Mortkhe Litvin - Fareygnte poezye

Mordkhe Litvin’s entry in the Leksikon fun yidishe shraybers is a brief but rich look into his life. He spent much of the interwar period in Weimar Germany, and due to his political activity had been imprisoned by the Nazis from 1934-1937. He fled to Paris, and following the Nazi invasion went underground and lived as a partisan. Following the war, he returned to Paris, where he was active in leftist and communist Yiddishist circles, publishing his own works in affiliated journals and newspapers.

After the Soviet Union revealed the enormity of Stalinist crimes, Litvin began to drift away from Communism. Around that time, Litvine also worked as a translator, rendering many classics of French verse and prose into Yiddish for the large émigré community in Paris. Like many other postwar Yiddish writers, he received the Itzik Manger Prize in 1973. His translations from the French were so noteworthy that the jury pointed to them in their rationale: “M. Litvin has created for us an illusion, that we are not confronting professional translations, but the actual source, the original, a Yiddish creation itself.”

Whether this pronouncement is accurate or noteworthy or not, I turn to the the first volume of French Translations and Commentaries that appeared in 1968 (with a second published in 1986). The introductions to the French translations provide the reader with the translator’s own views on translation, and particularly regarding the term “anthology,” about which Litvin writes extensively. More specifically, Litvin points to the limitations of the term, and to his own collection of texts. He writes:

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1 Leksikon fun yidishe shraybers (Biographical dictionary of Yiddish writers) (New York, 1986), cols. 331-32.
3 פֿראַנצײזע איבערזעצונגען און קאָמענטאַרײכן Frantseyzishe iberzetsungen un komentaren
The classification [anthology] says it all — to provide most important, essential, and representative number, arranged according to a definitive category: nationality, time period, sensibility, and often...the profession of the editor. An anthology is, consequently, is always an assemblage dependent on specific principles of classification. The translations in front of me for readers, are not arranged according to such principles, not classified according to a specific marker. The collection does not claim to, nor ascribe to the name “anthology.”

Litvin poses a question about “Frantseyzishe poezye - iberzetsungen un komentarn:” : what is an anthology if not something produced at the expense of including certain authors and their works over others?” For Litvin, glossing over certain centuries or literary genres is a matter of centering, shaping, and molding this particular volume. Litvin also makes clear that, for this particular volume, the theme around which the entire work depends is Baudelaire.

Litvin’s indebtedness to Baudelaire is twofold: Baudelaire’s place within the canon of French poetry is indisputable, and in addition: Baudelaire’s work itself provides a structuring of this particular assortment/selection. Litvin also posits that the genre of anthology itself is at the

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4 See Litvin, Frantseyzishe poezye, 1-2. Der nomen gufe (sic) zogt es shoyn — vil ibergebhn dos viktikiste, dos ikerdiikste, dos same representative fun skhum shafungen, opgeklibn vedlik a festn simen: lender, epokhes, rikhtungen, suzhshetn, tsi afil tsumol...di profesye fun di mekhabrim. An antologye iz, bekheyn, tomid an opklayb loyt a bashtimtn printsip fun klasifikatsye. di iberzetsungen, vos mir leygt do far dem leyener, zaynen nit grupirt arum aza printsip, nit klasifitsirt vedlik a bashtimtn simen. di zamlung kon deriber nit pretendim — un preendrin oykhl nit oyfn nomen antologye.

5 Litvin, Frantseyzishe poezye, 2.

6 Litin, 3.
heart of translation: its conceptualization rests within the translator...namely, from the *inzikhvelt* from the translator...and arouses a lyrical feeling in the language of the translator. A lyrical voice emerges not only via the “translator” (i.e., the act of translating), but what the translator evokes through the translator’s *mame-loshn*, here explicitly mentioned as Yiddish. But here, the reader also gets to ask: what is “Yiddish” in this case, and what role does Yiddish play for translation for this particular act of anthologizing? For Litvin, Yiddish evokes the lyrical poetics found elsewhere (in other languages, coming from other writers), and simultaneously from the translator.

Furthermore, he derides poets, writers, and critics who claim that it is impossible to render what appears in one language into another, or that translation is simply a prosaic instrument to render meaning (*verter-taytsh*). Rather, Litvin hints at the “nit-*iz* loshn” where form and content are one and the same; form is not lost in translation, as some would like to think Litvin does not, however, think he is alone in saying the opposite, that through translation...
one can find the lebnskvah (life sources). This echoes what Paul Valéry, Mireille Gansel, Benjamin, et al.) attempt to understand about translation across multiple languages and epochs: word illumination (albeit ignited by a foreign fire) turns into a complimentary line here or there, or more simply stated — the creative second act. For Litvin, the translations themselves are not the highlight; the process of getting to the translation is. Litvin gets to the heart of what many in translation studies and theory have pointed to via Baudelaire, Benjamin, and others: that translation has no beginning nor end, and within this unbounded state, a truism of translation emerges.

What is perhaps striking about Litvin’s essay, is the Yiddish language’s own ability to illuminate, compliment, and forge ahead. Litvin advocates for translation—for Yiddish, from Yiddish, and lastly: in/to Yiddish, all of which are historically central to the role of Yiddish for Ashkenazi Jewish culture. Litvin is thus adamantly opposed to the lyrical becoming an absolute entity (“lyric power does not simply mean a power from heaven”), because (although not dependent on) it is shaped by language.

That is also where the role of the translator becomes more heavily involved as both reader and writer, and where Litvin returns to Valéry: “And is the translator first and foremost par excellence — a reader? But the relation remains merely subjective — between poet and translator — and yet, also objective — between languages, tongues. The translator thus detects, and prolongs what the poet alleges in a differing [albeit in one’s own] way.”

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11 Litvin, 7. לירישער ציטער הײסט ניט סתּם אַ ציטער מן השמים...

12 The word eygen[em] (אײגענעם) is poetically ambiguous. It implies subjectivity and individual agency, and yet it also implies sameness. For translation, what is one’s own in one’s own language is also identical to someone else’s in their languages. This distinctly, simultaneously “identical, yet other” is something that Litvin points to in the following lines:
This then begs the question: how does the doubling nature of translation pertain to multilingualism? Litvin notes that the doubling (of texts in one language giving rise to texts in another, ones which readers in the other language can now understand) also leads to a doubling if the reader can “[already] meet/get to know” the original. Simple stated for Litvin: a doubling also occurs for multilingual speakers, who, like the translator, can take it upon themselves to fareygnt a text.

Noting the relationship between the necessity and the freedom of poetic translation, Litvin points to a dualism between the former and the latter as farzikhik (self-interested) and the inzikhik (introspective). “Translating poetry — [that which] demands language from the original, because of the fact it contains within itself all universal possibilities from every language. The more one can translate from it, the richer it becomes.” Likewise, this also demands from the language (into which something gets translated) a certain potentiality: more translations rendered means a richer language. And in turn: this creates a demand from a text. Litvin uses both farlangen (a word imbued not only with demand and desire, but also belonging) and betn (denoting urgency) to state the demands of poetry to be translated; through the complexity and subjectivity comes a rendering of what multiplies and makes versatile in itself the transformative. The reproducibility stemming from the act of translation plays a pivotal role

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13 Litvin, 7.
14 Litvin, 7. See also footnote 23 that echoes, “oyf...eygenem oyfn”
15 Litvin, 8.
16 Litvin, 8.
17 Litvin, 8-9.
18 Litvin, 9.
for Litvin, who in turn cites various theories of translation, including Cervantes, Voltaire, Shelley, and others. The “original” is no more a “beginning” than the poetic translation—also a work in itself. And furthermore, as some have the urge to write poetry others must translate. What one wants to accomplish, and what one can accomplish is the rivalry within every translator (here, Litvin quotes the Russian writer Vasily Zhukovsky who, according to Litvin, said, “Translators of prose are technicians (specialists); translators of poetry are rivals;” khpn klp (to receive punches) is the metaphor that Litvin arrives at to describe poetic translation.

Litvin is also quick to note: although the translator’s imagination often comes through the work of the poet(s) being translated, there is a drawback to this. Translations fare better when the translator takes note of what a poem conveys before creating substance out of something else that the translator is nevertheless bound to, while being forced to leave behind certain elements of the material. Litvin reiterates Paul Valéry’s “gifted (geshenkte) and re/constructed (konstruirte) ferzn:” the poet “gifts” and the translator is obligated to re/construct, leading the gifted line back to already placed (in Yiddish: shoyn doike) construction of the poet’s.

“[Torment to select] is not so much the assortment, but the dismissal [of other options]. The art of translation is above all abandonment (mevater zayn) and sacrifice (makrev zayn).” In quoting Valéry (and Rimbaud), Litvin hints at the “translation as loss,” but also exposes the eynem/eygen paradox he is trying to reconcile in poetic translation: a word’s meaning has a

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19 Litvin, 9.
20 Litvin, 10-11.
21 Litvin, 10.
22 Litvin, 11.
23 Litvin, 12.
24 Litvin is especially interested in word choice in translation: meaning and sound, and how avoyde (loss) ensues, which nevertheless takes translations in new directions.
singular or unifying position in a poem, which is to represent multitudes within the word itself, as well as within a stanza and within a poetic text.\(^\text{25}\)

The translator, however, creates an entire new set of paradoxes, multitudes, etc. if they indeed ever reach this theoretical starting point of their own translations, where meaning from one form of the text to another resides both beneath (unter) and among (tsvishn) the lines of poem.\(^\text{26}\) Mattering less than rhyme and meter are these more nuanced streams of thought pulsing through a poem. This is also, according to Litvin, a theorem formulated by Heine that translation consists of a visnshaft in its own right, newly emerging each time in its creative and destructive potential.\(^\text{27}\) Victor Hugo and Paul Éluard demonstrate this according to the translator himself: Hugo’s rhyme, flowering language is far simpler to translate than Éluard’s unrhymed free verse that causes the translator to emerge bruised and torn apart.\(^\text{28}\) Litvin, coins this difficulty to render verse as getting to the nakete vort, a term eerily similar to Ravitch’s similarly titled volume of modernist verse, that points to whether one can disguise or not the inability to render the extraordinary but ruthless (umberakhmonesdik), severe, and immense bareness.\(^\text{29}\)

But there is a possible catch-22. A poet like Éluard might, according to Litvin, be difficult to translate due to his poems’ exactness and sparsity, but other challenges persist when ambiguity and connectedness arise, and across languages (as Litvin sees happening in Baudelaire’s work).\(^\text{30}\) The ability then, to create multiple meanings from one text point to the

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\(^{25}\) Litvin 12 ff. According to the Litvin’s footnotes, he had translated Valéry in the fifties. It is obvious that in addition to Boudelaire, Valéry is central to Litvin’s theories of translation.

\(^{26}\) Litvin, 16.

\(^{27}\) Litvin, 16.

\(^{28}\) Litvin, 17.

\(^{29}\) Litvin, 18.

\(^{30}\) Litvin writes, “Bay Bodlern vikn ober di verter un verter-asotsiatsyes nit durkh zeyer oysterlishkeyt, tsi durkh der umgerikhtkeyt fun zeyer farbindeung, nayert durkh zeyer nit oysmestlekher tifkeyt, vos greykht biz in di same untergruntishe, d’h ureygnste, blutikste kemerlekh funem lebedikn geveb fun loshn.”
limits of translation representing a whole, as each new translation is just a fragment of many possibles (Litvin calls this potential/limitation the *anderzprakhikn kosmos*), and the source of greatness as well as servitude for the translator.\(^{31}\) At least [translators] can delight in translated works by diving deeper into works that evoke the lyrical, even if they sometimes miss the mark.\(^ {32}\) Litvin’s notion of the *iberdikhtet* (something translated, or given poetic form) becomes multifaceted; all translations become valid, by nature of their existence, when they capture the tonality of multiple idioms, not just of one language or another.\(^ {33}\)

This in turn echoes many popular theories of translation today, which stipulate that the reader should not have illusions about the translation ostensibly being its own (*eygn*) work, and should therefore somehow evoke the text being translated. Citing Johann Heinrich Voss, the 18th century translator of Homer into German:

“The reader should not be under the illusion that the translation is ostensibly a work of its own doing, but instead should always encounter through reading reminders of the original...the translator works around this principle, sometimes even violating his own language, with a type of dialect if you will, that isn’t available

\[^{31}\] Litvin, 19.
\[^{32}\] Litvin, 19.
\[^{33}\] Litvin, 28.
beyond the translation at hand. And yet, it is still understandable in
the eyes of the carriers of the language, which he is using to
translate.\textsuperscript{34}

Litvin’s theories of translation make the introduction to this volume a central text to postwar Yiddish literature. Furthermore, it is both his insights into the process of his own work, but the \textit{arrangement} of it that also furthers the study of Yiddish translation for postwar Jewish culture.

\textsuperscript{34} Litvin, 28.