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My first experiment with modern translation of the poetry of Taras Hryhorovych Shevchenko (1814–1861) was conducted mid-2021, six months before Russia invaded Ukraine, the country of birth Shevchenko and I share. I am an Early Career Researcher experimenting with translating older works into the language of today. Can contemporary translations make the similarities between Shevchenko’s time and ours more obvious? My initial translations were influenced by my apprehension in presenting a work that alludes to ongoing Russification of Ukraine, but Ukraine’s continued fight for cultural autonomy is now a global conversation and I find myself feeling freer to be political in my translation work.

Ukrainian national poet Taras Hryhorovych Shevchenko was born into serfdom in the small town Moryntsi, Cherkasy Oblast, at the time under imperial Russian rule. He died in exile in St Petersburg. Despite the attempts to phase out Ukrainian culture, Shevchenko wrote his poetry in Ukrainian. His activism for Ukraine’s cultural autonomy led to his exile in 1845. Nevertheless, Shevchenko continued to advocate for Ukrainian culture by adding his unique mark on it, a mark that is still revered today. Shevchenko’s legacy lives on, with statues in his honour standing in most major cities in Ukraine.

The poems in his suite titled *In the Casemate* (1847) speak of his exile and describe scenes of peasant Ukrainian life. The poems are about the trauma of watching one’s country torn apart from afar, and the emotional connection one has to their homeland; such a connection cannot be severed by distance. *In the Casemate* continues to feel relevant to the Ukrainian identity, particularly in a time of active war.

In *Translation and Rewriting in the Age of Post-Translation Studies*, Edwin Gentzler advocates for a shift in translation studies to allow more creative approaches: “The goals of translation [have] shifted The aim of a new generation of translators is less to achieve linguistic accuracy and more to facilitate communication” (19). My experiment in modern translation is influenced by Gentzler’s work in post-translation.

My work is also inspired by Maria Davhana Headley’s 2019 modernized translation of *Beowulf*, particularly her use of colloquial language to give the classical text a modern relevance. Furthermore, I am inspired by Tracy K. Smith’s translations of Yi Lei’s poetry, which take certain liberties to allow the feminist poetry from 1980s communist China to be relevant to a contemporary American woman. Both poets aim to give their contemporary readers the opportunity to experience the older source text as though it were written for them today, thus exploring the original’s ongoing relevance.

Shevchenko’s oeuvre is a masterful example of nineteenth-century verse poetry, and has previously been translated into English by John Weir, Vera Rich and others, as well as into other languages, such as Eugène Guillevic’s translations into French. Many previous translations have dutifully followed the rhyme, scansion and tetrameter of the originals. I take a different approach, using free verse and contemporary English language to give the poems a new, contemporary identity. Translating the poetry into a contemporary poetic sensibility exposes that the source text’s imagery and key themes are still as relevant to the modern Ukrainian experience as they were to Shevchenko and his peers. As I digressed from some of the nineteenth-century stylistic choices, such as rhyme and tetrameter, it was important to stay as close as possible to the original flows of words and ideas; my translations stay as close, line-

by-line, to the original as possible. I believe the alterations I have made during this experiment are respectful to the originals.

In Poem III I focus on replicating Shevchenko's nuanced punctuation choices and avoid changing the sentence structures. Faithful punctuation and line-by-line translation has allowed some of the ambiguities of the original to remain. For example, for lines 14–16 of the original, some translators have interpreted these as father asking son to pray for the country, while for others it is father asking son to pray for Shevchenko. My interpretation lands on the father asking the son to pray for Shevchenko, however I hope that both interpretations can be read into my translation.

Furthermore, in free verse, Poem III has come to resemble spoken word poetry, which is often associated with political activism through poetic expression. Spoken word poems traditionally “linger on personal and political themes, the most common of them being the expression of marginalized identity” (Somers-Willett 7). This new poetic identity feels appropriate to the original, as Shevchenko is grieving his exile, and the marginalization of both himself and Ukrainian culture.

Poem XII was chosen for the translation experiment for being particularly pertinent to the immigrant identity, which I find an intriguing theme to explore in the process of modernising the poetry. The source text is about enforced exile; Shevchenko is probably speaking to his fellow Ukrainian activists and artists. In a modern context, we can allow Shevchenko to speak to us instead. Translating Poem XII into contemporary, conversational language allows it to be read as the immigrant experience. Particularly lines 6–7, which evoke the internalized need to respect the land where one has ended up though it will never truly be home, something immigrants often feel we must do in our adoptive countries.

Poem VIII is a description of peaceful Ukrainian peasant life. Perhaps it is a memory, perhaps it is Shevchenko's imagining. For this translation, I have kept rhyme as a device in order to juxtapose it to the other two poems, which use the first person, making them feel more intimate for the reader. Poem VIII feels like a painting, like a hazy memory for a Ukrainian reader, and a new scene for a non-Ukrainian person. Far away, we are not invited in but to observe it. By keeping the rhyme scheme, these elements of separation and wonder are kept.

My life as a Ukrainian immigrant influences my reading of Shevchenko, and my subsequent translation of his work. While I have not experienced political exile, I relate to the distance, longing and love that are key themes in the poems of *In the Casemate*, and find his work agonisingly relevant to the Ukrainian experience today, especially in a time of active war with Russia. This relevance is what I sought to highlight through my modern translations. The liberties taken in this translation experiment were done with the utmost care and respect for the original and the significance they hold for Ukrainians. I hope reframing Shevchenko's poetry for a contemporary English reader brings with it a new perspective on the contemporary Ukrainian experience.

Bibliography

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РОЕМ III

Мені однаково, чи буду
Я жить в Україні, чи ні.
Чи хто згадає, чи забуде
Мене в снігу на чужині –
Однаковісінько мені.
В неволі виріс меж чужими,
І, не оплаканий своїми,
В неволі, плачучи, умру,
І все з собою заберу,
Малого сліду не покину
На нашій славній Україні,
На нашій – не своїй землі.
І не пом'яне батько з сином,
Не скаже синові: “Молись,
Молися, сину: за Вкраїну
Його замучили колись”.
Мені однаково, чи буде
Той син молитися, чи ні...
Та не однаково мені,
Як Україну злії люде
Присплять, лукаві, і в огні
Її, окраденую, збудять...
Ох, не однаково мені.

РОЕМ VIII

Садок вишневий коло хати,
Хрущі над вишнями гудуть,
Плугатарі з плугами йдуть,
Співають ідучи дівчата,
А матері вечерять ждуть.

Сем'я вечеря коло хати,
Вечірня зіронька встає.
Дочка вечерять подає,
А мати хоче научати,
Так соловейко не дає.

Поклала мати коло хати
Маленьких діточок своїх;

POEM III

It doesn't bother me, if I
live in Ukraine, or not.
If anyone remembers, or forgets
me in the snow of a foreign place –
all that doesn't bother me.
Imprisoned among strangers grew
and, not cried for by my own,
among strangers, amidst tears, will die,
and take it all with me,
leave not a trace behind
in our glorious Ukraine,
on land that is not theirs.
Father and son won't pay respects,
he won't say: “pray,
pray, my boy: for his country
he has been brutalized before”.
It doesn't bother me, if that
son prays, or not ...
What bothers me,
is to see vile people hypnotize Ukraine
with cunning, and set ablaze
robbed, wake her once again...
Ah, that bothers me.

POEM VIII

Cherry orchard by the hut,
chafers buzz around the fruit,
ploughmen trudge their faithful route,
as children skip and sing,
and mothers wait for supper to begin.

Family gathers for their evening meal
up above, a bright star rises
daughter serves as mother criticizes
her harsh words swiftly chilled
by a nightingale's sweet trill.

By the house a mother puts
her babies down to rest

Сама заснула коло їх.
Затихло все, тільки дівчата
Та соловейко не затих.

ПОЕМ XII

Чи ми ще зійдемося знову?
Чи вже навіки розійшлись?
І слово правди і любові
В степи і дебрі рознесли!
Нехай і так. Не наша мати,
А довелося поважати.
То воля Господа. Годіть!
Смиріться, моліться Богу
І згадуйте один другого.
Свою Україну любіть,
Любіть її... Во время люте,
В остатню тяжкую минуту
За неї Господа моліть.

sleeps with them in a loving nest.
All grows calm, just the children
and the nightingale sing on.

ПОЕМ XII

Do you think we'll meet again?
Or is this farewell for good?
The word of truth and love
we've sowed over steppes and wilds!
Well, that's that way it is then.
Not our Mother but we abide.
You can't fight fate. Godspeed!
Resign yourselves, and pray
think of one another often.
Love your dear Ukraine,
love her ... even in the angry times,
in the final miseries
pray for her to God above.