

Interpretation and Resistance

The Ukrainian Reception of Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Buckwheat”

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Over generations, Ukrainian readers have engaged with Hans Christian Andersen’s stories through various translations. From the early introductions of Andersen’s tales during the period of the Russian Empire in the 1860s (for instance, in Ivan Bilyk’s translations) to their Soviet-era adaptations (such as those by Oksana Ivanenko), Andersen’s fairy tales – particularly those with Christian motifs – have been reframed by translators, editors, publishers, and critics in response to changing ideological and cultural paradigms

This article examines how the translator Mykhailo Starytskyi employed adaptive strategies to localize his 1870s translation of Andersen’s fairy tales, making them more accessible and culturally resonant to the target audience. It explores how Starytskyi’s translation choices reflect the social and literary processes in Ukraine during this period, including the growth of national awareness across different strata of society and a shift toward incorporating folklore traditions into literature.

Set against the backdrop of Russian imperial censorship (notably the Valuev Circular), Starytskyi’s translations foreground the linguistic and cultural distinctions between Ukrainian and Russian, often resisting official Russian narratives by embedding elements of Ukrainian oral tradition. This resistance contributes to a deliberate distancing from the dominant imperial culture to assert local specificity.

Andersen’s fairy tales, rich in symbolism and layered meaning, have long invited diverse interpretations, from historical and social to psychological. During the 19th century, these stories were repeatedly translated and circulated across different regions of the Russian Empire, including Ukraine. Such circulation laid the foundation for localized Ukrainian editions, such as the first illustrated Ukrainian collection of Andersen’s tales translated by Starytskyi and illustrated by the Ukrainian painter Mykola Murashko. This collection serves as a case study for analysis in this article, highlighting the semiotic dimensions of the fairy tale “The Buckwheat”. These dimensions offer readers a deeper understanding of cultural

nuances through the linguistic associations of the word “buckwheat” in the Ukrainian language. Furthermore, the illustrations accompanying other fairy tales in the collection contribute to reinforcing local cultural identity.

Exploring the Translation Landscape of the Late 19th Century in Ukraine: Censorship and Political Constraint

More than a century and a half has passed since the first translations of Andersen’s tales appeared in Ukraine between 1868 and 1873. These translations were initially produced by the Ukrainian poet Ivan Bilyk (Rudchenko) (Mikhno & Gaidei, 2017) and later by Mykhailo Starytskyi (Starychenko), a prominent Ukrainian translator and writer of the 19th century (Kurbatova, 2018).

One major influence on Ukrainian literary and language history during this period was the Valuev Circular of 1863, which declared that the Ukrainian language was merely a distorted form of Russian influenced by Polish and derogatorily referred to at the time as “Little Russian”. The circular significantly impacted Ukrainian publishing by restricting the use of Ukrainian in religious and educational texts. Remy (2007), Miller (2003), and Dibrova (2017) have investigated how these censorship measures were designed to suppress Ukrainian national consciousness, particularly the alignment of the intelligentsia with the peasantry in pursuit of political self-determination. As Remy explains:

Apart from the fear of Polish and Ukrainian subversion, Valuev was motivated by a long-term desire to spread the use of Russian – at least among some minority nationalities of the empire. The officially “provisional” nature of the circular was Value’s tactic to appease the significant opposition that he anticipated within government circles against the restrictions. (2007, p. 87)

These restrictions severely disrupted Ukrainian book publishing. Yet despite this, Ukrainian-language publishing persisted. By the mid-19th century, a network of old printing houses had developed in Kyiv (such as the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra press, active since 1615), alongside new print shops of various sizes (e.g. Ivan Chokolov and Borys Hrinchenko) as well as bookstores operated by Leon Idzykivsky, Mykola Ogloblin, Franz Johanson, Stefan Kulzhenko, and V. I. Davydenko. Starytskyi’s translation of Andersen’s fairy tales was published in 1873 by Davydenko’s private press and later distributed by the “South-Russian Bookstore” and the Bookstore of De-Mezer in Kyiv.

Further restrictions followed with the Ems Ukaz of 1876, which intensified the censorship of the Ukrainian language. This secret decree, issued by Emperor Alexander II of Russia, banned the use of Ukrainian in printed materials intended for mass distribution, as well as in theatrical performances and public lectures. These oppressive measures drastically curtailed the visibility of Ukrainian cultural expression.

Despite these restrictions, Andersen's fairy tales continued to circulate in Ukrainian during the period of strict censorship. In 1872, Starytskyi wrote to publicist and educator Mykhailo Drahomanov:

Last winter I finished translating Andersen's fairy tales; the first edition will contain 32 (I chose the best ones). If the book is successful and there is demand, you can choose more. Now it is being printed: it seems that it will be a fine edition, decorated with a portrait of Andersen and 12 illustrations by Murashko, plus many vignettes. It will be costly. I hope it will be published in December. (Starytskyi, 1965, p. 433)

Throughout his life, Starytskyi worked as a writer, translator, and playwright, all in service of a broader goal: establishing a distinct Ukrainian national literature. He began his poetic career by translating works from renowned international authors such as Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, and Mykola Nekrasov (Russia); Heinrich Heine (Germany); George Byron (Britain); Adam Mickiewicz (Poland); and Serbian folk songs. These translations were not merely literary exercises – they were part of a cultural strategy to import prestigious foreign literature, thereby enriching the Ukrainian literary landscape and enhancing the symbolic capital of the Ukrainian language.

By rendering the works of major figures like Shakespeare, Gogol, and Pushkin into Ukrainian, Starytskyi not only made these texts accessible to local readers but also positioned Ukrainian literature within a broader European context. His work thus served multiple interrelated purposes: cultural enrichment, political resistance, and the development of linguistic and literary sophistication.

In terms of Pascale Casanova's theory of literary capital, Starytskyi's translations of Andersen's works can be interpreted as strategic efforts to accumulate symbolic capital for Ukrainian literature. Casanova (2004) argues that writers from "small" literatures – those with limited international recognition – often rely on translation and engagement with established literary traditions to enhance their visibility, prestige, and cultural influence. These

literatures face challenges such as marginalization, limited resources, and reduced global reach compared to more institutionally dominant literary cultures. However, they can still accrue literary capital by translating and interacting with major foreign works, thereby elevating their own cultural and literary status.

For this reason, Pascale Casanova's theory of the world literary space offers a suitable framework for understanding Starytskyi's contribution through his translations of foreign texts, including Andersen's fairy tales. Casanova's conceptualizations of dominant and dominated literatures, symbolic capital, and literary autonomy allow us to interpret Starytskyi's translations not simply as stylistic or ethical choices, but as strategic interventions aimed at repositioning Ukrainian literature within an unequal literary hierarchy.

Translating Andersen: National Identity and Early Reception

In the 19th century, Mykhailo Starytskyi's translation work aligned closely with the goals of the Ukrainophile movement, which sought to promote Ukrainian language and culture under conditions of imperial repression. Between the 1860s and 1880s, Ukrainian intellectuals prioritized education in the vernacular, producing textbooks, publishing original literature, and translating major works into Ukrainian as a way to cultivate national identity.

Kyiv emerged as a key center of Ukrainophile activity in the 1870s–1890s, particularly through the so-called Old Community of intellectuals, among whom Mykhailo Starytskyi was a central figure (Shandra, 2012). His 1873 translation of Andersen's *Fairy Tales with a Short Biography* (*Казки Андерсена з короткою його життєписью*), comprising 24 tales over 362 pages and printed in Kyiv, reflects this broader cultural and political project.

However, earlier attempts to translate Andersen's fairy tales into Ukrainian had been made by other translators. One such figure was Ivan Bilyk, whose name appears in the catalog of Ukrainian book publications compiled from the holdings of the National Pedagogical Museum. According to the catalog's editor, Savchenko, a standalone edition of "The Buckwheat" and several other tales was published independently of Starytskyi's later volume. Unlike Starytskyi's edition, however, Bilyk's translation did not achieve wide circulation though it was published in 1868 in Lviv (then part of Austrian Galicia) by the Shevchenko Scientific Society. This edition comprised only 58 pages and included "The Buckwheat" and other tales (Haidei & Mikho, 2015).

While not all of these stories were equally popular or widely circulated, they represent early efforts to introduce Andersen's works to Ukrainian audiences. The reasons for this

remain unclear – his edition included only a few tales, and he did not continue translating Andersen’s work. This may be explained by his personal biography, which suggests that he eventually distanced himself from the idea of national development and the Ukrainian cultural revival that many of his contemporaries embraced. The *Collection Ukrainian Children’s Book 1885–1923* compiled by the Pedagogical Museum of Ukraine provides a comprehensive catalog of Ukrainian translations of world literature, including all known editions of Andersen’s fairy tales (Haidei & Mikho, 2015).

In contrast, Starytskyi’s 1873 edition marked a turning point in the adaptation of Andersen’s fairy tales within the Ukrainian literary system. His work aligned with the broader cultural and national revival of the 1870s–1890s. This movement was further strengthened by the rise of realism and democratic values in literature, particularly under the influence of Kharkiv-based critics and writers. In his article “Ukrainian Literature, suppressed by the Russian Government,” the famous Ukrainian ethnographer and philosopher Mykhailo Drahomanov (1841–1895) addressed the reasons for the decline of education and literature in Ukraine as well as the denationalization of the upper classes of the population, writing:

Uncertain and amateurish in its first steps, Ukrainian literature later recreated its political and social character. This literary movement had already yielded noticeable results, starting in 1830. Kharkov professors and scholars began to think about the need for a national restoration of Ukraine, if not a political one, then at least a literary one. (Drahomanov, 2002, p. 4)¹

His views were supported by intellectual circles of that time, leading to the organization of a Pan-Slavic circle. Its purpose was to gather folklore, write poems and other literary works in the Ukrainian language, translate major works, and enlarge the national literary capital.

Considering the historical context and taking into account the linguistic peculiarities used in translation, Starytskyi’s translations of Andersen’s tales could be viewed in light of Pascal Casanova’s view that translations are never neutral and usually involve an asymmetrical dynamic between literature and languages.

In the political and historical context of nineteenth-century Ukraine, Starytskyi’s translations of Andersen’s fairy tales foreground linguistic and cultural distinctiveness between Ukrainian and Russian, thereby subverting the restrictions imposed by the Valuev

¹ This article on the development of Ukrainian literature in the 19th century was first published in 1878: the French-language original was published in Geneva by the author himself, the Ukrainian translation by Ivan Beley was published in Lviv by the magazine *Pravda* (this translation was reprinted by Ivan Franko in the series “Small Library”, No. 2).

Circular. According to Casanova's concept of literary capital, Starytskyi's translations can be understood as deliberate interventions aimed at strengthening the symbolic position of Ukrainian literature within a hierarchically structured world-literary field. Even under conditions of marginalization and limited resources, which marked the time when Andersen's fairy tale translations came out, they accumulated symbolic capital by emphasizing Ukrainian cultural values and images and enhancing their cultural legitimacy as linguistic innovation and cultural resistance.

Starytskyi's invention of neologisms and using them in the translation of fairy tales such as *Байдужість* (indifference), *Темрява* (darkness), *Потужний* (powerful), *Блакитний* (light blue), *Свічадо* (mirror), and *Мрія* (dream) demonstrates how translation became a means of linguistic enrichment and cultural assertion rather than simply an act of mediation between languages (Levchyk, 2015). For this article, I examine the "forged words" from the fairy tale "The Fir Tree" and "The Buckwheat" to understand Starytskyi's contribution to the national language development. As a poet, he devoted significant attention to enriching and expanding the expressive potential of the Ukrainian language: its very semantics. Starytskyi used neologisms in the texts, and at the end of the 1873 translation edition of Andersen's fairy tales, there is a dictionary of Ukrainian words. The predominant method for forming neologisms was nouns and adjectives, whose proportion was considerably higher than that of verb-based ones, which influenced the character of his poetry as a form of poetic reflection and contemplation. E.g. the nouns "перестрах" (fear), "парост" (branch, twig), "пишнота" (magnificence, splendor), and an adjective "спаніла" (glorious, aristocratic).

When the little fir tree was very happy to be taken out of the place where it grew and was on its way to the future it expected and exclaimed:

"Невже й мене виведе моя доленька на ту *спанілу* дорогу?" раділа ялинка. "Коли вже дістанусь до тих теплих панських покоїв, де така *пишнота* й переших? А далі що [...] Я спочуваю ту величну спанілість." (Starytskyi, 1873, p. 23)

The Ukrainian text could be read as follows in English:

"Will my fate also lead me to that splendid path?" rejoiced the fir tree. "When will I finally reach those warm noble chambers, where there are such splendor and luxury? And then what? [...] I feel that magnificent splendor."

Starytskyi used his own “forged words” for *splendid* path, all that splendor and magnificence – спанілий, спанілість – which for Ukrainian readers signify that strata of nobility which were in the 19th century, a landlord who had peasants and land, a priest (pastor), a village headman. In the Ukrainian context, the word “спанілий, spanilyi” does not necessarily mean rich but also a good way of life to follow. Another interesting thought could be that the western part of Ukraine was under the rule of Austro-Hungarian empire and people called the others who lived abroad “пан”, noble person. For the Ukrainian reader, it gives the fir tree the expectations of a young person who wants to follow another way, a good way of life which pertains to social status changes.

Artistic Integration: Murashko’s Role in Enhancing Starytskyi’s Translations

Another aspect of the specific impact of Starytskyi’s translation was the illustrations accompanying the fairy tales. These illustrations, created by the young Ukrainian painter Mykola Murashko (1844–1909) at the outset of his career, provide additional insight into the cultural and artistic context of the translations. Starytskyi invited Murashko to illustrate the translated texts – a decision of considerable importance at the time. This choice not only served to popularize Andersen’s fairy tales among Ukrainian readers but also ensured that the language and illustrations were more effectively adapted to and better received by the local audience. The collaboration with Murashko resulted in an edition of Andersen’s fairy tales as well as his biography in volume 1873. In the cover illustration (Figure 1), designed

with ornamental details and typography characteristic of nineteenth-century Ukrainian decorative art, the composition integrates national motifs while retaining the visual conventions of a European fairy-tale book.

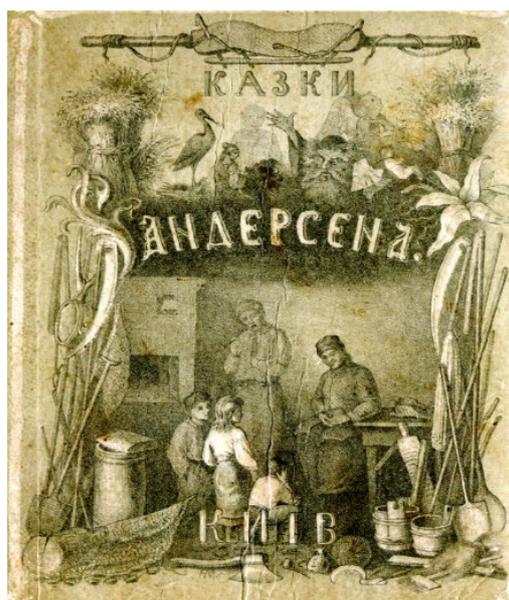
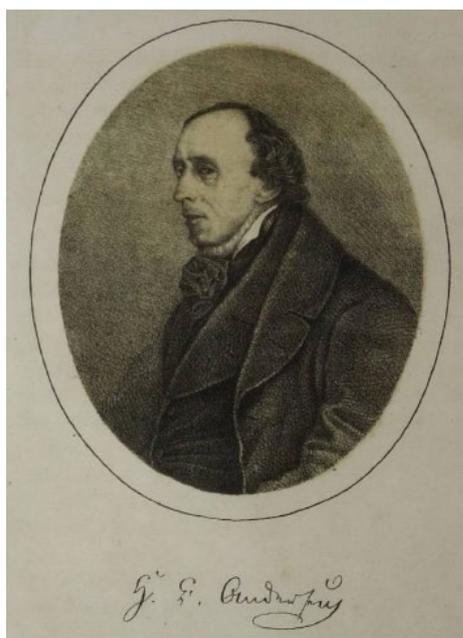


Figure 1. Cover of *Andersen’s Fairy Tales with a Short Biography*, translated by M. Starytskyi and illustrated by M. Murashko (Kyiv, 1873). Public domain. Source: UARLIB.

The Ukrainian edition of Andersen's fairy tales illustrated by Murashko marked the artist's first experience in book illustration. The background of his artistic career and his decision to illustrate Starytskyi's translation are discussed in a project initiated at the National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture by researcher Valeriia Pitenina (2019). She notes that Murashko had likely seen other illustrated editions of Andersen, although there is no evidence identifying which ones. Pitenina suggests that his visual inspiration may have come from the 1839 edition featuring illustrations by the German painter and graphic artist Georg R. Osterwald, or from the first Russian edition of Andersen's tales with illustrations by Mikhail Klodt (1868). Murashko's travels across Europe further indicate that he was familiar with at least one foreign edition of Andersen prior to 1873.

The Ukrainian-speaking literary community probably also had access to Andersen's Polish-language editions, the first of which appeared in 1859 (Andersen, 1859), a two-volume work in a thick, medium-sized binding without illustrations. Ewa Ogłozza notes:

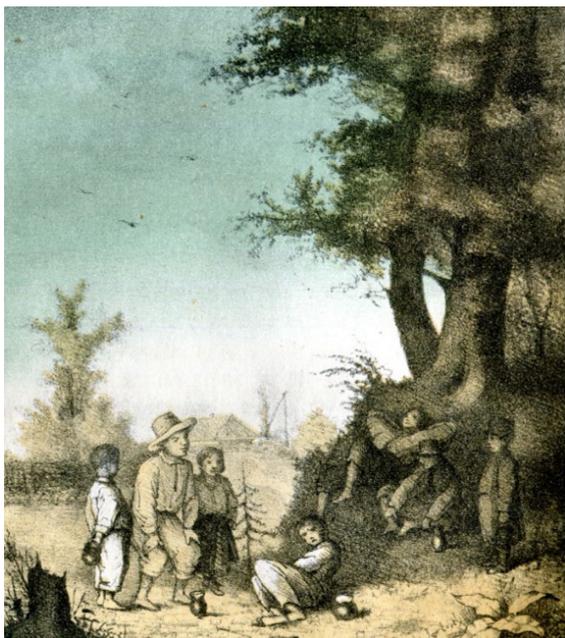
The first Polish editions of Andersen's fairy tales, published in 1859, contained illustrations by prominent foreign artists – Wilhelm Pedersen, Edward Dulac – or anonymous imported woodcut prints, which were everywhere at that time. But already at the end of the 19th century, editions of fairy tales with original illustrations began to dominate in Poland. (Ogłozza, 2018)



The 1873 volume of Andersen's fairy tales (Figure 2) opens with a portrait of Hans Christian Andersen, and Murashko's rendering closely resembles the photographic portrait taken by Franz Hanfstaengl in 1860. In Murashko's interpretation, the author appears in near profile, his features marked by a subdued, contemplative expression that recalls the tone of Hanfstaengl's 1860 image.

Figure 2. *Andersen's Fairy Tales with a Short Biography*, translated by M. Starytskyi and illustrated by M. Murashko (Kyiv, 1873). Public domain. Source: UARTRLIB.

Yet even Murashko's first illustration elicits surprise among modern viewers. In Figure 3, we see how Murashko visually relocates Andersen's fairy tale into a Ukrainian cultural setting, placing children in a landscape marked by local traditions and everyday life. In the drawing for the fairy tale "The Fir Tree," instead of the Danish natural beauties vividly described by M. Starytskyi in the foreword, we see children set against the backdrop of a typical Ukrainian rural landscape. This landscape is characterized by expansive fields, traditional folk houses built of wood and clay, and rolling hills, which are emblematic of the Ukrainian countryside.



The scene is imbued with a sense of rustic charm and simplicity, reflecting the everyday life and environment familiar to Ukrainian viewers.

Figure 3. M. Murashko, illustration for "The Fir Tree," from *Andersen's Fairy Tales with a Short Biography* (1873). Public domain. Source: UARTRILB. <https://en.uartlib.org/exclusive/my-soft-and-gentle-andersen/>

For relevant examples of typical nature descriptions in Ukrainian poems and prose of the 19th century, it is worth mentioning these writers and excerpts from their famous works, which highlight the Ukrainian rural landscape. In his poem "The Cherry Orchard by the House," Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861) writes, "A cherry orchard by the house. Above the cherries beetles hum. The plowmen plow the fertile ground" (2022). This poem is nearly an icon of the Ukrainian landscape: springtime, village life, work, and song – all elements that form the "idyllic Ukraine" in the reader's imagination. In the novel *The Kaidash Family*, Ivan Nechuy-Levytsky (1838–1918) gives this description: "Beyond the village, far away, the hills rolled gently on, and on them, like wild periwinkle in bloom, villages stood [...]. And everything seemed to be drowning in the green of gardens" (1879/1988). This proves that in the novel, nature is not just a backdrop but part of the characters' mental landscape – familiar, homely, and dear. In the novel *The Black Council*, Panteleimon Kulish (1819–1897), describes it this way: "In spring, the steppe seems to buzz with life. Tall grasses, flowers,

birds – and among it all, a lone Cossack on horseback, like a speck of shadow on a vast painting” (1857/1994, p. 14). In Kulish’s work, the landscape often symbolizes greatness, freedom, and historical memory.

With this cultural imagery in mind, it is instructive to return to Murashko’s illustration of Andersen’s fairy tale “The Fir Tree.” In Andersen’s narrative, the action unfolds first in a forest where the fir tree grows and later within the home of a wealthy family. The story is told from the perspective of the tree itself, personified as a sentient being whose moment of fulfillment occurs on Christmas night. Yet this moment of joy soon gives way to melancholy, as the narrative closes with the tree’s inevitable decline and eventual burning – a symbolic culmination that transforms the tale’s festive setting into a meditation on transience and loss.

Murashko shifts the emphasis: the primary figures in his illustration are the children, with the “downcast” fir tree barely visible among them. All attributes of Christmas and indications of Denmark as the story’s setting vanish and are replaced by recognizable Ukrainian houses, embroidered children’s shirts, and fences in the background. In effect, the illustration does not depict a particular moment from the tale but rather captures the connection between Andersen’s child heroes and the child readers, who are presented in the attire of contemporary Ukrainian peasants against a familiar rural landscape.

While Murashko sought to domesticate the visual reception of the fairy tale, Starytskyi achieved a similar effect using national landscape markers in his translation. At the beginning of “The Fir Tree,” where Andersen describes that the tree grows “in the forest on a good place,” the Ukrainian version renders this as “on a beautiful place covered with *morizhok*,” literally “na krasnim morizhku” (на краснім моріжку) (Starytskyi, 1873, p. 3). The term *morizhok* (моріжок) in Ukrainian refers to a plant of the buckwheat family (*Polygonaceae*). Although it literally denotes a common field plant – known locally by names such as goose spur, spurge, or bird buckwheat – its use here extends beyond the botanical. The word introduces a culturally specific image that anchors the scene within the Ukrainian rural landscape. This lexical choice represents a deliberate effort to infuse the translation with symbolic and emotional resonance, aligning it with Ukrainian linguistic and literary traditions. Functioning as an interpretative marker, *morizhok* allows Starytskyi to preserve poetic density while simultaneously reinforcing a distinctly Ukrainian cultural horizon. Murashko’s visual language was likewise grounded in Ukrainian cultural traditions, visible in one other illustrations in the translated volume which is at the end of the book and is the depiction of the *kobzar*, a Ukrainian folk singer, a bard, who sang to his own accompaniment on a special



national musical instrument, the bandura or *kobza* (Figure 4). The *kobzars* were often blind and traveled from village to village performing *dumy* (epic songs).

By including such imagery in his visual work, Murashko complemented Starytskyi's translation of Andersen fairy tales, both thus contributing to a broader project of cultural resistance that sought to assert Ukrainian identity through language, image, and artistic form.

Figure 4. M. Murashko, illustration of a *kobzar* (Ukrainian bard) playing the bandura. Public domain. Source: UARTRILIB. <https://en.uartlib.org/exclusive/my-soft-and-gentle-andersen/>

The Ukrainian Interpretation of “The Buckwheat”: Symbols and Values

Starytskyi highlighted the ethical and moral values of Andersen's fairy tales in his introduction, encouraging readers to “taste this first edited set of the fairy tales,” naming the fairy tale “The Buckwheat” (“Boghveden,” 1841) as an example. It is one of the first fairy tales in the volume. The decision to include this fairy tale in the collection might have been driven by several reasons: expanding the list of translated texts by the first translator, the motif of the tale itself, or the symbolism chosen by the writer. It is noteworthy that he included this fairy tale considering the meaning of the word and its functionality in the Ukrainian language. The buckwheat could be symbolic, as even a person who sows it is called in Ukrainian “Гречкосій” (Grechkosiy). According to the Ukrainian Language Dictionary, it has two meanings. The first is colloquial, referring to someone who sows buckwheat. The second is archaic, meaning a peasant and similar to “splendid path,” this has a built-in idea of a particular social stratum. This dual meaning is exemplified in the works of the nineteenth-century Ukrainian writer Ivan Karpenko-Karyi (1845–1907).² For instance, in one of his novels, he writes, “I want to become a farmer, a buckwheat grower.”³ This

² See the entry for Ivan Karpenko-Karyi at the Encyclopedia of Ukraine (n.d.), which gives more information about the author as a playwright who highlighted social relations and conflicts and concentrated on psychological portrayal and character development, thereby creating the finest examples of turn-of-the-century Ukrainian didactic plays about peasant life and laying the foundations of modern Ukrainian theater.

³ See the entry for buckwheat (гречкосій) at the *Dictionary of the Ukrainian language* (Slovnyk.ua, n.d.).

reference illustrates how common the word “buckwheat” was in Ukrainian culture. Starytskyi might have referred to it as a familiar and well-understood concept for the Ukrainian reader.

The symbols and images in the fairy tale “The Buckwheat” give a Ukrainian reader a picture on the one hand of nature and on the other hand express the deep meaning, the motifs of pious humility and gratitude. The plot of the fairy tale is set in the countryside, where a proud buckwheat plant stands tall and refuses to bow its head, unlike the other plants in the field. The wise old willow tree advises the buckwheat to bow its head in humility, especially when a thunderstorm is approaching. The willow explains that even humans dare not look at the lightning, as it is a manifestation of divine power. Despite the willow’s advice, the buckwheat remains defiant and stands upright during the storm. When the lightning strikes, the buckwheat is burned and destroyed, while the other plants that bowed their heads are spared. The story concludes with the willow tree reflecting on the fate of the proud buckwheat and the importance of humility and reverence for divine power.

The interest in this fairy tale might have been sparked by its associations with elements familiar to Ukrainian readers. The fairy tale contains a range of symbols that correspond to motifs familiar within Ukrainian cultural tradition, including lightning, angels, sons, fire, willow trees, sparrows, and buckwheat. In translating these narratives, Starytskyi sought to ensure linguistic clarity and cultural resonance for the target audience. This approach often involved localizing to better fit the cultural context and expectations of the Ukrainian readership, resulting in thoughtful adaptations geared toward cultural nuances of the target audience.

That Starytskyi’s translations are designed to conjure specifically Ukrainian cultural ideas can be demonstrated through their symbolic importance within the Ukrainian context. The word “buckwheat” evokes expressions widely used in the Ukrainian language and references a culturally significant plant. Additionally, the tale’s symbolic elements – such as the willow tree, fields, lightning, and the implied presence of God – resonate deeply within Ukrainian culture. When reading the first line of the fairy tale, the reader imagines a landscape filled with “fields” of various crops. In the Ukrainian translated text, the word “fields” is interpreted in two ways: “pole” and “nyva.” In the Ukrainian context, different types of agricultural land are named with specific terms. The word “pole” (field) is etymologically close to the meaning of “open space, flat field” and is used for any plants. On the other hand, “nyva” (field) signifies land where wheat grows and indicates arable land that has been left

to recover for a period of one to five years, or land normally used for growing permanent crops, meadow, or pasture grasses, but has not been used for this purpose for some time.

According to the Ukrainian thesaurus dictionary (slovnyk.ua, n.d.), the word “buckwheat” generates many derivatives in the language itself and its cultural dimension, evoking the reader’s image of buckwheat to create a perspective on the fields and lands. This is what Starytskyi used in his translation of Andersen’s fairy tale “The Buckwheat”. By focusing on these specific terms in the Ukrainian text, we can see for instance how the author describes the place where the buckwheat grows using several words for depicting the field. In English translation, Andersen’s story reads:

Time and again after a storm, when one passes a field where buckwheat is growing, one sees that it has become quite black and scorched, [...] I’ll tell you what the house sparrow has told me, and the house sparrow has heard it from an old willow tree that stood next to a field of buckwheat [...]. In all the surrounding fields corn grew, rye, barley as well as oats, yes, the lovely oats that when ripe looks like a host of small yellow canaries on a branch. But there was also a field of buckwheat, and that field was right next to the old willow tree – the buckwheat did not incline its head the slightest as the corn in the other fields did – it towered up, proud and stiff! (Irons, 2024)

In these examples, the word “field” is translated into Ukrainian by several synonymic words, as “nyva,” which etymologically means “lowland of the field, land.” As for the names of the crops mentioned in the fairy tale, “pashnia” is a field with different types of corn or kernel and “zbizje,” derived from Old Slavic, /сѣбожьје /– “happiness”, “wealth”, “estate”, cattle, grain, arable land – is a collective noun that means plants and cereal grains; in effect, group of plants, including the families of cereals, buckwheat, are grown on the fields to produce grain used for food. With the phrase in the fairy tale “боже збіжжя”, “God’s richness, abundance”, “pole, nyva, pashnia” (all these words close to the meaning “field”), Starytskyi describes the Ukrainian countryside while translating Andersen’s fairy tale.

Another significant image in Andersen’s fairy tale “The Buckwheat” is the willow tree (*верба*), a culturally resonant symbol in Ukrainian tradition. The willow occupies a central place in folklore and national imagery, encapsulated in the proverb, “There is no Ukraine without a willow and a viburnum.” In folk belief, the tree is linked to water, spring rituals, and renewal, symbolizing both sorrow and the persistence of life. According to the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Symbols of Ukrainian Culture* (2015), the willow represents modesty,

endurance, and maternal grief – motifs that recur in Ukrainian literature as metaphors for loss and resilience.

In his translation, Starytskyi renders the willow with particular attention to descriptive nuance: “Величезна верба та, й доладня і пишна, тільки стара вже – аж згорбилась” (Starytskyi, 1873, p. 37), which translates to, “That huge willow, graceful and magnificent, though already bent with age”. The adjective *пишна* (“magnificent”), which appears in Starytskyi’s list of neologisms appended to the 1873 edition, reflects his broader effort to expand the expressive capacity of Ukrainian poetic language. By imbuing the scene with culturally specific connotations, the translator anchors Andersen’s imagery within a symbolic landscape familiar to Ukrainian readers, transforming a natural motif into a vehicle of cultural continuity and emotional depth.

Like the willow, the image of buckwheat in Andersen’s tale acquires a distinctly Ukrainian resonance in Starytskyi’s translation. Buckwheat, deeply embedded in Ukrainian agrarian and linguistic traditions, functions as both a lexical and symbolic marker of national identity. Through such culturally specific choices, Starytskyi reinterprets Andersen’s moral universe in terms that reflect the ethical and emotional codes of Ukrainian rural life, linking natural imagery to collective experience and linguistic renewal.

Final Thoughts on Translating “Buckwheat” into Ukrainian

The Ukrainian translation of “The Buckwheat” may be read as both a cultural adaptation and a subtle act of literary resistance. Starytskyi’s rendering of Andersen’s tale not only enriched the expressive capacity of the Ukrainian language but also positioned translation as a medium of national self-articulation under conditions of political constraint. The recurrent appearance of the word *buckwheat* in Ukrainian idioms, literature, and everyday life underscores the symbolic resonance of this motif and helps explain its particular relevance to Starytskyi’s choice of text.

Within the broader framework of Pascale Casanova’s theory, Starytskyi’s translation can be seen as an effort to accumulate literary capital and assert the visibility of Ukrainian culture within the asymmetrical political geography of nineteenth-century Europe. Translation here becomes more than linguistic transfer – it functions as a form of cultural negotiation and symbolic repositioning. Through the adaptation of Andersen’s narratives, Ukrainian literature entered into a dialogue with dominant European traditions while simultaneously challenging the imperial structures that sought to suppress it. At the same

time, the interpretive possibilities opened by this translation extend beyond the political. The tale's engagement with natural imagery, everyday language, and moral reflection suggests that the Ukrainian reception of Andersen involved not only resistance but also reinterpretation, a process through which foreign texts were internalized, transformed, and endowed with new meanings. This dynamic interplay between translation, language, and identity invites further inquiry into how small literatures construct cultural autonomy through acts of adaptation and recontextualization.

Ultimately, Starytskyi's "The Buckwheat" does not merely demonstrate how a text travels across linguistic borders; it reveals how translation itself becomes a space of negotiation – between center and periphery, empire and nation, the familiar and the foreign. In this sense, the story continues to speak to contemporary discussions of cultural resilience and the politics of literary circulation, offering more questions than definitive answers.

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