

TRANSLATING REMIZOV

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About ten or twelve years ago Professor Karlinsky asked me to translate some Remizov for the collection of émigré writing that he was then editing. My answer was an unequivocal “No. I detest Remizov. He wrote a cruel and unfeeling obituary on Zamyatin. His *V rosovom bleske* is simpering and sentimental. And, generally, most of his writing is untranslatable.”

Letters went back and forth, and I am grateful that my “No” was not accepted as final. One day I was working at the library, and I thought—“let me take another look.” I ordered a number of Remizov’s books—*Myškina Dudočka*, *Posolon’*, *Martyn Zadeka*, *Podstrižennymi Glazami*, and others. I read, and read, and read, and fell in love—head over heels. And love is the *second* essential requirement in translation—love for the writer and his work, and a deep affinity, without which the rendition dies.

It was a revelation: A wood goblin blessed with the gift of music and of words. A master stylist, an intensely Russian master stylist. A man of marvelous prismatic vision, a great artificer, utterly unique, both idiosyncratic and universal, and an artist of absolute integrity. The rare person who is absolutely himself, who doesn’t, cannot conform to any *given* models or standards. His style—of being, of seeing, of writing (and, as I later discovered, of painting)—totally *his own*—and, to me, delightful. And, what endeared him to me even more—he was steeped in folklore—and, he had toys all his life, and he loved the mouse who became his friend during the dark, terrible years of occupation in Paris.

I was enchanted, and as I know more of him, I am more and more enchanted by the “gaiety of spirit” (*veselje duxa*) that he felt was so essential in a human being and that he possessed so richly—his perpetual mischief, mockery, pretense. He was forever trying on a variety of masks, and dressing up others in masks, and often you cannot tell the truth from the invention, yet both—as he sees them—are fascinating, and both essentially true and essentially false.

I love his sense of the ridiculous, his often outrageous, wildly burlesque, wildly funny “indecencies,” his unseeing seeing eye, his extraordinary capacity for capturing a moment in a few salient strokes (and if there are no vivid details, he’ll invent them!), his gift for expressing emotion through seeming absence of emotion.

Alexej Remizov. *Approaches to a Protean Writer* / Ed. by G. Slobin. Columbus: Slavica, [1987]. 286 p. (UCLA Slavic Studies; Vol. 16).

But he is all contradiction, and he has endless facets. Along with the marvelous sense of play, the wild absurdities and laughter, there was the strict and rigorous artist and the man who felt life profoundly and tragically, and this runs through all his work—from his early fictions through the folk tales, apocrypha, dreams, and autobiographical writings.

In *Myškina Dudočka* (*Mouse Piper*) he speaks of the hundreds of mice that overran the house he lived in, during the frozen, hungry years of German occupation in Paris. The concierge, he says, finally brought in a “krysumor,” a (surely apocryphal) French version of the pied piper. He describes the sound of the pipe which lured the mice to their destruction (incidentally, an enormously difficult passage to translate):

In this piping call there was something both kind and merry—luring, carefree trills, but in the very depths of the sound I heard a piercing anguish, the same feeling as when a man wanders from room to room, finding no rest or respite, as when there is no place for him on earth, and no hope of ever finding one—this soul-tormenting ache—its voice sounded within me.

В этом вызывающем дуде было что-то и доброе и веселое — призывные беззаботные переключки, но в самой глубине звука мне прозвучала щемящая тоска: это то самое чувство, когда человек бродит из комнаты в комнату, не находя себе места, это когда нет на земле человеку места и не найти его и никакой надежды — эта душу выматывающая тоска, ее голос звучал во мне (p. 109).

Clearly, the piper is Remizov himself.

In much of his work, especially his later work, and especially after his wife's death, there is a sense of utter desolation—absolutely his own, but also everyman's. (As in *Martyn Zadeka*—“My Flowers”—a reference to his lost daughter?) In *Načalo Slov* (“The Origin of Words,” *Literaturnyj Sovremennik*, 21/xi/1954, p. 11), he writes:

And when I perish, my word, my music, spring air, spring song—where will you go? And there is no one on earth who has heard me: Briusov, Andrej Bely, Blok, Vološin, Z. N. Gippius, Gumilev, Esenin, Kuzmin, Sologub, Vyač. Ivanov, Zamyatin—only mute crosses on graves, and crossless ones.

He knew life, and he knew death.

Remizov was forever intrigued by the creative process—his creative process, and wrote about it again and again. To me, as a translator, his self-searching is especially interesting. Here are a few quotes from *Načalo Slov*:

My mode—my non-bookish Russian—has been as a cataract in the eye to the critics (p. 8).

With the bride's song of lament, her prayer to the sun, the moon, and the rainbow, I begin my whirl of words in the Russian mode, and I cannot speak in any other way. . . . With the maiden's lament before marriage I enter Russian literature—on September 8, 1902 (p. 9).

And throughout my writer's life, with the same play of destiny as in my daily life, I have had one goal and one intention: to perform verbal pieces as a musician performs music on his instrument (p. 9).

I never intended to “enter” literature (p. 9).

I dreamed of becoming a singer, a musician, an actor, a painter, a teacher of penmanship, a barber, a pyrotechnician (to send up bursts of fireworks and magical stars), a philosopher, a scholar—and here I am in literature. And even asked the blessing—of the sun, the stars, the rainbow—to all four corners of the world (p. 9).

And I love words, the primal sound of the word, and the combination of sounds: I love the singsong Moscow speech, I love the native Russian omissions of words (ellipsis), when a phrase looks like a honeycomb; I love the confusion of tenses—the moving line with a sudden leap, and sit-down; I honor and revere the wise word—rarest among the jumble of dull, dim-witted words of nonsense, but I will gladly welcome a mindless blurt and foolishness if spoken out of a man's own sight and in his own voice (p. 10).

I want to write as I speak, and speak as it comes (p. 10).

I am no teller of tales, I'm a singer, and I never became a “novelist” (p. 13).

Once I made an experiment: I remembered that one must touch the earth; and only then will I come alive. I gathered regional dictionaries . . . and, reading slowly, letter by letter, without haste, I walked the length and width of Russia. And what came from where. *My Posolon'*—it is not an invention, not a composition—it came of itself—the breath and the color of the Russian earth—words (p. 16).

Remizov wrote somewhere that even a cultivated Russian will not understand much of his writing. He not only delighted in archaisms, in regional folk speech—he needed these to say what he had to say, in the way he had to say it. He rejected and violated all bookish rules of syntax, grammar, sequence, logic, and the result is totally his own, and totally delightful—to read. But to translate? That is quite another matter.

And here I must interpolate with a few words on translation generally. We use the word constantly, without defining it, without saying what it is, what it should be, and what it can or cannot be. One—translation is an art, and the translator is, or should be, an artist, re-creating a work in another medium, another language, just as a musician re-creates a composition, as an actor re-creates a play.

A translation must be absolutely faithful and absolutely free—and this is not as paradoxical as it seems. Freedom does not mean license to change, to add or delete, to explain, or anachronize. It means that the translation *must breathe* in the new language, must sound as true and right and authentic as did the original. It means that the translator must listen to the words

on the page, must yield himself to the material as completely and sensitively as the original author yielded himself to what spoke from within and through him. But he must also breathe freely if the translation is to be alive.

And this means that the translator, besides full knowledge of both languages, must also know the world in which the author lives or lived. He must have an excellent ear, first of all for the meaning, and—equally important—for connotation, association, nuance; he must understand or sense why, out of a dozen synonyms, the author chose this particular word; he must have a finely tuned sense of language. In short, he *must have talent*. And that is the *first requirement*. In essence, the translator must be an excellent writer, who writes, without vanity or intrusion, along with the original author, asking himself at every moment (whether consciously or not): How would this writer have said this in the language I am working in?

And a second interpolation: for some strange reason the worst offenders against the art of translation—with a few notable exceptions—are academics, teachers of literature. These teachers of literature, forgetting or ignoring all they know, or should know about literature, and throwing away to the wind whatever sense of values they should have, rush in where angels fear to tread, and merrily mutilate the works of their betters without a twinge of doubt or conscience—in fact, mightily pleased with themselves. And, most incredible of all—their sorry productions are published by the dozens year after year by prestigious (and not so prestigious) publishers (mostly academic), as though the only thing that matters is the name of the author or the work, not the shape in which that work is presented.

All this is particularly true of Russian, which, again for some odd reason, falls into the same dismal category with the “lesser known languages”—Asian, African, and, of course, the classics.

Remizov, deeply Russian, rooted in the Russian past, in Russian religious writings, in folk speech and folk lore, with his blend of Christianity and Slavic paganism, can safely be said to write in a “lesser known language.” His language, his perception, his specific mode of feeling and seeing, are utterly alien to English or American experience. And there are often no equivalents in English for the Russian words, values, religious-emotional attitudes.

All language is a code, a shorthand, a system of references based on specific experience, some of it universal, some acutely local, wholly of this place, of this people, of this culture.

What is the translator to do if the reference, the experience, the categories, emotional, intellectual, and verbal, do not coincide, or even overlap?

In translation there are verbal and non-verbal means. Music is more universal than words. Listen and capture the tonalities, the rhythms—and words begin to come and fall into place, conveying, at least in part, the shape, the quality, and the intent of the original.

In the very best translation, especially of a writer like Remizov, losses and shifts are inevitable, not only because of non-coincidence of language, but also because the eye and the mind of the reader are different, and the associations he brings to the work are different. Translation is a possible-impossible art. Yet when it works, when the text sings like the original, it's a wonderful feeling—a miracle!

On the whole Remizov's writings can be split into three categories: The difficult, yet translatable; the very difficult, but perhaps translatable; and the utterly impossible. I have done some of the first two. I would not touch the third.

I was asked to translate some passages of *Besnovatye*, to accompany Remizov's illustrations. Utter defeat. Even the title is impossible. How convey first, the particularity of the traditional Russian attitude toward what we in English call “the possessed,” (and the “*jurodivye*” and the “*klikuš'i*”), and, second, the utter fixity and frenzy and vitality of the madness characteristic of possession, which are so vividly and musically expressed in the very sound of “*besnovatye*”?

And then the archaic Russian mode. Even archaic English, if it could be mastered enough to sound inevitable and natural, would be a complete distortion. Render it in modern English? A violation of the work's art and sensibility, utterly alien to *our* English. Remizov is an absolute poet. To put his archaic work into present English would be as outrageous as the currently prevalent translations of poetry (Russian, and other) that litter our literary scene. Such translations can at best give an idea of what the work is *about*, never what it *is*—its music, its nuances, its reverberations. They are not translations—they are demolition jobs.

And so, we must accept that there are barriers, frontiers that cannot be crossed, and the translator must respect them and beat a dignified retreat.

In conclusion, some of Remizov's own words about translation and translators:

Translators wail and complain, though what is it to them? They'll do it all as they please, anyway; but then it can't be otherwise: in language, neither the intonation nor the pattern coincide. (*Načalo Slov*, p. 8)

In *Myškina Dudočka* in the chapter “Vavilonskoje Stolpotvorenje” (“Babel”) Remizov tells the story, in his extravagant-comic style, of the attempts

to translate three of his stories into French for a bi-lingual edition of *Zolotoje Runo* (*The Golden Fleece*) in 1905. Three Frenchmen were invited to do the translations—Chouseville (all immersed in Verlaine and Mallarmé), and two others, without particular literary qualifications, a Duboudom and a Bourdon, both married to hefty Russian women, candy-makers, from whom they learned Russian. The poor Frenchmen labored and labored on the stories—and incidentally, even the titles are untranslatable—“*Xovala*,” “*Nežit*,” “*Vodylnik*.” He cannot say, he tells us, how Duboudom managed with his wife, but the story of Bourdon would soon be learnt by all of Moscow. His Annuška, fed up with his lack of attention, got up one night, announced that she was going to drown herself, and disappeared. Soon after that, a body was fished out of Moskva-River, and no one knew—was it a man or a woman. “Perhaps it dropped off,” or “an anomaly”—all Moscow was agog. And Remizov feared to show his face. *He* knew it was Annuška, and it was all his fault—his “*Xovala*.”

After some time he met Duboudom. “And how are you doing?” Duboudom, in embarrassment—“Mine burnt” (“*Sožglas*”). Remizov, horrified (one drowned, the other burnt!)—“Oh, no!” “In the stove,” the translator explained. “The manuscript.” And Remizov understood—his “*Vodylnik*.”

And then, he says, after many years,

. . . in Paris, like snow out of the blue, they took it into their heads to translate me into French.

There's nothing much to tell. The same story. Schletzer swallowed mercury, Pascal in despair retired to a monastery, Chouseville—and how I hoped that he would not abandon, because, as he himself confessed to me, he “never married”—yet even Chouseville has disappeared without a trace somewhere in Syracuse, reading the Koran and speaking nothing but Arabic.

. . . в Париже, как снег на голову, затеяли меня переводить на французский.

Много рассказывать нечего. Все то же: Б. Ф. Шлецер ртуть проглотил, П. Паскаль с отчаяния ушел в монастырь, Шюзевиль — а как я рассчитывал, не покинет, “потому что никогда не женился”, как сам он мне признался, а вот и Шюзевиль безвестно в Сиракузах, читает коран и говорит только по-арабски (p. 196).

So much for translators of Remizov!

New York

Note: All the passages quoted above were translated for this essay. The sources are not at present available in English.