Questions of survival

Between Forgetting and Making Present. On the new translation of Viktor Shklovsky's *Zoo*.

By *Olga Radetzkaja*

Translated from the German by *Steven Corcoran*

The image of translators as bridge-builders has fallen into some disrepute of late, and not without reason. But in one respect, it clearly remains true: every translation connects spaces. Concretely, it will often connect the living spaces of the author and the translator. More abstractly it links the cultural spaces or 'semiospheres'[1] in which both texts, original and translation, interact with their readers. Less obvious but equally true is the fact that a translation also connects times. It plays on two temporal levels: the time of its own creation and the time of the original. Both times *speak* through a translation. The greater the distance, the more tense the interval, and the clearer it becomes that the translation must somehow relate to the original time, necessarily relate. For no matter how 'modern' or 'baroque', how 'freshly' or how 'solidly' the translation of a non-contemporary book turns out to be, by rewriting the text *now*, this text is inevitably related to the present of the translation. Thanks to the translation, it might also be said, the present enters into a relationship with that other time. New translations thus also have an anamnestic function; they are texts of memory.

When the publisher Sebastian Guggolz first asked me if I could envisage re-translating Viktor Shklovsky's *Zoo* for him, memory came into play immediately.[2] I remembered the first time I read this text: I was in my third semester of Slavic studies in Berlin. It was a cold and grey November day in 1985, and I was riding the number 19 night bus under Yorckbrücke while reading about the 'twelve iron bridges' under which the author of these 'Letters Not About Love' wandered in his exile, consummately maintaining the balance between irony and despair, playfulness and seriousness. Paradoxically, this book by an exile who is unhappily in love – and who may have only made up his love to distract himself from his homesickness – awakened in me a fierce longing for the very place from which his letter-writing, first-person narrator longed so much to turn away: the Berlin of the 1920s, whose streets Boris Pasternak and Andrei Bely would stroll, and in which the futurist painter Ivan Puni would grab potatoes cooked on hot coals for his friends in his Schöneberg studio at two o'clock in the morning. Compared to this Berlin, the Berlin of the 1980s seemed to me to pale in comparison.

Zoo demonstrates how art and theory (and by extension love and friendship) can dance together. This was something to keep in mind and so, I decided at the time, the book should always be kept in my pocket. Nevertheless, over the years I had largely forgotten it – not the fascination it caused, but the text itself, bar a few highlights like the iron bridges.

I had also forgotten – or in my youthful, identificatory exuberance had not even taken note of – the fact that this book, about which I reminisced, was precisely a text of

memory: I had read it in German, in the Alexander Kaempfe translation published in 1965, which is based on the third Russian version published in Moscow in 1964.[3] It begins with a look back in time: the text opens with the primal scene of Viktor Shklovsky's escape from Russia (‘a man crosses the ice...’) – and immediately builds a historical framework around it: ‘All that was in 1922’, the author continues, ‘I was not happy abroad, later I returned, and now I am reprinting this book, which was written in Berlin at the time, "here at home”: "Moscow 1963".’

By contrast, the first published version of *Zoo*, which I read in Russian in 2017, is thoroughly contemporary, in the sense that it came out in Berlin in July 1923, and was written only shortly before in the winter and spring of 1923.[4] It opens not with the memoir-introduction of 1964, but instead with a user’s guide for readers that, titled ‘Preface by the Author’ and dated 5 March 1923, places the ‘Letters Not About Love’ that follow precisely on the line between fiction and reality.

The book’s reinterpretation as a memoir is only one of the many changes that the text has undergone over the course of its various editions – some addresses, German proper names, dates were deleted, and then partly restored, while some letters have been rejected, and new ones added; individual words, half sentences, and whole passages have been deleted from others – but this change was the directly decisive factor. This text, the original *Zoo* of 1923, was unknown to the German reading public and ought not to remain so.

The translation I consequently undertook thus goes further back in time in order to come closer to the present. For *Zoo* 1923 is in the present tense in an emphatic sense: the events and the letters that comment on them intertwine, overtake each other at a breathless pace, and this near coincidence of what is described and description is constitutive for the book. This is particularly vivid in its ending.

Zoo 1964 concludes with the surrender of this letter-writing émigré, with his farewell to Berlin and a comic inventory of the modest luggage along with which he covets readmission to Russia:

> Let me go to Russia, me and my plain luggage: six shirts (three in the wardrobe, three in the laundry), a pair of yellow boots, inadvertently polished with black shoe polish, an old pair of blue trousers that I tried in vain to iron a crease into.

Zoo 1923, on the other hand, continues at this point for about half a page. Instead of ending at the close of a chapter of his biography, it terminates with an evocation of the future, with an appeal not to kill the author at the moment of his surrender:

> Don't do as we did in Erzurum: during the capture of the fortress there, my friend Sdanevich once rode along a road.
> On the left and right of the road lay mown-down Turkish soldiers. Their wounds were all on the right arm and head.
> My friend asked:
> ‘Why did they all get it in the arm and head?’
> ‘Very simple’, came the reply, ‘when the Turks surrender, they raise their right arm’.

Whether the author was compelled to remove this ending or suggested removing it himself is ultimately irrelevant; no doubt both could be argued. But from a functional point of view, the evocation of the future had in any case become superfluous forty

years after *Zoo* was first published: Viktor Shklovsky was not in fact killed upon returning to the Soviet Union. Against the odds, he survived the years of Stalin's terror. [5]

All the same, *Zoo 1964* remained largely the same as *Zoo 1923* and yet also became a completely different book. *Zoo 1964* is the book of a man who narrowly escaped. The truncated ending removes its radicalism, as the courage of despair transmutes into subdued confidence – and this mild, dim light radiates over the whole, even where the text is unchanged.[6]

My new translation is an attempt to bring out the radicality, to make the harsher, sharper light of the 1923 version perceptible throughout the book. It seeks to switch on the present-day spotlights, so to speak.

So is it about modernity? I'll do another loop.

If some books are translated twice, and others again and again, this is not done out of necessity but out of desire. It is not done as a reaction to the supposed shorter self-life of translated texts, but rather due to the seductive power of the possibility of opening a new door onto a book that, over the years, has retained its mystery, its brilliance, its urgency. The possibility of asking it new questions in order to hear new answers.

To justify opening the door we do not need to posit that the 2020s have any superiority over, say, the 1960s. Underlying this practice and this impulse is not some know-it-all attitude, but rather the opposite – curiosity, hunger for knowledge. And the view from this newly opened door will always be different than the view from the previous door – just as the space from which one looks out has also become different.

What have I seen from my new door?

For one thing, a book written from and about Berlin, the capital of detachment I know so well. The narrator and letter writer in *Zoo* walks the streets, he looks about and writes, but he remains on the outside, uninvolved: ‘We see nothing of German culture. In Berlin we are like oil on water’.[7] At the same time, his few sentences about the non-Russian artistic-literary scene, about German Berlin, are extremely pithy. They paint a picture of depression and apathy, of rust, dampness and an architectural style that is like boring, ‘ready-made clothing’. The author is afraid of becoming infected with this lifelessness, of becoming a ‘shadow among shadows’.

More than a book about a place, however, *Zoo* is a book about a time, a historical moment, a tipping point between two epochs – in the author’s biography, but not only: ‘Europe is coming to an end’, writes the actual Shklovsky in a letter to his actual wife a few weeks before his return to the Soviet Union. ‘Europe is coming to an end, Ljussik, out of political irresponsibility and nationalism. The night is falling in Europe’. He has no illusions about the alternative to this Europe that offers no salvation; for the country from which he fled and to which he is returning has not become more humane in the meantime: ‘The air is bad at home, there is no air at all here’.[8]

This engaged view of an apathetic world spells the uncertain moment before the choice between two evils: for me, these two points are the essential ones, since *I recognise something in them* and my present thus leads to an open-ended

conversation with the present of *Zoo*. In my view, this kind of conversation increasingly shows itself to be the real meaning of new translations of non-contemporary texts, or perhaps even more precisely: it is their energetic core. At their centre is thus neither a modernisation nor a patination, but an *updating* that works in both directions and through which a concrete linguistic form can emerge. In a new translation not only is a past made (more) alive, but, by linking to this past anew, a present is too. In this sense, new translations are historical, or at least they should be. They tie different times together, work against rupture, disconnectedness, the deserts of forgetting. *Staying alive*: the conversation between the past and the present is the prerequisite of survival.

Yorckbrücken, 1977 ©Jürgen Henschel
FHXB Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg Museum:
https://berlin.museum-digital.de/object/42144

Endnoten

1 The concept of the semiosphere is developed by Jurij Lotman in his book *Die Innenwelt des Denkens* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2010), pp 162–290.

2 Viktor Shklovsky, *Zoo: Briefe nicht über Liebe, oder Die dritte Heloise*. Trans. from the Russian original by Olga Radetzkaja (Berlin: Guggolz Verlag, 2022.)

3 Viktor Šklovskij, *Zoo oder Briefe nicht über die Liebe* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1965). Viktor Šklovskij,, *Zoo: ili pis'ma ne o ljubvi*. in Žili-byli. Vospominanija, memuarnye zapisi, povesti o vremeni: s konca XIX v. po 1962 god. Moskva 1964.

4 Viktor Šklovskij, *Zoo: Pis'ma ne o ljubvi ili Tret'ja Eloiza* (Berlin: Helikon, 1923).

5 On Schklowski's later biography, see, among others, Anselm Bühling: Das Schiff auf dem Weißmeerkanal, in *tell – Magazin für Literatur und Zeitgenossenschaft*, March 11, 2017

6 ‘I live badly. I live dully, as if soaked in preservative’, is how Shklovsky describes such dullness in *Dritte Fabrik* in 1926. Viktor Šklovskij: Dritte Fabrik. Trans. Verena Dohrn and Garbiele Leupold (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1988), p. 71.
7 Viktor Šklovskij: Gibel' ‘Russkoj Evropy’ [The Fall of ‘Russian Europe’], in *Gamburgskij sčet. Moskva* 1990, pp. 187-190, here p. 188.
8 Šklovskij’s letters to his wife from this time are published on the blog of Shklovsky’s biographer Vladimir Berezin

#Neuübersetzung, #Erinnerung, #1920er Jahre, #Berlin, #Russland

©Ebba D. Drolshagen

Olga Radetzkaja lives in Berlin, translates literature from Russian (and French) into German, and works as an editor for OSTEUROPA magazine. Her authors include Julius Margolin, Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Poplavsky, Maria Stepanova and Polina Barskova. She is co-author of the documentary film *Spurwechsel: A Film of Translating* (2003). In 2019, she was awarded the Straelen Translation Prize, and in 2020, together with her author Maria Stepanova, the Brücke Berlin Prize.