The 19th century began with the "Golden Age" of Russian poetry. For translation, it was a period of “creation”, famous for translated masterpieces. The beginning of the century emphasized the difference between prose and poetry translation. Prince B. Golitsyn was the first to raise the question and to speak about the stylistic accuracy of prose and poetry translation (in the 18th century most poets, V. Trediakovskiy for example, did very free translations of poetic forms, sometimes substituting them with prose).

One of the most prominent figures of 19th century Russian culture was Vasily Zhukovsky, celebrated for several translations or adaptations that are major poems in their own right, including versions of the English poet Thomas Gray's An Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard (1802 and 1839), Homer's Odyssey (completed 1847), and Lord Byron's The Prisoner of Chillon (1822), fairy tales by Charles Perrault and the Grimm brothers. His Svetlana (1813) was a reworking of the German poet Gottfried August Burger's Lenore. Pushkin referred to Zhukovsky as ‘the genius of translation’.

Zhukovsky’s literary development is a transition from one aesthetic system to another, from classicism, through sentimentalism, to romanticism. V. Zhukovsky began as a classicist. The motif of his first creative period was expressed by his words: “The most pleasant translation is, of course, the best.” To achieve harmony (and ethos), the poet might sacrifice accuracy of translation. Zhukovsky saw a clear difference between translating poetry and prose: according to him, a prose translator is the author’s slave, a poetry translator is the author’s rival. A poetry translator only imitates the author and transforms the text into a creation of his own imagination. Hence, he considered it possible to use the following methods of translation: adapting the content to the Russian receptor, making him/her feel as if the characters were Russian and lived in Russia (Lyudmila); translating prose by verse (for better melody and harmony) (Undina); ignoring the meter and stanza of the source text (An Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard by T. Gray was translated in hexameters); free rendering or retelling (Sud v podzemelye, “An underground trial”).

The next part of Zhukovsky’s creative work is connected with sentimentalism. As a sentimentalist, he transformed the source text as far as he understood and felt it, according to his personal taste and experience. He emphasized his belief that poetry should be an expression of feeling. An author’s ideas and themes were filtered through the translator’s soul and reflected in a new way, making quite a new work of art. V. Belinsky, assessing Zhukovsky’s translations, remarked that some parts of his translations seemed to have been copied directly from the poet’s life; therefore, his translations were far from being perfect but they were excellent as his own literary works. In his translations, Zhukovsky revealed his mood, which was the defining characteristics of sentimentalism.
Later, as a Romantic poet, he paid more attention to reflecting the individual form and content of the source text in translation, emphasizing Romantic conceptions of landscape, and folk ballads. He retranslated some ballads and poems (Lenoreby G. Burger, A Country Church Yard by T. Gray) because the former style did not suit him. It was also at that time that V. Zhukovsky translated Homer's Odyssey (1849).

Striving for translation accuracy was characteristic of another Russian poet and translator, N. Gneditch, the creator of the Russian Iliad. When translating, Gneditch aimed at “not identifying Homer’s idea with a Russian one”, and especially at “not ornamenting the original”; that is, he stood for subordinating a translator to the author, for accomplishing the most accurate translation, close to the source text.

While Gneditch dealt with epic literature and drama, P. Vyazemsky extended these principles to lyrical poetry. But his translations proved to be too close to the source text. Trying to reproduce the individual peculiarities of the original, the translator followed not only the sense but also the syntax of the source text, thus making his translation literal.

Until now theorists in literature and translation have disputed A. Pushkin’s role in translation theory and practice. Three opinions may be outlined.

Pushkin was both a great poet and a great translator. He used to be very critical about both adaptation (or free translation) and interlinear (or word for word) translation.

Pushkin cannot be called a translator. B. Tomashevsky wrote that Pushkin despised translation and considered it to be the work of minor journalists. Y. Levin supported this view by claiming that Pushkin had no consistent translation system. He regarded translation as a kind of school to study creative writing. Translation was never an objective in his work.

A compromise point of view was expressed by P. Kopanev. Pushkin did not work out a theoretical system of translation, but his casual statements, assessments, and translations are of great value. They demonstrate his attention to literary translation as a linguistic means of developing Russian culture. He was always well informed about Russian and translated literature, although he held translation in low esteem.

Notwithstanding this wide scope of theoretical views on Pushkin’s role in translation, the following should be taken into account:

Pushkin’s translations are inseparable from his original creative writings (his translations are rather his own poems, as they are usually very far from the source texts);

His translations are based on various theoretical principles: there are accurate, free, shortened translations and adaptations;

Pushkin translated only great works of literature, never paying attention to minor, secondary works. Thus he contributed to the enrichment of Russian culture.

M. Lermontov is often mentioned, along with Pushkin, among the representatives of the “realistic tradition of translation”. Like Pushkin, Lermontov treated translated works as if they were his own creations. He emphasized some elements of a work at the expense of other elements. He also increased the stylistic pathos of his translated work, adding tragic or pathetic notes to it. He would insert his own extracts in translations. His translations (from T. More, H. Heine, A. Mickiewicz and others) did not mention the source author (that was typical of the day). From time to time, the poet simultaneously used several sources, sometimes by different authors. In a word, for Lermontov there existed no borderline between his own poetic work and translation.
A great role in Russian translation theory was played by Vissarion Belinsky. In the 1830s, Belinsky tried his hand in translating but he was great not as a translator but as a translation critic who emphasized the translator’s noble mission in bringing together cultures, and developing the nation’s aesthetic feelings, developing the language. It was Belinsky who contrasted prose translation with poetry translation in theory. In prose translation, he said, one cannot either add or reduce anything, or change the text. The purpose of translation is to substitute the source text, including all its drawbacks. The poetry translation, he thought, can be adapted to the tastes and requirements of the reading public. Some years later, though, he changed his attitude to poetry translation, believing that a translated poem should render the source text as closely as possible.

On the whole, this period of Russian translation is characterized by the special role of the translator who appeared as a creator, a poetic activist, rather than the servant of an original author or text.

Literature: