

FROM PAGE TO PAGE TO STAGE

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The author of the article analyses, in a comparative way, three different aspects of the first edition of M. Gorky's play "Vassa Jeleznova": the text itself, its translation into the British variant of the English language and its production in New York. Using Walter Benjamin's theory of drama translation the author shows that the British translation, despite numerous inaccuracies, has proved to be very effective for staging purposes. Using this interpretation the troupe of an American theatre, without reading the play in the original (the Russian language) managed to convey exclusively adequately the essence of Gorky's play, making it clear to the Western public.

Keywords: stage, drama, an English translation (the British variant), production, the theory of translation of a drama work, the troupe of an American theatre, a play by M. Gorky, the Western public.

În articol sunt analizate, în mod comparativ trei aspecte diferite ale primei versiuni a piesei „Vassa Jeleznova” de M. Gorky : însuși textul, traducerea lui în varianta britanică a limbii engleze și montarea acesteia la New York. În baza teoriei lui Valter Benjamin referitor la traducerea unei lucrări dramatice, autoarea demonstrează că traducerea în varianta britanică a limbii engleze s-a dovedit a fi destul de eficientă pentru punere în scenă în profita multiplelor erori de traducere. Folosind această traducere, trupa unui teatru american, fără să fi citit piesa respectivă în original (în limba rusă), a reușit să redea în scenă deosebit de bine esența piesei de M. Gorky, prezentând-o ușor de înțeles pentru publicul din vest.

Cuvinte cheie: scenă, dramă, traducere în limba engleză (variante britanică), punerea în scenă (spectacol), teoria traducerii unei lucrări dramatice, trupa unui teatru american, o piesă de Gorky, spectatorul din vest.

В статье рассматриваются, в сопоставлении, три различных варианта первой редакции драмы Максима Горького «Васса Железнова»: собственно текст, его британский перевод на английский и его англоязычная постановка в Нью-Йорке. Опираясь на теорию драматического перевода Вальтера Бенджамина, статья показывает, что британский перевод, несмотря на многочисленные искажения и неточности, оказался весьма эффективным для постановочных целей. Используя этот перевод, труппа американского театра, не читавшая русскоязычный оригинал, исключительно адекватно передала на сцене суть горьковской пьесы, одновременно сделав ее понятной для западного зрителя.

Ключевые слова: сцена, драма, британский перевод, постановка, теория драматического перевода, труппа американского театра, горьковская пьеса, западный зритель.

1917, the year of the Russian Bolshevik revolution, is a distinct demarcation line that divides Maxim Gorky's life and work into "before" and "after" periods. The pre-1917 Gorky explored human nature, and his dramas were bursting with talent, freshness, immediacy and potency; post-1917, he mostly catered to the party needs, which made the contents of his plays markedly diluted and dull.

It was still in the "before" period that the first version of *Vassa Zheleznova* was conceived and written. This first, 1910, version, which I will hereafter refer to as "Vassa the text," draws a blood-chilling picture of people's twisted and perverse morality. Zheleznova, whose name in Russian means *made of iron*, is the epitome of a strong and powerful woman. She almost single-handedly runs a huge family business of manufacturing bricks and tiles. She is the matriarch of a big family that consists of her husband (dying in Act I and dead in Act III); three grown children, all married and two with kids of their own; her brother-in-law; a poor distant female relative who helps around the house; and a maid. Vassa's manager Mikhail, who assists her with the business and is the father-in-law to her younger son Pavel, also lives in her house. Intent on keeping the reins of the business in her own hands, Vassa eagerly forges her husband's will, making herself the sole beneficiary and cutting off all her children; plots to poison her brother-in-law, also a shareholder; and even forces her younger son Pavel into a monastery.

Gorky insists that Vassa's family dynamic is really a survival-of-the-fittest race: only those who Vassa deems worthy are allowed to remain by her side; weaklings have no chance. Her husband Zakhar, now that he is terminally ill, is useless to her, and she prays to God for his speedy death. Her two sons, Semyon and Pavel, are feeble—one emotionally (being tied tight to his wife Natalya's apron), the other physically (a cripple since early childhood)—and they do not, in her opinion, deserve a share of the business. Prokhor, her good-for-nothing brother-in-law, whose two life passions are womanizing and pigeon keeping, poses a direct threat to her capital once he decides to adopt one of his illegitimate sons and make him an heir. By the end of the play, having done away with most of her relatives, Vassa chooses only two as potential successors: her eldest daughter Anna and her daughter-in-law Liudmila.

In the spring of 1935, the Moscow Art Theatre II, a branch of MAT created in 1912 by Stanislavsky and Sulerzhitsky, started rehearsing Gorky's *Vassa Zheleznova*. The production's director, Alexander Cheban, requested changes from Gorky, to make the play more contemporary. Responding at once, Gorky asked to stop the rehearsals, as he intended to redo the entire play. That is how the second, 1935, version of his drama came into being. The *Vassa* of this "after" period completely changed the themes and philosophical underpinnings of the "before" *Vassa* by adding the character of Rachel, Vassa's daughter-in-law, who is an exiled revolutionary. Rachel becomes a symbol of a new future, and Vassa dies at the end of the play, proving that all her efforts at amassing capital, and sacrificing her own flesh and blood to secure it, are nothing but the agony of an old regime condemned to death by a new world.

Gorky insisted that the second version of *Vassa Zheleznova* was definitive and the first one, which won a Griboyedov Memorial Award in 1911, was to be discarded. And it was: in the Soviet era, the "before" *Vassa* was performed professionally only once. In 1978, Anatoly Vassilyev staged it at the Stanislavsky Moscow Drama Theatre. Meanwhile, the "after" *Vassa* continued its triumphant march through professional theatres of the Soviet Union and abroad. That is the version most Russians are familiar with, as it appeared in every edition of Gorky's plays (whereas the "before" version could only be found in complete collections of his works).

With the exception of *The Lower Depth* (*Na dne*), another play from the "before" period, Gorky's dramas do not enjoy great popularity in the United States. They are rarely studied and even more rarely produced. It was a prominent event when Horizon Theatre Rep, a well established New York theatre that has been around for over a decade, decided to stage the nearly forgotten version of *Vassa Zheleznova*. It is noteworthy that neither Christopher Carter Sanderson, the director of the production, nor any cast member reads Russian. The staging was preceded by a lot of research on the author and the historical period—mostly done by Rafael De Mussa, the company's artistic director and the actor playing Prokhor in the show. As a result, the final product was remarkably faithful to Gorky's text.

Both *Vassa* the original Russian text and *Vassa* the New York theatre production communicate, in Walter Benjamin's terms, the same *essential substance* or *essential quality*, a "specific significance inherent in the original" [1, 71]. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, a language is a semiological system (a) that "should allow an unlimited number of ideas to be expressed with a limited number of signs in its structure" [8, 73], (b) that should be arbitrary, i.e., only have meaning because a community has agreed to attach a particular meaning to a particular sign [8, 113], and (c) the fundamental purpose of which should be communication as any such system can only originate and develop in a social context [8, 16]. If we accept that theatre has its own such language, and if we further accept Bertolt Brecht's idea that a stage version of a written text is yet another possible translation, adaptation or transadaptation of printed matter into theatricalized matter (which Brecht called the performative language of *gests*¹), then *Vassa* the text and *Vassa* the production can be absolutely equated in terms of Benjamin's intended effect of pure language.

New Yorkers saw Gorky's *Vassa* when they were looking at Susan Romanoff (Horizon Theatre's

1 According to Brecht, *gest* does not equal gesticulation, which can be defined as explanatory or emphatic movements of the hands. *Gest* is a totality of visual signs that provides an insight into a character or an elucidation of a situation and should be expressive of an overall attitude [2, 165–166].

leading actress), a slender woman with steel-gray eyes, who wore very stiff and restricting dresses and held herself rigidly upright at all times. She portrayed the title character as an unyielding despot, a lady with an iron fist who effectively managed to manipulate everyone around her. Romanoff showed us a capitalist shark ready to step on heads and necks to protect her investment, a hypocrite hiding her only interest—money—behind a facade of family values. Romanoff's compact gestures and frozen mask of facial expression conveyed very well Gorky's idea of Zheleznova—a woman made of metal rather than flesh and blood; cold, collected and guarded, as if clad in protective armor.

Anna (Laura Marks) was shown as a woman quickly turning into her mother, lying her way through life, adjusting to any circumstances with her personal benefit in mind, and knowing on which side her bread was buttered. Since her husband could not produce healthy offspring, he got scratched off Anna's list of potential candidates to father her children, with no mercy or regret. Liudmila (Jennifer Rubins) was the same way: parading her spectacular beauty and youth, she found no shame in getting pregnant out of wedlock or taking Prokhor's advice on how to terminate the pregnancy, the price of which—becoming her uncle's sex slave—she readily accepted. Her marriage to Pavel (Jacob H. Knoll) had been arranged to cover up her promiscuity, and no secret was made of it. Vassa took Liudmila's side rather than her son's, paying no heed to Pavel being cuckolded and publicly humiliated.

Vassa's older son Semyon (Bristol Pomeroy) was shown as a man with no ambitions, doing what his wife Natalia (Celia Finkelstein) told him to do. Gorky's insistence that Semyon is not altogether bright manifested in Pomeroy's careless laughter, hurried, overly excited speech patterns and, generally, happy-go-lucky attitude of a hopeless dreamer. Vassa showed no respect for either Semyon or Natalia, brushing them off as incapable of any serious undertaking.

As long as Vassa considered a person useful, she continued exploiting him or her. She used Dunya, whom Jacqueline Margolis played as a quiet nonentity, with her head bent low and visibly afraid to look anyone straight in the face, to spy and eavesdrop on her household; she used her manager Mikhail (Ed Banas) as an obedient accomplice in her dirty deeds. Banas played a man used to taking orders from a woman most of his life by keeping his voice and temper in check.

As soon as one of her marionettes became redundant, Vassa cut the strings easily and decisively. Lipa, her maid, was played by Laura Malone as a young woman who lived in constant fear of exposure. Her face had an imprint of perpetual suffering, as unmistakable as Cain's mark. The actress constantly moved at a run, to show eagerness and zeal as well as to convey the impression of somebody who was very uncomfortable in the presence of others and longed to escape. Lipa was blackmailed by Vassa into doing whatever she requested her to do, until the maid's horrible secret (the murder of the baby that she had had with Semyon) became publicly known. As soon as Vassa lost her weapon against Lipa, the maid was discarded and subsequently hanged herself. Once Prokhor, Vassa's brother-in-law, declared that he wanted to take his share out of the business, he became a tangible threat to her capital, and the only way she could protect her enterprise was to have him murdered cunningly and ruthlessly.

That was the dynamic of a weird and dysfunctional family that New York audiences could glean from Sanderson's directions, the same exact one that the readers of Russian discovered in the original Gorky's text. However, between *Vassa* the text and *Vassa* the production, there lies a third (or, in fact, second), intermediate, *Vassa*—*Vassa* the English translation, done in Great Britain by Tania Alexander and Tim Suter. Technically, instead of a translation, it should be called a rather frivolous adaptation, where the collaborators took liberties by shortening remarks, inserting some of their own, putting existing words into another character's mouth, and even doing away with some stage directions and considerable chunks of the dialogue. If we look at Alexander and Suter's collaborative effort vis-à-vis the traditional standards of translation, those of maximum possible resemblance to, and preservation of, the original text, then it cannot be considered even remotely passable. But once we apply to it Benjamin's theory of dramatic translation, its intentional deconstruction and expropriation of Gorky's text become not only necessary, but clearly justified.

To a certain extent, a translation would have to look like the original, which is supposed to be fixed and inalterable. The task of the translator remains contradictory: He is forced to adapt his own language more or less mimetically to a foreign text—comparable to an actor wearing a costume that doesn't fit well. On the other hand, he is obliged to destroy and replace the original text with a new one that eliminates the traces of the old, even hiding its disappearance. [6, 53–54]

To observe how Benjamin's theory works and gets reinforced with Brecht's performative-translation theory once the translation is further translated into the stage language, I would like to compare the very beginning of Act I of *Vassa* the text, *Vassa* the translation and *Vassa* the production. (Highlighted are the parts where the translation is inadequate.)

Раннее утро зимнего дня. Большая комната — спальня и рабочий кабинет Вассы Железновой. Тесно. [8, 9] В углу, за ширмами — кровать, налево — стол, заваленный бумагами, вместо пресс-папье положены изразцы. Около стола — высокая конторка, за нею, под окном — кушетка. Лампы с зелеными абажурами. В правом углу — изразцовая лежанка, около нее — несгораемый шкаф и дверь в молельную. К ширмам припилены булавками бумаги, когда мимо них проходят — они шевелятся. В задней стене — широкие двери в столовую; виден стол, над ним люстра. На столе горит свеча. Дунечка собирает посуду для чая. Липа вносит кипящий самовар.	Early winter morning. A large room, which is Vassa Zheleznova's bedroom and her office. The room seems cluttered up. In one corner behind a screen is a bed; to the left of it a table covered with papers held down by tile, which serve as paperweights. Next to the table is a tall desk and in front of the window, a sofa. Several lamps with green shades. In the right corner is a tiled stove with a flat top and next to it a safe and a door leading to a chapel. Various papers are pinned to the screen and as you pass them they rustle. Upstage there are wide doors leading into the dining room; one can see the table with a chandelier hanging above it. On the table is a lighted candle. Dunya is laying the tea in the dining room. Lipa brings in a steaming samovar.
Дунечка (тихо): Воротилась?	Dunya: Is she back yet?
Липа: Нет.	Lipa: No.
Дунечка: Ой! Что же теперь будет?	Dunya: Oh dear, what's going to happen?
Липа: А я знаю?.. (Идет в комнату хозяйки и осматривает ее.)	Lipa: I really don't know. (She enters Vassa's room and looks around.)
(Из двери молельной выходит Васса, поправляя очки и волосы на висках. Смотрит на стенные часы над столом.)	(Vassa enters from the door leading to the chapel.)
Васса: Почему опоздала? Четверть восьмого, видишь?	Vassa: You're late, Lipa! What time do you call this? It's a quarter past seven!
Липа: Под утро Захару Ивановичу опять худо было.	Lipa: I'm sorry, Vassa Petrovna, but Zahar Ivanovich was taken bad again, early this morning.
Васса (проходя к столу): Дешеш нет?	Vassa: Hm. No telegram from Anna yet?
Липа: Нет.	Lipa: No.
Васса: Все встали?	Vassa: Where's everyone else? Are they up yet?
Липа: Павел Захарович и не ложились еще...	Lipa: Well, Pavel Zaharovich didn't go to bed at all—
Васса: Нездоров?	Vassa: Don't say he's ill as well!
Липа: Людмила Михайловна дома не ночевали.	Lipa: No, madam, he was waiting up for his wife. But Liudmila Mihailovna wasn't here last night. I don't know where she can have been or who she was with...
Васса (негромко): Берегись, Олимпиада!.. Я тебе... покажу!	Vassa: Watch it, Lipa, I'm warning you...
Липа (испуганно): За что же?	Lipa: Me? Why?
Васса: А вот за то, что неприятное мне... со вкусом ты говоришь...	Vassa: You like the taste of bad news, don't you? It gives you a thrill, eh?
Липа: Васса Петровна! Да ведь я это...	Lipa: Vassa Petrovna, I only—
Васса: Ступай, зови всех к чаю.	Vassa: Oh shut up and get out.

A compact Russian one-word sentence *Тесно* (*The room is cluttered up*) is translated as *The room seems cluttered up*. The difference manifests itself in the degree of certainty: *something is this way* never equals *something seems this way* as the first one states a fact and the second one only a supposition. The word *заваленный* is different from the English *is covered with* because, unlike its English counterpart, which is what is called neutral, or not emotionally colored, *заваленный* has a distinct negative connotation that suggests messiness and untidiness on top of a huge load of work one needs to deal with.

In *Vassa* the production, these two mistranslations in the opening stage directions showed us how the intentional demolition of *Vassa* the text in *Vassa* the translation came to mean exactly what

the original meant. The room *was* really crammed and cluttered up. But since theatre performance, unlike written text, is very visual, the verb *to seem* (“to appear to the observation or understanding” [9, 1046]) fit in perfectly. The effect of too little space for too many things was achieved primarily by cutting the stage in half, with heavy, top-to-bottom drapes placed across the entire stage space. The drapes not only considerably diminished the performing space but also served as the back wall of the room and displayed a significant number of paintings, icons and gilded tassels. Furniture items were so numerous that the actors had to zigzag between them, and, when more than three of them were on stage at the same time, their movements were visibly constricted. Vassa’s desk had an abundance of books, papers and ledgers on it, and even more of them under it, which did have the effect of certain carelessness, untidiness and disarray.

The next two linguistic “blunders” are *изразцовая лежанка* that is not just a *tile stove*—which to an English-speaking reader (especially that of the twenty-first century) suggests merely a cooking device—but rather a room-heating installation also used as a naturally warm bed for sleeping; and an obvious mistranslation of the word *шевелятся*, which suggests movement, as opposed to *rustle*, which suggests sound. For staging purposes, both of them were truly insignificant. As far as the first “blunder” is concerned, it was hardly possible to use a heating bed (or a tile stove for that matter) as part of the scenery in New York—where one would get this Northern and Eastern European artifice virtually unknown in warmer climates? As a result, this particular item was absent from the scenery, which, in my opinion, was a merit, since had it been present, the audience would probably have spent most of Act I wondering and guessing what it was. As to the second, while the rustling sound would be more than appropriate in the production (and there was, in fact, a lot of rustling, although it came primarily from women’s stiff dresses), unjustified movement of sheets of paper pinned to the wall might be a distracting factor.

The stage direction for Dunya’s opening sentence—*тихо/sotto voce*—is omitted from the translation. So is half of the next one for Vassa: *поправляя очки и волосы на висках[,]* *смотрит на настенные часы над столом/adjusting her glasses and hair at the temples[, Vassa] throws a glance at the clock above the desk*; and the next two: *проходя к столу/on her way to the desk* and *испуганно/frightened*. For practical reasons, the opening sentence of Act I, when some people are still getting comfortable, finishing their conversations, turning off their cell phones or unwrapping cough drops, cannot be uttered *sotto voce*, because it will most likely be drowned in the background noise. In fact, the question that Dunya asked Lipa—whether or not Liudmila had come home after spending the night elsewhere—is crucial for understanding the characters and their relations in the drama and should not be lost. Vassa in the production did not wear glasses at all, let alone adjust them. Sanderson emphasized that a woman like Vassa would not succumb to any weakness and would not be dependent on any assisting device. Adjusting anything in her appearance did not work with the director’s vision either. Everything about Vassa, a resolute and unwavering woman to the core, should be set in stone (or should we say, cast in iron), immaculate, fixed solidly with no need for adjustments. As far as the third missing stage direction—*on her way to the desk*—is concerned, the stage space, as I mentioned before, was so crammed with furniture that giving a general direction to any specific object seemed neither feasible nor necessary.

А я знаю?..—Lipa’s response to Dunya’s rhetorical question (*What is going to happen?*) technically should never be translated with the neutral *I don’t know*. The Russian phrase is openly snappy and even somewhat rude, as it has an additional meaning of irritation at the necessity to continue the conversation. In Gorky’s text, this is the only instance when Lipa is briefly alone on stage with Dunya, someone who almost equals her in social status and shares the function of an obedient spy and house help. At other times, Lipa is openly bossed around by most of the household and has to stay meek and humble. It seems that Sanderson decided against overburdening the audience with the short and insignificant remark that Lipa makes to Dunya. After all, her conflict is not with Vassa’s poor relative

but with Vassa herself, and there are no other instances in the drama where Lipa and Dunya would converse alone on stage.

Vassa's next remark—*Почему опоздала?/Why are you late?*—is a question rather than an assertive sentence with an exclamation point: *You're late, Lipa!* The Russian question does have a distinct air of superiority about it, and yet it is aimed at finding out Lipa's reason for being late, while in *Vassa* the translation, the sentence merely states a displeasing fact. Another instance of replacing a question with an exclamatory statement is her later inquiry about Pavel's health. *Нездоров?* simply means *Is he not well?*, whereas *Don't say he's ill as well!* is an irritable exclamation. In the performance, both substitutions appeared well-warranted in giving us an insight into Vassa's bossy character.

Lipa's reaction to Vassa's question of why she is late is unnecessarily, or so it might seem, enlarged: *Под утро Захару Ивановичу опять худо было/Zahar Ivanovich was taken bad again, early this morning* does not have *I'm sorry, Vassa Petrovna* in the beginning. However, in *Vassa* the production, this frivolity was not only justified but necessary. Lipa's weakness and dependency was established early on and remained constant until her outburst in Act II and suicide between Acts II and III. Her apologetic *I'm sorry, Vassa Petrovna* effectively honed the audience's understanding of Lipa's enslaved position.

Another sentence is added to Vassa's *Все встали?/Is everybody up yet?* There is no asking where everybody is. But in the stage version, in the context of Liudmila not spending the night at home, this very question seemed valid because it drew attention to the transgressions of Vassa's daughter-in-law one more time.

Yet the worst faux pas, in terms of the traditional, non-Benjaminian approach to translation, comes in Lipa's lengthy *No, madam, he was waiting up for his wife. But Liudmila Mihailovna wasn't here last night. I don't know where she can have been or who she was with...* instead of Gorky's short *Людмила Михайловна дома не ночевали/ Liudmila Mihailovna didn't spend the night at home*. While this daring addition might seem outrageous to non-dramatic translators, it works very well in the production as a smooth introduction of characters with long and difficult Russian names and also as a casual explanation of the family hierarchy.

Likewise, Vassa's calm and neutral dismissal of Lipa—*Стынай, зови всех к чаю/Go and call everybody for tea*—contains no order to shut up and does not sound as if Vassa is ousting her maid because she is mad at her: it is merely a signal that there is a job that requires Lipa to step out of the room. And again, the translation's levity, once it was pronounced on stage, worked in a positive way, this time to reinforce the audience's impression of Vassa.

As poetry offers and enables much more than the communication of a message, theatre can't be reduced to a more or less appropriate translation of a text. The various features and qualities of a performance go far beyond the rendering of a writer's intention. [...] This may lead us to the theatrical nature of translation in general, to a scene of gestures that maintain and justify the exchange of signs and meanings in the "afterlife" of texts. Benjamin and Brecht have illuminated the interrelations between theatre, translation, and the perception of gestures in literature by crossing the borders between theory and practice, text and performance, language and body. And both of them, more or less explicitly, deconstruct the traditional patterns by which translation theories usually reflect the communication of intentions and messages. [6, 54]

Between Benjamin's dramatic translation and Brecht's performative translation there lies Benjamin's *reine Sprache*, pure language that carries the ultimate truth of the original. The gap between the text and its translation into another language could be enormous. However, according to Benjamin, when the translation is further translated into a staged production without revealing a dissonance with the pure language of the original text, when the staged translation conforms harmoniously to the message of the primary source that may only be construed by reading between the lines, such a translation can and should be called successful. "For to some degree all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines [...]" [1, 82]. The interlinear version of such texts is the prototype or

ideal of all translation [1, 82]. By the same token, despite its obvious ambiguity, *Vassa* the translation should be accepted as dramatically valuable, as it positively demonstrated its faithfulness to *Vassa* the text having been tested in *Vassa* the production.

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