

REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERPRETER'S STATUS IN MICHAEL FRAYN'S *THE RUSSIAN INTERPRETER*

ANTONY HOYTE-WEST*
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4410-6520>
NOTTINGHAM TRENT UNIVERSITY

Abstract: Offering an external and fictional perspective on interpreting in the Soviet Union, this article involves a close reading of Michael Frayn's prize-winning 1966 novel, *The Russian Interpreter*. The study focuses on the changing status of Paul Manning, a British postgraduate student in Moscow who is originally called on to provide commercial interpreting services for a visiting British businessman, Gordon Proctor-Gould. However, Manning's role and remit evolve as his position as an interpreter expands to blend Proctor-Gould's professional activities with his complicated personal life. After contextualising the necessary background on fictional translators and on Frayn and his novel, this article first foregrounds the method in which Manning was recruited, before examining how the interpreter deals with the blurring of professional and personal spheres. Finally, it profiles an example of a disastrous interpreting performance, noting the implications for Manning's status as a practitioner.

Keywords: British students in the Soviet Union; fictional interpreters; interpreting in the Soviet Union; transfiction; 20th-century English literature

1. Introduction

The geopolitical tensions of the Cold War era proved to be a dynamic influence on literary fiction across various world literatures (Hammond 2005), as the political relationship between the West and the Soviet Union became increasingly frosty. In the case of the United Kingdom, a literary portrait symbolising the country's postwar rethinking of its foreign policy towards its erstwhile Second World War ally is *The Russian Interpreter*, a 1966 novel by the eminent author, playwright, and translator Michael Frayn. As will be presented and discussed in this article, the novel is loosely inspired by Frayn's first brief sojourn in the Soviet Union in the mid-1950s, which took place after he graduated from university and several years after his military service as a Russian linguist.

* antony.hoyte.west@gmail.com



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Blending comedy and social commentary, Frayn's narrative portrays the humorous travails of Paul Manning, a young British postgraduate student in Moscow who, through his Russian language skills, becomes unwittingly embroiled in a shady scheme with predictably disastrous consequences. Given Frayn's own familiarity with the Russian language and Soviet culture and society, as well as with translation and interpreting through his linguist training, the novel can be said to offer a unique external view on contemporary Soviet reality. Therefore, via the close reading of three selected excerpts from the book which hone in on aspects of the interpreter's role, status, and ethics, this article builds on previous research to outline how this specific example of literary fiction depicts interpreting-related perspectives in the Soviet Union during a pivotal period in its history.

2. Transfiction and *The Russian Interpreter*

Perhaps owing to their multifaceted role as bridges between cultures and the manifold connotations of mystery and intrigue that this can imply, translator and interpreter protagonists have been a recurrent feature in literary fiction. Commonly grouped under the designation of 'transfiction' (Bergantino 2026: 1), scholarly analyses of these works and their fictional characters have centred on various authors and national literatures. Arrojo's (2017) seminal monograph profiled the presence of translator protagonists in several works by canonical authors such as Borges, Cervantes, and Kafka. Additionally, the numerous contributions in edited volumes coordinated by scholars such as Kaindl and Spitzl (2014), Spitzer and Oliveira (2022), and Miletich (2023) examine the portrayals of translators and interpreters in varied works of fiction which represent a wide array of languages and literatures. Thus, as highlighted by Valdeón (2025: 1120-1121) in his overview of contemporary trends in academic research on translation and translators, transfiction remains an attractive topic which generates significant scholarly interest.

In keeping with the topic of this special issue, several analyses have foregrounded fictional translators in the Soviet and post-Soviet space. Focusing on examples of detective fiction, Baer (2005) has traced the figure of the translator in works by popular Russian authors such as Boris Akunin, and Olshanskaya (2014) has also examined the portrayal of fictional translators and interpreters in Soviet and Russian cinema and literature, including the 2006 novel by the internationally-acclaimed author Liudmila Ulitskaya, *Daniel Stein, Interpreter*. The titular interpreter in the latter work has also been analysed in detail by Baer (2014), who has additionally scrutinised the translator protagonist in a fictionalised memoir authored by Semyon Lipkin, the noted Soviet literary translator of Central Asian languages into Russian (Baer 2022). Furthermore, Viktor Pelevin's novel *Generation P*, which features a language professional as its main character, has been analysed by Ivashkin (2018).

In the Soviet and Russian context, Olshanskaya writes that "translators' personae have been used in several Russian literary and cinematic texts in a variety of contexts," adding that these milieux can include metaphorical representations of "ideological and cultural tensions between home-grown and imported phenomena, or between the East

and the West” (Olshanskaya 2014: 144). This latent instability can also be noted in works with translator or interpreter protagonists by native Russophone authors who have opted to write in other languages; as Hansen observes in her studies of novels by Andreï Makine, Michael Idov, and Olga Grjasnowa, “translation is associated with performance and deception” (Hansen 2019: 400).

In synthesising these two notions (i.e., cultural and ideological tensions with deceptive and performative elements), Michael Frayn’s second novel, *The Russian Interpreter*, represents an interesting study for analysis, adopting the case study-based approach common in transfiction research (Bergantino 2026: 24-25). Born in London in 1933, Frayn is a noted British author, playwright, and journalist, receiving a Tony Award in 2000. As a novelist, his works have been thrice nominated for the renowned Booker Prize (in 1999, 2002, and 2021), and the novel analysed here received the prestigious Hawthornden Prize in 1967, the year after its first publication (see The Booker Prizes 2026; Hawthornden Foundation 2026).

Indeed, Russian has been something of a leitmotif in Frayn’s remarkable career. After an initial foray into the language at school (Wroe 1999), he was successful – as he details in the introductory note to the updated 2015 edition of *The Russian Interpreter* – in gaining a sought-after place to learn Russian during his compulsory military service in the early 1950s (Frayn 2015: v). With the geopolitical importance of the language increasing in the era that was to usher in the Cold War, the need for trained linguists correspondingly increased and specialist intensive courses were developed (Footitt 2011). Hence, as Frayn observes, “some six thousand of us were taught Russian, and trained to be translators and interpreters” (Frayn, 2015: v), before observing laconically that “by the time I’d done my Russian course, in 1952, the blockade of Berlin had long since been lifted, and I never had to interrogate any prisoners, or even [...] listen in to Soviet radio traffic” (Frayn 2015: xiii). As Frayn mentions in a recent memoir recalling selected friendships during his life, whilst training as a linguist he also served as co-editor of the course’s bilingual literary magazine, and additionally made the acquaintance of the formidable director of the programme, Professor Dame Elizabeth Hill (see Frayn 2023).

His interest in the Russian language continued at Cambridge, where he initially studied modern languages before switching his degree to philosophy (Wroe 1999). After a short study stay at Moscow State University (which was to prove fundamental for the genesis of *The Russian Interpreter*), Frayn later returned to Soviet Union as a journalist, even covering the visit of the then British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, in 1959 (Wroe 1999); he has mentioned his experiences in the Soviet Union in newspaper articles and interviews (Wroe 1999; Frayn 2005). In terms of cultural activities, Frayn is well-known for his acclaimed English translations of plays by Anton Chekhov (Hesse 2015: 156-157), and his official entry in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2025) also underlines how Chekhovian themes have influenced his dramatic oeuvre as a whole.

As highlighted in the introductory note to the most recent edition of *The Russian Interpreter*, Frayn undertook a short-term visit to the Soviet Union’s most elite educational institution in 1956. Though the author is at pains to state that the events in the novel are fictionalised (Frayn 2015: v), he nonetheless concedes that some of the

Soviet characters are loosely based on some of the people he met during that first visit to the country (Frayn 2015: ix). Given Frayn's deep immersion in Soviet culture and society, as well as the fact that his knowledge of Russian proved sufficient to translate Chekhov, it can thus be advanced that the setting and milieu to these fictional events is nonetheless grounded in the reality of that time – as Frayn himself observes: “The old Moscow that I tried to give some people a picture of in this book was part of my own past as well as Russia's” (Frayn 2015: xiv). To this can be added Frayn's own in-service training as a Russian translator and interpreter, as well as his admittedly rudimentary experience in practical interpreting.

Though listed as an example of a work of literary fiction with a translator or interpreter as a key character (see Fóllica and Lladó 2017: 2), extensive analysis of *The Russian Interpreter* has seemingly only appeared in two previous studies, both written in German. The first, part of an extensive monograph by Andres (2008), examines Frayn's work as part of a comprehensive comparative study of several other novels with interpreter protagonists. As summarised by Simescu (2019),¹ Andres's analysis adopts a common structure, beginning with the work itself, before examining the role and context of the interpreter and interpreting, and noting their centrality (or not) to the work's given plot. For *The Russian Interpreter*, her study centres on the interpreter's contribution to the novel's overall portrayal of communication and communicative aspects. The second study (Salevsky and Salevsky 2005), is a brief chapter which focuses solely on Frayn's novel. It concisely summarises the main plot points, making pertinent remarks on the interpreter's role, before linking the novel and its setting to macro-level phenomena, such as the geopolitical thaw in relations between East and West in the immediate post-Stalin era up until the mid-1960s.

The present article expands on these two analyses to offer critical reflections on three main instances where interpreting plays a key role in the novel – Paul Manning's initial recruitment as an interpreter; a pivotal moment in his interpreting ‘career’; and his poor performance when interpreting at an important banquet. Though these instances may also feature – to a greater or lesser extent – in prior German-language scholarship on the novel, the present study examines these through a different lens, centring on the interpreter's status in these interactions. In utilising detailed close reading (an approach also employed by Arrojo's 2017 monograph), and with judicious reference to the text of the original novel, this article also refers to Frayn's aforementioned introductory note (Frayn 2015: v-xiv), which draws attention to the real-life Soviet personalities Frayn met during his initial stay and whose presence underpins the narrative's fictionalised events. In integrating these facets, it is intended to offer new insights on the status of the interpreter-protagonist in *The Russian Interpreter*.

3. Recruitment and First Forays as an Interpreter

The titular Russian interpreter of Frayn's second novel is Paul Manning, a British postgraduate research student in the Faculty of Administrative-Management Sciences

¹ Despite the researcher's best efforts, unfortunately he has not been able to locate a copy of this monograph.

at Moscow State University. Indeed, Manning's academic peregrinations have taken him from Cambridge to the fictional 'London School of Civic Studies,' and now onto Moscow "for his eighteen months' hard labour" (Frayn 2015: 5). Despite his seemingly impressive educational trajectory, Manning's accomplishments are less than stellar. Though he had brought his thesis to the Soviet Union "for its health," the work was "still poorly" (Frayn 2015: 5), noting that Manning holds vague notions of taking his research to warmer climes: i.e., to "Berkeley, perhaps, or Accra" (Frayn 2015: 5). Taken in the context of the time of the book's publication, in highlighting the famously restless campus of the University of California or socialist-leaning Ghana under Nkrumah, these brief asides – underscored by his current decision to study in the Soviet Union – also serve to hint at Manning's own political and ideological sympathies. The young Briton is under the quasi-paternalistic care of his erudite Soviet departmental host (and minder) Sasha Zaborin, who tells his charge in flawless English that he is "'personally responsible for you to the committee and [...] for seeing that your research goes well while you are in our country'" (Frayn 2015: 10).

Manning's services as an interpreter are requested by the enigmatic Cambridge graduate Gordon Proctor-Gould, a fellow Briton who swears that he overlapped with Manning when they were studying at the same Cambridge college, although Manning does not recall this (Frayn 2015: 2). Proctor-Gould appears to be a businessman trading in minor artworks, additionally boasting of his "exclusive rights on the whole Soviet market" (Frayn 2015: 27) to organise networking delegations which bring together distinguished Soviet and British personalities via group tours of the other's country. As a sweetener, Proctor-Gould has brought a library of English books with him as gifts for his Soviet hosts. Noting the difficulty of obtaining foreign publications in the country, these innocuous "presents for the natives" (Frayn 2015: 21) later transpire to have a different purpose. Although never fully explained, these books are apparently part of a scheme to smuggle in and out sums of money, as well as literary manuscripts that have been banned by the Soviets. Thus, from the outset of the novel, the importance of words and language – both written and spoken – is highlighted.

Despite his ostensibly frequent contacts with the Soviet Union, Proctor-Gould is a self-declared poor linguist, underscoring his inability to read Cyrillic by stating that he had "never mastered this comic alphabet they've got" (Frayn 2015: 27). Though acknowledging that the Soviets "who are going to be presentable as personalities in Britain or the United States speak English" (Frayn 2015: 27), Proctor-Gould is keenly aware of the importance of having a native English speaker as his personal interpreter. He states that "'it's not easy to assess the personality of a Russian when it's being filtered through another Russian, with a Russian outlook and Russian preconceptions. What I need, it seems to me, is not a Russian who has learnt English, but an Englishman who knows Russian'" (Frayn 2015: 27-28). Indeed, together with issues of trust and reliability, this understanding is a core tenet of diplomatic interpreting and the reason why bilateral delegations usually have their own interpreters (Akgün and Yetkin Karakoç 2024: 78).

Proctor-Gould is also cognisant of the financial aspect, adding that he would pay Manning London rates in a currency of his choosing. Given that the two men do not formally know each other, Manning enquires about the background research that

Proctor-Gould has done on him, with the businessman replying “‘Just that your Russian is fluent, and that your standing with both the Soviet authorities and the Embassy is reasonably good’” (Frayn 2015: 28), overcoming Manning’s wariness that his countryman is seeking to utilise him for subterfuge. In analysing this swift and informal recruitment procedure, it is evident that Manning has been selected purely based on the opinion of others. Interestingly, no qualifications, tests, or even evidence of previous interpreting experience have been asked for, despite the fact that by the 1960s, both the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union were formalising interpreter training at the institutional level (Coveney 1982; Chernov 1992). In addition, as a non-Russian-speaker, Proctor-Gould is unable to assess for himself whether Manning is a competent interpreter. Rather, Manning is simply in the right place at the right time, thereby fulfilling Proctor-Gould’s need for a trustworthy native English speaker who can interpret for him at various events. This timeliness is also borne out by real-life examples from high-level contexts, when even ballerinas with the requisite language skills have been called on as interpreters in given situations (Naimushin 2023). As such, the importance of trust in such settings is highlighted (Rizzi and Lang 2025: 206-207).

Yet, there is no mention in the novel of how Manning acquired his Russian skills – given that his thesis is in the domain of administration and management studies, it is to be surmised that his expertise lies in social science rather than philological disciplines. In addition, he has resided in Moscow for the past year-and-a-half, but there are no references to him attending language courses (such as the preparatory year of intensive Russian language that foreigners undertook before admittance to Soviet faculties – see Rosen 1970: 247-248). Nonetheless, as later events confirm, it does appear that he has a degree of fluency in the language across various registers, despite the challenges that Russian can pose for learners from non-Slavonic-speaking backgrounds.

A further point which becomes increasingly relevant is the question of Manning’s reimbursement. As his mention of ‘London’ rates states, Proctor-Gould appears to be used to interpreters; indeed, the businessman highlights that Manning’s abilities are to supplement the official Soviet interpreters he uses on his other duties. It is Proctor-Gould who dominates the discussion, thus offering a clear demonstration of power. Though the sum of two guineas per hour is offered, no documents or contracts are signed, and the presumably considerable logistics of transferring the payment (or its equivalent in Swiss francs, roubles, or other currency) are never expanded on. As such, Manning’s limited capacities to negotiate – and by extension, his general naivety about the whole scheme – are highlighted in this excerpt, illustrating his lower status. In sum, the lack of formal paperwork means that the terms of business between the two men remain, quite simply, a gentleman’s agreement.

Yet, following his agreement to become Proctor-Gould’s interpreter, Manning’s life in Moscow is transformed. In demonstrating the intersection of interpreting with elite worlds (Hoyte-West 2021), his humdrum student existence is substituted by “a round of parties, receptions, conferences, congresses, reunions, exhibitions – all the various bends and corners in life at which a sediment of people might be deposited for inspection” (Frayn 2015: 30), and Manning gains entry to strata of society he had previously not come across. In a further development, Manning learns of Proctor-

Gould's lucrative sideline as a commission agent for various British institutions, spending "hours with him calling on government offices, university departments, and cultural agencies to convey greetings from British counterparts" (Fraysn 2015: 30). The multifarious nature of these interactions makes it difficult to categorise Manning's activities within a broader descriptive taxonomy of interpreting settings (i.e., as a liaison, business, or community interpreter, etc. – see Ozolins 2014), which themselves are often characterised in a notional hierarchy. What is apparent, however, is he interprets in consecutive mode.

Turning to the descriptions of interpreting featured in the novel, Manning is somewhat disgusted by Proctor-Gould's superficially performative nature which contrasts with Manning's own introspected personality. Indeed, with a note of derision, he thinks privately of his employer as a "public man" (Fraysn 2015: 31), as demonstrated by Proctor-Gould's penchant for speechmaking:

"On the slightest pretext, at even quite small receptions, Proctor-Gould would make a speech. The phrases which came rolling so steadily and emphatically out on these occasions – [...] – were not exactly clichés. They were units of the public language. At first their abstraction and generality appalled Manning as he translated them. Yet he could see them have their effect on the audience – the limited effect of public language on a public audience, but an effect nonetheless" (Fraysn 2015: 31).

Despite his own personal reservations as to the vacuity of the words he is required to interpret, Manning nonetheless remains faithful to the original speaker's wishes by interpreting them faithfully. To his consternation, however, he observes the effect that these seemingly vapid platitudes have on their intended audiences: "People listened and applauded with genuine respect and interest. An attempt at some more personal form of communication, conceded Manning grudgingly, might have had no effect at all without the framework of a real personal relationship to give it meaning" (Fraysn 2015: 32).

It is after one of these events, having been introduced by Manning, that Proctor-Gould meets Sasha, Manning's English-speaking Soviet host at the university. The two get on famously and the trio decide to head for dinner together. However, "Manning felt very much the third of the three. He was not needed as an interpreter, since Proctor-Gould and Sasha were speaking English together, and he was lumbered with a large silver-plated model of the university skyscraper" (Fraysn 2015: 32).

As mentioned by Salevsky and Salevsky (2005: 105-108), this event foreshadows the blurring of the boundaries between interpreter and client, with implications for Manning's standing. It also provides a clear portrait of the interpreter's uncertain status when his services are no longer required: with no language barrier impeding communication between Proctor-Gould and Sasha, there is no need for Manning's presence. He is figuratively and literally redundant, his junior status exemplified by carrying round Proctor-Gould's cumbersome gift from his Soviet hosts like a lackey. Indeed, Manning's ancillary role is confirmed by his exclusion from the two men's deep conversation, noting that "it was he who had to drop back when there was not enough room for three abreast on the pavement, then run a couple of steps to catch up again. It was he who had to interrupt to insist that they decided on a restaurant, as the

other two strode towards nowhere, completely absorbed in recalling their mutual childhood passions for stamps, railways, and wireless sets” (Frayn 2015: 32-33). Accordingly, the sense of his own superfluity leads him to experience an “obscure irritation. It was as if one’s parents and one’s teacher had taken to each other too readily; a threatening coalition” (Frayn 2015: 33).

Indeed, this episode highlights the oft-discussed notion of the interpreter’s visibility – or lack of it – in various communication settings (Martínez-Gómez 2015: 175-178). When his linguistic skills are no longer required, Manning is simply ignored, thus underlying that he is seen as a conduit rather than as an active participant in the conversation. This is particularly heightened by the intimate nature of the topic the men are discussing animatedly, that of childhood reminiscences, which represents a sharp contrast to Proctor-Gould’s banal and formulaic speeches in his role as a “public man.” Yet, despite his hostility at being excluded, Manning is simply conforming to the professional expectations underlined in the gentleman’s agreement, and which are *de rigueur* for any professional interpreter. However, as subsequent events in the narrative detail, the situation regarding his uncertain status is to become much more complex.

4. A Change of Circumstances

As also summarised elsewhere (Salevsky and Salevsky 2005: 106-107), the ultimately ill-fated relationship between Proctor-Gould and Raya, a non-English-speaking lecturer at the journalism faculty but who proves to be a state informer, gives important perspectives on the interpreter’s status in the novel.

Raya’s first meeting with the Englishmen occurs when she tags along, seemingly uninvited, to the Faculty’s departmental picnic in the forest outside Moscow. She initially attaches herself to Manning, flattering him by addressing him with the title of “Comrade Interpreter,” thus elevating his status, before mentioning that she is interested in Proctor-Gould. However, her inability to speak English makes her reluctant to embark on a relationship, adding that “There seems to be a terrible lot of explanation to go through before the appropriate moment arrives” (Frayn 2015: 46). The solicitous Manning offers his services as an interpreter, which Raya dismisses with irony: “‘A love affair through an interpreter. That’s a very cultured prospect’” (Frayn 2015: 46). Yet, this is what indeed happens, and Raya and Proctor-Gould swiftly become an item. Indeed, over dinner in a restaurant, at first Manning is very eager and supportive regarding their relationship, noting that he “felt that Proctor-Gould’s compliments [to Raya] were indirectly compliments to himself. He translated them fully, wherever possible improving upon them and making them more fantastic in the Russian” (Frayn 2015: 60).

In this instance, this burnishing is a notable example of Manning not conforming with the expected professional conduct of interpreters (Torresi 2024). In short, he is manipulating what is being said for his own ends, as his ego has been flattered. However, this approach quickly backfires when Proctor-Gould wishes to invite Raya to Britain as one of his distinguished personalities. Amazed at the suddenness of this move, Manning disbelieves that the invitation is genuine, to which Proctor Gould

responds “‘Paul,’ he said, ‘you’re supposed to interpret what I say, you know, not argue about it.’” (Frayn 2015: 61). When Manning answers that he was no longer on duty, and that the occasion was social, rather than business, Proctor-Gould retorts that “‘In my profession all occasions are business ones. In any case, I’m paying you, Paul’” (Frayn 2015: 61).

An argument ensues between the two men, with Raya repeatedly banging on the table and loudly demanding a translation which attracts the attention of the diners. With reluctance, Manning purposely mistranslates what Proctor-Gould is saying, and his rendition of the businessman’s “‘Tell her I think her wonderful directness and charm will communicate remarkably well, even though she doesn’t know English’” (Frayn 2015: 62) becomes “‘He thinks that your lack of English would make it rather difficult’” (Frayn 2015: 62).

Yet, perhaps echoing the sentiment of exclusion that Manning felt previously during Sasha and Proctor-Gould’s meeting, his attempts to thwart the relationship are unsuccessful. Unbothered by the state authorities, Raya moves into Proctor-Gould’s hotel suite, and the further blurring of the boundaries between Manning and his countryman are illustrated when Manning is summoned to interpret some “logistical points” in order to “get a few things settled” in the couple’s nascent relationship. Noting that Proctor-Gould could “scarcely get one of the Intourist [state] interpreters” (Frayn 2015: 71) to do so, the businessman makes clear that he would not ask Manning “to translate anything that might embarrass” him (Frayn 2015: 71). Despite pulling rank in the outburst over dinner where Proctor-Gould underlined that he is paying Manning for his interpreting services (and the clear power differential that this displays), a further blurring of professional and personal spheres occurs when Manning’s original remit changes. Noting that the couple “quarrelled endlessly, with Manning’s assistance” (Frayn 2015: 80), it was observed that:

“There was less and less for Manning to interpret between Proctor-Gould and his official contacts, more and more between him and Raya. Manning’s earnings declined; it was somehow tacitly agreed between them that it would be improper for Manning to be paid for interpreting Proctor-Gould’s dealings with his mistress. Each day Manning swore that he would have nothing more to do with them; but each time the message came he hurried round (Frayn 2015: 80).

Eventually Raya leaves, taking Proctor-Gould’s precious books with her. Unaware of their dual purpose, Manning assists his client in trying to retrieve them, leading to a convoluted wild goose chase across Moscow. Given that the services that Manning was engaged for – the interpretation of formal events – have changed drastically, his loyalty to his client represents a clear example of the psychological links which underpin their gentlemen’s agreement. Though the circumstances may be different, Manning feels a sense of duty to his employer, although no formal contract has been signed. In this regard, lines between professional conduct and overfamiliarity have most certainly been transgressed, and Manning’s status moves from esteemed linguistic facilitator to that of a sidekick.

5. A Final Humiliation

Close to the novel's dénouement, immediately before Proctor-Gould's illicit wheeze with the book smuggling is exposed, Manning performs exceptionally badly at an important occasion. The scene is a grand faculty dinner, held in the banqueting suite in the university skyscraper. The faculty dean presides over the occasion; Sasha of course is in attendance, and Proctor-Gould has been invited too. Manning has become increasingly inebriated after the endless toasts, but when the dean makes a speech to address the British businessman, Proctor-Gould is eager to respond, thereby requiring Manning's "usual skilful services" (Frayn 2015: 162). In a state of extreme drunkenness, Manning panics: "What the hell had Proctor-Gould been saying? He couldn't remember the half of it" (Frayn 2015: 163). Attempting a brief summary into what he thinks is Russian, Manning experiences his countryman's admonishment: "What do you think you're up to. Paul. [...] You were speaking English. Do you realize that?" (Frayn 2015: 163). The following ensues:

"He hurriedly tried again in Russian, and the speech continued. But the more he translated, the more obsessed he became with his lapse, and the insight it had given Proctor-Gould into his standards of accuracy as an interpreter. And the more he worried about that, the less he heard or remembered of what Proctor-Gould was saying, and the more he had to improvise. It was like a nightmare in which his appalled gazing back at each last disaster brought blundering into the next" (Frayn 2015: 164).

Finally, after the ceremonial presentations of various books, the interpretation is over, with Manning "in the process of descending from the remoteness of the sky into a chair which had somehow appeared to catch him" (Frayn 2015: 164). Ultimately, the evening is capped off with the arrest of the two Englishmen, who are taken into custody and subsequently deported back to their homeland.

As the above illustrates, this final event exemplifies Manning's own uncertain status. In the first instance, his subordinate position means that he feels unable to decline Proctor-Gould's request. Though he commits the error of not paying attention to the original speaker, compounded by simply summarising the speaker's words in the original rather than interpreting the language, this situation is something that, had Manning been trained to a professional standard, he could have been able to mitigate. In addition, he is also concerned by Proctor-Gould's potential erosion of trust in his abilities.

Indeed, history has infamous (though infrequent) examples of poor interpreting on the international stage, such as the American president Jimmy Carter's visit to Poland (Chekin 2023) or Nelson Mandela's memorial service (Pienaar and Cornelius 2015: 191-195). Such occurrences are hugely embarrassing and carry the potential – as in the case of Manning's misinterpretation – for reputational risk. Yet, as Frayn observes in his introductory note, this event in the novel was partly inspired by his own experiences. Confiding that he "even once or twice did a bit of interpreting" but "wasn't very good at it" (Frayn 2015: xiii), he adds that his "first effort was at a horrible drunken Soviet banquet marking the end of our stay in 1956," where he interpreted a speech by a visiting French scientist into English, rather than into

Russian. Unlike Manning, who was made aware of his mistake immediately, Frayn only realised much later; fortunately, he adds that “not that anyone, at that stage in the evening, had appeared to notice” (Frayn 2015: xiii). For Manning, however, there is to be no deliverance from his poor performance. As his literal transit into police custody symbolises, the situation is arguably emblematic of his own complex and blurred relationship with Proctor-Gould and, by extension, with the wider Soviet context.

6. Conclusion

Through analysing the changing status of the interpreter protagonist over the course of Frayn’s second novel, the three instances highlighted in this article have examined how Paul Manning was recruited, noting the power differential exemplified by the unbalanced professional relationship between Manning and Proctor-Gould, as well as the consequent blurring of spheres when Manning is called upon to interpret in Proctor-Gould’s personal life. It also notes the challenges caused by Manning’s general lack of professionalism and his ensuing inability to deal with challenges relating to his shifting role and uncertain status. In terms of contributing to the scholarly literature on interpreters in fiction, this analysis provides a portrait of an unqualified *ad hoc* interpreter, where interpreting in commercial, professional, and personal settings become merged, with far-reaching consequences. Building on this study, further investigations could therefore focus on the depiction of interpreters in other fictional English-language works set in the Soviet Union, as well as contrasting these findings with similar works of Russian literature set in the Soviet period and which also feature translators and interpreters as principal protagonists.

In sum, given its grounding in the Soviet reality as experienced by Frayn himself, as well as the author’s commitment to offering a literary snapshot of the Soviet Union as he first encountered it in the mid-20th century, the study has presented relevant external perspectives on how, via the activity of interpreting between Russian and English, an Englishman navigated the complexities of life in a society very different to his own.

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in relation to this research.

Ethics Statement

The author(s) confirm that this study was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled