

MORE THAN WORDS: ROBERT BURNS IN ARMENIAN TRANSLATION THROUGH RUSSIAN

KRISTINE DADYAN*

<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3475-5888>

BRUSOV STATE UNIVERSITY

ANUSH SEDRAKYAN**

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1667-0410>

YEREVAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Abstract: This article examines the Russian and Armenian translations of selected poems by Robert Burns, focusing on the versions produced by Samuil Marshak and Vahagn Davtyan. Rather than evaluating the translations in terms of fidelity to the source text, the study approaches them as instances of cultural reinterpretation shaped by distinct literary traditions, historical circumstances and aesthetic values. Particular attention is paid to the role of indirect translation, as Davtyan's Armenian versions were produced not from the Scottish originals but through Marshak's Russian translations. Drawing on a comparative analysis of several well-known poems, including *Comin thro' the Rye*, *Wha is that at my Bower-door?*, *Song — (O Whistle, and I'll Come to Ye, My Lad)*, *The Joyful Widower*, *For a' That and a' That* and *John Barleycorn*, the article demonstrates how poetic meaning is transformed as texts move across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The analysis reveals that Burns's poems acquire different tonal, ethical and symbolic dimensions in Russian and Armenian. Marshak's translations tend to foreground musicality, emotional immediacy and the conventions of Russian lyric poetry, while Davtyan's versions reinterpret Burns through Armenian cultural perceptions of memory, fate, endurance and collective experience. The study argues that translation should be understood not merely as the transfer of meaning between languages but as a process of cultural mediation and poetic recreation. In this context, the Russian and Armenian translations of Burns do not represent different degrees of accuracy but different ways of reading and reimagining the poet. The article concludes that the enduring vitality of Burns's poetry lies in its ability to sustain multiple cultural lives while remaining recognisably its own. Translation, therefore, emerges not as a distortion of the original but as a mode of literary continuity through which poems acquire new voices, new meanings and new cultural homes.

Keywords: Robert Burns; literary translation; indirect translation; cultural transfer; Samuil Marshak; Vahagn Davtyan; comparative translation studies

* christin.dadian@gmail.com

** annsedrakyam@ysu.am



1. Introduction

In the Soviet Union, Western authors were selected for translation not only on the basis of their literary merit, but also according to ideological considerations, established traditions, translators' personal preferences and the prevailing political climate. As Lefevere argues, literary works do not enter a target culture in an unmediated form. Through processes of rewriting, translators, editors, critics, anthologists and publishers adapt and manipulate texts to conform to dominant ideological and poetological currents (Lefevere 1992: 6). Within the Soviet literary system, this mechanism contributed to the preferential selection and promotion of foreign authors whose works could be interpreted as sympathetic to the working classes, critical of social inequality or oppositional toward established political, religious and economic institutions.

The ideological framing of translated literature extended beyond the translated text itself. As Kaloh Vid notes, one of the principal objectives of Soviet translation policy was to present foreign authors in ways that aligned them with Soviet ideological values and to promote officially sanctioned interpretations of their works. Translations of foreign literature were frequently accompanied by explanatory prefaces intended to guide readers toward the 'correct' interpretation of the text. These paratexts formed an important mechanism of ideological mediation, shaping the reception of foreign authors and, in some cases, assuming a significance that rivalled or even surpassed that of the translation itself (Kaloh Vid 2011: 89).

When a poet's voice was considered excessively provocative or politically sensitive, translators could smooth over or soften its sharper elements. Yet censorship did not operate exclusively through omission, prohibition, or direct textual intervention. Within Soviet literary culture more broadly, it could also give rise to indirect strategies of expression. Loseff (1984: x) conceptualizes "Aesopian language" as a literary system that developed under the influence of censorship, enabling communication between author and reader while concealing inadmissible content from the censor. Censorship could thus become not only a restrictive force but also a condition shaping literary form and strategies of communication.

The relative freedom afforded to translators could, however, also facilitate intervention in the opposite direction. As Friedberg argues, the official preference for 'free' translation was partly motivated by the fact that it provided a convenient mechanism for censorship and ideologically driven intervention in foreign texts. The doctrine of *vol'nyi perevod* afforded translators considerable latitude in their treatment of the original, allowing omissions, additions, and reformulations that could bring foreign works into closer alignment with Soviet ideological expectations (Friedberg 1997).

At the same time, literary translation in the Soviet Union often attained a remarkably high artistic standard. Western literature was frequently translated with considerable linguistic care and literary sophistication. Yet Soviet translation was rarely a neutral act of linguistic transfer; it was also an act of interpretation and ideological mediation. In fact, the Soviet school of translation may be regarded as one of the strongest and most influential in the world, but it invariably operated at the intersection of artistic creativity and censorship. Brian James Baer attributes the high

status of translation in Russia partly to the multilingualism of the educated elite. The participation of many distinguished writers in translation activities “lent prestige and cultural ‘legitimacy’ to those translated texts” (Baer 2011: 7-8).

Russian functioned as the principal language of interethnic communication in the Soviet Union, while knowledge of Western languages was not always encouraged. Armenia had a strong tradition of Russian studies and many highly qualified specialists in Russian language and literature, whereas experts in English, French, and other Western languages were comparatively few in number. Publishers generally preferred texts that had already been tested and approved. If a work had been translated into Russian, passed censorship, and been accompanied by an ideologically acceptable preface, it was considered a safe candidate for translation into Armenian. In this sense, the Russian translation served as both an ideological filter and a guarantee that the work would withstand further scrutiny by the censorship apparatus. The selection and adaptation of foreign literature in the Soviet Union were instrumental in establishing ideological links between the Western and Soviet literary canons, effectively incorporating foreign texts into Soviet cultural discourse. Yet the Russian text itself was often not merely a translation but also an interpretation (Sherry 2015: 95-96).

As a result, Armenian translators frequently worked not with Burns, Hemingway, or Flaubert directly, but rather with Marshak, Kashkin, or Turgenev's mediated versions of those authors. This practice was not an incidental feature of Soviet translation culture but formed part of an institutionalized system of indirect literary translation. Drawing on archival material, Witt (2013) shows that various forms of indirect translation played a significant role in the construction of the Soviet literary canon, with intermediary texts, particularly *podstrochniki* (interlinear translations), being widely used within Soviet translation practice. She further demonstrates that such practices became institutionalized within the Soviet literary apparatus from the early 1930s and continued throughout the Soviet period (Witt 2017). Natalia Kamovnikova similarly observes that translations into Russian “regularly served as intermediary texts for further translations into other languages of the Soviet Union” (Kamovnikova 2018: 54). The Armenian reception of Robert Burns must therefore be understood within this broader system of indirect translation. In the process of indirect translation, important features of the original — authorial style, dialectal nuances, rhythm, and syntactic particularities — were often diminished or lost. Once these elements had been smoothed out in the Russian version, they tended to disappear altogether in the Armenian translation.

What, then, did Armenian literature, readers and society gain from this process? Here we encounter a striking paradox. Armenian translators were highly accomplished stylists who worked with Russian texts of exceptional literary quality. Through their translations, they produced remarkable works of Armenian prose and poetry that enriched the national literary tradition. In many cases, these translations were not mere replicas of the originals but literary works in their own right. Rather than simply reproducing a foreign text, they reimagined it within the expressive possibilities of the Armenian language, creating works that could stand on their own as significant achievements of Armenian literature.

In the Soviet Union, the body of Western literature available in Armenian was not, strictly speaking, Western literature as such, but rather Western literature refracted through Soviet publishing practices and translated into Armenian. This corpus played a significant role in shaping literary taste, influenced the development of Armenian literature during the Soviet period, and fostered a sense of engagement with Western cultural values. At the same time, access to those values remained mediated through Russian and conditioned by the ideological priorities of Soviet cultural policy. While it appeared to open a window onto the West, it often presented Western literary and intellectual traditions in ideologically reframed forms, thereby limiting Armenian readers' exposure to those traditions in their original cultural and historical contexts. From the perspective of contemporary translation studies, indirect translation, understood as "the historical process of translation from an intermediary version" (Pym 2011: 80), should not be regarded merely as a deficiency or distortion, but rather as a historically conditioned mode of cultural transfer.

2. The Afterlife of Burns: From Scotland to Armenia and Beyond

There are poets who arrive without 'knocking at the door.' They enter literature and begin to speak as though they have lived there for centuries. Robert Burns is one of them. At that moment, the translator is neither host nor guest, but a neighbour, listening to the voice through a thin wall and wondering whether to translate the words themselves or the breath that can be heard between them.

In the case examined here, two such neighbours are Samuil Marshak and Vahagn Davtyan, who listened to the same Burns, though the walls through which they heard him were different. Marshak encountered Burns from within the Russian poetic tradition, while Davtyan approached him through Armenian poetry and, importantly, through Marshak's Russian translations. The fact that both translators were themselves established poets is particularly significant. As Mata Buil (2016) argues, poet-translators may function as a "double link" in the literary system: they introduce foreign poets to new audiences while their translations also interact with their own poetic production. In this process, poet-translators may both assimilate elements of the original poet's style and introduce marks of their own style into the translation. The Burns–Marshak–Davtyan trajectory therefore involves not simply the transmission of a text across three languages, but successive acts of poetic mediation shaped by translators who were poets in their own right.

This becomes particularly apparent in the different ways in which Marshak and Davtyan make Burns speak within their respective literary traditions. At times, translation appears to demand precision. Yet Burns prefers to be sung. Marshak sings him as though he wishes Burns to become his own — almost Russian, marked by clarity of intonation and directness. His role in shaping the Russian reception of Burns extended far beyond the production of individual translations. Kaloh Vid (2018) shows that his translations dominated the Russian reception of Burns for decades and remained the versions most frequently republished even after the end of the Soviet period. His interpretive choices consequently played an important role in shaping how

generations of Russian readers encountered Burns. Indeed, Marshak's translations were so influential that they effectively created a distinctly Russian Burns, to the extent that, in a well-known Russian saying, "We say Marshak and we mean Robert Burns; we say Robert Burns and we mean Marshak" (Kaloh Vid 2011: 166). Marshak's achievement lay not merely in translating Burns but in recreating him within the Russian literary tradition. Through his characteristic clarity, directness, and lyrical fluency, he produced a version of Burns that felt remarkably familiar to Russian readers and became inseparable from their understanding of the Scottish poet.

However, Davtyan sings him differently. His approach to Burns can also be situated within his broader practice as a poet-translator. As Manukyan (2024) observes, Davtyan regarded the translator's own poetic individuality and the affinity between poet and translator as important conditions of poetic translation. Particularly relevant here is his conviction that a skilled poet-translator could produce a work of genuine artistic value even when working through an intermediary rather than directly from the original. This position is especially significant in the present case, since Davtyan encountered Burns through Marshak's Russian versions. He does not, however, simply reproduce Marshak's Burns. Rather, he allows Burns's Scottish voice to resonate through the Armenian text, preserving traces of a cultural and poetic world beyond the target culture. The result is not a fully domesticated Burns, but a poet who remains recognizably Other even as he speaks in Armenian.

In comparing these translations, we are not seeking to decide which of them is right. Rather, we witness the same voice living two different lives. In one, it becomes part of a larger literary conversation, where restraint, clarity and the reader's trust are of paramount importance. In the other, it enters a culture in which the word itself has always carried a special weight.

We are speaking of what happens to a poet when he is truly loved. And perhaps, too, of the fact that translation is not a bridge, but an encounter along the way — a meeting place where everyone arrives with their own accent and leaves, however slightly, transformed.

Vahagn Davtyan most likely encountered Burns through William Saroyan, who borrowed the titles of two of Burns's poems for his own works: *My Heart's in the Highlands* and *Comin Thro' the Rye*. Yet this was more than a simple literary acquaintance. Yet this was more than a simple literary acquaintance. It was an encounter between kindred poetic temperaments, whose affinities transcended the geographical and cultural distances that separated them.

Davtyan saw in Burns not so much Scotland as a chronicle of rural life and experience. He was drawn to Burns not because of the lofty aesthetics of his poetry, but because Burns speaks of human beings as though they have already endured catastrophe and yet have not lost their voice. That, perhaps, was what mattered most. Burns does not weep — he sings.

Saroyan had already demonstrated that simplicity is the ultimate form of depth. He showed that the language of loss can be luminous and that memory need not be vengeful. And Davtyan, even if he never quite took Saroyan by the hand, breathed the same air — the air of a writer who had managed to remain alive in every essential sense and therefore felt compelled to speak with clarity. If Saroyan is the prose of a lost

home, then Davtyan is the poetry of accumulated echoes. And Burns is the spring at which both could quench their thirst.

Literary influences have long ceased to be mere ‘borrowings’, they have become part of a living bloodstream through which nations converse with one another in lines of verse and poets recognize their kindred spirits across the centuries.

William Saroyan is Armenian not merely because he was born into an Armenian family, but because his writing dwells simultaneously in loss and in song. That is the key. Saroyan is the writer who speaks in a simple, unburdened voice about things heavier than stone. And it is here that he encounters Robert Burns.

Burns is not merely a ‘Scottish poet.’ He is an Orpheus of the fields. His poetry does not belong to the salon but to the open landscape, where human beings stand alongside the wind, labour, and memory. In Burns, Saroyan recognises something of himself—not in a stylistic sense, but in an existential one. Burns writes, “*My Heart’s in the Highlands*,” and this is not a matter of geography. It is an anthology of exile. The heart is not where the body resides; it remains in the place that has been lost forever. For Burns, the Highlands are neither Scotland nor Armenia. They are humanity’s lost home, the place where people have not yet forgotten how to be simple and kind. For Armenians, this line from Burns becomes a prayer. Saroyan does not merely borrow it; he reclaims it as his own. Burns’s ‘field of rye’ is a meeting place for lovers. Saroyan’s field, by contrast, is time itself, stretched out like a harvest season. The rye field becomes a space through which a person walks as through the course of a life. Some things break, others endure, and some leave their mark upon the palms of the hands. Saroyan transforms Burns’s folklore into everyday life. He suggests that for the ordinary person, life is not a heroic journey but a walk through the days, where every moment remains alive, even when it appears insignificant.

One of the most distinctive voices in American literature, J. D. Salinger, also takes up this same image, though by then it has already become part of a broader cultural inheritance. For Salinger, the rye field becomes a place of falling. A child may fall. Innocence may disappear. Growing up is no longer a process of growth but a loss of balance. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, the adolescent protagonist Holden Caulfield wants to stand at the edge of the field so that he can prevent someone from falling. This is no longer Burns, nor even Saroyan; it is the last person who still believes that it is possible to save another human being.

Burns sings. Saroyan remembers. Salinger keeps watch.

This is a shared human quality — a person standing at the centre of the world and asking: Is it possible to remain alive without becoming cruel? Is it possible to remain simple without becoming naïve? Is it possible to keep one’s heart in the Highlands when the Highlands themselves no longer exist? Literature answers neither yes nor no. It answers with a song, and each poet sings that song in his own voice.

3. Cultural Mediation and Poetic Reinterpretation in the Translations of Robert Burns

Vahagn Davtyan translated Robert Burns's poetry not from the original, but through an intermediary language — Russian. Burns was translated by many Russian translators, yet Davtyan chose to work from the versions of Samuil Marshak. In 1977, the publishing house *Sovetsky pisatel* issued a separate volume of Burns's poetry in Davtyan's Armenian translation under the title *My Heart's in the Highlands*. The collection contains twenty-two poems by the Scottish poet. In what follows, we shall focus on six of them.

One of the most delightful of Burns's poems is *Comin thro' the Rye* (1782). This is not a moralizing poem. There is a smile in it, but not an innocent one. Written in Scots dialect, it speaks in a language that is vivid and alive. In this poem, the unspoken carries greater weight than the event itself. The kiss is neither a tragedy nor a transgression. It is neither romantic lyricism nor licentiousness, but rather a form of rural philosophy and bodily freedom. Bodies meet by chance, the sky sends down rain and a young woman's skirt is soaked. Burns makes a remarkable poetic move: he veils the subject in mist. It is not an 'I' and a 'you' who encounter one another, but bodies themselves.

The Russian text embodies the mindset of a different culture. Here there is an observer, there is judgement, and there is explanation. The girl is cold, she is shivering. This is no longer a playful encounter of bodies but a social scene. In Burns's poem, the kiss is a natural occurrence; in Marshak's translation, it becomes an event that demands interpretation.

Take, for example, the line: “Что с него возьмёшь!” (p. 351)¹ [Eng.: “What can you expect from him!”].²

This is the Russian formula of fatalism and indulgence. Burns knows nothing of it. He offers no excuses; such things simply do not interest him. The Russian text draws the poem closer to the realm of morality, but it does so subtly, even tenderly. It does not condemn; it sympathizes. And in this lies an entire Russian tradition: human beings are weak, life is difficult, but what can one do? This is no longer Burns; it is Russian Chekhov.

The Armenian text, translated from the Russian, is the most restrained and intimate of the three. Paradoxically, it is also the most physical: wet stockings, a trembling body, chattering teeth.

In the lines “...Ի՞նչ կարող ես պահանջել.

Եվ ի՞նչ հոգին է մեր ամենքի...» [Eng.: “What can you demand? / And what concern is it of any of us?”] (p. 5)³ society makes its presence felt through the

¹ All English source texts and Russian translations discussed in this article are taken from Burns's bilingual volume *Stikhotvoreniya* [Poems], compiled by I. M. Levidova (1982). To avoid repetitive bibliographic references, only page numbers will be provided in the citations.

² All English translations of Russian and Armenian quotations are the authors' own unless otherwise stated.

collective voice — we, all of us. If Burns suggests that the world need not know, the Armenian text suggests that the world would do better not to interfere. This is neither the bodily freedom found in Burns's poem nor the sympathy of the Russian version. It is an ethic of silent consent: do not speak, do not look, do not judge. Let the night and the field conceal everything. If we are to be honest, the Scottish text is the freest, the Russian the most humane, and the Armenian the most restrained. In Burns, the body exists before sin; in Marshak's translation, the body appears under the gaze of society; for Davtyan, the body exists within tradition.

Burns laughs. Marshak sighs. Davtyan remains silent.

Why is this so? Because translation is always a culture's self-portrait. An eighteenth-century Scot could allow himself a kiss without confession. A twentieth-century Russian felt compelled to explain it. An Armenian poet felt compelled to conceal it. And none of them is lying. They are simply speaking the truth in the language of their own shame and their own freedom. Burns writes, "*need a body cry*" (p. 350), Marshak responds, «Что с него возьмёшь!» (p. 351), [Eng.: "*What can you expect from him!*"], Davtyan answers, «Եվ ի՞նչ հոգսն է մեր ամենփ...» (p. 5), [Eng.: "*And what concern is it of any of us?*"]. Three cultures, and one eternal question: who has the right to know that the body was happy?

One of Burns's best-known poems is *Wha is that at my Bower-door?* (1783). It is more than a courtship but a verbal duel. Burns writes in Scots rather than in standard English, and this is important. As Smith (2007) emphasizes, Burns was highly self-aware about linguistic nuances, an awareness that is important to understanding his artistic achievement. Expressions such as "*wha*," "*bower*," "*gae your gate*," and "*ye'se nae*" give the poem its distinctly Scots linguistic character. There is no pathos here, yet the poem is charged with eroticism. The sense of intimacy arises not so much from the relationship between the characters as from the poem's intonation. Structurally, the poem follows the pattern of antiphonal singing: the woman poses a question or expresses a concern, and Findlay responds each time with the same formula:

Եթե ես քո դուռը դուրս քուց անեմ...
«Բա՛յ ց արա», - ասում է Ֆինլեյլը: (p. 11-12)

[Eng.: *If I open the door to you...*
‘Open it,’ says Findlay.”]

The repetitions are a crucial element of the poem. They dismiss the heroine's objections and create an effect of relentless insistence. Findlay does not persuade; he persists. The original contains no explicit erotic imagery. Yet there is night, a door, an awakening from sleep. This is eroticism that is implied rather than stated — anticipated, theatricalised, and unabashed. Findlay is both forceful and seductive, while the woman neither forbids nor rejects him; instead, she tests him. In the original, Findlay exerts a certain pressure, repeatedly asserting his desire. Burns writes: "*Indeed*

³ All Armenian translations discussed in this article are taken from Vahagn Davtyan's translation volume *Im sirte lernerum e* (1977). The references to these texts will be indicated by page number only.

will I, quo' Findlay.—” (p. 270). In the Russian translation, this becomes: «*Могу!*» [Eng.: “I can”], «*He дам!*» [Eng.: “I won’t give”], «*Найду!*» [Eng.: “I’ll find”] — *сказал Фундлей* [Eng.: “said Findlay”] (p. 271). The Armenian version reads: «*Կարն ի եմ*», «*Չե՛մ թողնիք*», «*Կգտնեմ*», — *սունւմ է Ֆինլէյը* (p. 11-12), [Eng.: “I can,” “I won’t let,” “I’ll find” — “says Findlay”].

The English — or, more accurately, the Scottish — text has no plot in the conventional sense. There is pressure. The female voice expresses fear, prohibition, and conditions. Findlay neither explains nor persuades; he simply affirms the inevitability of what is about to happen.

Indeed will I, quo' Findlay
Let me in, quo' Findlay
Let it pass, quo' Findlay (p. 270).

The Scots dialect plays a crucial role here: it is earthy, bold and unapologetic. The poem’s eroticism arises not from imagery but from voice and repetition. In Burns’s poem, the woman is not a victim; she is the one who directs the game, the one who sets the terms. Burns creates a rare model of erotic equilibrium in which ‘yes’ and ‘no’ coexist at the same time.

The Russian text follows a different poetics. The dialect has disappeared, along with the acoustic monotony of the original. In its place we find a clearly defined rhythm, dramatic clarity and a distinctly theatrical dialogue. The Russian Findlay emerges as a recognizable literary figure: bold, shameless and slightly comic. He is a man carried away by his own enthusiasm. Cheerful, audacious and somewhat comical, he resembles the hero of a popular urban folk song. The Russian translation makes the encounter more concrete and immediate through temporal markers such as “*all night long*” and “*until dawn*.” The female voice becomes more defensive, while Findlay grows more resolute. The delicate equilibrium between the two is somewhat compromised. Vahagn Davtyan’s Armenian translation is based not on Burns’s original poem but on the Russian text, and this is of crucial importance. What we encounter is not Burns’s poem itself, but an Armenian interpretation of a Russian translation of Burns. Elements that had already been weakened in the Russian version disappear altogether in Armenian. Repetition ceases to be hypnotic, and the dialogue loses its acoustic uniformity. Davtyan’s Armenian text is more literary, smoother, and more polished. Even its conversational intonations seem refined. Burns’s erotic boldness yields to poetic decorum. The ending is particularly revealing. In the Russian version, we read: ...

Молчи до крышки гробовой!
«Идет!» - сказал Фундлей (p. 271).

[Eng.: “*Keep it secret until the day you die!*
‘Done!’ said Findlay.”]

In the Armenian text, we read: «*Դու պիտի լռես, լռես անհաւքէտ*» / «*Թի՛սի՛ զաւ*», — *սունւմ է Ֆինլէյը*» (p. 12), [Eng. “*You must remain silent, remain silent forever.*” /

“*High five*” — says Findlay]. Here a note of fatality enters the poem; the exchange takes on the character of an oath. This is no longer a playful conspiracy between lovers but an existential promise. In the Armenian version, Findlay is no longer shameless; he becomes a symbol — of the human being as fate, as a recurring choice. The heroine, too, is more restrained, less ironic, and more guarded. In Burns’s poem, the two protagonists engage one another as equals. The Russian version turns their encounter into a performance, while Davtyan’s interpretation becomes a dialogue infused with moral reflection.

Three versions, three cultural codes. In Burns’s text, poetics takes precedence: sound, rhythm, and repetition. The Russian translation foregrounds character, humour, and theatricality. The Armenian translation privileges symbol and meaning. In Burns’s poem, the inevitable “yes” unfolds gradually through the course of the night. In the Russian version, it becomes the triumph of a bold and determined man, though not without a touch of irony. In the Armenian text, it is transformed into a man’s promise. What changes in these translations is not merely the language, but the very understanding of desire, of words, and of responsibility.

For the purposes of comparative analysis, we are presented with a rare and valuable text: *Song — (O whistle, and I’ll come to ye, my lad)* (1793). The translations by Marshak and Davtyan are not merely translations, but three distinct cultural manifestations of the same lyric poem. Burns’s poem is a work of exceptionally simple vocabulary and extraordinarily subtle poetics. Its power lies in its language of trust, its form of a vow, and its expression of intimacy. It is precisely for this reason that the translations become interpretations of the poem rather than mere linguistic reproductions of it.

Burns’s poem is built upon three fundamental principles. The repeated line, “*O Whistle, and I’ll Come to Ye, My Lad,*” is not merely a refrain; it is a speech act, carrying something of the force and enchantment of a spell. It brings together a signal — the whistle — and social risk in the form of parents, and the Church. Repetition becomes a means of sustaining resolve. Let us also consider the poetics of the word «*uuulu*» (p. 6), [Eng.: “*as though*”]. In this poem, pretence is not deception but a mode of affection, a way of expressing love.

*Արհ՛, քայլ ասու ինձ մոտ չես գալիս,
Ասու թէ իսկի՛ ինձ մոտ չես գալիս:* (p. 6)

[Eng. “*Come, but as though you were not coming to me,
As though you were not coming to me at all.*”]

There is love in these lines, though it is veiled. This is not romantic rebellion but peasant defiance, almost a national strategy. It is a necessity, a means of preserving affection and human relationships. Burns’s Scots dialect is not a decorative device; it is the language of a community in which love is expressed through action rather than confession:

Թե եկեղեցում հանդիպենք, նայի՛ր,
Իմ ընկերուհուն, ոչ թե ինձ նայիր: (p. 6)

[Eng. “If we meet in church, be sure to look
At my companion, and not at me.”]

This is a minimal yet sufficient act of expression. Burns’s poem is a lyric of restrained boldness, in which love and desire are articulated through instructions.

In the Russian translation, instruction gives way to heightened expressiveness. Judging by the conventions of twentieth-century Russian style, it is most likely an adaptation intended for singing, which means that the poem has been fundamentally transformed. Burns’s line “*tent when ye come*” (p. 308), which literally means “*be careful when you come*,” is rendered by Marshak as «Но в оба гляди, пробираясь ко мне» (p. 309), [Eng. “*But keep your eyes open when you’re making your way to me*”]. Here, Burns’s caution is transformed into a sense of adventure and suspense. The Russian text systematically raises the emotional temperature. In «Ты свисти — тебя не заставлю я ждать» (p. 309), [Eng. “*Just whistle, and I won’t make you wait*”], the anxiety of waiting gives way to impatience. In Burns’s poem, the heroine promises that she will come; in the Russian version, she hurries toward the meeting. This is a significant shift in meaning: determination is replaced by emotional impulse. Burns reinforces the song-like quality of the stanza through a network of recurring long /i:/ sounds (*me, wee, be*), particularly at line endings, producing a musical effect that complements the playful and intimate tone of the poem. The drama of secrecy is preserved, the refrain is highly musical and the text reads with ease and lyric fluency, which means that it remains alive as poetry.

What is lost in Russian and Armenian, however, is Burns’s strategy of concealing love as a cultural code, along with the irony embedded in the dialect. The Russian translation turns Burns into a romantic poet viewed through the prism of Russian lyricism. Here, feeling is more important than the manner in which it is concealed. The Armenian text creates a different impression. It comes close to a folk ballad: «Հիւ ծառի շուքը գտի՛ր, ցանկալի՛ս...» (p. 6), [Eng. “*Find the shade of the old tree, my beloved...*”]. There, where Burns employs functional points of reference (back-yett, back-stile), the Armenian text introduces a visual landscape: ...

Ու շատ վախեցիր, որ մի անհոգի,
Քեզ գրկիս միջից հանկարծ չպոկի...: (p. 6)

[Eng. “*And be very afraid lest some heartless soul
Should suddenly tear you from my embrace...*”].

The climactic sentence in the Armenian translation does not closely resemble its counterpart in Burns’s poem. It is an interpretation, yet one that remains true to the poem’s inner tension. What in Burns is concealed within social anxiety is brought to the surface here through bodily imagery. Unlike the Russian translation («не смотри», «не со мной говори», «идёшь не ко мне» [Eng. “*don’t look*,” “*talk not to me*,”

“*coming not to me*”]), the Armenian version carefully preserves the code of secrecy («Արի՛, բայց ասես ինձ մոտ չես գալիս», «ոչ թե ինձ նայիր», «չասես» [Eng. “*Come, but as though you are not coming to me,*” “*look not at me,*” “*don’t say*”]). At the same time, however, it infuses that code with an Eastern plaintiveness. Among the strengths of this translation are its heightened emotional intensity and its preservation of the dramatic element inherent in concealing a love affair. Davtyan’s translation is distinctive because it is shaped by the traditions of Armenian song. What it lacks, however, is the lightness of Burns’s poem; in its place stands a more pronounced sense of drama.

Burns suggests that to love, one must master the art of discretion. The Russian translation becomes an impatient declaration of love. In the Armenian version, love becomes fate.

Particular attention should be paid to the poem *The Joyful Widower* (1890s). What we encounter here is not merely a set of texts in different languages, but a chain of cultural transformations in which each link alters not only the language, but also the intonation, humour, ethics, and even the metaphysics of the poem.

In this poem, Burns is a cruel jester, a folk moralist whose smile is so broad that one can almost see every last tooth. The English text possesses the simplicity of a ballad, a coarse, almost tavern-like humour, and an irony entirely free of remorse. The close relationship between lyric and song is a significant feature of Burns’s poetic practice. As McCue (2012: 69–70) demonstrates, Burns’s songwriting was closely connected to melody, with the structure, rhythm, and cadence of a tune playing an important role in the creation of the lyrics written to accompany it. The lyrical speaker offers no justification. He is happy. His happiness is morally questionable, yet entirely sincere. That is where the poem derives its power. “*Now, now her life is ended.*” The repetition of “*now, now*” is more than a rhythmic device. It is almost song and dance. And the culmination comes in the final image: the wife is in heaven, yet her voice...

*For why,—methinks I hear her voice
Tearing the clouds asunder.* (p. 382)

This is not a domestic quarrel but a cosmic conflict between characters. Burns’s protagonist does not suffer, repent, or philosophize. He is a ‘joyful widower,’ a figure whose very title sounds indecent. The Russian text, however, is already a different work. Noticeable shifts occur, including changes in dates and other details. In Burns’s poem, the date is the fourteenth of November; in the translation, it becomes the beginning of May. This is not accidental but a deliberate alteration. November is cold and muddy. In the Russian text, it is May, a choice that introduces an ironic tone and turns the scene into a parody of a wedding. The protagonist also becomes gentler. Burns writes, “*She made me weary of my life*” (p. 382), whereas Marshak translates this as «*He раз мечтал повеситься*» (p. 383), [Eng.: “*More than once I dreamed of hanging myself*”]. In the Russian version, the protagonist complains, shares his suffering, and almost seeks sympathy, whereas Burns laughs. Burns’s poem ends with a note of mockery in which the protagonist openly delights. The Russian translation, by contrast, concludes with a cautious joke: «*Боюсь, что черт не принял в ад / Моей*

жены покойной» (p. 383), [Eng. “*I fear the devil did not admit / My late wife into hell*”]. The word «боюсь» [Eng. “*I fear*”] introduces doubt and a measure of propriety. Russian culture does not permit the protagonist to be entirely shameless. This is no longer a mock-ballad but a satirical confession. The humour remains, but it has been softened, and the protagonist becomes almost sympathetic to the reader. The Armenian translation is a tragicomedy of fate. And it is here that the analysis becomes most interesting. Davtyan’s translation is mediated through the Russian text and therefore loses some of the audacity of the original, yet it acquires an existential density of its own. The movement from humour to fate is evident from the very first lines: «Ես կհնձունի լի չար ժամի» (p. 18), [Eng. “*I took a wife in an ill-fated hour*”]. This is the language of fatality. The marriage is presented not as a mistake or a foolish decision, but as an encounter with an ill-fated destiny. The protagonist no longer mocks; he is a man broken by circumstance. The Armenian translation is also saturated with Christian vocabulary: «Սուրբ հայրն աղոթք արարի» (p. 19), [Eng. “*The holy father said a prayer*”]. What we encounter here is a ritual world in which the protagonist’s fear of hell becomes visible. Where Burns mocks the devil, the Armenian text introduces a genuine metaphysical anxiety.

«Հավատացե՛ք, ես վերնից

Ծաւնո՞ք ձայն եմ լսու՛մ» (p. 19), [Eng. “*Believe me, from above / I hear a familiar voice*”], make it clear that the protagonist is no longer joking. This is almost a confession. The thunder ceases to function as a caricature and becomes a manifestation of memory, guilt, fate, and the voice of the past.

Each of these translations is distinctive, shaped by its own cultural code. Burns continues to be read because his poetry allows for multiple modes of interpretation. He wrote not about a whistle itself, but about the language of signs that lovers customarily share. And each translator — Russian or Armenian — has added a personal intonation to that language. This is not a distortion of the original, but the highest form of fidelity to one’s own national poetic tradition.

When examining the Armenian translation of Robert Burns’s *For a’ That and a’ That* (1795), the presence of the Russian intermediary text becomes evident in both the poem’s rhythm and semantic structure. This mediating process introduces a number of noticeable shifts, as the Russian cultural and literary context inevitably influences the translator’s choices. Although these modifications may enhance the poem’s accessibility for the target readership, they simultaneously distance the translation from certain nuances of Burns’s original. The first significant point of divergence appears in the title itself. Burns’s *For a’ That and a’ That* was rendered, through the Russian version, as ‘*Honest Poverty*’ (Честная бедность; and similarly Ազնիվ աղքատություն in Armenian). This change not only signals the translation’s reliance on the Russian intermediary text but also redirects attention away from the original title’s rhythmic and refrain-like function. At the same time, it reflects Vahagn Davtyan’s preference for a more explicit rhetorical statement, replacing Burns’s understated emphasis with a title that foregrounds the poem’s social and ethical message. Despite these departures, both the Russian and Armenian translations preserve the poem’s underlying rhythmic organisation. This fidelity is particularly evident in the treatment of Burns’s recurring lines, where the translators strive to retain

not only the semantic content but also the essential rhythmic movement of the original. The repeated refrains are reproduced in a manner that closely approximates Burns's metrical pattern, demonstrating a conscious effort to preserve the poem's formal core even as other aspects undergo cultural and linguistic transformation.

Burns's *John Barleycorn* (1782) occupies a unique position in its Russian and Armenian translations. It is not merely a source text; it is both victim and victor at once, much like John Barleycorn himself. He is killed, processed, distilled, and then returns in an entirely different language, rhythm, and national mythology. *John Barleycorn* is not so much a poem as an agricultural myth disguised as a song. From a Romantic perspective, it is not 'poetry' but ritual. Burns writes as though language itself has grown out of the soil. The apparent simplicity of the narrative is deceptive. Beneath it lies a cyclical vision of the world in which death is not a tragedy but a necessary stage of existence. John is killed not out of malice, but because that is how time is structured. The bones, the blood, and the millstones are not metaphors but agricultural implements. The final lines of the poem are not a hymn to drunkenness; they are a wink at fate: you may break me and grind me down, yet I shall still bring you joy. Burns is not a moralist. He is a shepherd of the cosmos.

In the Russian text, Marshak introduces an important yet almost imperceptible shift. John is no longer a force of nature but a character. He is no longer the grain of barley that embodies a deeper truth, but a popular figure, almost a folkloric hero. In the original, John is simply 'he' — not a fully individuated personality. In the Russian translation, however, "he" becomes a "good fellow," a "dashing fighter," an "old man." This is a clear example of humanization: «Славный Джон», «боец лихой», «старый Джон», «покойный Джон при жизни молодец» (pp. 36-41), [Eng: "Gallant John," "dashing fighter," "old John," "The late John was a fine fellow in life"].

The Russian translation places particular emphasis on John's heroism. His death becomes an act of heroism, while his enemies are cast as villains, even as class adversaries. The widow's song serves chiefly as a source of consolation. What the Russian text loses, however, is the cosmic coldness of the original, the mechanical rhythm of agricultural time, and Burns's characteristic wry smile. The Russian version is beautiful, musical, and persuasive, yet it moralises the poem. It explains. In Burns's poem, events simply take their course.

And this is where things become truly interesting — namely, in the Armenian translation. We already know that the Armenian text was translated, not from Burns's original but from the Russian version, and this is readily apparent. It is not the shadow of the original, but the shadow of a shadow — one that has nevertheless acquired an originality of its own.

In the Armenian translation, the ballad gives way to the parable. John is no longer so much a hero as a martyr. The language is expressive, marked by an inner warmth and an almost soul-stirring epic quality. Particular attention should be paid to such words as 'spirit,' 'hope and faith,' and 'heart':

Նրանց հոգու վիշտն է այրում,
 Տալիս հույս ու հավատ,
 Եվ սրտի մեջ որբնայրում
 Երգում է նա զվարթ: (p. 22)

[Eng. “It burns away the sorrow of their souls,
Giving hope and faith,
And in the heart of every widow
It sings cheerfully”].

John is no longer a seed, nor merely a hero; he becomes the bearer of a people’s vital force. What disappears in the Armenian translation is Burns’s neutrality, his irony as a philosophical outlook and the cycle of life as a natural law. In their place emerges an ethics of survival.

The paradox is that Burns would probably have liked these translations. *John Barleycorn* exists precisely in order to be ground, milled, brewed, and drunk — and translated. The Russian translation turns it into a drinking song. The Armenian translation turns it into a song of courage. But Burns’s *John Barleycorn* is a song of the earth. And if we are to raise a glass, let it be not to the ‘accuracy’ of translation, but to the fact that *John Barleycorn* has drowned in neither Russian nor Armenian.

4. Conclusion

Robert Burns’s translations are not replicas but dialogues between cultures, each of which hears in his poetry a voice that feels intimately its own. As a poet of song and the folk tradition, Burns lends himself to multiple interpretations. His texts are not ‘closed’; they are open works, capable of taking on different shades and meanings as they move across languages and cultures.

Samuil Marshak made Burns part of the Russian poetic heritage, not as a foreign classic, but as a living presence within Russian culture itself. His translations deliberately depart from literal accuracy in favour of musicality, clarity, and a distinctly popular intonation. As a result, Burns in Russia became not an object of philological inquiry, but a poetic experience capable of speaking directly to the reader. Vahagn Davtyan, translating Burns through the intermediary language of Russian, continued this process, though within a different cultural framework. His version does not seek to reproduce the original source text; rather, it reinterprets it through an Armenian sensibility shaped by notions of fate and memory.

In this multi-stage process — from the Scottish original to the Russian translation and then to the Armenian text — one form of accuracy is inevitably lost, yet another is gained: cultural accuracy. Each translation reflects not only the meaning of the poem, but also the state of a language, the spirit of an age, and the experience of a nation. For this reason, the search for a single ‘correct’ version is ultimately misguided. What matters more is understanding how one poem can live many different lives.

Burns remains recognisable in all of these incarnations precisely because his poetry endures translation as it endures an ordeal. Its tone may change, its genre may shift, and even its underlying philosophy may be recast, yet it does not disappear. In this case, translation is not a distortion but a form of continuation — a distinctive means of giving poems a new memory, a new home, and a new voice.

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Conflict of Interests

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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.