Reconfiguring the sensible through translation
Patterns of “deauthorization” in post-war Soviet Estonia

Daniele Monticelli

The article investigates the ambivalent role of translation as a means of radical social and cultural change in a totalitarian situation such as the earlier Sovietization of Estonia after WWII. Translation becomes, on the one hand, an empowered and dominant activity in the establishment of the new ideological and cultural values; but it functions, at the same time, as a disempowering and marginalizing kind of writing to which writers suspicious to the new regime and silenced as authors are now confined. An original combination of Jacques Rancière’s notion of “distribution of the sensible” [partage du sensible] and Michel Foucault’s understanding of the “author-function,” is adopted in the article to describe all this as a process of deauthorization, thus unraveling the relation between authorial agency and political authority, the rationale behind hegemonic discursive attitudes toward different literary activities within a given social order, and political interventions in literature and culture under totalitarian rule.

Keywords: translation, deauthorization, distribution of the sensible, author-function, censorship, Soviet Estonia

Introduction

This article addresses questions that are central to this special issue, by positioning them within the context of an ongoing research project on translation under Soviet rule observed from the peculiar peripheral perspective of Estonia (see Gielen 2011; Lange 2012; Monticelli 2011; Monticelli and Lange 2014). Given that “literary translation in the Soviet Union may well be the largest more or less coherent project of translation the world has seen to date” (Witt 2011:167), it is quite surprising that it has attracted so little attention from translation scholars, if compared with translation under other totalitarian and authoritarian regimes.
such as Nazi Germany, fascist Italy or Franco’s Spain. Particularly regrettable is the fact that this lack of interest has led to the unquestioned academic acceptance of clamorous cases of “selective memory loss” like the short Russian Tradition article by Vilen N. Komissarov (1998/2011), which has been republished without any essential changes in the History and Traditions section of all the editions of the Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies. The article describes translation in the Soviet period of Russia as an unstoppable dynamic of progress toward quantitative and qualitative perfection without a single reference to the crucial political circumstances of censorship, publishing constraints, lists of forbidden foreign authors, and so on. The project mentioned above contributes therefore to uncovering an important knowledge gap while, at the same time, developing a new approach to the issue of translation under totalitarian/authoritarian rule, integrating the conceptual toolkit of translation studies with notions originally elaborated within cultural studies and critical theory.

This article investigates statistical data on original literature and translation, and the personal biographies of authors and/as translators in order to raise some hypotheses on the destiny of authorship during what is called the “Stalinist period” of Estonian history, dating from the annexation of the country by the Soviet Union in 1940 to the middle of the nineteen fifties. Scholars in cultural and literary studies generally analyze these years of early Sovietization in Estonia as a radical break with the country’s cultural and literary traditions and emphasize the repressive role of censorship and persecutions in this forced reshaping of Estonian culture. I will argue here that this process can (also) be described in terms of a radical redistribution of the prerogatives of authorship that I will describe as a complex “procedure of deauthorization” of Estonian writers in which translation(s) played a central role. My analysis will therefore focus on the extratextual devices of censorship, such as bans on authors and texts, and on the constraining translation policies, such as quotas for original and translated literature, and selection criteria for source literatures, languages and translators. The need to evaluate adequately the place of translation(s) in the Stalinist procedure of deauthorization will lead me to integrate the analysis of the destructive aspects of censorship and persecution with an analysis of their rather constitutive role in establishing a new social order. We must, in other words, keep in mind that prohibitions and omissions are always

1. Although I sometimes describe phenomena as generically “Soviet” or simply “totalitarian,” I always employ the term “Stalinist” to refer to the specific procedure of deauthorization analyzed here. The results of the analysis of the postwar phenomena cannot in fact be extended automatically to the post-Stalinist period because the dynamic of Soviet power saw important discontinuities (for an analysis of continuities and discontinuities in Soviet translation policy, see Monticelli and Lange 2014). I will briefly return to this in the conclusion of this article.
also means of delimitation and separation, i.e., constitutive devices for creating a shared space of sociocultural normativity. As Eiléan Ni Chulleanain, Cormac Ó Chulleanain and David Parris have stated in the introduction to their collection on communication and interference in translation, “censorship is designed to define the spaces it protects” (2009: 21). The procedure of deauthorization that I am going to study here constitutes a good example of the reciprocal support of the destructive and constitutive aspects of censorship.

My argument reads into the notion of author(ship) a series of etymologically connected concepts such as authority and authorization, which bring to the fore the issues of cultural agency and its legitimation by power. One could say, in this respect, that, while not believing in the post-modernist idea of a constitutive textual death of authors, the Soviet regime tended rather to silence and “kill” them when necessary, both (exceptionally) physically and (for the most part) symbolically. While translation scholars have tried in recent years to make sense of cultural agency and its relations to power through references to Bourdieu (e.g., Inghilleri 2005; Gouanvic 2005), I will avoid this approach here, because the notions of capital, whether economic, social, cultural or symbolic, and its circulation and accumulation present clear problems for an understanding of the grid of possibilities and constraints that the Soviet order set out for authors and translators during the Stalinist period. I will instead base my analysis on an integration of two theoretical concepts — Jacques Rancière’s “distribution of the sensible” [partage du sensible] and Michel Foucault’s “author-function” — that will allow me to embrace both the repressive and the constitutive tendencies of Soviet politics toward authorship and translation, and to cast a new light on a couple of commonly employed notions in contemporary translation studies.

**Partage du sensible and the author-function**

According to Rancière, any social order is symbolically constituted upon a shared principle for the organization and classification of perceptive experience that he names partage du sensible. The distinct English words alternatively employed as translation equivalents of the French partage in Rancière’s texts — ‘partition’ and ‘distribution’ — help illustrate the two fundamentally intertwined aspects of this operation. If the sensible is basically what can be seen and what can be heard (and thus what can be said), its partition coincides with a division or separation between “the visible and the invisible, the sayable and the unsayable” (Rancière 2004: 13). It is this preliminary delimitation that institutes the boundaries of the social order, “disclosing the existence of something in common” (ibid.: 12), i.e., what is visible and sayable according to that particular partition. The fact that the
partage is also a distribution means that it not only individuates a space of shared experience but also structures that space, putting into place “the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it” (ibid.: 12–13). For Rancière this partition/distribution is all that politics is about. As he explains (2003):

politics in general is about the configuration of the sensible […] It’s about the visibilities of the places and abilities of the body in those places, about the partition of private and public spaces, about the very configuration of the visible and the relation of the visible to what can be said about it. All that is what I call the partition of the sensible.

While the notion of partage du sensible constitutes the conjoining link between Rancière’s aesthetic and political theories, in his specifically political works, he generally employs the French word police to characterize the hegemonic partition/distribution of the sensible in a given social order, at a given historical moment. The “police order” (1999: 21) functions not only as a principle of sharing and delimitation but it exhaustively counts the parts of society and separates them from what has to remain unsayable and invisible according to the given partition and distribution of the social order. This brings to the fore, along with partition and distribution, the excluding import of the partage du sensible. As Samuel Chambers (2010: 63) has observed:

[to have no place within the police order means to be unintelligible — not just marginalized within the system, but made invisible by the system. Police orders thereby distribute both roles and the lack of roles; they determine who counts and they decide that some do not count at all.

While all this seems immediately to resonate with what we are used to considering as a defining cultural feature of totalitarian regimes, i.e., their obsession with appearances and total control, it is important to stress that for Rancière any social order is grounded and legitimized by a “sensory order that organizes domination, which is that domination itself” (1999: 24). His thesis must therefore be distinguished, first of all, from Walter Benjamin’s understanding of the “aesthetization of politics” and its application as an explanation for the emergence of the totalitarian phenomenon. Second, Rancière is very clear that his police should absolutely not be confused with “truncheon blows of the forces of law and order” (1999: 28). The “police order” cannot therefore be equated to the kind of authoritarian situation that we usually define as a “police regime.” Focusing on the governmental mechanisms of our contemporary democracies, which he actually considers to be new oligarchies, Rancière insists on what I have called above the constitutive and administrative rather than the repressive and destructive side of the police order.
While Rancière never thoroughly engages with the totalitarian phenomenon in his work, I will follow here his suggestion that there exist different kinds of police, and assume that the distinctive character of the Soviet police order, i.e., its totalitarianism, coincides with a hypertrophic development of the delimiting, separating and excluding functions of the partition/distribution. The Soviet police order pretends, in other words, to distend exhaustively and cover completely every single point of the social space without any remainder. This is the reason why, while not coinciding with a “police regime,” it must nevertheless be enforced by one that is basically in charge of the material execution and consequent irreversibility of symbolic exclusion.

The Rancièrean conflation of aesthetic and political issues makes the arts into a particularly significant site for analysis of social change. Focusing on literature, I will situate the Stalinist procedure of deauthorization within the context of the radical reconfiguration of the partage du sensible — what is visible, what can be said and heard — brought about by the Soviet regime in post-war Estonian society. In order to do that, the Rancièrean paradigm needs to be integrated with Foucault’s conception of authorship. Instead of declaring with Barthes the disappearance of the author, Foucault provocatively transforms authorship into a “function.” The author is thus deprived of “its creative role” and analyzed as “a complex and variable function of discourse” (1980: 138) which has, more precisely, to do with “the existence, circulation and operation of certain discourses within society” (ibid.:124). The questions to be asked (and which I will ask here) when trying to trace the author-function within a given social configuration will then not be “how does a free subject penetrate the density of things and endow them with meaning?” or “how does it accomplish his design by animating the rules of discourse from within?”, but instead “under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject [the author] appear in the order of discourse; what position does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow […]” (ibid.:137–8).

From a Rancièrean standpoint, we can express this by claiming that the author-function can be concentrated and distributed, attributed and denied within the partition of the sensible, thus sanctioning the visibility/invisibility (“appearance” in Foucault’s passage) and the (in)abilities (“position,” “function,” “rules” in Foucault’s passage), i.e., the (in)capacity of its endowed or dispossessed bearers to speak or be heard. The Stalinist procedure of deauthorization will therefore be analyzed in what follows as the complex process of this concentration, distribution, attribution and denial of the author-function within the reconfiguration of the sensible in the literary polysystem of post-war Estonia. I will consider first of all its embodiment in published literature, where it coincides with the redistribution of the proportions between, on the one hand, original and translated literature, and,
on the other hand, different source languages and literatures of translated works. The analysis will then focus on the attribution/denial of the author-function as embodied in the different writing activities of Estonian authors/translators and their publication before, during and after the post-war period. Finally, I will trace all this in the materiality of the text where the author/translator takes the form of a name, whose visibility/invisibility, sayability/unsayability becomes the target of censorsial interventions revelatory of the writer’s degree of authorship/authority/legitimacy. Translation will emerge from this multilayered analysis as both a preeminent device and a place of implementation of the Stalinist procedure of deauthorization.

*Deauthorization as redistribution of the visible and the sayable: Reconfiguring the Estonian literary polysystem*

Tables 1 and 2 report the share of original works and translations in the last ten years of the pre-war independent Estonian Republic (1), and the first ten years under Soviet rule (2).

**Table 1.** Published works during the last ten years (1929–1939) of the Estonian Republic.\(^a\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Originals</th>
<th>Translations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1929–1939</td>
<td>approx. 16,350</td>
<td>approx. 13,900 (85%)</td>
<td>approx. 2,450 (15%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Figures integrate statistical data from Antik (1935); ERÜ (1938, 1941); Liivaku (1989).

**Table 2.** Published works during the first ten years (1940–1954) under Soviet rule.\(^a\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Originals</th>
<th>Translations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940–1954</td>
<td>10,162</td>
<td>5,243 (51.5%)</td>
<td>4,919 (48.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) The sources here represent the chronology of Soviet Estonia’s book publishing for the years 1940–54 (NER 1956 and Soosaar 1987). The period of German occupation (1941–44) is excluded from the statistics.

The figures clearly show that the “transitional” period of Sovietization was also a “translational” period with a remarkable shift of the author-function from the “own” to the “foreign” in the post-war redistribution of the sensible within Estonian society. The absolute hegemony (85%) of Russian among the source languages for translation between 1945 and 1954 confirms the close relationship between the cultural and the political shifts. Translation was in this respect literally made into the means by which “newness entered the world” (Bhabha 1994:227). Table 3 re-
stricts the scope of publishing statistics to belle-lettres and it illustrates the share of different source literatures among literary translations of the post-war period.2

Table 3. Literary works published during the period 1945–1955 (including children’s literature).a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Estonian literature</th>
<th>All translations</th>
<th>Russian literature</th>
<th>Other Soviet literatures</th>
<th>Foreign literatures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>33 50%</td>
<td>33 50%</td>
<td>28 85%</td>
<td>4 12%</td>
<td>1 3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>68 44%</td>
<td>85 56%</td>
<td>58 68%</td>
<td>18 21%</td>
<td>9 11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>44 36%</td>
<td>78 64%</td>
<td>54 69%</td>
<td>20 26%</td>
<td>4 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>48 38%</td>
<td>77 62%</td>
<td>55 72%</td>
<td>8 10%</td>
<td>14 18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>57 48%</td>
<td>61 52%</td>
<td>43 71%</td>
<td>7 11%</td>
<td>11 18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>69 55%</td>
<td>56 45%</td>
<td>51 91%</td>
<td>4 7%</td>
<td>1 2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>42 34%</td>
<td>83 66%</td>
<td>59 71%</td>
<td>13 10%</td>
<td>11 9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>27 21%</td>
<td>99 79%</td>
<td>77 78%</td>
<td>13 13%</td>
<td>9 9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>53 41%</td>
<td>77 59%</td>
<td>54 70%</td>
<td>10 13%</td>
<td>13 17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>46 39%</td>
<td>73 61%</td>
<td>45 62%</td>
<td>20 27%</td>
<td>8 11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>56 44%</td>
<td>70 56%</td>
<td>43 61%</td>
<td>20 29%</td>
<td>7 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945–55</td>
<td>543 40%</td>
<td>792 60%</td>
<td>567 72%</td>
<td>137 17%</td>
<td>90 11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a This table reports statistical data collected in Möldre (2005). The paltry figures for original Estonian literature acquire an even more dramatic momentum if we consider that they include reprints of earlier works. So, for instance, only 77 of the 191 books by Estonian writers published in the bleakest period of Stalinism, between 1950 and 1953, were new works. I will come back to the status of reprints within the Stalinist procedure of deauthorization later on.

The full meaning of these figures is evident only if we interpret them within the broader framework of Stalinist censorship. That framework in fact determined and directed the redistribution of the author-function that gave rise to the radical reconfiguration of the visible/invisible and sayable/unsayable in post-war Estonian society. I have put forward elsewhere (Monticelli 2011) a makeshift synthesis of the multilayered nature of Stalinist censorship mechanisms employing two intertwined operations that I named “erasure” and “overscription.” These terms originated as critical developments of, respectively, Susan Bassnett’s observations about “erasure” in the dubbing practices of totalitarian regimes (1998:136–137) and Lawrence Venuti’s notion of the “inscription of the foreign context” (2000:473, 477), but I will adapt them now to the Rancierean/Foucauldian framework employed here, which importantly expands their explanatory capacity.

2. In pre-war Estonia, Russian literature was only in fourth place in terms of literary translations, after German, English and French.
Erasure is principally related to what I have called above the repressive side of Stalinist censorship. In the Rancièrean terms applied to our case study, erasure was meant to make invisible that part of pre-war Estonian literary culture (both indigenous and of foreign origin) that was to remain unsayable and unhearable within the new Soviet police order. First, bans on Estonian and foreign authors led to the massive withdrawal of volumes from publishing houses, bookshops, libraries and private collections and their destruction or displacement in special archives inaccessible to the public. This swept from the sphere of visibility millions of volumes that had circulated freely before the war. Second, the persecution of living Estonian authors led to the rescission of contracts with the State Publishing House and, in the harshest cases, imprisonment and confinement. The consequence in both cases was that the persecuted authors disappeared completely from the public domain. Their names were removed from anthologies, encyclopaedias, literary histories, and bibliographies published or simply circulating during the period of their persecution.

In erasure deauthorization thus manifests itself as an attempt to make literally invisible works and individuals — both dead and living, Estonian and foreign writers — from which the author-function had to be removed in order to deny any authority to the discourses that were now disfavored but whose “existence, circulation and functioning” had been granted in pre-war Estonian society by the names that had now to be erased. Erasure as a censoring mechanism draws in this respect on the Rancièrean relation of correspondence between the sayable and the visible: what is unsayable has to be removed from view, and what is invisible cannot possibly be heard. This explains the relationship between visibility/sayability and authority in the process of Stalinist deauthorization: being unsayable, the invisible loses all authority, which conversely means that the unsayable and unauthorized have to be made invisible. Erasure also brings clearly to the fore the distinctive feature of the totalitarian distribution of the sensible, i.e., its aspiration to completeness and irreversibility. This is accomplished by the material and symbolic destruction described above, which turns invisibility/unsayability into absolute non-existence.

At any rate, erasure alone cannot possibly provide the means for a reconfiguration of the sensible as it introduces into the sensible extensive blank spaces that, if left alone, would contradict the completeness and irreversibility of the Soviet distribution. These spaces needed to be filled so that the new sensible order may be complete. This is where the constitutive side of censorship emerges along with translation in the Stalinist procedure of deauthorization. I name this “overscription,” which coincides in our case study with both the preponderance of translations.

3. At the beginning of the fifties, over 100 Estonian and 400 foreign authors — that is most of the original and translated literature published before the war — were completely forbidden.
over original works and of Russian literature among translations. The translation of both Russian classics and contemporary Soviet authors not only filled the spaces of visibility abundantly left by the erased tradition in public libraries, bookstores and Estonian homes, but also sanctioned the new principles of sayability in the Soviet redistribution of the sensible. Translated Soviet literature becomes, in other words, the matrix for the generation of new “original” texts in accordance with the canon of socialist realism. Estonian literary scholar Sirje Olesk (2003: 465) has suggested in this respect that the notion of “Estonian literature” should be replaced by that of “Soviet literature written in Estonian” to designate ‘original’ production in the post-war years. The author-function rescinded through erasure from Estonian writers is not only re-assigned through overscription to established Soviet authors, but it is now made responsible for the “existence, circulation and functioning” of the new Soviet discourse within Estonian society; overscription also continues and brings to an end the originary removal, by transforming Estonian writers themselves into new Soviet authors. This is the necessary constitutive complement to the repressive side of the Stalinist procedure of deauthorization.

A quite explicit formulation of all this is to be find in a key text drawing the official boundaries for Estonian writers after the Stalinist turn of the screw at the end of the forties. The text, signed by Johannes Käbin, the secretary of the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party,⁴ is entitled “The Tasks of Soviet Estonian Literature”⁵ and was published by the communist daily Pravda in May, 1950. Given what has been said so far, it is not surprising that an otherwise inexplicably long and central section of the article is devoted to translations. More interesting, however, is the synthetic but very efficacious description by ‘Käbin’ of the combined deauthorizing import of what I call erasure and overscription: “One must admit it: if we did not have translations of Russian classical literature and of works by contemporary Soviet authors, many Estonian men-of-letters would ramble with their production still for a long time in the backyards and dead-end streets of formalism and decadence” (1950).⁶ The very metaphorical toolkit deployed by ‘Käbin’ in this passage brings us back to the Rancièrean logics of visibility in the distribution of the sensible. What has to be erased (formalism and decadence) is already attributed some kind of intrinsic invisibility by associating

---

4. Käbin was not the empirical author of the article (which was probably written by one of his literary ideologues), but of course the embodiment of the author-function necessary for bestowing authority on the text.

5. Notice the official definition as distinguished from both “Estonian literature” and Olesk’s “Soviet literature written in Estonian.”

6. All translations mine unless otherwise indicated.
Deauthorization as redistribution of “ways of being”: Authors as translators

Our investigation of the Stalinist procedure of deauthorization against the background of the Soviet reconfiguration of the sensible in post-war Estonian society has so far focused on the issues of (in)visibility and (un)sayability. However, as we have observed above, the police order of the visible and the sayable is always complemented and secured by a functional organization, which Rancière defines as a “distribution of places and roles, and the systems of legitimising this distribution” (1999: 28). It is here a matter of activities attributed or negated to individuals within a police order. If the author-function has been considered above as embodied in works and writers, our analysis must therefore be completed with an investigation of authorial ways of being/doing and their relationship to the issue of visibility/sayability. Stalinist deauthorization in this respect directly impacts the very activity of writing as a source of authorship and authority. Soviet “common sense” – quite similarly to our current common sense – distinguished between different degrees of authority for different kinds of writing and turned this distinction into a rationale for the procedure of deauthorization as applied to writers’ activities and ways of being. Translation as an ‘authorless’ or minimally authoritative writing activity also played a central role in this side of the procedure. All this emerges with particular clarity when we consider the consequences of the Soviet reconfiguration of the sensible on the writing activities of preeminent pre-war Estonian novelists and poets. Their increasing persecution from the end of the 1940s resulted not only in their original works being banned but also in their writing activity being progressively limited to translation alone (mainly from Russian). I will briefly consider two emblematic examples in order to highlight the general pattern of the process of deauthorization, which does not rely here on a simple dichotomy (original writing vs translation) but includes a series of nuanced intermediate stages in both original writing and translation. Friedebert Tuglas (1886–1971) had probably been the most influential novelist and literary critic of pre-war Estonia. His political engagement in the 1905 revolution against the tsarist regime and his consequent imprisonment and exile added to his literary merits, making Tuglas a legendary figure in independent Estonia.
and earning him the title of “People’s Writer”\footnote{It is interesting to observe how this highly desirable Soviet recognition, which endowed its recipient with material and symbolic privileges, sanctioned at the same time that transfer of authority and legitimacy from the writer to the Party (as representative embodiment of the “People”), which functioned as the necessary premise for eventual deauthorization.} at the dawn of the Sovietization process in the country. Despite all this, the Stalinist turn of the screw at the end of the 1940s led to accusations of “formalism” and “cosmopolitanism,” as a consequence of which his title was rescinded, he was expelled from the Writers’ Union and his works were banned and withdrawn from circulation. This is why, after the publication of his *Travel Journals to Italy and France*, in 1945, his bibliography reports only translations from Russian (and of Andersen’s fairytales) and their re-editions until 1955, when the beginning of the Khrushchev thaw coincided with the first new editions and reprints of Tuglas’ own works.

An analogous pattern of deauthorization with an earlier start and a later end (Figure 2) can be observed in the case of Betti Alver, the most admired poet in the last decade of the independent Estonian Republic. Alver’s last original collection of poems dates from 1936, while in the post-war period she translates from Russian (and Goethe); we have to wait until 1962 for a new original collection of poetry. The total silence in 1950–51 and the difference weight between translations as separate volumes and translations for periodicals, new translations and re-editions of old translations are particularly noteworthy here.

Similar stages of deauthorization are observable with other Estonian writers who did not fall into the most extreme categories of those who were deported or who emigrated. These are writers who remained in Estonia after the end of the war

---

**Figure 1.** Deauthorization: Friedebert Tuglas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td><em>Travel Journals to Italy and France</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>Translation of A. Chekhov’s <em>Selected Short Stories</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Translation of M. Gorki’s <em>The Artamonov Business</em> (nameless)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Translation of H. C. Andersen’s <em>The Ugly Duckling and Other Fairytales</em> (pseudon. A. Kabral)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>New edition of the translation of L. Tolstoy’s <em>Peter the Great</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>New edition of Tuglas’ <em>Little Illimar’s</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>New edition of Tuglas’ <em>Travel journals</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Friedebert Tuglas (1886–1971)
without becoming legitimated and authorized Soviet authors for various reasons that did not necessarily depend on their own choice, but often stemmed from the whims of the authorities. After the end of the Stalinist period, we see again a similarly systematic process of reauthorization, which follows the same pattern but in the opposite direction and with the same chronological variety already observed above. We are now in a position to add greater detail and nuance to our understanding of deauthorization in terms of a Rancièrean redistribution of places and roles, of ways of doing and making, and of their legitimation within the broader reconfiguration of the sensible in postwar Estonia’s literary polysystem.

Figure 3 illustrates what Estonian translation scholar Katiliina Gielen has defined as a “hierarchical pattern of literary activities” (2011). Unlike Gielen, I do not believe that the Sovietization of Estonia was responsible for the “emergence” of this pattern in the post-war period. This understanding of authorial agency and its different degrees was actually already in place before the war and continues to be in place in today’s Estonia as in the rest of the “free” world. Soviet authorities
simply turned this commonly accepted hierarchy of literary activities into the rationale for the process of deauthorization described above.

The final step of deauthorization: Making translators invisible

A certain tension emerges from what has been said so far about the central role of translation within the Soviet reconfiguration of the sensible in post-war Estonian society. We have, on the one hand, observed a shift of the author-function along with authority and legitimacy from Estonian originals to translations from Russian and other Soviet literatures as a means of radically redistributing visibility and sayability within the Estonian literary polysystem. On the other hand, the activities of Estonian writers in the post-war period have led us instead to consider translation as the eminent place for deauthorized writing. These two facets of translation, respectively empowering and disempowering, now risk short circuiting the Stalinist process of deauthorization by bestowing some undesirable authority on the delegitimized author-translator. In Rancière’s terms we could claim that if translation was meant to have a degrading effect on the activity, place and role of authors within the literary polysystem, it might yet grant them some kind of visibility, or even a voice, and thus introduce a discrepancy between the perceptive and the functional sides of the Soviet police order.

In order to avoid this, even translations had to be subjected to a specific process of deauthorization, following different stages, already partially listed in Figure 3, and aimed at securing the complete invisibility and voicelessness of problematic translators. The most straightforward way of deauthorizing translators was, of course, to deny them the very right to translate. This was, for instance, the case with Marta Sillaots (Figure 4) who had been the most prolific translator in pre-war Estonia. Her impressive yearly output of translations until 1948 is followed by

**Marta Sillaots (1887–1969)**

- 1946 five translations
  (including Tolstoi’s *War and Peace*)
- 1947–1948 ten translations,
  (including Dickens’ *Picwick Papers*)
  two new editions of translations
- 1949 new edition of I. Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*
- 1950–1956
- 1956 up to now reprints of her translations

**Figure 4. Deauthorization of translators: Marta Sillaots**
a single re-edition in 1949 and then by total silence, which lasted for the six years following her arrest (1950) and deportation; it was only broken after 1956 by re-editions and reprints of old translations.

This extreme solution to the issue of the agency of deauthorized translators could be applied in single cases such as Sillaotsa, but was unfeasible on a larger scale insofar as the Soviet reconfiguration of the sensible relied heavily, as we have seen, on translation and the list of competent translators was too short to lose the services of all the problematic translators. Thus, other common ways of negating translators’ authorship included, particularly between 1950 and 1953, the publication of their translations in peripheral venues, such as periodicals, anthologies or textbooks rather than in separate volumes (see Figure 2 above), and the omission or pseudonimization of the name of the translator (see Figure 1 above). An interesting problem, which reveals particularly well the aspiration to exhaustive totality of the Soviet reconfiguration of the sensible, was represented by renowned pre-war translations by deauthorized Estonian writers and translators that reported not only their names but also, in many cases, their comments or afterwords and

Figure 5. Title page of the first edition (1938) of Johannes Semper’s translation of The Red and the Black

All rights reserved
continued to circulate in the 1950s because their foreign authors had not been included in the proscription lists. In these cases the invisibility of deauthorized writers and translators such as Tuglas, Alver and Sillaots was achieved through the very mechanisms of erasure and overscription that were defined above. I will show this through an example that allows me to introduce another preeminent intellectual of pre-war Estonia, the poet, novelist, critic and translator Johannes Semper (1892–1970). Figure 5 shows the original title page of Semper’s translation of *The Red and the Black* [*Punane ja must*], first published in 1938. The name of the translator [*Tõlkinud J. Semper*] is given there immediately below the title of the novel.

The first edition of the translation included Semper’s afterword signed by its author as “the translator” [*Tõlkija*] (Figure 6). The copy of the book pictured in Figure 5 and 6 is currently held at the Estonian National Library, but was most probably held during the Soviet period in a private library and thus escaped the censors throughout the years of Semper’s disgrace which followed the chronology already described above for Tuglas.

---

**Figure 6.** Johannes Semper’s afterword to the first edition (1938) of his translation.
Publicly accessible versions of the same translation were in fact modified at the end of the forties, with the name of the translator scratched out or inked over (Figure 7), while his afterword was completely torn out of the censored books.

The translation could thus continue to circulate without any reference to its problematic translator. The erasure of Semper’s name made the “invisibility of the translator” into the guarantor of his lack of authorship and authority, i.e., his
voicelessness: “[w]hoever is nameless,” writes Rancière, “cannot speak” (1999: 23). However, scratches and crossings out, missing and glued pages introduced blank spots into the sensible, traces and indexes of an absence, possibly exposing the violence and partiality of the Soviet reconfiguration. This is why a second edition of Semper’s translation of Stendhal was published in 1952 where overscription managed finally to conceal the traces of the former erasure. The name of the translator simply disappeared from the title page of the 1952 edition (Figure 8), while Semper’s afterword was replaced by a text authored by A. Ivaschenko and translated from Russian, where Stendhal’s work was placed within the ‘ideologically correct’ interpretative framework.

The different stages of erasure and overscription constitute here once again a general pattern of deauthorization of translators, which at the same time reproduced, continued and reinforced the general pattern of writers’ deauthorization through translation illustrated in Figure 3 above. That profound solidarity between the alignment of “ways of being, ways of doing, and ways of saying appropriate to each” and the distribution of “bodies within the space of their visibility or their invisibility” (Rancière 1999: 28), which constitutes the fundamental cornerstone of any police order, is thus reaffirmed in all its totalitarian exhaustiveness within the Soviet reconfiguration of the sensible in post-war Estonia’s literary polysystem.

Conclusion

The present analysis of the Stalinist procedure of deauthorization in the context of the reconfiguration of the sensible, which defined a new regime of visibility and sayability by displacing roles and activities in post-war Estonian society, offers us some instruments for rethinking the relation between authorship, translation and censorship beyond the mere listing and classification of censorial interventions in translated texts that have attracted most of the attention of translation scholars. The adoption of a Rancièrean standpoint allowed me first of all to position censorship on a much wider background of social reconfiguration where the repressive moment of cuts and distortions is always integrated by a constitutive moment of reshaping and recreation. This in turn made it possible to address adequately the complexity and ambivalence of translation as a mechanism for cultural and social change. Finally, my analysis contributes to the development of an understanding of writing activities that avoids the clear-cut opposition between originals and translations and postulates instead a nuanced continuum of different degrees of authorship and authority that helps to unravel the rationale behind both hegemonic discursive attitudes toward different literary activities within a given social order, and political interventions in literature and culture.
The author is, as Foucault claims in an earlier version of the essay that constituted the other theoretical pillar for this paper, “an ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning” (1979: 159). The Foucauldian notion of author-function has allowed me to describe the consequences of that fear in a totalitarian situation like the Stalinist one, which tended to revert fear into preventative terror. When understood as a complex process of removal, gathering and redistribution of the author-function, the process of deauthorization described above immediately reveals its strategic position for the totalitarian affirmation of the univocality of meaning as against its dangerous proliferation. The symbolic or even physical disappearance of the author as an empirical person within the process of “erasure” does not imply the dissolution of the author-function, but rather its dislocating reactivation within the (re)constitutive process of “overscription.” The visual metaphors of the “disappearance of the author” (Barthes) and the “invisibility of the translator” (Venuti) thus acquire new meaning within the Rancièrean/Foucauldian paradigm adopted here, functioning as the privileged indicators of a much broader process of reconfiguration of the sensible that grounds and legitimates a new social order and the redistribution of subjective positions within it.8

A last issue worth to be addressed as a way of introducing possible directions for future development of the present research is the explanatory scope of the notion of deauthorization elaborated here using evidence from post-war Estonia. Given the increasing homogeneity of the Soviet system after Stalin’s rise to power, I think it would be quite reasonable to extend what has been observed above to cover the experience of other Soviet Republics. The role of translation as a device for the delegitimization of writers’ authority within the Stalinist attempt to make them invisible and speechless has, for instance, been observed by scholars in the case of deauthorized Russian writers such as Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova (e.g., Witt 2011: 151). Differences will probably emerge here on the chronological axis of the process of deauthorization, reflecting earlier or later

8. In his outstanding book on translation and the making of modern Russian literature Brian J. Baer has suggested a correction to the concept of deauthorization employed here, by introducing the notion of reauthorization, which shifts the attention from Romantic authorship with a capital “a” to authorship with a small “a,” thus enabling “more text-centered models of literary production to emerge” (2015: 116). Translation functions from this point of view as a “vehicle for the symbolic remaking of Romantic writers into Soviet cultural workers” (ibid.: 131). I share with Baer a weakened, Foucauldian understanding of authorship and the idea that the process of de- or reauthorization is not simply repressive but also productive of a new writing subjectivity. However, my approach emphasizes the clear persistence of a hierarchy of literary activities under Soviet rule, which continues to be determinant in the attribution of the author-function and authority to subjects in the literary field.
annexation of the individual republics to the Union, different speeds in the process of Sovietization and other local specificities. The alternation of deauthorization and reauthorization described in Figure 3 could also be made into a criterion of evaluation of the dynamics of Soviet power at the level of both the Union as a whole and, possibly comparatively, the individual republics. A comparison of the Soviet situation with that of other socialist countries and ideologically opposite totalitarian and authoritarian governments, such as Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Franco’s Spain, may finally turn the analysis of procedures of deauthorization into a means for detecting shared assumptions and discrepancies in these regimes’ attitudes toward authorship, translation, censorship and, more generally, the role of literary and cultural agents in that radical reconfiguration of the sensible that always accompanies the birth of any social order aspiring to absolute novelty.

References


doi:10.1080/13556509.2005.10799195


doi: 10.4324/9780203446621


**Author’s address**

Daniele Monticelli
School of Humanities
Tallinn University
Narva mnt 29
10120 Tallinn
Estonia
daniele.monticelli@tlu.ee