

Afterword: On Translation

I was an editorial consultant on this new English translation from the original Czech:

Fateful Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk During The World War, Book Two; & Books Three and Four, by Jaroslav Hašek, translated by Zenny Sadlon, (<https://svejkcentral.com/>).

Thus I read it—with a microscope, multiple times—before it was published. Here is what I drafted as an “Afterword” to the book, which was not in the end used:

“We set ourselves the task of rendering Hašek’s account of Švejk’s adventures into English. Most Czechs will tell you that is impossible.

Most translations—‘good’ translations—read as though they were written in the language that is being read. If you didn’t already know it was a translation, you wouldn’t be able to tell by reading it. But this was not our vision. This most ‘Czech’ of novels can’t be translated—in this way—because too much of its Czechness would be lost along the way. That’s why Czechs think it can’t be translated.

Zenny would put it into ‘English’ and my job was to tell him it wasn’t English. I told him how to put it into English, and he told me that wasn’t what the Czech meant. And so it went. No doubt some of its Czechness has been lost. But some has been preserved—not just the content, but a sense of the language.

The value of this approach was well-expressed by Rudolf Pannwitz, in *Die Krisis der europäischen Kultur*, 1917 (quoted by Walter Benjamin in “The Task of the Translator,” an introduction to a Baudelaire translation, 1923; this text translated into English by Harry Zohn, 1968):

Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works.... The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language. It is not generally realized to what extent this is possible, to what extent any language can be transformed, how language differs from language almost the way dialect differs from dialect; however, this last is true only if one takes language seriously enough, not if one takes it lightly.

We have tried to take Czech seriously. The cost is a certain smoothness that the reader expects; the benefit is a broadening in our acquaintance with a ‘foreign tongue.’

A customer reviewer on Amazon.com of the first edition of the first book of this translation wrote:

When I saw this new translation of Švejk in a bookstore I immediately bought it. I love the novel and I have always thought that the Cecil Parrott translation, although good, wasn't quite “it”. The problem with Parrott’s translation is that it is a little too formal compared to the Czech original (incidentally, I’m fluent in Czech, so I know what the prose should feel like). This new Sadlon translation promised to remedy this situation, so optimistically I plowed right in, hoping for the best. Unfortunately, although the language has been (appropriately) “roughed up” a bit, the prose has suffered. Hašek’s prose flows. It feels “right”; it doesn’t jar. Unfortunately, Sadlon’s translation at times does. Parrott’s prose is, I think, closer to the original in its feel, while Sadlon’s vocabulary is closer to the original. Blending the two, I suppose, might be the answer.

Here, we see, is a dilemma: Hašek’s prose flows, but Czech and English are very different languages. If we render it into English that flows, we lose some of its Czechness; if we preserve its

Czechness, it doesn't flow in English—it jars. The reviewer hopes for a 'blending of the two,' but that is easier said than done.

This, at any rate, is the best we could do. Some may think we have massacred the English, but at least we haven't euthanized the Czech.”

James C. Klagge

© 2007, 2011

Drafted 2007, Posted June 27, 2011:

https://www.amazon.com/Fateful-Adventures-Soldier-Svejk-During/dp/1438916701/ref=pd_bxgy_14_img_2?encoding=UTF8&pd_rd_i=1438916701&pd_rd_r=7V1A52QHKHD7XYRY6GRM&pd_rd_w=EJ27i&pd_rd_wg=To5M9&psc=1&refRID=7V1A52QHKHD7XYRY6GRM#customerReviews