also acted as a translator. She translated Polish literature in the form of poetry and essays to
Russian, speeches and essays by Vaclav Havel from Czech to Russian, and some poetry and prose into Slovak and French. Several other translators translated her work into English, Polish, and Ukrainian. In addition to this uniqueness and statelessness, this notion of dislocation and displacement of the poet is geographical, but it is also cultural and linguistic, since Gorbanevskaya was able to converse and translate in multiple languages and co-existed in multiple cultures simultaneously. (1)

Understanding the Context of the Thesis

Given the starkness of displacement, dislocation and disenfranchisement that served to both traumatize the poet and feature in her work for the rest of her life after 1968, it becomes all the more necessary for translators of Gorbanevskaya’s works to make sure that the translations are centered both in the time period and the language she came from. As Chamberlain puts it, the translator must “enter the proper contract” when dealing with the translator/author relationship. This is no easy task, as Gorbanevskaya’s work is immediately infused with the multiple displacements as well as issues relating to her gender, her political reality, her life as an exile, her family, and her writing style (Chamberlain 465).

Summary

In summary, the translation of Gorbanevskaya’s works must be filtered through several layers of translation and interpretation. First, the poet’s imagery needs careful analysis and interpretation, and must be viewed in light of her life of exile and disassociation. Second, the poet wrote in such a way that to say she merely evoked and drew upon her life as a source material is an injustice to power of her pathos. That is why her work needs to be viewed under such a thick lens, so that one can truly understand the various systems involved while reading
and translating her work. Chapter Three will discuss translations of Gorbanevskaya’s poetry and the translators themselves.
Primarily, Gorbanevskaya’s poems were translated into English by Jerald Smith and Daniel Weissbort. Her poetry was translated from Russian into Polish by Victor Voroshilsky, Stanislav Baranchak, and Adam Pornorsky, and into Ukrainian by Valery Boguslavsky. Daniel Weissbort has translated more of her poetry than anyone else. Born in London in 1935 to Polish Jews, who escaped Poland in the late 1920s, and were able to emigrate to Britain via Belgium at the beginning of the 1930s, Weissbort grew up speaking French, Polish and English. He studied history in college, but his dream was to study poetry, especially Russian poetry, and he went to Russia to study poetry in the 1960s. There was a passion for Russian poetry: he felt for a certain character of the poetry itself and believed that Russian poetry had a certain theme of universality that appealed to all of mankind, something, he believed, to be lacking in English poetry, which I believe he used as his basis for translating to English (Weissbort, 12). Weissbort studied Russian poetry for several years and learned Russian while he was in the country. With Ted Hughes, a British poet, Weissbort founded the magazine *Modern Poetry in Translation* as a way to celebrate poets from other areas of the world and translate them into English.

Weissbort began to translate Russian poets in the late 1960s and published the first translations of Gorbanevskaya’s poetry into English in 1972. He continued to translate Russian poetry, and later led a workshop on translating poetry at the University of Iowa for over 20 years, writing books on the importance of translation. He founded a translation prize to be given yearly to the best translated document.

Weissbort was also a poet himself, as illustrated below:
Untranslated

Do I preserve what I know by not transcribing you,
not finding a form of words for you –
the look of you and your way of looking?
Do I keep you in the original,
untranslated? Weissbort and Hughes (15)

Looking at his work above, it is hard to miss the way in which Weissbort views the importance of both poetry and translation. Judging solely on the poem above he is markedly divided regarding the treatment of a work in its translation. Weissbort is able to acknowledge the various subpoints of the poem and the realm in which they exist; but wants to treat them with respect. In doing so he becomes mentally torn between the beauty and meaning of the original and the need to express those ideas to others. He struggles with “finding a form of words” that are able to maintain the importance of the pieces past. As such he facilitates between a line of thought to maintain the “original” or “untranslated” work so that all the important socio-cultural concepts remain intact. In essence I believe that Weissbort is at war with himself over Venuti’s concept of visibility and the notion of if and how to work the poem in such a way as to avoid any possible injustice to the author in tone and meaning.

Weissbort faced some criticism of his translations. McDuff (1) argues that because Weissbort had spent his career translating poets in Eastern Europe, and those poems were particularly difficult to translate, he somehow felt his way was the only way that Russian poets could be translated, and there was no room for other points of view, which McDuff saw as a flaw within the translations. As the nature of poetry and the language itself is constantly shifting and
changing McDuff posits that Weissbort’s translations are not viable due to the presence of his ego in these translations. McDuff accused Weissbort of choosing sides while selecting, reviewing, and working translations; it was either his side, or the wrong side; all of which emphasizes the complex nature of translation, and requires that translator and reader alike are subject to distinct scrutiny that can be better solved through a proper understanding of the theories involved in such a work.

*Poly-System Theory of Translation and Natalya Gorbanevskayas’ Poetry*

The translation of literary works from various cultures has been a highly debated topic by linguistic scholars across the globe. Poly-system theory for translation, developed by Even-Zohar helps to provide a holistic approach to the translation of literary works in regard to the cultural climate in which they were written. Prior to the implementation of poly-system theory to the translation of literary texts, translation services were completed without consideration for the sociopolitical and cultural climate in which the work had been written. Without this consideration, much of the meaning of the original text could be lost, leaving scholars to implement poly-system theory to accurately and effectively translate canonized literary works into various languages. The use of a comprehensive approach to literary translation helps the receptor culture interpret and understand the literary work in a more complete context. The receptor culture that will be receiving the translation will be able to understand the function of the work and the context of why it was written. This approach was widely accepted in the 20th century as the most comprehensive way to interpret and translate literature. Also, various linguistics scholars have expanded upon Even-Zohar’s theory to provide insight into the ways in which receptor cultures integrate various works of literature.
Understanding poly-system theory and its theoretical framework is crucial to comprehending the issues surrounding translation of Gorbanevskaya's poetry by Daniel Weissborts. Using a poly system approach to translation allows the receptor culture to place the poetry in its role for the given society. This poetry can take a primary or a secondary position regarding its influence on the receptor culture. The comprehensiveness of the translation and the sociopolitical implications during the time in which the poetry was written will determine the role that it plays in literary influence. The translator that is responsible for interpreting the language of the text can greatly influence the ways in which the text is received by a given culture. The aim of the translator is to understand the perspective of the foreign writer and maintain a sense of transparency when creating an objective translation. If this is to be lost, or the translator does not fully understand poly-system theory in regard to creating an accurate translation, the true intentions or meanings of the text could be lost or ill-received.

According to Venuti:

A translated text, whether prose or poetry, fiction or nonfiction, is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer’s personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text— the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the “original”. (Venuti, ‘Genealogies of Translation Theory: Jerome’ 1)

During the translation process that Weissbort undertook while translating Gorbanevskaya, Weissbort was forced to review the life experiences and timeline of events that surrounded the poetry written by the author. Much of Gorbanevskaya’s history and experiences related to her
poetry surround the Russian civil rights movement during her lifetime as well as her imprisonment in a psychiatric hospital for her involvement in civil rights. The literary work that she produced, originally written in Russian, was reflective of the time period in which she lived and wrote. It seems not to be a surprise then that in the case of poetry translation from Russian into English that the translator must be as transparent as possible, even to the point of invisibility, in order for the poet’s voice to shine through. As noted by Kline (1), this is a difficult task:

I was conscious, in producing this personal selection of Russian poetry, of the way in which all the poets take on the voice of the translator, and thus their special individuality is lost. It is a problem associated with the very act of translation. I would encourage the reader to sample as many different alternative versions of these poets as possible, and thereby try to realise the individual flavour of each poet for herself or himself. If there is a theme that unites this selection, it is the nature of the Russian spirit itself, its clarity, and uncompromising passion, and its triumphant survival, often against the odds.

That being said it is necessary to understand the implications of the author’s life experiences in regard to her writing. If Weissbort was to not understand what the author had been through, and the mistreatment she experienced while imprisoned was misunderstood, the translation of her works would not be accurate or transparent. Weissbort needed to review and understand the reality in which the author lived and wrote to be able to provide an accurate translation of her works into the receptor culture’s language. The implications of poly-system theory in a translation such as this is crucial; since the sociopolitical sphere in which the author lived was so influential, her writings reflected her truth during that time. The cultural context of the writing is as important as the words itself, if the original intent of the author is to transcend language itself.
There are various strategies within the poly-system theory that translators can use to interpret and translate literary works. However, the various strategies that are used can have a profound impact on the literary work itself. Lawrence Venuti speaks to the transformation of various literary works through translator interpretation;

On the materialist assumption that language is creation thickly mediated by linguistic and cultural determinants, the hermeneutic model treats translation as an interpretation of the source text, whose form, meaning and effect are seen as variable, subject to inevitable transformation during the translation process (Venuti, ‘The Translator’s Invisibility’ 5-6).

The interpretation of the translator of the work that is being written may change the meaning of the original text. This can create a major disconnect between the truth of the text as the author meant, and the eventual translation that is produced years later. This discrepancy can be mitigated through the integration of poly-system theory into the translation process. By taking an approach that considers all the aspects that can influence the author and the meaning of the literature, a translator can attempt to discern the true meaning of the work and convey that in the translation. Throughout history various perspectives on the translation of literary works, either canonized or non-canonized have shaped the way cultures view foreign literature. The literary translations of these works are crucial for understanding various cultures of the world. However, when translators do not take an objective yet holistic stance during their translation process, it is possible for the literature to become transformed. Even-Zohar cautioned against this and it has been a result of various displaced works throughout various cultures. When a translation is produced that is adapted to fit into a given receptor culture, it becomes unreflective of the culture in which the literature was written. The true intent of the author becomes lost in translation, and
ultimately causes the work to become displaced. There are various strategies that have been reviewed and implemented by master translators charged with the responsibility for teaching and reviewing literary works.

Venuti goes into great detail in his ‘Call to Action’ regarding the processes required for translations to truly reflect the original content of a literary work. Much of Ventui’s call to action is regarding the necessary understanding of poly system theory in translating critically important literature. He surmises that the change in contemporary ideology regarding translation strategies requires that the reading, teaching and review of translation needs to fundamentally change to implement a level of opacity of the translator. The translation of a text serves to not only convey the words that are produced by the author, but to convey messages and cultural norms of the time in which the work was written. When translators resist this sense of invisibility or transparency within their rewriting of a literary work, the original content may be influenced or transformed by the ideologies of the translator. This can lead to the displacement of translated literature within the given receptor culture. Venuti determines the various strategies that can lead to objective translations as well as transformed versions of an original text. His call to action inspires translators to reevaluate the methods of translation to ensure that literary works, regardless of the receptor culture, will not become displaced (Venuti, ‘The Translator’s Invisibility, Second Edition, 312).

Notably, Even-Zohar comments extensively on the cultures intertwined with Russia and the issues in translations that have occurred between various cultures. Even-Zohar explains the relationships between Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew cultures and languages in regard to Slavic influence and finds that simply because these cultures lived in close proximity to one another,
their languages were still very complex and distinctive. To translate one language to another means to understand the author’s culture as well as the receptor culture that will be reading the literary work. It is crucial to consider the position that the literary work will take once it is released to the receptor culture. Translations of these Russian cultures have historically been transformed due to a lack of focus on poly-system theory. With such an intricate balance between these cultures, it is essential that translators are able to remove their personal inferences and remain objective when translating works from authors of various cultures (Even-Zohar 104). When considering the historical context of the translations of Gorbanevskaya’s poetry, Daniel Weissbort’s rendition of this poetry served as a window into the cultural atmosphere experienced by the author. The implications of a poly-system theory approach to the translation of Natalya Gorbanevskaya’s poetry means that the true reality and nature of the works will be represented in the translations produced by Weissbort. Even-Zohar’s work with poly-system theory is the reason for accurate and objective translations of foreign and international texts into widely understood languages. For a reader to truly understand the nature of the text that was written, the translator must take a world view perspective and consider all possible influences to ensure that a literary work is not transformed through translation.

On the surface, it would seem that Gorbanevskaya’s poetry would be fairly easy to decipher, but as emphasized throughout this argument that is not the case. Kublanovsky(1) stated that:

In spite of the brevity of individual poems, which sometimes seem to be no more than snapshots of a spiritual reality picked out of the flow of time, Gorbanevskaya’s poetry is always epic and in its way epochal; it is like a section of an old tree with a plethora of
rings, allowing you to reconstruct in detail the past, where your life too is represented.

Remarkable is the selflessness, the disinterestedness of her poetry; adaptation, conformism are utterly foreign to it. Her voice, with all its pathos, was from the start not intended for the Luzhniki Stadium, or even for the pages of Soviet journals, but for a circle of fellow thinkers, the very best of our people at that time.

But it is this marked “easiness” that provides such a deceptive view on the translation of her poetry. Kublanovsky goes deep into how Gorbanievskaya’s poetry acts effectively as a gateway to the past; touching on all various aspects that bring life to the concepts that inhabit her poetry and her life. It is this concept that makes her poetry so endearing and powerful to the thinkers of our time, as well as vastly increasing the difficulty faced by translators of her poem for a litany of reasons.

Perhaps one of the largest linguistic problems when translators attempt to translate a work of poetry from is language distance from English. While English is “closer” to German and Spanish, because it has both Germanic and Latin roots, it is lexically very distant from Russian, and uses a different alphabet. As pointed out through the figures illustrated in Mann and Yarowsky’s translation lexicon through bridge languages, there are very few cognates to guide the translator when translating from Russian into English (Mann and Yarowsky 2).

An example would be evident in Gorbanievskaya’s poem, “This, From the Diagnosis”, translated by Weissbort particularly in the last stanza (67).

It’s good not to feel the brain’s convolutions-

has there been a change? - is it yourself, isn’t it? -
not settling down to breathe in, from underneath the rubble

the dust of what, please God, is irrecoverable.

The variant above is from Wiessbort's own translation series, and yet when transferred to a web-based medium by Mr. Meeker, we get the slight variation in the final stanza.

It’s good not to feel the brain’s convolutions-

has there been a change? - it is yourself, isn’t it? -

not settling down to breathe in, from underneath the rubble

the dust of what, please God, is irrecoverable. (Meeker, 1)

Although the words are the same within the context of the poem, the order of the second line in the last stanza is different and could possibly change the meaning entirely. Now this could be a simple error in transcribing the poem to this web-based medium, or it could be that Meeker himself felt that Wiessbort might have been wrong in his variation. Since Meeker focuses largely on the importance of language, specifically in protest poetry, he very well could have altered the last phrase to create a better tone and flow. The second translation, in modern English, is a rhetorical question, because presumably, the poet knows the answer, whereas Wiessbort’s translation could be viewed as an internal debate, with the speaker of the poem questioning the change around them specifically, even going so far as to question themselves; as it is often difficult to address change in oneself. Even a change of a word, or the change in location of the word, changes the meaning of what the poet/translator may have intended.

Perhaps the strongest example of a linguistic or structural change comes within “Poem One” of Twelve Poems. The original translation by Weissbort features an interesting choice to make the translator known. Here Weissbort (5) breaks free from the notion of invisibility, and
“flaunts” his talent for translation, his knowledge of Gorbanevskaya, and the importance of said knowledge; “Pistes of black ice in the drenched avenues.”

The use by Weissbort of the word *pistes* has caused some analysts to use this poem as an example of the translator “flaunting” his extensive knowledge of languages to use a French word rather than an English word in the translation (Shaffer 27). It is true that the poet herself lived in France for much of her adult life. However, Shaffer argued that through the use of multiple languages within the poem, not for effect, but merely as a placed word, creates misunderstanding, as many English readers will translate this word as pieces, rather than tracks or trails, which is the actual translation. But isn’t that the point? Shaffer completely missed the mark by addressing his use of the word as a boastful measure of talent. Weissbort was using this moment to address the ever-important issue of Gorbanevskaya’s displacement from her homeland. The poem addresses the despair of being forced into exile and removed from her homeland. The use of the *pistes* here is an homage to depression Gorbanevskaya must have endured during her exile in France. One can feel the despair in the first stanza, as the “darkness” of her “familiar landscape” is only “pierced by” her “sobbing”; and by making the choices he did Weissbort provided this visible translation, as Venuti would put it, that only helped to shine bright the disparities of the world in which she lived.

Of course the changing of a word could affect the meaning of the poem, and any translation error (such as *pistes* for pieces) implies that each reader could view the poem differently, but this “misunderstanding” is essential in understanding the underlying themes of Gorbanevskaya’s life. Weissbort is using the word intentionally to create a form of confusion that comes from this form of expulsion, or eviction of sorts. Weissbort is using his knowledge to
create a visible translation that works to inform the reader of complicated nature of despair brought upon this type of traumatic event. Whether the “pieces of black ice” are visual representations of her own shattered world, or “the tracks of black ice” leading her back to a once familiar place that now seems so foreign is up to the reader. And it is due to Weissbort’s knowledge of her life, and his word choice that allow this notion to be for debate. A linguistic issue is really just another way of saying, a visible translator made a choice that affects the work in such a way that it creates a debate among the readers and as such helps bring to light the complicated issues, in the case of Gorbanevskaya the literal and figurative displacement of her life, that develop these complex notions.

In addition to linguistic issues, poetry translation also involves literary issues within the poem and aesthetic issues with the structure, overall meaning, and poetic truth. While prose translation allows for a bit more leniency, poetic translation involves the weight of each word placed within the overall structure of the poem. For example, if a translator chooses words that do not keep the alliteration, the metaphor structure, or the imagery of the poem, then the poem translated is not a transparent reflection of the poet, but rather the intervention of the translator that distorts the meaning of the poem. Venuti addresses this issues with his writing on Jerome and his argument that any level of 1:1 correspondence is not possible in any translation.

First the structure of the poem is important. In some cultures, such as Japan’s haikus and the sonnets of England, the structure of a poem is as important as the poem itself, because it follows a specific form and style. Gorbanevskaya had a particular form and style of writing, usually using clipped lines and a sparseness of word usage, which makes every word she wrote within the poem extremely important. Brodsky (76), himself a translator and a Russian poet,
noted that when translators reject the metrical structure and rhymes intended by the original poet, he or she allowed themselves to alter the meaning of the poem, which they view as a source of pride, almost a God-like complex. While Brodsky noted that some alteration of the poem is virtually impossible, the degree of freedom the translator has should be used sensibly. One example of alteration of a poem is changing the meter of the poem to fit stylistically from Russian to English. Because Russian words are usually much longer (by two or three syllables at least) than English words, it is more difficult to fit a Russian poem into the iambic pentameter required of some poetic forms because of the syllable count. This wedging of a Russian-language poem into an English straitjacket has the effect of making the Russian poem seem heavier, denser, by comparison, which the poet did not intend (Brodsky 77).

In addition, with regard to free verse, which is usually the form chosen by Gorbanevskaya, there have been cases when the translator alters a word or two and keeps the structure of the poem, as well as instances where the structure of the poem is ignored in favor of the language of the poem. Brodsky (77) called this act of translation error, as bad as misrepresenting a word in the translation of poetry. Both poems structure and sentence structure must be upheld to hold to the original intent of the poet. The poem below, which is unnamed, demonstrates the success Weissbort had with a translated Gorbanevskaya (1).

Turn the sky over,
lower it into the sea,
the silent into the voiceless.
Help the sea to rise,

lift the sea into the sky,
sea-blue into sky-blue,
height and depth
bring into balance.

Balance yourself and the world,
the world and the ladybird,
the wavelet and the wave
that drags you under to the bottom.
And go down to the bottom, softly
banging the moist doors behind you

In this poem, Weissbort did a good job of perfectly balancing the poem when he translated it into English. The structure of the translated poem matches closely with the original Russian poem in its appearance in the original Samzidat version simply titled “Verses 1962-1967.” However, not all of Gorbanevskaya’s poems were translated so well. “O My Poor Europe” is an example of two different translations by different translators with different poetic structures:

O my poor thing, this my graveside verse
is nothing but proof of my powerless
and endless love unto the end
for these final convulsions of your
face, etched with a net of slit
trenches, when the infantryman doesn’t count,
but there’s so much freedom for chill winds,
trucks and armoured cars.

Translated by G.S. Smith
In contrast, the last stanza of the Weissbort translation is stark in its balance and use of the poet’s voice as weight. You will see in comparing the two the difference between the choice of heavy wordplay and structural choice.

Poor Europe, my cemetery verses are proof of a powerlessness,
irreparable love to the end,
a last grimace of the face,
yourself, marked with a network of slits
of trenches, when soldiers don't matters
but there's freedom for the breeze,
for trucks and armored cars.

As displayed above, the first translation, in which the translator looked at words over structure, does not feel as balanced as the Weissbort translation above. Smith seems to apply an almost airy feel to the words, whereas Weissbort is more direct and as such comes across conveying a much more powerful meaning towards the undertones of the writing. The airiness of Smith’s version counter acts the harsh nature of the words and experience Gorbanevskaya is trying to portray. Weissbort on the other hand through his structural choice provides a dry rendition, almost as if it follows a dejected sigh at the harsh reality of the world the speaker lives. For the poet’s intent to come through, translators must pay particular attention to the balance, structure, and voice of the poem.

Because nearly all poems have metaphorical expressions, it is essential that the translator capture the metaphors the poet intended to add to the imagery, the message she is trying to convey. For that reason, metaphorical expressions are extremely necessary to the poem, but extremely difficult to translate, as is most figurative language. Newmark (1988) posited there are six different types of metaphors that must be translated: Dead Metaphor, Cliché Metaphor, Stock
or Standard Metaphor, Adapted Metaphor, Recent Metaphor, and Original metaphor. The ones most typically used by poets are the latter three, and for the purpose of the thesis they are defined as follows:

1. Adapted Metaphor: According to Newmark, this metaphor has been readapted or recreated for a different purpose, such as when a poet says, “you are my sun” (109).

2. Recent Metaphor: This type of metaphor is produced through imitation and spreads rapidly through the language. Examples of recent metaphors would be “unfriend” and “delicate flower of promise” (111).

3. Original Metaphor: An original metaphor, according to Newmark is the most difficult to translate, because it is created originally by the poet, and “contains the core of an important writer’s message, his personality, and his comment on life” (112). For original, adapted, and recent metaphors to translate correctly, the translator must study the poet and her imagery used during the writing process in order to effectively translate the poet’s thoughts.

When looking at Gorbanevskaya’s work, and Weissborts translations of her work, the translation of metaphor becomes a daunting task that must be addressed in such a way to properly convey the translators thought and experience. Weissbort through his knowledge of Gorbanevskaya’s life and circumstances works well in the translation of her metaphors, specifically the Original as described by Newmark. An example of the use of metaphor found within Gorbanevskaya’s poetry (1) can be found in her work, “To Czeslaw Milosz.” The poem was written by Gorbanevskaya about a Polish poet she worked to translate, serves as an example of how difficult it can be to translate figurative language, especially metaphors.
'Twas then I fell for foreign rhymes,
ones that rustled so stridently some dubbed them "hissing..."
And from there, I suppose, did arise,
many misfortunes of mine, fortunes too.

And now I'm a seasoned translator, professional of sorts,
spending nights rustling pages of Dal's musty tome,
reveling in the chirping of archaic words.
and muttering out loud as if over a book of Tarot.

But I'll give thanks, though I don't know to whom
not to myself, nor to God, not to chance, nor to blind divination,
that, as I whisper at night to the Paris outside of my room,
I still hesitate, pausing in awe before hammering out each translation.

No, not to myself, nor to God, nor to chance, nor to a call from above-
but to that tongue which believed my sincere declaration of love”.

Looking at the first stanza Gorbanevskaya writes of “foreign rhymes” that “rustled” in such a way they could have been “hissing.” The foreign tomes are speaking to her in such a way that they could be dangerous, the words hiss and rustle as she overlooks them, and as such she treats them with care. This is done because Gorbanevskaya knows the difficulty involved in translating the work of another, and desires to express that difficulty to her readers. Furthermore,
Gorbanevskaya is not writing this work for herself, or God, but instead translating and writing for to the “tongue which believed,” or those who can look at the “misfortunes” that have arisen from her work as a poet and a translator, and its effect on her life, Gorbanevskaya is using metaphor to aptly confer the difficulties of translation and poetry and its effect on the socio-cultural problems she faced at the time. Gorbanevskaya used the metaphor throughout this poem to address the problems she faces in such a way that it could be looked upon instead as the art of translation. The Weisbort translation above works to show the socio-cultural issues Gorbanevskaya faced, through the translated Original Metaphors of her work.

**Socio-cultural Problems**

In addition to the linguistic and literary aspects of poetry, translators must also understand that words are loaded weapons, and the poet has arranged them for maximum impact. Mashadi Said pointed out that many words used in poetry are culturally bound. Poets write about what they know, and for that reason, many of their words are embedded in the sociocultural issues of their day as such she stated that

“Expressions that contain culturally-bound word(s) create certain problems. The socio-cultural problems exist in the phrases, clauses, or sentences containing word(s) related to the four major cultural categories, namely: ideas, behavior, product, and ecology. The "ideas" includes belief, values, and institution; "behavior" includes customs or habits, "products" includes art, music, and artifacts, and "ecology" includes flora, fauna, plains, winds, and weather.” (39)
As such, these culturally bound concepts must be treated with care, so that a translator can influence the receptor culture with as much impact as the original contained for the original culture.

Perhaps more than any other area of translation, translators of culturally driven or culturally bound expressions must be mindful of the background of themselves and of their poets they are translating, in order to be as transparent as possible, and not add meaning where it is not needed, or take away the meaning the poet intended. This may also be the area that proves the most difficult to translate, as illustrated below.

O city, o city, o city

“O city, city, o city, city,
To rush into your window in the ice!

As I was getting out of Bologoye
I wound up stuck on side tracks there,
And now in my straightforward poems
All’s empty, empty, bare, so bare.

And a soft voice, like a wild dove,
Sliding through the celestial silence of the ether
Refuses to descend to me, stays far above,
Fails to relieve my hunger and my fever.

Forgotten backroads county, wayside and wild,
All crossings closed, all movement paralyzed.
My light-filled city, the iron child,
The cold of spring, unfaithful light (1)”.

At first glance, the translation of this poem seems very straightforward. Gorbanevskaya is in or around the city of Bologoye in the Soviet Union. However, further research into the name
of the area reveals that there are several areas called Bologoye in the former Soviet Union. While many of the areas in the current country of Russia called Bologoye are villages, the largest town of Bologoye is a city of approximately 30,000 people that serves as a major rail hub between Moscow and St. Petersburg (Roosa 395).

However, the history of Bologoye perhaps serves as a window to the thoughts of the poet and illuminates information that may be useful for translators of “O city”. The area developed as a natural village around the larger city of Novgorod, but it had its own customs and identity. Bologoye developed slowly until the railroads, perhaps one of the most important ways that the former Soviet Union continued to work towards unification of such a large land mass, developed. The town had traditions and customs, and a sense of place, until repeated changes and government additions and subtractions to the area served by the town, and even the town itself, in governmental structure and function, erased the uniqueness of the town, and reduced it to a rail hub, a stopover in between two “great” cities (Roosa 395)

This habit of erasing and reforming, and renaming, seems to be a feature in many Soviet-era writings, not just Gorbanevskaya’s. George Orwell wrote in 1984 (33) that “The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became the truth.”

Solzhenitsyn commented on this “erasure of the past” by both the Soviet Union and Russia, both before and after the Communist takeover (and one could speculate he might say the same thing now), that it appears to be the propensity of the country to erase things, erase people, to take them down to nothingness, as this quote illustrates (357):

“At what point, then, should one resist? When one's belt is taken away? When one is ordered to face into a corner? When one crosses the threshold of one's home? An arrest
consists of a series of incidental irrelevancies, of a multitude of things that do not matter, and there seems no point in arguing about one of them individually...and yet all these incidental irrelevancies taken together implacably constitute the arrest.”

Gorbanevskaya’s poems quite frequently touch on themes of being reduced to nothing; as if her words fall upon deaf ears, only known to yourself for no one will listen or understand the struggle of nonexistence, as illustrated in the poem “Leaves, something in my ear you twitter (1)”:

“Leaves, something in my ear you twitter
hardly audible, you whisper to my cheek, tickle,
you'll not cure my soul's deafness this way.
I'll not shed tears, remembering those nights
which existed, no more do, and behind which
there's no catching up, even at breakneck speed,
neither by express train nor direct,
to reach the bare-legged, dewy dawn.

I kept a keen knife, in case of love.
I warn the shower:
"Don't!"
Leaves, something in my ear you whispered,
rustled in under my ribs, tickled the larynx…
This poem work in a way to react to this feeling of “deafness.” Gorbanevskaya and her voice is nothing but a “twitter” in the ear: a voice that you cannot even be sure was heard or even there at the beginning. At the time, the citizens felt this erasure, as evidenced by the above quote by Solzhenitsyn, and it was a distinct possibility to become lost or erased for voicing the wrong opinion. “There is no catching up,” and it would be impossible to “cure the souls deafness” as the state continued to eliminate the radical free thought that threatened its very existence. Despite this consistent effort to remove the free thought, that idea was always there: “rustled under her ribs” in the heart of the thinker. Gorbanevskaya wrote in effort to address the many issues of the state, and the socio-cultural issues encompassed within, and tried to bring a voice to the people. This voice is what lead to her exile, her erasure, and even her existential eradication.

To look further into this, one can look at the crafted example of Gorbanevskaya’s feelings of erasure and anonymity that comes from “Roasting Over a Slow Fire (1)”

“Don't touch me!' I scream at passers-by -
they do not even notice me.
Cursing the rooms of other people,
I hang about their anterooms.

But who will knock a window through?
Who will hold out his hand to me?
I am roasting over a slow fire.”

The slow burn that Gorbanevskaya feels is that of the social pressure brought on by exile and erasure. Her voice was consistently stifled by the government, and it got to such a level that she
felt alienated from society and the land she called home. No one would “hold out his hand” to her; save her from this nonexistence.

It is here we can discuss the importance of her diagnosis of “sluggish schizophrenia.” Sluggish schizophrenia is believed to have been a diagnosis created solely to further the political agenda of the Soviet Union. There are a number of experts in the field of Soviet psychiatric abuse who agree that the diagnosis was created by Andrei Snezhnevsky and his team of psychiatrists. During this time “individuals who did not comply with the prescribed behavior of a normal Soviet citizen were targeted as political dissidents and were officially diagnosed as exhibiting signs of sluggish schizophrenia, nervousness, eccentricity, and neuroticism.” (Shapiro). A description so broad made it easier for the government to address political dissidents as patients, who could not conform to the normal standards of a Soviet citizen at time, which would allow for an easy dismissal of any form of thought or work counter to the Soviet Union. To make matters worse, as the disease worsened with time, Snezhnevsky went a step further to express that the sluggish diagnosis was only distinguishable through its effect on the social behavior of the individual: the episodes a patient might experience would be addressed as “a severe case of ‘inflexibility of convictions,’ or ‘nervous exhaustion brought on by his or her search for justice,’ or ‘a tendency to litigation’ or ‘reformist delusions.’” (Shapiro quoting, “The American Psikhushka” By Joe Power). With the knowledge that her affliction could very well be a political ploy to silence her dissidence, one can take another look at Gorbanevskaya’s poetry through a different lens. Mainly, looking at the work of a properly diagnosed schizophrenic versus that of a perfectly healthy individual who is being “erased” by the government in multiple ways. The concept of nonexistence that is addressed in her work could be drawn not just from an exile from her homeland, but also the denial of her own free thought and opinions as a
schizophrenic rambling that had absolutely zero bearing on the current socio-cultural environment.

As such, it would appear that in order to effectively translate any piece of poetry, it would become important for the translator to study deeply the culture of the poet and attempt to understand it as much as possible. As discussed earlier, Gorbanevskaya’s principle translator, Weissbort, came from the same culture of philology and literary aristocracy that Gorbanevskaya did. Both of these individuals had a love of words in multiple languages and a desire to see poetry translated and spread to the West, to be read by as many people as possible in order that they might understand the poet’s universe, and a life lived in protest of censorship and the lack of freedom experienced by individuals within the Soviet Union.

With that in mind, Weissbort, while understanding the general themes of the Russian poets he translated, also understood the background of Gorbanevskaya, but it would have been difficult for him to completely understand her on multiple levels. First, the difference in gender would make Gorbanevskaya difficult to understand. Almahasheer (7) discussed the idea of females as displaced themselves by saying that Gorbanevskaya suffered multiple displacements and attempts at muting her voice, in part because she was a woman. He noted that Gorbanevskaya repeatedly tried to erase and remake history herself within her own poetry, in the hope that her voice might be heard.

Almahasheer also noted the many references in Gorbanevskaya’s poetry to the feminine, to fertility, and to the role of the female within her writing, because he felt she wrote that women within the Soviet Union were considered important from a fertility standpoint, but not important with regard to the right to have personal freedoms or liberties, and even though the message
within the country was equality of the sexes, in reality, there was very little that was equal within the Soviet system, unless one discussed that both men and women were tortured and murdered for their beliefs (10).

Second, Weissbort, although not female, and not oppressed, came from a family who had been oppressed, as noted earlier. His parents were Polish Jews who immigrated to escape the repeated pogroms in Eastern Europe. In addition, Weissbort’s own writings confirmed that while he was not oppressed himself, he developed a deep friendship with Gorbanevskaya and a desire to see her poetry spread throughout the literary world. He was the first translator of her poetry into English, and he also translated the notes of her trial into English so that others would know what happened to her (Haven 1). It is clear from his writings of her that he admired her work, and her courage, especially because she demonstrated at Red Square in Moscow with a very young child even though she knew that she would be imprisoned for her beliefs, and that she would suffer greatly. Weissbort noted that while Gorbanevskaya was inherently political, her poetry was not. Instead it was terribly personal, and sought to bridge distance between herself and others, perhaps because she always felt she was on the outside looking in, not only to her country of origin, but on the whole of humanity, especially when they committed atrocities against each other (Haven 1).

However, although Weissbort admired her greatly, it would have been extremely difficult for him to understand the level of displacement and disassociation Gorbanevskaya found herself in for nearly all of her life, living the last 40 years of it in exile, and never receiving citizenship anywhere until only a few years before her death. Her sense of pathos, of longing for her native Russia, abound throughout her poetry, and add to her sense of righteous anger over what the government of the Soviet Union, and now of Russia, had done to her country.
Summary and Conclusion

Who Cries Above Me

Why speak of trouble, or beauty
when the happy body, forgetful,
naked as the thieves upon the cross,

itself wants to be deceived.

Who weeps, who cries above me,
crossing the frontier of snow,
where the wintry wind, the icy wind,
chills the bright waters of a spring.

And in this unearthly merging of passions,
this parting of hands, this rarefied breath,
is the cross, the muffled breaking of bones,

and at the stake the crackle and the blaze” (Gorbanevskaya 3).

It would be difficult not to feel the sadness, the chill Gorbanevskaya writes about so often in her poetry. The poet exiled for her belief in the freedoms that many people around the globe
take for granted on a daily basis. Although she spent the majority of her life in Paris, and grew to
love the city, her longing for reunification with her homeland is clearly expressed in the lines she
wrote during her life.

Gorbanevskaya represents many poets from the era of Soviet rule when dissention was
forbidden, when exile and death was common, and when censorship was the rule. Nevertheless,
she edited and wrote under censorship, hiding in the dark, and publishing her poems and the
works of other writers as she was able to in magazines and pamphlets that were passed down,
copied, and read to tatters. While she was able to complete these tasks in secret, it was her
demonstration with six other people in Red Square in August of 1968 that cost her all of her
freedom. She was institutionalized, harassed, and threatened until she left her native country,
ever to return to live.

Russian poetry in general is difficult to translate. The language is many degrees distant
from English, and that alone makes it a dicey process for translators. The alphabet is completely
different, the rhyme scheme is different…one could say that everything about the poetry is vastly
different from English. It is not enough to understand the language, one must also be extremely
familiar with metaphorical expressions and other figurative language, as well as locations
familiar to the poet. Translators must also be familiar with the time period of the life of the poet,
and the biography of the poet herself, in order to effect as good a translation as possible.

The degree to which Russian poetry remains so difficult to translate makes the need for
the translator to immerse himself or herself into the life of the poet. Weissbort, a son of Polish
immigrants who grew up speaking English, French, and Polish, had an affinity for Eastern
European poetry, and began studying Eastern European poets at an early age. He studied
extensively in the Soviet Union and spent the majority of his time translating Russian poets. He
began his career translating Gorbanevskaya and other Russian poets who were imprisoned or exiled for their beliefs; in fact he began his career by translating the notes from her trial. He has largely been considered to be the best translator of her poetry into English.

However, critics have pointed out that Weissbort, while acknowledged as a good translator, and perhaps the best translator of her oeuvre, cannot completely identify with the poet for several reasons. His background, while similar to Gorbanevskaya’s, is not the same, as he did not suffer the same deprivation of family she did. Her father died in the war, and she had no relationship with him. She was raised in the deprivation of the Soviet Union, while he grew up relatively comfortably in London. She was institutionalized for her beliefs, while he remained free. He was not subject to censorship or imprisonment for his writing or translation. In addition, because he was of an opposite gender, he may have had difficulty understanding the feminine experience.

All translators operate under a difficult model, they must work to make the work of a poet or writer in another language come to life within the “new” language without taking away from the poet’s original intent. As has been demonstrated in the thesis, this is extremely difficult to do for any translator, but it is especially difficult to take the extent of Gorbanevskaya’s poetry, with its sparseness of words, her use of metaphor, her references to locations and aspects of her confinement, and her religious and melancholic undertones, accessible to English readers. While Weissbort, with over 40 years of translation experience, did an admirable job, and it is obvious he admired her work, there will always be room for improvement when a translator who is not a native speaker of the language translates a poet with as extensive and complicated a history as Gorbanevskaya.
Works Cited


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