

A Poem and its Versions

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THE TRANSLATION of literature - and above all the most concentrated, fundamental form of literature, lyric poetry — has long excited controversy and given rise to vastly different opinions: from those for whom 'poetry' is what gets left out in translation, to those for whom poetic essence is precisely that which transcends the translation process, from those who, following the philosopher Quine (1970) argue that not a single word, let alone a sentence or a whole work, can truly be translated, to those who pragmatically point out that translations have always been made, continue to be seen as in whatever way carrying authority, and indeed have had an unavoidable role in the transmission of civilization. I have said more about these matters — in the context of Chekhov's short stories — elsewhere (Milner-Gulland & Soboleva 2005), and do not intend to attempt any contribution to the theoretical debate in this short paper. Rather, I wish to put before the reader what seems to me a rather intriguing situation, whereby a most distinguished poetic translator has published his own two versions of a single poem, twelve years apart, allowing us to witness the development of his own thinking and feeling about the nature of the poem in question and about the idiom of (American) English within which he found a satisfactory equivalent for his purposes. The translator was Paul Schmidt, who sadly died in 1999 and thus cannot tell us what processes were involved in his decisions. The poem is 'Odinokiy

litsedey' by Velimir Khlebnikov (1885-1922). I should deckte a personal interest in the problem: I have in my time published two independent versions of the poem 'Obed' by Nikolay Zabolotsky (1903—58), several years apart: the difference is that when I made my second version, in something of a hurry, I had totally forgotten about the first one!¹

First we need to examine 'Odinokiy litsedey' itself, all the more so since — though often mentioned - it has seldom been studied at any great length in scholarly literature. Actually it deserves, I believe, the sort of thorough analysis that Fiona Björling (1973) devoted to Zabolotsky's 'Stolbtsy' in her first work, or that I have in my time attempted with respect to various poems, including Khlebnikov's 'Tatlin, taynovidets lopastey...' (Milner-Gulland 1987).² Among the formal features of 'Odinokiy litsedey' to which such an analysis would attend would be its rhythmic structure and sound-patterning, both distinctive and meaningful,³ but features that are in general effectively disregarded by translators, since even if they could be imitated they would carry unrecognizably different weight within another language-system. In the case of Khlebnikov, an analysis might also examine rather esoteric features that were certainly of importance to the poet, such as the choice of initial consonants, not to mention intertextual echoes with his other works. There is, however, a brief but useful article that concentrates on the poem's 'mythological layering' (Somova 2008), a fascinating and complex topic to which we shall return.

The poem gives, from first acquaintance, a feeling of extraordinary vigour: in the words of its own seventh line, of 'striding forth regardless'. The sense of narrative immediacy is established from the first word 'And...' (*I*), and *il a* return again and again to start phrases and sentences up to the last: the mode is paratactic rather than discursive, the speaker a messenger with a journey to make, a task to fulfil, a battle to fight, a message urgently to deliver. He is other things too: a prophet (not named as such, but clearly

¹ Published in Zabolotsky (1994) and Weissbort (1999).

² For an overview of the poet, see Cooke (1987); on this poem: Ram (2001).

³ On sound-patterning in Russian poetry, see (eg) Ward (1975).

indicated to be one through the referential echo, in line 4, of Pushkin's 'Prorok', 'like a corpse in the wilderness'); the legendary-Theseus, through the most sustained set of mythological references in the poem; a 'warrior of truth'; the victim of wind, weather, exhaustion and his own destiny; and most strikingly — most puzzlingly, perhaps — an 'actor', both in the title and in line 6 (there 'sleepy'; in the title 'solitary', but originally *bedniy*, 'poor'(Khlebnikov 1986, 675), whose significance will shortly become clear). Why an 'actor', using the rather antiquated form 'litsedey'? Clearly it would have been against Khlebnikov's principles to have used the European, non-Slavic word *aktyor*, but *litsedey* perhaps strikes an appropriate initial note in a poem whose overall diction is a timeless, rather solemn Russian (note too the use of 'ochi'⁴) without colloquialisms, let alone any 'Futuristic' touches. He is an 'actor', in a quite uncomplicated but perceptive way, not because he is falsifying himself, but because anyone on the public stage (where he believed he had to be) is inevitably an actor, adopting a role. The successor to Khlebnikov's *litsedey* will be Pasternak's Hamlet, going out onto the stage with thousands of binoculars trained upon him. A further, weighty intertextual reference suffuses the title — perfectly obvious for English speakers, maybe less so for Russians: to Macbeth's 'poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage', with the actor representing, in tragic mode, the totality of human life. Much of Khlebnikov's work is cast in, or tends towards, dramatic form: his final dramatic 'supertale', 'Zangezi', with its prophet-hero who is an alter ego of the author, dates from the same period as this poem. An even weightier intertextual allusion comes at the end of the poem, as its conclusion or summation: to the parable of the sower (first of the parables of Jesus, in all the first three Gospels) — itself possibly mediated through Pushkin's 'Svobody seyatel'(1823). The parable itself is dependent on the prophecy of Isaiah (Matthew 13:14): 'seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive', a message that lies behind the whole text.

A central metaphor binds the poem together: that of the Minotaur, whom the hero-poet, after his tribulations, slays. We

⁴ On the concept of *ochi* for Khlebnikov, cf. Milner-Gulland (2000), specially pp. 211 et seq.

know that for Khlebnikov this figure meant War (Khlebnikov 1986, 675); it has also been suggested that its 'curly head' represents the familiar image of Pushkin (whom Khlebnikov and his colleagues had, long before, notoriously wished to eject from 'the steamship of modernity'⁵), but I find this unpersuasive. Khlebnikov through his prophetic and denunciatory writings has 'slain' war, but the populace (who launched a civil war hot on the heels of the war against Germany) are blind to this feat. There remains the initial literary reference - direct rather than metaphorical or allusive - to Anna Akhmatova, very prominent since it begins the text. Whatever is she doing here, given the remoteness of her ('Acmeist') poetic method from Khlebnikov's supposed modernism? She is, I think, a multivalent figure in the poem. On the surface her tears and outpourings seem to symbolize the vapid and over-refined culture of the pre-war era, to be contrasted with the strenuous feats of the poet-hero. Yet Khlebnikov and Akhmatova, close in age, knew each other, respected each other, exchanged quotations and dedications (Khlebnikov 1986, 675); nor did Akhmatova's work refrain from reflecting the tribulations of its times. Has she a hidden role here as Ariadne, the *volshesnitsa*, the muse without whose secret aid the poet would never have found his way to his quarry? Her — and for that matter Pushkin's - characteristic locus of Tsarskoye Selo meanwhile has striking significance as a contrastive chronotope to that of the desert, the caves, the cliff where the main action unfolds. If the poem is a 'journey', its route and ultimate destination are remarkably unexpected in view of its starting-point (a metaphor for human existence?).

A prominent series of binary oppositions - as often in Khlebnikov - structures the poem's narrative argument: blindness/perspicacity; somnolence/action; cliff/cave; dragging/striding; battle/ torpor; comfort/exposure; singing/seeing; solitude/multitude; narrator/Akhmatova (implicity maleness/femininity?); hero /beast -probably others can be identified. The most profound of them, no doubt, is compulsion/freedom: under the buffeting of weather and

⁵ See, eg, Markov (1969, 45-53).

the lunar power of free will (*volya*), the narrator awakens to his own voluntarism.

This is one of the works from the last year or so of Khlebnikov's too-short life, after his Civil War hardships and his visit to Persia. These show a writer in complete command of his poetic means, sure of his vision and idiom; they often have a vatic or minatory tone that, as Ronald Vroon has reminded us, are no longer to be taken merely metaphorically, but in full seriousness: worryingly, 'We lose the safety net of poetic convention' (Vroon 1997). Though his manner is always unmistakably his own, his work has travelled remarkably in the span of little over a dozen years that comprise his writing career: the winsome fantasy and flights of neologistic invention that made his early reputation have fallen away, save for a few very specific purposes, and a stripped down lucidity has moved in. Not that there are no more strangenesses of diction or expression: cf. the line in this poem *Gde umirala nevozhmozhnost'* mysterious in its simplicity. Above all he has become comparatively stable and self-assured about his own 'I', his poetic persona, that earlier — as several commentators, in particular Vroon, have pointed out — moved elusively between his many 'Voices'. And the ego is a large one: as we have seen, in this poem Khlebnikov's forebears, to a large extent equated with himself, are the hero Theseus, the prophet Isaiah, Jesus, Shakespeare and Pushkin.

Schmidt's translations of this poem both appeared in a bold project, eventually in four volumes, that he undertook with the help and advice of various scholars, particularly Vroon; it started as a 'Complete Works', but more realistically became 'Collected Works' by the end. First to appear was a sort of 'taster' volume, *The King of Time*, in which the first of our versions was included; then came three numbered volumes, the third of them 'Selected Poems', which contains the second, and one must assume definitive, version. The project stretched over 16 years - longer than Khlebnikov's own public writing career — and must have been a heroic effort. By the end Schmidt hardly mentions *'King of Time'*, saying only that texts previously published there 'have been revised, sometimes significantly' (Vroon 1997, ix; Khlebnikov 1985). A considerable difference between the versions is that the second has an endnote, discussing briefly the Akhmatova, Pushkin and Theseus/Minotaur

references. Purists might hold that such notes detract from literary translation, which should be self-sufficient, but I do not see how they can always be avoided if a desirable level of intercultural comprehensibility is to be retained.

It should be mentioned that Schmidt was not the first published translator of 'Odinokiy litsedey'. He was preceded by a version in *Snake Train*, edited and in part translated by Gary Kern (Khlebnikov 1976). The volume has certain merits, though the most of the translations cannot match Schmidt's literary skills and Schmidt never mentions its existence. The *Snake Train* translation of our poem is rather clumsy and at times misleading, and I shall not discuss it further, save for a couple of points. The title is rendered 'The Lone Performer', and *ustalij litsedey* in the fifth line comes out, quite interestingly, as 'exhausted mummer'. For Schmidt's various translations of *litsedey*, avoiding these two nouns, see below. At its end the *Snake Train* translation keeps the reference to the sower who goes forth impersonal, while Schmidt's versions use the first person. It could well be argued that 'depersonalization' of the concluding two lines is not only effectively contrastive, but closer in spirit to the sense of parable.

Schmidt's two versions differ from each other in minor — but not wholly insignificant — points of layout and punctuation, and, at a couple of moments, of verbal tense (the later version consistently follows Khlebnikov in using the past). The versions have much in common, including one or two debatable interpretations: the 'personalization' of the sower's task; also 'the moon's inclination' for *voley mesyatsa*, to my mind obscuring the force of the concept *volya*, '(free) will'. The conspicuous lexical differences between the versions are all in the first half of the poem. Most prominently, they concern the *litsedey* of the title. In the first version 'solitary player' transmutes into 'poor player' — in case the Shakespearian echo might have been missed — in line 6, which has nine words in English for the original two in Russian, since 'worn-out actor' is thrown in for good measure. In Schmidt's second version, however, he distances himself as far as he can from 'Macbeth', with the rather obtrusive modernisms of 'Solo Actor' in the title and — even more provocatively — 'face-faker' in line 6, introducing (I believe) a very different tone to the hero's quest. Whether this is because he

thought the apparent Shakespearian reference itself invalid, or was in pursuit of his stated aim of making 'a poem in American English' out of each of his translations, we can but guess. Maybe the same ' motive animates the second large change, where the rather odd 'looking for a break in the wall' supersedes (in line 7) the former 'shuffling heedlessly on'; I would translate the Russian literally as 'striding forth regardless', so we have moved far from lexical sense. Schmidt, as he made clear in his prefaces, had no compunction in adopting a free approach where what he saw as the 'transaction' that the translating process involved seemed to demand it: the translation thus becomes a 'cultural and temporal response to the original' (Khlebnikov 1997, vii). But I should add that as a rule he remains careful and perceptive towards literal meaning — often by no means simple to establish in Khlebnikov's multivalent works, for reasons it would take too long to go into here. In line 13, clearly not content with the literal 'evening wanderer' for *vecherniy strannik*, he gives us 'tardy traveler' in his first version, then (finding the alliteration too heavy?) introduces a neologism, or anyhow non-standard form, 'lated traveler', into his second — which I find rather successful.

As readers, we must judge for ourselves how we rate the various versions of this poem. What we know is that Schmidt has intended in each case, without 'fetishizing' the original, to produce a 'self-sufficient text'. In the context of this poem's subject, it is interesting that he saw the translator as 'performing' the part of a poet, just as an actor prepares to create a part on the stage. I perceive Schmidt — I hope not unjustly — as having wished in his later version of 'Odinokiy litsedey' to 'roughen' and defamiliarize the texture of it ; though I have not gone into this, I believe readers will feel a certain rhythmic bumpiness in the second version as compared with the first. Personally, sensing the urgent onward motion of Khlebnikov's original, I like this less; but maybe I shall come to feel differently. The fact remains that 'translation', as between languages, is only a striking instance of what we do all the time, when we accommodate any utterance to our own mental frameworks, and thereby alter the latter, by however little.

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Appendix 1

ОДИНОКИЙ ЛИЦЕДЕЙ

И пока над Царским Селом
Лилось пенье и слезы Ахматовой,
Я, моток волшебницы разматывая,
Как сонный труп, влачился по пустыне,
Где умирала невозможность,
Усталый лицедей,
Шагая напролом.
А между тем курчавое чело
Подземного быка в пещерах темных
Кроваво чавкало и кушало людей
В дыму угроз нескромных.
И волей месяца окутан,
Как в сонный плащ, вечерний странник,
Во сне над пропастями прыгал
И шел с утеса на утес.
Слепой, я шел, пока
Меня свободы ветер двигал
И бил косым дождем.
И бычью голову я снял с могучих мяс и кости,
И у стены поставил.
Как воин истины, я ею потрясал над миром:
Смотрите, вот она!
Вот то курчавое чело, которому пылали раньше толпы!
И с ужасом
Я понял, что я никем не видим:
Что нужно сеять очи,
Что должен сеятель очей идти!

Velemir Khlebnikov, 1921-22

Appendix 2

THE SOLITARY PLAYER

While Akhmatova wept and her poems poured out
Over Tsarskoe Selo,
I have to unwind the enchantress' thread
And drag myself like a drowsy corpse through the desert:
All about me, impossibility lay dying.
I was a worn-out actor, a poor player
Shuffling heedlessly on.
But meanwhile in dark caves
The curly head of that subterranean bull
Kept up its bloody chomping, devouring men
In the smoke of insolent threats.
And wrapped in the moon's inclination
Like the tardy traveler in his drowsy cloak,
In dreams I leapt upon the precipice
And moved from cliff to cliff.
I moved like a blind man, until
Freedom's wind directed me,
Beat me with slanting rain.
And I cut the bull's head from the hulking meat and the bones,
And set it upon the wall
Like a fighter for the truth, and shook it in the world's face:
Here it is, look!
Here is that curly head the crowd once blazed for!
And with horror
I understood — no one could see me.
I would have to sow eyes.
My task was to be a sower of eyes!

trsl. P. Schmidt (1985)

Appendix 3

THE SOLO ACTOR

While Akhmatova wept and her poems poured out over

Tsarskoe Selo,

I unwound the enchantress' thread
and dragged myself like a drowsy corpse through a desert
where all about me impossibility lay dying:

a worn-out actor, a face-faker,
looking for a break in the wall.

But meanwhile in dark caves
the curly head of that subterranean bull
kept up its chomping, devouring men
in the smoke of insolent threats.

And wrapped in the moon's inclination
like the lated traveler in his drowsy cloak,
in dreams I leapt upon the precipice
and moved from cliff to cliff.

I moved like a blind man, until
Freedom's wind directed me,
beat me with slanting rain.

And I cut the bull's head from the hulking meat and the bones,
and set it upon the wall.

Like a fighter for the truth I shook it in the world's face:

Here it is! Look!

Here is that curly head the crowd once blazed for!

And with horror

I understood — no one could see me.

I would have to sow eyes.

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