I want to consider some aspects of literary translation, and how the themes of remoteness and connectedness play into the subject.

- Translation is perhaps a metaphor for what is a basic human need: conveying in words our experience of the world. Whether it’s the birth of a baby, the silence of a snowscape, feelings of love or bereavement – we search for ways of expressing these things in a language that can be understood by others. In that sense we are all translators. Those who translate literature for a living, however, are involved in something much more complex – a creative act that might even be seen as a kind of miracle. When all goes well what we are given is something fresh & newborn in another language, as good and pleasing as the life that has gone before, and all recreated out the basic currency of words.

- In Britain we have tended to be quite wary of translation: we are an insular lot with literary tastes to match – this despite the fact that our whole literary canon has been shaped by translation: from Homer to the Bible, from Tolstoy & Dostoevsky to Freud. The figures tell their own story: out of approximately 125K titles published in UK annually, only 3% are translations. In France, for example, over 30% of books published are translated titles. In other countries it is considered quite normal to read works in another language.

- One of the effects of our relative monoglotism is that the status of the translator in the UK is quite low. There is still a tendency not to acknowledge translators – for example, in newspaper reviews, where the name of the translator does not automatically appear alongside that of the author. Which is odd, not to say shameful, since without a translator there would be nothing to review.

- As a result translators have become an oddly invisible subspecies. It used to be even worse: translators of the Bible were routinely strangled or burned at the stake, and poor William Tyndale, who coined such phrases as ‘let there be light’ and ‘the salt of the earth’, suffered both fates. We have come a long way since then, but even now we fail to appreciate the extraordinary creative art that is at the heart of a good literary translation.

- On the whole we like our translations to read smoothly and easily – this is what reviewers tend to call an unobtrusive translation – by which they mean not too
foreign-sounding. The highest praise seems to be reserved for those books that sound just as if they had been written in English in the first place. Which is a slightly odd idea if you think about it: judging a work that started off in another country in another tongue according to – to what exactly? To how British, how Anglo-Saxon it sounds? It would be wonderful if we could come to see ‘foreignness’ as pleasing and attractive, to accept that we don’t always have to feel at home in foreign fiction.

- The situation is very different in other countries, where translators are highly esteemed. In Japan, for example, translators enjoy much the same status as novelists. Yet in Britain and in the US we still prefer to have only one name on the book jacket.

My first ‘real’ job was developing the Russian list at a London publishing house in the 80s and 90s. This involved buying English language rights, mainly for fiction, and giving manuscripts out for translation, or sometimes translating them myself. In those early days Russia was still the Soviet Union, and nearly all our authors suffered persecution of one form or another, either in the gulag or through forced expulsion.

When I translated The Year of Miracle & Grief, I often wished that I could have contacted the author, to ask him about this or that, but there was no possibility. Leonid Borodin was a Soviet dissident and a Christian, arrested first in 1967 and sent to the infamous Camp 17. He was released in 1973 but rearrested in 1982 on charges of anti-Soviet propaganda and sentenced to ten years hard labour. One way of exerting pressure on the Soviet authorities was for the works of dissidents to be published in the west. Shortly after The Year of Miracle & Grief appeared, Borodin was released. In different parts of the world persecution of writers is still happening today. Translating these writers into English is one means of helping them.

Let me take another sort of example of a Russian book published in English around that time – a mass market novel that helped subsidise the more literary output.
On the 10th Nov 1982 Leonid Brezhnev died of a heart attack. In keeping with the Soviet tradition his death was not announced straightaway, and this gap between the actual death and the announcement gave rise to my first (and only!) publishing coup.

*Gorky Park* by Martin Cruz Smith had been published the year before and publishing houses were on the lookout for similar racy thrillers littered with corpses. I got the opportunity to read the typescript of *Red Square*, not as a commissioning editor but as a reader for another publisher. It began in classic detective mode with a telegram appointing an investigator to look into the circumstances of the death of the First Deputy Chairman of the KGB – a man by the name of Tsvigun. Except that Tsvigun was not a fictional character, but the real First Deputy Chairman of the KGB and also Brezhnev’s brother-in-law. In real life *Pravda* had reported the death as being the result of a ‘prolonged illness’ but according to Kremlin watchers this was completely implausible. The novel was different from *Gorky Park* in that it was more faction than fiction, but it was comparable in quality and more true to life. I said all this in my report and sent it to Collins. A day or two later I got a call from a literary agent who wanted to offer me a book – all very hush hush. When I explained I had already read it for Collins she said that Collins had declined to make an offer. This was the 10th November. Brezhnev was already dead, but no one knew. We concluded the deal that day, and the English language rights were acquired for £4K. The next day it was announced to the world that Brezhnev was dead. Andropov, head of the KGB, who had – according to the factional novel, just bumped off his deputy, was poised to take over. Suddenly the novel was dynamite and worth many times what we had paid for it.

**A couple of points about this translation.**

- To remain topical the novel had to appear as quickly as possible, early in the New Year ideally. The printers wanted the finished typescript by December 1st, allowing just 18 days for translating 150K words. We would need a team. In St Andrews I gathered a team, but it took two or three days to make copies and for everyone to read it. Which left just two weeks. There isn’t much light in Scotland in November. We had day jobs and families, so we had to become creatures of the
night. This was also before the days of personal computers – the whole lot had to be typed up from our longhand.

- The authors Topol & Neznansky were not in the gulag, but in the US, after being expelled. Since a lot of the dialogue was contemporary slang from the Russian underworld, I had to make frantic transatlantic phonecalls. The phone bill came to £2K, half what we had paid for the English language rights. (What a difference Skype would have made…)

A word about Machine Translation

- During those long nights translating Red Square, I used to think how wonderful it would be if we could press a few buttons and get a machine to translate: insert Russian at one end and get English out at the other. This was not complete fantasy. A form of Machine Translation had begun as early as 1949, in response to the climate of fear at the start of the Cold War. Warren Weaver from the Rockefeller Foundation circulated a memorandum about the possibilities of using digital computers – recently invented – to translate documents between one language and another. ‘It is very tempting to say that a book written in Chinese is simply a book in English which was coded into the “Chinese code”. If we have useful methods for solving almost any cryptographic problem, may it not be that with proper interpretation we already have useful methods for translation?’ Warren Weaver

- The US wanted to discover how near the Soviets were to getting the atomic bomb. One way of doing this – so the thinking went – would be for Russian-English translators to comb through research journals, but the problem was it would have needed a whole army of translators to do this and there wasn’t one, nor could you create one instantly. Weaver thought that the solution might be to invent a machine that could do it. ‘Think of individuals living in a series of tall closed towers, all erected on a common foundation. When they try to communicate with one another, they shout back and forth, each from his own closed tower. It is difficult to make the sounds penetrate even the nearest towers, and communication proceeds very poorly indeed. But when an individual goes down his tower, he finds himself in a great open basement, common to all the towers. Here he establishes easy and useful communication with the persons who have also descended from their towers.’ Warren Weaver

- In one sense this is a lovely idea – a sort of utopian analogy, a Tower of Babel, but on the ground floor. The success of the cryptographers at Bletchley Park had led some people to think that language itself might be regarded as a code. But of
course there’s a huge problem here: a code is a way of concealing information; to find the information you need the key. A machine would therefore need, as it were, to strip away the language – the code – so as to discover the real thing that is encoded, which I suppose would be something like pure meaning. But in truth there is no ‘great open basement’, just as there is no language of pure meaning (No time to go into the philosophy of this.)

- Another problem is that translation is a process that is never complete. It is a complex art, to do with more than mere words (which are just the starting blocks). It has little to do with direct equivalence between languages.

In time it did become possible to store sets of words in different languages on a computer and match them. And this was the real beginning of Machine Translation (MT) – or CAT as it became known (Computer Aided Translation) Companies with global sales began to use computer programmes to translate instruction manuals, for example – sometimes with hideous results, of course. And we’ve all had the experience of seeing what nonsense you can get by using an online translator.

Some of the reasons for this

- It would be near impossible to programme a whole grammar into a computer, and even if it were possible, native speakers of a language frequently break the rules.

- Different languages work in different ways. Russian, for example, is a dense and concise language. A single verb in Russian can be a complete sentence, telling us not only who is doing it, and whether the doer is male or female, but also whether the activity has been completed or is still going on. In Anna Karenina, Prince Oblonsky offers wine to a dinner guest with these two words: Prikazhete, krasnovo? Which means, ‘Order, red?’ We can work out from the word endings that Oblonsky is asking (literally), ‘Will you give me the order to pour out some red wine for you?’ This is usually translated as: ‘Will you have some red wine?’ – conveying the sense, yes, but in no way matching or retaining the ellipsis.

- Some of you will have had the experience of being translated. If it’s into a language you don’t know, then that’s maybe just as well. You take it on trust. If it’s a language you do know it can cause a lot of heartache.

- My own experience of being translated has been good and bad. I had a very positive experience with a Dutch translator. She asked me (by email) many questions, and her intelligence and insight gave me complete confidence. By
contrast my German translator asked nothing and charged on regardless, sometimes missing out passages and even occasionally adding in something of her own.

- With the advent of e-mail, collaboration between translator and author has become easy. Christopher Maclehose (a publisher who has perhaps done more than anyone else to bring translations of modern fiction into English) advocates translator and author working together. This is what he says: ‘It seems to me certainly desirable that a translator open a line to the author, and keep it always open. I don’t remember a single case in which the time taken to establish communication with an author was time wasted. On the other hand I remember many cases where a failure to do so has led to grief.’ Christopher Maclehose

- The ‘grief’ arises when carefully written passages are mangled and rendered senseless in another language. A good literary translation is not simply a technical exercise; it is also an act of supreme empathy. But if the translator refuses to engage, the results can be a pig’s ear. Or the ear of a pig, as my German translator might have said.

There is nevertheless a place for CAT translation, and it has made huge strides, but always with certain limitations. Google Translate is different. It’s not the Warren Weaver approach, it doesn’t do meaning at all. What it does is use vast computing power to pair documents, books, journals, anything that’s been written or said before, picking out statistically the most probable version of what’s been submitted to it. Much of the time it works!

Of course it couldn’t work without the labour of thousands of translators over millions of hours. They are the people who have produced the texts that Google Translate scours. And so this is a beautiful genuine collaboration between man and machine. [It also is constantly being refined, asking the people who use GT to improve on the translation it provides.]

Does it make mistakes? Yes it does. But they are usually quite easily spotted – and therefore less invidious than human howlers that are often not picked up.

Even if translators are willing to engage, however, things can still go wrong. I leave you with one of my favourite examples - an email my husband got from his Korean publishers.
Dear Mr. Erdal,

I appreciate very much for your reply with such a meticulous opinions. One with comments given with the description I was not difficult to understand.

Concerns you have sense enough because we will contemplate. Especially, considering you for the position you will be a great strength to our work.

In my opinion, we have the part you pointed out that you will be when you work with this.

Best regards,