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MAKING THE EPIC NEW:
NOTES ON THE RUSSIAN TRANSLATION OF *THE CANTOS*

***Abstract*:** A brief account of the first Russian translation of *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* is presented. The problems encountered during translation are considered, and the translator's and editorial decisions are discussed. An overview of the references used during the work on the translation and commentaries is presented. The central problem of translating *The Cantos* is identified as a lack of poetic language and techniques in Russian literature that are comparable with those of Anglo-American modernism. The methods of creating the modernist epic in Russian poetry are discussed and examples of similar attempts made by predecessors are mentioned. In particular, the translations made by N.I. Gnedich, M.L. Lozinsky, A.Ya. Sergeev, S.S. Khoruzhi and V.A. Hinkis, as well as translations of ancient Greek and Chinese literature are mentioned. Among all the various factors influencing the transition of the text from one literature to the other, authenticity, persuasiveness and laconism are stressed as the major reference points not only for translating the text, but also for commenting on the translation and writing the biographical notes. Every effort was made to ensure that the book would look and feel like an artifact of Pound's lifetime. This is perfectly in line with the concept of *Fortleben* of the original text, as was suggested by Walter Benjamin. In this way, the translation is seen not only as an interpretation of the text, but as the renewal, survival and prolongation of the text's life.

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ПАУНДОВЕДЕНИЕ В XXI ВЕКЕ

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ОБНОВЛЕНИЕ ЭПОСА: ЗАМЕТКИ О РУССКОМ ПЕРЕВОДЕ *THE CANTOS*

***Аннотация*:** Статья посвящена переводу поэмы Эзры Паунда «Кантос» (*The Cantos of Ezra Pound*) на русский язык. Рассматриваются общие проблемы перевода модернистского эпоса и обсуждаются отдельные переводческие и редакторские решения. Статья содержит краткий обзор литературных источников, использованных при работе над переводом и комментариями текста. Центральная проблема перевода *The Cantos* определена как отсутствие в русской литературе поэтического языка и приемов, характерных для англо-американского модернизма. Обсуждаются способы создания модернистского эпоса в русской литературе и приводятся примеры подобных попыток сделанных ранее. В частности, упоминаются переводческие стратегии Н.И. Гнедича, М.Л. Лозинского, А.Я. Сергеева, С.С. Хоружего и В.А. Хинкиса, а также переводы текстов древнегреческой и китайской литературы. Среди множества факторов, определяющих возможность перехода текста из одной литературы в другую, аутентичность, убедительность и лаконизм выделяются как основные не только для перевода паундовского текста, но и для той части работы, которая содержит комментарии и биографию. Многое было сделано для того, чтобы перевод, комментарии и даже биографические сведения выглядели как артефакт паундовской эпохи. Это находится в русле концепции *Fortleben*, предложенной Вальтером Беньямином. Перевод при таком подходе это не просто интерпретация оригинала, но обновление и продолжение жизни текста.

***Ключевые слова*:** Эзра Паунд, «Кантос», теория перевода, литературный модернизм.

In November 2017, the first Russian translation of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* was published by Nauka Publishers in St. Petersburg, Russia. The transformation of such a vast, dense and complex text as *The Cantos* into another language does not occur without consequences. How was this translation possible, and were there any peculiarities related to the new interpretation of Pound's work in the twenty-first century? How were the necessary compromises made between translating word-for-word versus paraphrasing such a complex work of poetry? Are there any comparable examples of this in the history of Russian literature? These and other similar questions are addressed in this study.

The art of translation has existed as long as language itself. Generally speaking, every act of communication is an act of translation in which we try to find the most suitable words to express our ideas and feelings. We live in a world of linguistic conventions and definitions. We are surrounded by translations. The very roots of our civilization are known to us because of translations. Key texts of Europe—Homer's poems and the Bible—are known to most of us only through translations. The list of translated literature is nothing but colossal. Given this, it is hard to believe that translations have only secondary status with respect to original writings. The major arguments for why people capable of reading in foreign languages still read the translations of literary works are quite straightforward. First, the language of an original work can be outdated and therefore hard to comprehend, even by native speakers. Along with the fact that there are abandoned classical languages, this is an obvious reason to use a translation of the original. Secondly, translations serve to enrich the native literature and culture, thus supporting their native languages. The underlying assumption is that it is a natural attribute of any language to be updated and developed over the course of time. Finally (and this is a much less evident argument that needs some further explanations), a translation must create and preserve an *exceptional* interpretation of the original, that can serve as a cultural reference, a foundation of a new paradigm in the sphere of the existing literature it enters. While reading, each of us creates an interpretation of a text. These private interpretations are countless, variable, and unstable, as they exist only at the moment of reading. This has something in common with a live music concert, where the work of art is interpreted in the tiny, transient moments when the notes are heard. Literary translation is an interpretation, but rather than a fleeting perception of music, it is retrieved from a mind, set on paper and distributed to the minds of others. In contrast to a music concert, literary translation becomes alive and valuable when it is saved on paper and thus connected

with written language and its forms. And just like any work of art, it wants to survive against time. If at all possible, any translation wants to be a unique representation of the original that is capable of fully replacing the original within a specific cultural space. The ambitions and aims of translations have to be set no lower, and often higher, than those of the original text. They must be the ambitions of a work of art. A translation is probably the only way to create and preserve an authentic interpretation by attempting to reproduce the form and style of the original text. One can argue that any paraphrase, including one in the language of the original text, might do the same. This is true, but with one important distinction: Retelling the text in the same language cannot preserve the form of the original without degrading it to a state of *parody*. Only translation into another language creates a paraphrase that preserves the form of the original text without degrading it to a parody. And it is exactly this for which the translator strives.

Let us now apply all that has been said to the Russian translation of *The Cantos*. First, it would be instructive to see what Russian literature, and more broadly, Russian culture, can gain from absorbing the text of Pound's *Cantos*. This question deserves an extensive study. Here we can point only to some outlines of the problem. Our key conjecture is that Russian literature has not produced the types of texts characteristic of Anglo-American modernism of the twentieth century. This is clearly noticeable when we look at the works of Russian novelists. Twentieth-century Russian novelists such as Andrei Bely, Vladimir Nabokov, Ivan Bunin, Mikhail Sholokhov, Mikhail Bulgakov, Andrei Platonov and many others, did not employ any original forms or methods that were radically different from those used by their great predecessors of the previous century. In contrast, Russian poetry of the twentieth century showed more originality. Like their European counterparts, the Russian poets at the beginning of the twentieth century followed two major artistic tendencies: Symbolism and Futurism. In opposition to Symbolism, there grew the famous movement of "Acmeism," of which Osip Mandelstam, Nikolay Gumilev, and Anna Akhmatova were the most important representatives. Neoclassicism and the search for the precise word employed by the Acmeists can be compared with similar trends in the Imagist period of Pound, Doolittle, and Aldington. The Russian Futurist movement that flourished at the time of Vladimir Mayakovsky and the Russian avant-garde artists can be compared to the Vorticism of Pound and his fellow poets. The works of Sergei Eisenstein, an innovative Soviet film director and the pioneer of montage, are reminiscent of Pound's findings of the ideogrammic method. Nevertheless, despite all the similarities in particular forms and approaches,

nothing like a universal synthesis of Imagism/Vorticism/ideogram that was implemented by Pound in his *Cantos* has been achieved or even attempted by the Russian poets. One explanation is that they simply had no time for anything like that. During the swift change of the political situation in the early 1930s, all avant-garde groups were demolished, while many artists and poets were persecuted by the Soviet bureaucracy and later terrorized by Stalin's regime. The poetic language of *The Cantos* has no direct match in the history of Russian poetry. Remarkably, the complex synthetic structures of language, topics, and images can be found in some other texts of the period. These are the works of the so-called "Orthodox church modernists," such as Pavel Florensky, Sergei Bulgakov, and Nikolay Berdyaev. To some extent, the vast 800-page eclectic, pro-medieval, mystical, sign-focused, new-age-flavored, and didactic text of *The Pillar and the Ground of the Truth* written by Russian polymath Pavel Florensky, can be compared to the entire project of *The Cantos*.

The absence of homemade models of modernist writing created a problem for translations of Anglo-American modernists. The case of James Joyce is demonstrative. His earlier works have been successfully translated in a familiar Chekhov-like style of laconism and sobriety. But such an approach would not work for *Ulysses*, the translation of which, by Victor Hinkis and Sergei Khoruzhi, was completed in the mid-1980s [Joyce 1993]. The translators of *Ulysses* found themselves in a rarefied air of the language. There were no tricks and trails available for them to make an authentic Russian translation of the modernist masterpiece. The translators had to apply all their enthusiasm and talent to construct something like a Russian modernist literary language in order to translate a single novel. A similar problem occurred with the reception and translation of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, although Eliot seemed to have more luck. There are accounts that Eliot's poetry was known to the Russian poets and that it influenced certain important works, such as *A Poem Without a Hero* by Anna Akhmatova and some of Joseph Brodsky's poetry (see the discussion in [Ushakova 2007] and [Tolmatchoff 2011]). In 1972, Andrei Sergeev translated *The Waste Land*, making a firm and convincing work that stays readable and publishable to the present day. It was likely the first attempt at creating a modernist-language version of Russian poetry using the model of Anglo-American modernism. It might have been the whole story of the Russian-language Pound, if Sergeev, a man of letters and a friend of Joseph Brodsky and Allen Ginsberg, had translated *The Cantos* in the 1980s. But he didn't.

Several attempts to translate and promote the poetry of Ezra Pound in Russia have been reviewed in a recent paper by Ian Probstein, who himself made an outstanding contribution to translating and presenting Pound's oeuvre to the Russian reader [Probstein 2017]. Most of the Russian translations of Pound's poetry appeared after the Perestroika, when ideological and aesthetic constraints had been softened. This culminated in a bilingual edition of Pound's poems (no *Cantos* at that time) published in 2003 with an introduction and commentaries by Ian Probstein. More than a dozen translators provided contributions to that volume [Pound 2003]. It was generally a success, though the collective labor presented one foreseeable drawback. The "Russian" Ezra Pound of 2003 was a hero with a thousand faces. Indeed, one can point to the multilingual and multicultural attitude of Pound to defend the multi-author approach to the translation. However, the "collective Pound" of that edition reveals a poet who neither possessed his own language, nor had a distinct view of the world. The latter can be damaging when translating poetry.

A few consequential journal publications of a number of cantos in Russian appeared between 2003 and today. Despite different degrees of success, those translations exposed the common problems of mixing a variety of styles and using randomly chosen vocabularies. The most typical problem encountered in translations of Pound's poetry was explained by Alexander Genis, who once said: "I translated Pound's cantos... and know how hard it can be. There always comes out a word-for-word translation." While this observation was specific to translations into Russian, the same may well be true for other languages as well. One can speculate that the very style and form of *The Cantos* are prone to this type of translation blunder. The ideogrammic fragments of *The Cantos,* charged as they are with diverse and often opposite meanings, beg to be translated with a level of precision customary for a philosophical treatise rather than a work of poetry. But still, it *is* poetry, and must be treated as such.

Art deals first with forms, and then with meanings. Ezra Pound declared that poetry must create a text full of meaning, but behind all of the twentieth-century artistic manifests and programs we see the old and everlasting distinction between the rational and emotional ways of cognition. The forms dwell even though the actual meanings tend to disappear. The political connotations of Dante's *Inferno* are fading away from us, but we enjoy its eternal artistic merit. The same will likely happen to the works of Ezra Pound. The bitterness of time and ideology will be washed away with time, but the forms of poetry will stay as long as the language exists. A word-

for-word translation emerges if the translator focuses solely on the meaning instead of focusing on the form. But how can form be reproduced in another language? To avoid literal rendering (that destroyer of the artistic form), one needs to translate the form itself. This means designing a medium for the form—a language with which the form is implemented. It is not an easy task. The language, as we have learned from the aforementioned examples, may not exist or have been developed, yet "creating" a language may prove difficult if the time and circumstances are not right and proper. But it is always possible to create a *stylization* that preserves all the traits of the language. This is how *The Cantos* can be translated. The translation can be a form of a stylized replica that possesses the most important features of the original. A replica is not a one-to-one copy, because a copy cannot be made if the material differs. Roman replicas were not exact copies of Greek sculptures. When the material differs, it is only the form that can be duplicated.

Translating Pound's *Cantos* into Russian means creating the type of modernist poetics that have been essentially lacking in Russian literature. This means that creating a modern epic in the Russian language, as opposed to simply a text, requires the creation of an individual language of the genre. The task seems so difficult that it appears almost unworkable, but there is a precedent in the history of Russian literature wherein a similar and even greater problem was successfully solved. In 1829, a Russian translation of Homer's *Iliad* was published by the poet and translator Nicolai Gnedich. To complete his enormous task, Gnedich had to significantly enhance or recreate the Russian hexameter. In fact, he recreated the entire poetic language to make this particular translation possible, and it was a success. This example teaches us two lessons. First, it shows that to make translation a work of art, the problem of its general form must first be solved. Secondly, it demonstrates that even a relatively distant epic can become an important cultural event if there is a niche in the cultural space that must be filled.

The *vers libre* of *The Cantos* is a much more universal, open, and less structured poetic form than Homer's hexameter. It provides more flexibility in translation, which is good in itself, but not what we truly need when searching for a *unique* form of the work of art. We need to restrict ourselves, singling out the form. All verses and phrases, the text as a whole, *and* each tiny element of it must bear a certain stamp, a mark, a genetic template that preserves the lineage from its single and unique form. But what can this be? In the case of *vers libre*, this can be a rhythm; a melodic structure that repeats itself and produces a unified flow of melody throughout the entire text, engaging each and every part of it. The Russian translation of *The Cantos* is an

attempt to make a *vers libre* with such rhythmic and melodic patterns, which can be identified by a Russian reader as epic-like patterns and forms.[1] All this would create a flavor of an ancient or "timeless" text. To balance (or conceal) the effects of such a stylization, a modern, direct, and almost colloquial vocabulary should be used. The combination of the neoclassicist style of writing (polyphonic and steadily repeating epic-like melodies) with straight-forward contemporary wording and relatively simple syntax might work to create the desired appearance of modernist poetic language. Applying this recipe throughout the whole text of *The Cantos*, a replica of Anglo-American twentieth-century modernism could be built within the means available in the Russian language of the twenty-first century.[2]

The notions of authenticity, persuasiveness and laconism were the major reference points not only for translating the text, but also for making the editorial decisions. The fundamental objective of the Russian edition was to publish *The Cantos* in a form that would look like Pound's *own* final publication.[3] This decision led to a couple of divisive changes in the structure of the edition. Some parts

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[1]   The author experimented with epic styles and forms in his poetry books *Ischezayushiy Vid* and *Zen Elegies*. As O.M. Ushakova says in her encouraging review of the Russian translation of *The Cantos*: "The translator was not so much based on previous translation practice as on his own experience in writing poetry [...] *Ischezayushiy Vid* represents, in our opinion, an example of a modernist epic. The language model chosen by the translator is generally consistent with Pound's artistic principles." [Ushakova 2018]

[2]   It is interesting to make one more linguistic observation, which became evident only after the translation had been completed. Even without intention, the vocabulary and syntax in the Russian replica of *The Cantos* have somehow overlapped with those of typical twentieth-century Russian translations of Confucius or ancient Greek philosophers. In both of these cases, the Russian translators utilized the language that would best represent authenticity, persuasiveness and laconism. It is not accidental that the linguistic locus of the Russian replica of *The Cantos* appears close to the texts that form its semantic core. At the same time, except for the quotes, the vocabulary of the Russian translation of *The Cantos* does not overlap with that of the Russian translations of Homer, Dante or any other ancient or medieval poets.

[3]   All was done to ensure that the book would look and feel like an artifact of Pound's lifetime. The preface and annex of the edition contain no criticism, and no references to Poundian studies have been made across the entire volume. Though it may seem quite a radical approach in search of authenticity, all this is perfectly in line with the concept of *Fortleben* of the original text, as was suggested by Walter Benjamin. Benjamin sees the translation not only like an interpretation of the text, but like a renewal, survival and prolongation of the text's life [Benjamin 1985]. Paul de Man added one more observation to this concept, talking about the "afterlife" of the original and pointing out the complex relationships between the original and its translation in the paradigm of living and dead [de Man 1986]. The Russian edition of *The Cantos* is an attempt to revive and, in some sense, *resurrect* the text and its author in the beginning of the 21st century.

of the 1991 edition of *The Cantos* produced by New Directions Publishing (and from which the translation was made) had to be moved and even omitted. The obvious candidates were the "Italian Cantos LXXII-LXXIII" and the "Drafts and Fragments of Cantos CX-CXX". The "Italian Cantos LXXII-LXXIII" were not present in any lifetime edition of *The Cantos,* but were included in the book in 1985. It is doubtful that Pound himself would have wanted to see these first exercises in Italian and mock-ups of Dante and Cavalcanti included among his best poetry.[4] The other surgical cut was the placement of "Drafts and Fragments of Cantos CX-CXX" into the Annex of the edition. It was clear that this decision would disagree with the contemporary tradition of publishing *The Cantos,* and it would likely not be supported by all Poundian scholars. But there was some logic behind this. The story of inserting "Drafts and Fragments" into the text of *The Cantos* is traced back to the time when James Laughlin tried to prevent unofficial publications of Pound's poetry in the late 1960s (e.g., see the discussion in [Barnhisel 2005]). At the time of Laughlin's effort to include those texts in *The Cantos,* Pound was reluctant and absent. The use of these texts was not directly approved by the poet, nor did he edit all of them himself. Their authenticity is questionable [Barnhisel 2005; Bush 1993]. Furthermore, the verses of "Drafts and Fragments" are written more in the style of lyrical poetry than in the epic style that shaped the rest of *The Cantos*.

Applying all the changes suggested, the edition of *The Cantos* officially issued by Nauka Publishers [Pound 2018] has the structure shown below (the titles are translated back from Russian; the page numbers of the Russian edition are given).

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[4] The Italian Cantos will likely appear in future Russian editions, but even then the problems of translation and accurate imitation of Pound's Italian language will have to be solved and the decision on how to deal with heroic pathos (sometimes appearing against the will of the poet rather comically) will have to be made.

      The sixty-page preface entitled "Ezra Pound and his *Cantos*" is a very important part of the Russian edition. The preface not only serves to make the reader familiar with the events of Pound's life and the history of creating *The Cantos*, but also sets the tone for the reception of the translated text. The preface is printed using font of the same size as that of the main section. This produces the feel of a closer connection between the preface and the rest of the book. The preface makes no attempts at any criticism of either the poetry or Pound's views. Pound's story is told in a gentle and congenial manner, displaying a sense of friendly irony, humor, and sensitivity. Pound's biography and the evolution of his views are narrated as if expressed by a close ally or a friend. The well-known memories describing Ezra Pound in Paris recounted in *A Moveable Feast* by Ernest Hemingway served as a model for this approach. To this end, an excerpt of Hemingway's memoir has been translated into Russian and used in the text of the preface. Another notable quotation was taken and translated from *A History of Western Philosophy* by Bertrand Russell. In the quote, the British philosopher explained his reasoning on the attitude of Greek philosophers and their medieval ancestors toward usury. The use of this quote and the discussion of the differences between ancient and contemporary opinions on the subject form a basis for understanding Pound's economic views from the perspective of the Aristotelian ethical approach to economics. The role of C.H. Douglas and A.R. Orage in involving Pound into the depths of the economic conspiracy is further discussed, and the name of Don Quixote is briefly mentioned when discussing Pound's inexorable struggle for a better world. The preface offers plenty of material on the cultural context and related details of living the artistic and literary life in the first half of the twentieth century. An attempt is made to explain Pound's traditionalist views by analyzing the very roots of his neoclassical aesthetics, referring to the morphological concepts of history of civilizations in the spirit of Oswald Spengler and others. The Annex section of the book is opened with the translator's notes. The aforementioned editorial decisions

on the structure of the book are explained here, some notes on Pound's style and vocabulary are given, and a brief review of Pound's modernist myth of everlasting confrontation between Light and Usura is presented.

The commentaries to the text of *The Cantos* mirror the preface in language and style. There are some important and original observations made in the notes to the cantos. The firm, dense, and sound sections of the Chinese and Adams cantos are treated as pillars of the entire epic, where avant-garde methods of painting and sculpture are applied to poetry, and ideogrammic forms help the poet reveal a complex story of a renewed Confucian parable. In the middle of the twentieth century, Pound defended the courses of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. He defended the purity and richness of the world as it was understood by ancient and medieval thinkers and poets. In his heart and mind he was always for his newborn, hard-working, independent America and against the corrupt, filthy empire of international bankers and moneylenders that epitomizes Usura. The commentaries themselves consist of the original notes to each canto followed by a glossary, in which the phrases, names, words and issues are explained. More than sixty monographs and dozens of journal articles on Ezra Pound's work and life were studied when preparing the Russian edition of *The Cantos*, the most useful of which are listed below.[5] Among them are the renowned guides [Terell 1993], [Cookson 2002]. A deep insight into the poetics of *The Cantos* and the connections of poetry with life events were found in [Alexander 1971, Kenner 1971, Rachewiltz de 1971, Carpenter 1988, Moody 2007-2015, Bush 1999, Nadel 2004]. The ideological and economical views of Ezra Pound were discussed in [Chace 1973, Rainey 1991, Redman 1991, Rabaté 1986, Surette 1999]. Accounts of Pound's approach to Confucianism, Neoplatonism and medieval philosophy were presented in [Lan 2005, Liebregts 2004, Byron 2014]. Despite the use of all the sources and studies, a thorough additional work of double-checking and identifying all the quotes, items, personal names and toponyms as they appeared in the existing Russian literature was more than necessary. The quotes from Homer, Dante, troubadours, Latin and Greek writers, as well as numerous others, are present in the Russian text in their original form, whereas the corresponding translations are given in the glossaries. In most cases, well-established translations existing in the Russian literature have been used. For instance, the translations of Homer by Nikolay Gnedich and Vasily Zhukovsky and those of Dante by Mikhail

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[5]   A broad overview of the literature on Ezra Pound and his *Cantos* is presented in [Bronnikov 2019].

Lozinsky have been reproduced. The translations of the Chinese ideograms (which retain their original size, proportions and positions in text) are partly given in glossaries, but it is a "Table of Chinese characters" that shows the translations of all Chinese characters into Russian keyed to the page/canto numbers. The phonetic transcription of the Chinese ideograms in Roman letters was transformed into Cyrillic by transforming the Wade–Giles system into the Palladius system. Special care was taken to double-check and identify the Chinese personal names and toponyms, for which purpose the Russian sinological literature and the established Russian translations of Chinese texts were used. The book also contains a large index with names and biographies of several hundreds of actors in *The Cantos*, which looks like an encyclopedia of Pound's heroes. The information from many historical and biographical sources, Russian encyclopedias and originally written text were used for the entries of the Index.

"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world," said Ludwig Wittgenstein. Are the worlds that spawned original texts and translated texts different? Yes, they are. The greater the dissimilarities between the original language and the translation language, the further these worlds are apart. Does it mean we create *another* text when translating? Yes, it does. But this is true for any interpretation, including one which is created by simply reading the original, since the worlds of two different persons can never be absolutely identical. It is not that an interpretation distorts the meanings of the text. Any interpretation reveals the meanings, and the number of distinctive meanings hidden in a big work of art can be endless. So it is with a translation. Neglecting some meanings, it reveals those that were obscure in the original or simply not discovered because of limitations of time. Being centered between the preface and the commentaries, both written as if they were composed from within Pound's world, the actual translated text is perfectly positioned to reveal the signs of congeniality. The entire Russian edition was an attempt to design a hermetic, self-sufficient splinter of Pound's world. How could it be anything else? Having been given the exceptional opportunity to fill the niche of modernist poetry in Russian literature, we had to work in good faith. After a delay of a few decades, Pound's *Cantos* has arrived for the Russian reader of the twenty-first century, bringing with them new forms of artistic expression and old themes of the epic—the epic that keeps renewing itself with each and every new interpretation.

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