

Literary Translation: A Hierarchy of Conflicting Demands

Isaac Stackhouse Wheeler

Cards on the table—I have consciously decided that I work for the readers who buy my translations, not the authors who write the original texts. Describing translation in terms of two poles, Schleiermacher wrote that “either the translator leaves the writer in peace as much as possible and moves the reader toward him; or he leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the writer toward him” (this is Susan Bernofsky’s translation). I am firmly in the second camp. My praxis is guided by the classic parable of Nabokov’s translation of *Alice in Wonderland*, which gives the reader the same playful, pleasurable experience as the original due to successful cultural adaptations, and his nigh-unusable *Eugene Onegin*, which doggedly reproduces the actual grammar and structure of Pushkin’s Russian. The approach to translation I advocate for here is built around emulating the young Nabokov working for his reader rather than the old Nabokov working misguidedly for his author. The ultimate goal is to give the reader of a translation the same experience a reader of the original text would have, not to replicate all of the



semantic content a linguist might find when analyzing it abstractly.

What actually happens in a translator’s brain between reading a sentence in the original text and writing a sentence in English? All too often, attempts to answer that question (my own included) are so vague and so focused on simple work habits that they recall Housman’s advice on how to find inspiration for a poem—have a pint and go for a walk—which most poets would agree is excellent advice, but which gets us no closer to what happens

under the hood. Since the ideal translation would do everything that the original does, in exactly the way the original does it, without adding or distorting anything, every worthwhile thing the original text achieves adds a separate stipulation for what the translator’s work must achieve. Since these stipulations often contradict one another or enter the territory in which the source language itself differs from the target language, literary translation is an exercise in compromise. James Merrill’s poem *Lost in Translation* is a heartbreakingly accurate depiction of this process:

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NORA FAVOROV acted as the principal editor of this issue of *SlavFile*.

...Know

How much of the sun-ripe original

Felicity Rilke made himself forego

(Who loved French words – verger, mûr, parfumer)

In order to render its underlying sense.

But how does the translator decide what to forego? That process can be modelled as applying a hierarchy of stipulations to the translation in descending order. Since translators can never consistently meet all of the stipulations they derive from the text, they must rank their importance. In short, the further down the hierarchy a translation consistently makes it, the more successful it is.

1 Does it produce the same effect on the reader as the original? The most fundamental standard, the translator's lodestar, resides not in the original text, but in the mind of the reader. This is why a good translator never resorts to claiming "that's what it says in the original." What it says in the original is something written in a language the reader cannot read, and the translator can only claim to have reproduced it if the reader would describe their experience of the translation as a native reader would describe their experience of the original.

2 Does it give the reader the same empirical information as the original? While this stipulation deals with facts rather than impressions, with material of the kind a student might be quizzed about on a reading comprehension test, it is still centered on the reader's experience, and was very deliberately not phrased as "does it contain all of the same semantic content of the original." I was recently translating an extended theater metaphor, in which a decisive historical moment is figured as turning on three kinds of lights one would typically find in a theater of the time. Translated to preserve semantic content, that phrase would read "kerosene lamps, footlights, and floodlights." The Russian, however, does not have the grating repetition of "lights," and adding it to the English in an overzealous attempt to convey all the actual physical objects represented in the original would turn a smooth rhetorical device into a clunky mess. "Footlights and kerosene lamps" has something much closer to the original rhetorical effect on the reader and is thus a better translation.

3 Does it avoid overattributing? In his *Poetic Diction*, Owen Barfield rightly noted that students learning a second language often have greater appreciation for the "architectural" element of its beauty than a native speaker can, since they have learned how it constructs meaning through intellectual effort rather than childhood absorption. In the same vein, he comments on how reading many examples of a particular kind of poem (ballads, for instance) desensitizes the reader to the unique features of that style and limits them to appreciating the unique virtues a poet has given a particular ballad. A thoughtful translator of Russian, for example, should be an experienced reader of Russian who is desensitized to its architectural features and will see past them to the literary peculiarities of the specific author in question. One peculiarity of Russian is what I ironically call its "Platonist" quality; it is much more prone to invoke abstract nouns than English, even when describing everyday experiences. For example, in a book I was recently translating, a character

holds a theater program in such a way as to “cover up the absence of his right incisor.” Translated literally, this quite straightforward Russian expression reads like some avant garde conceit. Translated in accordance with my third rule, it simply reads “cover up his missing right incisor.” As a translator, my function was to translate the author’s book into English, not translate the “flavor” of Russian into English by fetishizing perfectly conventional architectural elements.

4 Does it insist on the logic of English? Once the translation has been steered clear of over-attributing, it can be steered into the currents that occur naturally in English. This process is essential even when one is not translating literature, since Slavic languages tend to naturally shift key information towards the end of a sentence, whereas English will place it at the beginning (“this sentence translated Victoria” as opposed to “Victoria translated this sentence”). The same process works at a higher level of granularity. Thinkers who embrace linguistic determinism have called a great deal of attention to how languages differ in how they frame reality as a whole, but the difference that translators actually encounter is much more banal; different languages can express different ideas efficiently and innately prefer certain patterns. In a Ukrainian novel my co-translator Reilly Costigan-Humes and I were recently working on, we found ourselves struggling with a sentence where a family was making a lot of noise, but fortunately their neighbors weren’t too close to them. The problem was that the sentence was quite colloquial. English has a wealth of colloquialisms for expressing something being uncomfortably close, but they only work as positive statements, which yielded cockeyed mutants like “their neighbors weren’t living right on top of them.” The solution was to respect the natural tendencies of English to have these statements be positive rather than negative, which yielded “their neighbors were a ways off.” Note that this is not a violation of the second stipulation; it merely writes an equation that yields the same number rather than trying to write the same equation. In literary translation, x is greater than y is not a distortion of y is less than x .

5 Does it match the stylistic register of the original? It may seem excessive to assign this requirement for a good translation its own section rather than folding it into the third stipulation, but using shifts or mismatches in stylistic register to produce a literary effect is simply a more common device in the Slavic languages than it is in English. The language coming over the metro loudspeakers in Kyiv or Moscow differs more from the speech of

the people on the platform than it does on the New York subway. Making the English reader feel these stylistic distinctions often requires “turning up the volume,” since the English ear is not as trained to detect shifts into artificial, bureaucratic language. In a Russian novel I was recently translating, a KGB officer was sitting in his office intimidating a prisoner in colloquial speech when another agent entered the room and addressed her superior in an official, bureaucratic register, but he rebuffed her and they switched back to colloquial, “partner-in-crime” style. In Russian, her bureaucratic tone can be conveyed by a brief utterance, but simply translating its semantic content would have been insufficient to convey that effect in English, so I had her pronounce every word represented by the abbreviations she uses in the original, yielding the appropriately absurd utterance: “Comrade Lieutenant Colonel of the Committee for State Security of the Union of—”

6 Does it invoke associations analogous to those of the original? The native reader’s experience of the original text always extends beyond the semantic context to embrace cultural associations and linguistic valences, such as etymology. Reproducing those associations is often quite tricky, since it involves either importing cultural context along with language or finding equivalents for that context. For example, in one Ukrainian novel, my co-translator and I found a description of a man being punched in the stomach so that he “folds up like a sofa bed.” While the image survives in English to some extent, the problem is that the sofa bed is a completely ubiquitous feature in many Soviet and post-Soviet apartments in a way that it simply isn’t in an American context, so we substituted “folded up like a lawn chair” to transplant the image without making the cultural bloodstream reject it. Note that this stipulation is deliberately ranked below the need to avoid overattributing and reproduce the proper reading experience. Once again, Nabokov’s *Onegin* is the classic example; in pursuit of replicating the etymological riches of a Russian poem, he produced something that delved into the etymological riches of English but was not a poem.

7 Does it use the same metaphorical mechanism as the original? I once spent a delightful afternoon reading Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* with an insightful friend, putting together a better reading than either of us could have managed alone. This reading, however, hinged on the fact that Gregor’s father was referred to as “mulish” at a key moment in the text, a word that invoked animalistic associations. We were using an English translation, so we were forced to ask ourselves; is the translator

accurately representing the German descriptor here? Is the association with an actual animal present in the German, or has the translator introduced a foreign metaphorical vector? Maximal precision is achieved in literary translation when the translator not only says what the author said, but says it in the same way—and since figurative, metaphorical language is the main empirical feature of literary texts as opposed to other sorts of texts, that means using the same metaphors.

The internal tension, or even internal contradiction, of my method, is made obvious by that last “holy grail” stipulation of using identical metaphors. Surely a perfect literary translation would be one that could survive close literary reading? One that will produce the same results when scrutinized by a critical Anglophone mind as the original would when scrutinized by an equally fine Slavic mind. Indeed, it would, but it would also be one that functions not just as grist

for the scholarly mechanism, but also as a pleasurable aesthetic text. Ultimately, in our non-ideal world, in order to make the compromises of which translation consists, one must rank these competing demands. Perhaps there is no perfect method for translating literary works, and we need two: translations could proudly and openly declare themselves to be either literary ones meant to be first and foremost aesthetic, or academic ones meant to survive close reading for scholarly purposes.

Isaac Stackhouse Wheeler is a poet and translator best known for his work with co-translator Reilly Costigan-Humes on novels by great contemporary Ukrainian author Serhiy Zhadan, including *Voroshilovgrad*, published by Deep Vellum, and *Mesopotamia*, published by Yale University Press. Wheeler's poetry has been published in numerous journals, including *Apofenie*, the *Big Windows Review*, and the *Peacock Journal*. He can be reached at isaacswheler@gmail.com

RusLit title challenge

The Bristol University (UK) Department of Russian and Czech's challenge to its Twitter followers unleashed a flowering of creative mirth, some highlights of which we have sprinkled throughout the issue.



BristolRussian&Czech @BristolRuCz · Apr 7

Improve a Russian book by changing one letter of the title

Rules: You may play with English translated titles or Russian original titles.

- THE CHEERY ORCHARD by Anton Chekhov

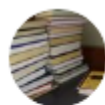
A vaudeville performance about the joys of living in rural Russia in the early 1900s.



Kate Holland @fyodor76 · Apr 7

Replying to @BristolRuCz

A Boring Tory by Anton Chekhov. An old right wing professor complains about his students and his gout.



Shamaila Anjum @shamaila_anjum · Apr 7

Replying to @BristolRuCz and @fyodor76

A Zero of Our Time— the classic Russian tale of a worthless man who contributes nothing useful to society. Oh wait that didn't change anything huh...



Mark Galeotti @MarkGaleotti · Apr 8

Replying to @BristolRuCz and @fyodor76

'Hat is to be Done,' Chernychevsky's didactic tale of Vera Pavlovna's utopian milliners collective, when she realises she hasn't completed all her orders. Lenin's favourite + the reason for his favouring caps (1 of many tips in his fashion guide, 'What Is To Be Donned')

AN INTERVIEW WITH LITERARY TRANSLATOR CAROL APOLLONIO, PART II

Interviewer: Steven McGrath



*Carol Apollonio is Professor of the Practice of Slavic and Eurasian Studies at Duke University and President of the International Dostoevsky Society. Her translated books include *Bride and Groom* (2018) and *The Mountain and the Wall* (2015) by Alisa Gavieva and *The Maya Pill* (2012) by German Sadulayev. She is also the co-author of *Chekhov's Letters: Biography, Context, Poetics* (2018) with Radislav Lapushin and *Chekhov for the Twenty-First Century* (2012) with Angela Brintlinger. Her most recent project has been a travel blog following Anton Chekhov's travels from St. Petersburg to Sakhalin:*

*<https://sites.duke.edu/chekhovsfootprints/> Her latest book, a short introduction to Chekhov called *Simply Chekhov*, is due out in 2020. Part I of this interview appeared in the winter 2020 issue of SlavFile.*

Let's discuss Anton Chekhov, the subject of your most recent work. You recently went on a pilgrimage of sorts, following the path of Chekhov's 1890 journey to Sakhalin. There has always been a sort of aura around him that drew admirers across ideological and stylistic divides. Many of us think of Chekhov as the Russian author whose personal life best corresponded to his high ideals. One of my favorite Russian authors, Sergei Dovlatov, once said, "I could stand in awe of Tolstoy's mind. Delight in Pushkin's art. Appreciate Dostoevsky's pursuit of moral truth, or the humor of Gogol. But I only want to be like Chekhov." To what extent is this attitude an assessment of Chekhov's character, and how much of it is assigning a unique place to him in the Russian literary canon? To put it another way, do we tend to value Chekhov more as an artist or as an idea?

I'm trying to puzzle out why Dovlatov said this; certainly there's a lot to admire in Chekhov, and he lacks the obvious personal or ideological qualities of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky that some people see as flaws, or the psychological complications of Gogol and suchlike (I'm not going there now; people have strong tastes and can fill in the blanks). Chekhov offers a lot of handles for emulation over and above his brilliance as a writer: handsome, attractive to women, active in "public service," sociable, courteous, well-dressed, gentlemanly, a doctor, a traveler... Also he died young, which means he didn't have all those extra years to go sour or do something that some people would find offensive. In his life path Chekhov was "good" in his human engagement, and that label, "humanist," is often applied to him. I do think that Dovlatov's

writing draws on Chekhov's style in ways that may reflect his admiration for Chekhov (humor, brevity, measure, taste). I wonder if that's what he means. I do not value Chekhov as an idea (which I think may mean as a standard for emulation); if I wanted to be like Chekhov it would be first and foremost as a writer. Though admittedly I'd love to have a small dose of his charisma, a quality I utterly lack.

I also think that those who value Chekhov are those who read him, not those who look at his life as an example. We readers fall madly in love with his art. Everything he wrote is a feast, worth reading just for the experience and nothing more.

Somehow we got off the subject of translation! On that subject I'd say that Chekhov is the hardest of the great Russian writers to translate, because so much of his art depends on his craft with the building blocks of the Russian language, and with musicality and rhythm.

Well, that calls for a follow-up. Can you give us an example of a difficult passage from Chekhov, and how you dealt with the difficulties of translating it?

For me the key issues for Chekhov can be impersonals and tense. When no person is given in the original and the English really wants you to put one in, the translator must make a choice—for the awkward "it" expression ("it was boring") or just to provide a person ("she/he was bored" or even "they were bored"). I grappled with this problem in my translation of "The Bride-to-Be" (if I correctly recall the ultimate title of my "Nevesta"—which, except for "Belated Blossoms" and maybe a short thing or two, is my only Chekhov translation), where the whole first paragraph gives a kind of landscape of a house and orchard (or is it garden?!?) infused with human

emotion, but without ever naming a human being as the source (the “bride” probably, but it is not specified in the text). I managed to keep people (pronouns) out of this paragraph, but it was hard to get it right. In an analysis I did once of all translations of “Lady with the Dog,” similar problems with person abound in the text and challenge translators—who offer many different options (this article is in Michael Finke’s and Michael Holquist’s MLA collection about teaching Chekhov). This principle of no clear division between human beings and the world around them is dominant throughout Chekhov’s work (and extremely hard to convey in translation). Probably his masterpiece “The Steppe” is the best example.

By manipulating this very specific feature of Russian language, which allows him to free emotional experience from any specific subject, Chekhov creates what people call his poetics of “mood”—but it is not a vague thing; it’s quite precise, really. It’s just that translators can’t deal with it.

That’s something many of us can relate to. It’s very difficult to convey impersonal constructions in a way that “sounds right” in English. As a final note, what advice can you give to translators who are looking for a good literary project to work on?

Here’s my advice:

All translators, not just beginning ones, should try to find their fulfillment in the process of translation itself, rather than in the result. This is insanely difficult, given that everyone wants to be published and to make a million dollars (only one of these being remotely possible in the field of translation). Be aware

up front that literary translation does not pay a living wage! Just pocket change, if you’re lucky. So it has to be worth doing for its own sake. No one should spend a lifetime doing something that does not bring pleasure.

In my experience, there’s more luck than skill in getting a good text to work on, which can be frustrating. So my advice is: follow reviews and postings about what is being written (if your goal is to translate something hot off the press). Or choose a text by an author or in a genre you like. Read, read, read for pleasure and when you find something you like, maybe take a stab at translating it. If you enjoy doing this, then produce a good English text (a chapter or two, say), and check around to see if someone else is working on it. You can do this by contacting the original publisher’s rights office. This is no guarantee that you will be The One to publish a translation, but it does help you get oriented.

If you are serious about translation, you should join ATA and/or ALTA and become a part of these vibrant communities—not only for “networking,” but to be nurtured and supported in what is one of the most lonely of professions.

You’ve given us a lot to think about as translators. Thank you for sharing your time and experience!

Steven McGrath is an ATA-certified Russian to English translator who received a Master’s Degree from Lomonosov Moscow State University. He translates material in the humanities and social and natural sciences. Steven lives in Iowa City, Iowa and can be reached at steven@mcgrathtranslation.com (website: www.mcgrathtranslations.com). He is currently serving as the SLD’s Assistant Administrator.

RusLit title challenge



Connor Doak @K0HH0P · Apr 7

Replying to @BristolRuCz and @fyodor76

ЛАМА С СОБАЧКОЙ by Anton Chekhov. A surprising encounter with a Pomeranian dog on the Yalta seafront reveals the true meaning of life to a Buddhist monk.



Connor Doak @K0HH0P · Apr 8

Replying to @K0HH0P @BristolRuCz and @fyodor76

WOW, THE STEEL WAS TEMPERED! by Nikolai Ostrovskii. An American visitor to the Soviet Union is awestruck by the wonders of Communist metallurgy.



Polly Jones @drpollyjones · Apr 8

Replying to @BristolRuCz and @fyodor76

Days of the Turbines. An intelligentsia family in Kyiv discover clean energy way ahead of their time.

NOTES FROM THE ADMINISTRATIVE UNDERGROUND

Eugenia Tietz-Sokolskaya (eugenia@sokolskayatranslations.com)

Steven McGrath (steven@mcgrathtranslation.com)

Translating and—to a lesser extent—interpreting are often described as isolating professions. We spend our days one-on-one with our work, and when we do venture out, the people we see are generally not language professionals. And yet, reminders abound that we are not alone, that there are people out there with diverse backgrounds but shared experiences, with whom we are connected in all sorts of often-invisible ways. For me (Eugenia), three in particular come to mind, all of which appeared since the last of these “Notes.”

Slovo Episode with Esther Hermida: The second episode of the rebranded SLD podcast, *Slovo*, was released in mid-February. Host Maria Guzenko interviewed California-based interpreter Esther Hermida, who talked about California’s new law, AB5, which in its attempt to protect misclassified employees has proven disastrous for true independent contractors, translators and interpreters among them. There are endless stories of colleagues losing big and long-standing clients, either directly because of the law or because the client was unclear on the details and chose to play it safe by cutting off all business with vendors in California. All of us can put ourselves in those translators’ shoes and empathize with the frustration, disappointment, and financial hardship this law has caused. At the same time, it was heartening to hear Esther describe how California’s translation and interpreting community has come together to fight this law and secure an exception for our industry.

Finding Inspiration in Smart Habits: Another antidote to feeling isolated has been the *Smart Habits for Translators* podcast, launched last fall (I promise I do more than just listen to podcasts all day!). One of the hosts is our own Veronika Demichelis, an SLD member and the former SLD podcast host, and the other is ATA’s President-Elect Madalena Sánchez-Zampaulo. Their conversations rarely touch on the languages they work in, highlighting how much of our daily life as translators we share with others in our industry. We can all benefit from the same tips and honest stories and relate to the experiences of someone working in a completely different specialization or language pair.

Translating for Kiva: From Eugenia—I know there are a lot of Russian translators just in the US, let alone across the globe, and yet sometimes this feels like a small world! This spring, I taught the Russian translation practice course for [Kent State’s online Master’s in translation](#), where I have a grand total of one student. I also translate as a volunteer for the microfinance organization Kiva (you may have seen their ads in this very newsletter) and recently discovered a familiar name in their list of volunteers! My student had joined just a few months before me. Steve has also been translating for Kiva for six months, and fellow SLD member Liv Bliss reached out to welcome me to the team when I joined. It’s amazing to me that the four of us, at such different stages in our translation careers, both found ourselves in the same spot with Kiva.

Our hope as administrators is that our division can pave the way for more of these reminders, fostering and facilitating connections among translators and interpreters working with Slavic languages. We have a lot we can learn from each other, and a lot to gain on a basic human level from strengthening those relationships and remembering that we’re all in this together.

P.S. By happy coincidence, I (Eugenia) was recently asked to find a translator for Zinaida Gippius’s «Цепь» for use in a Russian history dissertation also focusing on themes of connection (in this case across generations during the upheaval of World War II). It wasn’t until I had nearly finished this column that I realized its imagery fit the topic very well! The original is included on the following page, along with a translation by Maria Jacqueline Evans, with permission.

We are still hoping that there will be an in-person ATA Annual Conference in Boston this fall and are planning accordingly. If you can recommend a restaurant near the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center that would be a good venue for our SLD Annual Dinner (not too expensive or noisy, preferably with a private dining room that seats 30-40), please send your recommendations to Steven McGrath:
steven@mcgrathtranslations.com

Цепь

Один иду, иду чрез площадь снежную,
Во мглу вечернюю, легко—туманную,
И думу думаю, одну, мятежную,
Всегда безумную, всегда желанную.

Колокола молчат, молчат соборные,
И цепь оградная во мгле недвижнее.
А мимо цепи, вдаль, как тени черные,
Как привидения, — проходят ближние.

Идут — красивые, и безобразные,
Идут веселые, идут печальные;
Такие схожие — такие разные,
Такие близкие, такие дальные...

Где ненавистные — и где любимые?
Пути не те же ли всем уготованы?
Как звенья черные, — неразделимые,
Мы в цепь единую навеки скованы.

Зинаида Гippiус

1922

The Chain

I walk alone, walk 'cross the snowy square,
Into the evening darkness, tinged with fog,
And think again that ever restless thought,
Ever insane, ever desired.

The bells, all those cathedral bells are still,
The fence chain, in the darkness, is at rest.
Receding past the chain, like shadows, black,
Like ghosts, the people drifting by.

They walk — the beautiful, the plain,
They walk so cheerful, walk so sad;
So similar — so different,
So close to me, so far away...

Where are the hated — and where the loved?
Are not the paths prepared the same for all?
Like blackened links, — unbreakable and sound,
We're in a single chain forever bound.

Translation by Maria Jacqueline Evans

2020



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New(ish) Kids on the Block

curated by Maria Guzenko (maria.guzenko@intorussian.net)

Welcome to the latest installment of our newcomers' column. This time, we are introducing Ryan Green, a Russian to English translator who is getting his master's degree. We also feature a question on convincing a prospective client to hire you, instead of speakers of the source language who charge lower rates. Please write to Maria at the address above with contributions, questions for our membership, and suggestions for articles and features.

Newcomer Profile: Ryan Green rgreen28@kent.edu



I have always had an interest in foreign languages but was unable to dedicate myself to the formal study of languages until the later years of school. It's kind of strange that something that so many people are forced to do, begrudgingly memorizing conjugations, vocabulary, sentence structures, and grammar, is something that I had always wished I could study but never really got the chance. Junior year of high school was when I could finally register for a German course, and I dove right in. A friendship with the Polish exchange student at my school brought me to love Slavic languages, which later developed into a love for Russian.

I started translating for myself while in college, since I loved Polish poetry. As part of my undergrad program I had a class in translation. Back then my Russian was quite bad, so I don't think the class was of much help. After reaching senior year and realizing my Russian was still not quite up to par, I heeded the advice of a dear professor and moved to Tver, Russia.

The first translation job I had I landed purely by chance. While in Tver, I was hired to edit magazine articles for a website called Russian Aviation Insider, the English-language portal of Russia's largest publication covering civil aviation. My boss let me do some test translations about helicopters, which, apparently, he deemed acceptable, and I became the website's primary translator of news from Russian into English. After three years in Russia, I decided it was time to say goodbye and moved back to the States. Now, I am at Kent State University, pursuing an MA in transla-

tion and teaching in the Modern and Classical Languages department. I work as a freelance translator from Russian into English. Currently I don't have a specialization. A lot of the work that I do get (still mainly from Russian clients) is promotional materials for conferences, but I have also translated for museums and special economic zones (areas in Russia where trade laws and economic regulations are different from the rest of the country). I have also had experience in many different fields, thanks to the excellent translation program at Kent State and the specialists we have here.

I attended the ATA Annual Conference for the first time in Palm Springs in October 2019. I joined ATA and the Slavic Languages Division only right before the conference, and I was grateful for the opportunity to become a part of the SLD network. Some of the most memorable times from the conference were the SLD annual dinner, where I got to sit down and speak with veteran Russian translators, and the Greiss Lecture, which I reviewed for *SlavFile*. For me, the most useful aspect of the conference was the opportunity to reconnect with people I had already become acquainted with in the past and to make new connections. When I attended a conference held in November by the American Literary Translators Association in Rochester, New York, I even saw several familiar faces!

At future ATA conferences I would like to see more attention given to the issues of translating and interpreting between Russian and English. I enjoyed last year's talk by the Greiss speaker, Boris Dralyuk, on the peculiarities of Odessan Russian, a talk that brought all of us Russophiles together in one place. I would also like to see more of a focus on what other specialists working with Russian do. I believe their insight as to where to look for jobs and what possibilities there are out there would be useful for a newcomer like me.

I'm hoping to see everyone at this year's conference in Boston. And also, one quick note: I am currently preparing to take the ATA certification exams in Russian and Polish to English, so I appreciate any tips from those who have already passed!

Newcomer Questions

In addition to profiling new and “newish” members, we will use this space to ask our more established members for their perspectives and advice for those starting out. Please share your questions via email or on social media.

Our next question comes from Lindsay Smith, an ATA-certified Russian to English translator and Russian/ESL instructor:

Eugenia Tietz-Sokolskaya, CT, MA

ATA Slavic Languages Division Administrator,
ATA-Certified Russian to English Translator

eugenia@sokolskayatranslations.com

First of all, editing other people’s work is still work! It’s an opportunity for you to remind the client why it’s worth having their translation sound like it was written by a native speaker, and that kind of client education benefits all of us.

Second, different clients have different needs, and there are definitely clients out there who want US-located, American translators (even if it doesn’t feel like it—sometimes you have to have faith!). Maybe they have a government contract and that’s one of the stipulations. Maybe they need ATA certification (which you, Lindsay, have!). Maybe they would rather just communicate with one person who does it all. Maybe they’re sick and tired of their Russian vendors’ emails getting caught in the spam filter (happened to my Russian clients a couple weeks ago!) or they’re wary of sending payments abroad.

You’ll notice that none of these are field- or specialization-specific. What you’re looking for is more the client’s circumstances. So cast a wide net. Wider! Eventually you’ll run into someone whose needs match what you’re offering perfectly. And in the meantime, consider taking that editing work when it comes and don’t give up hope.

“Since I graduated, I’ve realized that the vast majority of R>E work is done by Russians because the clients either don’t care enough to hire a target-language speaker or don’t want to pay U.S. rates. Or they try to hire us to edit/proofread and clean up a lot of stuff that either is in a field I’m not qualified in or is underpaid. What fields/specializations will customers pay EN natives to translate?”

Lucy Gunderson, CT

ATA-certified Russian to English translator

lucy@russophiletranslations.com

I don’t think it’s a matter of specialization as much as type of client and client education. If we can show clients that the cheap translator/native editor strategy is more expensive in the long run, then they will see the value of hiring the right person to translate in the first place. It’s important to understand that quality doesn’t matter to everyone, so I guess for Lindsay it would be a matter of finding people who believe in quality. It may be hopeless to attempt this with translation agencies, but certainly direct clients (law firms, NGOs seeking Western funding, for example) will accept this reasoning.

If I had to pick specializations, I guess marketing/transcreation and translation for publication (academic journals, newspaper articles, etc.) would be good areas to investigate.

Answer Our Next Question!

Share your thoughts or ask a question by emailing me at maria.guzenko@intorussian.net.

RusLit title challenge



Will Studdert @WillStuddert · Apr 8

Replying to @BristolRuCz and @fyodor76

The Taster and Margarita, a critical guide to early Soviet cocktails.



elisabethvandermeer @arussianaffair · Apr 9

Replying to @BristolRuCz and @fyodor76

'First Live', Turgenev's daily livestream quarantine vlog from Spasskoye, which Tolstoy pretends not to watch/enjoy.

An Interview with Olga Bukhina, Translator of English-Language Children's Literature into Russian

Interview conducted and translated by Lydia Razran Stone

Olga, your website shows you to be an author and prolific English to Russian translator of children's literature. Could you start off by telling us a little bit about your background and, in particular, how you came to specialize in this area of translation?

My training and initial profession was as a clinical psychologist. I worked in one of Moscow's psychiatric hospitals, but in the 1980s I began translating children's books. I do not have children of my own, but I was very involved in the upbringing of my sister's four—three boys and a girl. The first two books I translated were from C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia—Prince Caspian* and *The Last Battle*. I undertook this without the slightest hope of publication; I simply wanted my nephews and niece to read these books. By then, the first book in the *Narnia* series, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, had already been published, and the next four, which could not be published because of censorship, were circulating in samizdat. My translations immediately joined them, thanks to the fact that they were approved by Natalya Trauberg, who was famous for her translations of Lewis' works for both children and adults, which were also widely read in samizdat.

Then came perestroika, and in 1991 my cousin became the editor of a new small press, which had decided to specialize in publishing children's literature. She and I collected all seven translations of Lewis' *Narnia Chronicles* and edited them (I also redrew and edited the maps) and published seven slim rainbow-hued volumes. That's how I suddenly became a translator with two published volumes to my credit. It wasn't long before my new profession left me with no time for my old one.

At first, I worked only with this publishing house, but when it closed, *Narnia*—another children's publisher—opened, and I worked with them for quite a while. I never had any particular desire to translate adult literature, but sometimes I did and found it interesting as well. Of course, I always had to supplement my income with something else. In Russia, I mainly worked as an editor, and in the US, I spent many years working for the American Council of Learned Societies, a foundation that supports the humanities.

I moved to New York City 21 years ago and for a couple of years did not translate at all (indeed, I did not even read anything in Russian). Then I began to translate again, starting with *Harriet the Spy*, one of my real favorites. Gradually I began to work with several publishers, and now I work with about a dozen Moscow publishing houses.

I began to write about children's literature almost by chance. I was asked to write an afterword for parents, and then another, and then another. Now I spend almost as much time writing about children's books, for parents, teachers, librarians, and anyone else who is interested, as I do translating. About ten years ago I began to do and publish systematic research on children's literature.

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At first I translated only “chapter books” for children in the middle grades. I find this age, when children can already read for themselves and select their own books, very interesting. In recent years I have also been translating many books for younger children, and literature for adolescents and young adults.

The one thing you left out of your first answer that fascinates me, and will fascinate our readers, is how you acquired your knowledge of English and English-language literature (not to mention how you got access to the books) in order to read and translate these works into Russian.

Like every child from an “intelligentsia” family, I started to study English early but quite unsuccessfully. Only later did I seriously apply myself to learning it. When I began to translate, I could only read the language, not speak it, which I came to much later. The C.S. Lewis books were in Moscow’s Lenin Library and my father, who had a Ph.D. in Technical Sciences, was able to take books out from there. He would take out a book for two weeks, and then another two weeks, etc.

Had you read the books you translated in English before you began to translate them?

Actually, I had not read, either in childhood or later, any of the books before I began to translate. I had not even heard of them. I have simply loved children’s books and have read them with pleasure throughout my life.

How do you select the books you translate—are you still keeping up with American and British children’s lit? From your standpoint, have there been any significant changes over the years making English children’s lit easier or harder to translate?

At first, I worked as a “scout” for the publishing company, since the editor did not read English, and helped to select books. Sometimes I would propose books I had found on my own and sometimes was given books to evaluate. Over the past 10 years, publishers have most often asked me to translate a specific book. I do not translate any book I don’t like. I try to read contemporary English-language children’s books, but of course, I’m only one person and cannot read them all. It’s hard for me to say whether it’s more difficult or easier to translate contemporary books. When I was starting out, I lived in Moscow and translated books written in the ’50s and ’60s. They were all very difficult for me. When I translated

Mister God, This Is Anna by Fynn [the penname of Sydney George Hopkins—eds.], I spent two hours sitting with an Englishman and even he could not answer all my questions. Now I live in New York and everything is much, much easier. I know more, and I have more ways of finding out what I don’t know by asking someone or searching on Google. For the last 10 years I have been collaborating with my sister, Galina Gimon. Galina lives in Moscow; she was trained as a mathematician and has raised four children. Collaborating is a great pleasure for both of us. Most of the books we translate are contemporary.

Of course, there are differences between British and US books, but still this is more a function of when they were written. Enid Blyton, a British author of children’s books, including some simple mysteries, in the ’20s to the ’60s, is very different from Meg Rosoff, a contemporary writer, who was born in the US and now lives in England. I also translate many graphic novels for children, and this is a completely different translation experience for me.

Do you speak two languages – English and Russian?
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I imagine that you have encountered many issues involved in somehow “interpreting” differences in Soviet/post-Soviet culture and American/British culture for Russian speaking children. Has that gotten easier or more difficult?

A translator of children’s books is always a translator of culture, and always tries to convey the small details and nuances of life in another country. When I myself was a child, these nuances were terribly, terribly interesting to me, and now I try never to omit them when I am translating, although this is not always possible or easy. I was not a “professional” translator during the Soviet era, and thus cannot compare with how it was back then, but the realities of foreign life are extremely important to me. Yes, of course, when you translate a middle-grade book about the life of a little girl in Texas at the end of the nineteenth century, you need to fill in details about how a cotton gin works that were not in the English original, since Russian readers won’t have heard of cotton gins (this became an issue in *The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate* by Jacqueline Kelly). However, it seems to me that children are much less put off by differences than adults and are thrilled by opportunities to learn something new. Furthermore, it is traditional in Russian practice to include explanatory notes in books for children and adolescents. I very much approve of this practice and have written an article about it as a researcher.

Because of cultural differences, might it actually be easier to translate children’s books that take place in a fantasy world?

Yes, in some sense, fantasy stories are universal and less culture-specific, but at the same time a translator is compelled to come up with all kinds of new proper and common names, and has to keep deciding whether it is more important to render form or meaning. An interesting example is *The Little White Horse* by Elizabeth Goudge, which is set in England but is full of fantastic creatures and names. For example, the villain has quite a symbolic name, Monsieur Coque de Noir. In my translation he became Сэр Вильям Кукарекур де Мрак. Моонакре, а торонум, became Лунная Долина.

Could you give us examples of some particularly clever word or phrase translations you are proud of?

It is difficult to choose! Galina Gimon and I were very happy with our translation of the book title *The Hippo at the End of the Hall*. We translated it with a rhyme as *Где-то там зуннономтам* (literally: There

Is a Hippo Somewhere Around). We had to defend this title to the copyright holders, since a literal translation would be not only boring but also a bit suggestive.

Here is another example from a book for preschool children—*Polly and the Puffin* by Jenny Colgon. This book contained a number of riddles that were not easy to translate. For example: “What do sea monsters eat? Fish and ships!” which I translated as “Чем питается морской змей? Размоченными в воде галерами!” (What does a sea serpent eat? Galleys marinated in water.)

You seem to be a driving force behind the Papmambook contest, which gives bilingual Russian children here in the States (or do you get submissions from other English-speaking countries as well?) an opportunity to try their hand at translating children’s literature from Russian into English. Can you tell us how that contest came about?

Marina Aromshtam, a writer and educator, created the Papmambook website (www.papmambook.ru), which is dedicated to children’s literature and reading. It sponsors a number of contests, both for adolescents in Russia and bilingual children living outside of Russia. I am in charge of running a translation competition under the auspices of Papmambook in the United States, but there are other contests in several countries involving translation into several different languages (in Australia and Cyprus, for example, the children also translate from Russian to English). Each contest is judged separately. The judges of the American contest are translators (experienced and beginners) and teachers living in both the US and Russia. The texts are taken from books written by contemporary Russian children’s authors. The winners receive award certificates and books.

This year marks our third round, following two previous successful competitions. Bilingual children are excited about translating short Russian texts into English—which, by the way, they may be more fluent in than in Russian. The parents, for their part, have been pleased to see their children motivated to read Russian. And perhaps after translating their small section, the contestants have felt a desire to read the entire book.

On Understanding and Translating Humor: The Spirits of Heinrich Böll's House

Presented by Martha Kosir

Reviewed by Julia LaVilla-Nossova

Julia LaVilla-Nossova



At the 60th ATA Annual Conference in Palm Springs, California, Martha Kosir gave a nuanced and thought-provoking presentation on translating humor, with an emphasis on Slovenian to English translation. For those in attendance, she

provided inspiring examples from the prose writings of Josip Osti, a Bosnian-Slovenian poet, writer, essayist, literary critic, anthologist, and translator.

Martha Kosir's presentation on her translation into English of Joseph Osti's short story collection, *The Spirits of Heinrich Böll's House* (Duhovi hiše Heinricha Bölla, 2016), focused on the issues one encounters when attempting to translate humor from one language and culture to another. This collection of short stories and anecdotes describes Josip Osti's encounters with fellow writers and poets working in South Slavic languages.

Josip Osti was the recipient of a grant as a writer in residence by the Heinrich Böll Foundation and other supporting organizations. The program extends an opportunity for a four-month working stay in the former summer home of the renowned German writer, winner of the 1972 Nobel Prize in Literature, providing a free space for artists who come from a difficult political climate and giving them, for a certain period of time, the peace they need to continue their work.

Josip Osti, who has enjoyed a remarkable literary career, has so far published over 40 books of poetry, several novels, numerous books of essays and literary criticism, journalistic texts, and 14 anthologies of Bosnian-Herzegovinian and Slovenian poetry and prose. He moved to Slovenia in 1990 and, since 1997, has written and published works in Slovenian, while continuing to write in his native language (the Croatian of Sarajevo provenance). His works have appeared in over 80 translations into other languages. In Kosir's words: "in what the author describes as a 'kaleidoscopic novel,' he recreates, through a fascinating mixture of humor and tragedy, the rich and vibrant Yugoslav literary scene. Many of the characters described are eccentric and highly unconventional, making the collection all the more interesting."

According to Kosir, translating the humor that infuses so many of Osti's stories was of special concern to her. This was because "many nuances that work so well in the Slovenian language often seem to fall flat and come out dry in English due to linguistic, but mainly cultural idiosyncrasies." She moved on to elaborate on the social theories of humor and the notion of humor itself, describing humor as a form of social play or a shared emotional experience, and as a potential means of confirming or creating inclusion or exclusion hierarchies (elevating or lowering people depending on whether or not they understand specific forms of humor).

The presentation mentioned that humor often ridicules its target and, consequently, can produce "heightened self-esteem" in those who understand and appreciate it. It also touched upon the "cognitive" aspects of humor when, within a specific social group or culture, there emerges a deviation (incongruity) from expected behavior. This led to speculation on the challenges of translating humor which, according to Kosir's quotation from *Humor in Translation* by J. Vandaele (2010), may end up being only "accessible to those who are at least vaguely acquainted with the parodied discourse."

Having touched upon issues of "function" versus "fidelity" in translating humor, Kosir invited the audience to think about the potential desirability of "functional translation"¹ when rendering humor in the target text, since, in the words of Patrick Zabalbeascoa, "Sameness, or similarity may have little to do with the funniness..." She also cited four strategies for dealing with the translation of humor (according to D. Chiaro):

- 1) Leave the wordplay unchanged (in which case the target language may end up not being funny);
- 2) Replace the source humor with a new, but different instance of humor in the target language (which may lead to a change of the connotation in the target language);
- 3) Replace the humorous phrase in the source text with an idiomatic expression in the target language (this approach may work);

¹ Nida and Taber (1982) define dynamic, or functional, equivalence as a "translation principle according to which a translator seeks to translate the meaning of the original piece in such a way that the translated language wording will trigger the same impact on the audience as the original wording did upon the source text audience."

4) Simply ignore the source humor altogether (this means that there will be a loss of meaning).

Without going into further detail regarding changes in denotation and connotation and other challenges that emerge while translating humor, it is worth noting that Kosir brought up some interesting examples of humor translation by comparing two English versions of the stories “Socrates and Dostoyevsky” and “Which Way is Left” from *The Spirits of Heinrich Böll’s House*. In both stories, preserving specific cultural references while retaining the humorous effect of the Slovenian source text was the biggest challenge.

Kosir first discussed the Slovenian term *indeks*, which can be roughly translated as “course-and-grade book.” An *indeks* is used by students in higher education to record the university courses completed and grades earned. In the United States, the closest equivalent would be a university transcript. Nevertheless, the *indeks* that Osti describes is very different in the sense that it looks like a little book that remains in each student’s possession, includes a student photo, and is presented to the professor for a signature after a comprehensive term exam is successfully completed (similarly to the so-called “*zachyotka*” used in Soviet institutions of higher learning). Most universities today use electronic copies, however, at the time when “Socrates and Dostoyevsky” was written, physical copies of these grade books were still very much in use and provided for the humorous incident described in this story. During her presentation, Kosir used two translated versions of “Socrates and Dostoyevsky” to demonstrate ways humor can be preserved in translation. In the first version, the word *indeks* was translated as “course-and-grade book,” while the second English version, which was translated by Kosir herself, retained the original source text word *indeks*—presumably, to emphasize the uniqueness of this culture-specific item and its difference from the more familiar “transcript.” Both translated versions render the meaning of the source text, but it is worth pointing out that “course-and-grade book” is easier to understand than *indeks*. Therefore, readers of Kosir’s translation have to make an educated guess while reading and then test their hypothesis against the logic of the story as it progresses. The joy of the ensuing sense of discovery, in my view, makes opting to retain the original word that denotes a culture-specific item in the English translation very well worth it because humor is best when it is not straightforward.

Another example Kosir brought up was the description of the poet Ahmed Muhamed Imamović in the

story “Which Way is Left.” As in the case above, she provided examples from two translations of the same story. The description of Imamović’s appearance plays an important role in the narrative because it emphasizes his overstated and flamboyant style, characterized by the bright colors and flashy patterns that were popular in that part of the world at the time. It also sets the tone for the absurd events that subsequently occur in the story. In Kosir’s translation, the poet was described as “...dressed as usual: à la American. He was wearing yellow and black striped pants and a checkered jacket featuring orange squares, with a red velvet vest over a blue silk shirt.” The other, more verbatim, translation from Slovenian is as follows: “Ahmed was dressed as usual: the American way. He was wearing yellow and black striped pants and a checkered jacket with orange squares. His red velvet vest covered his blue silk shirt.” Most American readers would likely disagree that Americans typically dress this way and find little humor in this wording. Kosir chose to make her translation of the poet’s appearance a little different from the source text and start the passage with the phrase “Ahmed was dressed as usual: à la American.” By evoking a multitude of combinations that begin with “à la” in English, Kosir conveyed the intended humor and created a certain mood of contrived foreignness. Absurdity, nevertheless, remains relative and so does humor. The objective of the translation was to capture the necessary nuances but at the same time leave room for further interpretation.

While preparing this review, I read two more delightful short stories by Osti in Kosir’s translation, “Bookkeepers” and “Dedication,” and this reinforced the decisions I made at the end of her presentation: to read *The Spirits of Heinrich Böll’s House* in its entirety, as well as the collection of Osti’s poetry, *All Loves Are Extraordinary*, which was also translated by Kosir; to learn as much as possible about the literary world of the former Yugoslavia; to give more thought to the issues of translating humor; and, perhaps, to reread some of the works of the former owner of the house in Langenbroich, Heinrich Böll, whose writings had exerted such a powerful literary influence² on Soviet society during the Khrushchev thaw.

Julia LaVilla-Nossova has been a staff Russian translator at the Department of State Office of Language Services since 2008. In addition, she continues working freelance in the Washington, DC area, where she has been interpreting and translating professionally since 1995. Julia can be reached at julialavilla@gmail.com

² Moskauer Deutsche Zeitung (September 18, 2018) describes “the Böll phenomenon in the USSR” in the article “Glazami perevodchika,” which introduces a book by Böll’s renowned Russian translator, Lyudmila Chyornaya.

DECOLONIZING CENTRAL ASIA THROUGH TRANSLATION

Presented by Shelley Fairweather-Vega

Reviewed by Nora Seligman Favorov

Attentive readers of *SlavFile* (or, for that matter, of recent English translations of Central Asian literature) know that Shelley Fairweather-Vega has set herself apart from the teeming horde of Russian>English literary translators chasing after great Russian books to translate. Having been clever enough to study Uzbek in graduate school, and through a combination of talent and serendipity, she has gradually developed expertise in the fertile but relatively underrepresented-in-English field of Central Asian literature (see [summer 2015](#), p. 15, and [fall 2016](#), page 11, to learn more about her career). In 2019 alone she had three novels come out: *Gaia*, *Queen of Ants* and *Of Strangers and Bees* by the London-based Uzbek writer Hamid Ismailov and *A Life at Noon* by Kazakh writer Talasbek Asemkulov.

Shelley began her talk by discussing its somewhat provocative title, giving as much of a nod to all the most important aspects of the fraught term “decolonizing” as the introduction to a 60-minute presentation allowed. Yes, this culturally rich region was colonized by the Russian Empire; yes, it was then supposedly decolonized by the Soviet Union; and yes, the “decolonizing” Soviet Union left a deeper imprint on the region than its imperial predecessor ever managed. But what Shelley’s talk mainly focused on was the role translators can play in allowing Central Asia to speak directly to readers from other cultures, peeling away the gooey layers of Eurocentric, Russocentric, and Orientalist stereotyping that have clouded the lenses through which the region has long been viewed.

“Translators are not neutral!” This exclamation was stamped onto several of her colorful and informative PowerPoint slides, sounding as much like a call to action as a frank admission. But what Shelley seemed to be advocating throughout her talk was nothing more radical than sensitivity and attention to the perspective of the source culture while also considering practicalities and the perspective of the target reader’s culture.

Because of the great influence Russia has exerted over the region, Shelley’s work translating the literature of Central Asia constantly confronts her with choices: should the names of people and places be transliterated based on the current rules of the source text country or the more familiar (certainly for us translators of Russian and probably for many readers

of the target text) rules of Russian transliteration? The choice in favor of source-country rules is probably more clear-cut when the source text is in Kazakh or Uzbek (some of the Central Asian works Shelley has translated were written in Russian). In either case, there are arguments on both sides. After all, we still know the leaders of Central Asian countries by their Russified names: Mirziyoyev, Nazarbayev, Jeenbekov, to name just three. Will English ever adopt spellings like Samarqand, Toshkent, Buxoro, and Xiva, rather than the Samarkand, Tashkent, Bukhara, and Khiva that came to us via Russian? And how do we de-Russify words like “dombra” (how will Anglophone readers feel about *dombyra*)? Shelley informed us that “yurt” or “yurta” actually means something different from what Russian tells us: in some Turkic languages it means “home” as in “home country,” not “a circular domed tent consisting of skins or felt stretched over a collapsible lattice framework...” as Merriam-Webster informs us (adding, admittedly: “Origin of YURT Russian *yurta*, of Turkic origin; akin to Turkish *yurt* home dwelling”). And when it comes to the Russian adaptation of the Uzbek word for “village,” *kishlak*, Shelley pointed out that “English has the phonemes that Uzbek has but Russian lacks—so sometimes it’s easy to spell things in a de-Russified way”: *qishloq*.

And then there’s the term “jigit,” which brings us to the “Great Jigit Controversy of 2019” and the revelatory discussion that ensued on a Russian<>English translation forum where one member posted the innocent query “Has any of you ever come up with a



One of Shelley’s slides showing some of the main influences shaping Central Asia: roughly speaking, government bureaucratic structure from Russia; grammar from Turkey; religion from the Saudi peninsula; and poetry from Persia. Used with permission.

single English word to represent the word **джигит**?” Shelley bravely stepped in to offer what she had learned from the authors she had worked with, using the Kazakh spelling of the word:

“I run into this word all the time in Central Asian writing... In the last Kazakh book I worked on, the translator into Russian simply transliterated the term everywhere, but added a footnote translating **жигит** as **парень** [guy or fellow]. She was right to do so, because in that book, at least, the Kazakh author used **жигит** to simply mean a guy—but he’s a local guy, in a particular geographical context, and he’s probably a good respectable specimen, by local standards, too—and that usually means brave, strong, daring, loyal, etc. ... [mostly] I translated it into English as ‘man’ or ‘young man.’”

This did not stop an avalanche of ill-informed stereotypes about burka-clad tough guys and horsemen (someone even wrote “Swashbuckler’ works in some contexts”).

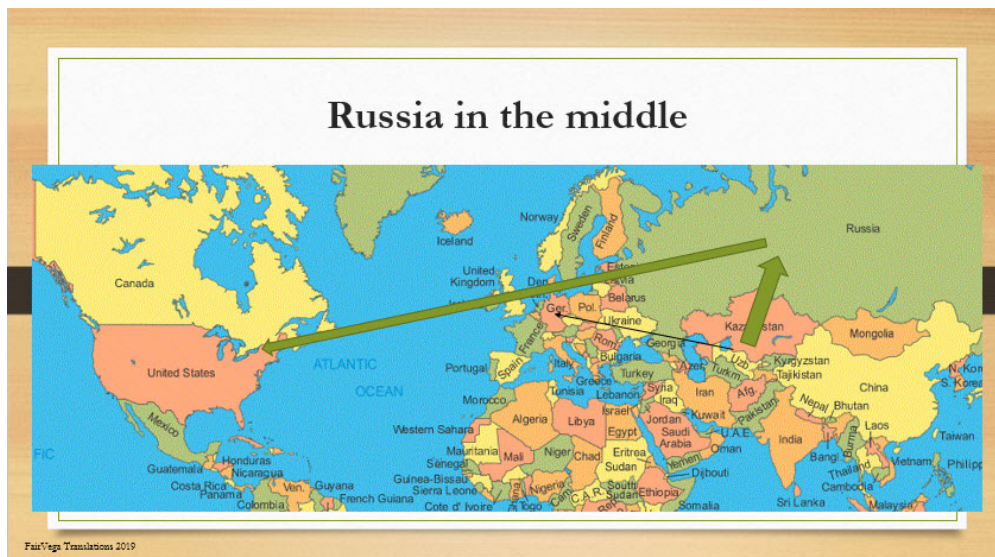
Shelley ended her talk by offering six pieces of advice for translators confronting the sorts of challenges her work translating Central Asian literature has presented:

1. Know your sources: As with everything in translation, context is crucial. On that translator forum, it finally came out, that the original query about “jigit” had to do with a Kazakh story in a modern setting that had nothing to do with horsemen or swashbuckling.
2. Acknowledge bilingualism: Because of Russia’s imprint on daily life, bureaucracy, education, etc., in Central Asia, Russian words crop up in Central Asian novels and should be “exoticized” in translations, not just translated. The shift to Russian has significance and should be conveyed to Anglophone readers.

3. Spell carefully: When choosing how to spell the names of places, people, and things, consider the context and do your research: consult authoritative sources, such as the [United States Board of Geographic Names](#) (which, as Shelley’s slide informed us, recently de-Russified the name of Ukraine’s capital, now advocating that it be spelled “Kyiv” in English).
4. Stay flexible: There might not be one right answer choosing among “dzhigit,” “jigit”, or simply “man,” “guy,” or “fellow,” or between “Samar-kand” and “Samarqand.”
5. Speak out: “Translators are experts. Share your expertise.”
6. Choose your projects: Shelley encouraged those of us game for our own “decolonization project” to choose a text and author that we find compelling. Whose story are you most interested in telling? Whose perspective do you most want to bring to the world of Anglophone readers?

And, of course, it is certainly not just Russia that has fed the world stereotyped, Orientalized visions of Central Asia, with images of exotic harems and brown-skinned terrorists, such as those found in Vladimir Motyl’s *White Sun of the Desert*. Flashing a slide showing Sacha Baron Cohen in character as Borat, Shelley reminded us: “We all have work to do.”

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For those of us who grew up in the West, Shelley’s presentation heightened our awareness of how much of our knowledge of Central Asia has come through the filter of Russian language and culture. Used with permission.

(More) Pitfalls, Spitballs; and Pratfalls: Sources of Bewilderment or Confusion for Translators in the Idiomatic Language Used in American Political News Reporting

Lydia Razran Stone

Starting in March of 2019, I searched national news in my newspaper, The Washington Post, and on Google and Yahoo News, collecting idioms and metaphors that I felt would give pause to a non-native speaker of English translating or simply trying to fully understand what was meant. I collected more than 4000 terms and started to classify some of the difficulties in order to use this material in a series of columns. This is the second, with more, in all likelihood, to follow.

1. Phrases that are likely to be confused with similar phrases containing the same or synonymous content words.

- a) *On the heels of* means close behind, or right after. Potentially confusable with *bring to heel* (compel to obey) or *crush under the heel of* (crush brutally).
- b) *(On one's) last legs* means on the verge of dying or being otherwise finished or even just exhausted. Confusable with *final leg* (the concluding portion of a race, contest, process, etc.).
- c) *Going to the bench* means that a court decision is about to be made or has been requested. Confusable with *being sent to the bench(es)*, which means being retired to a temporary bystander's position (a sports metaphor). Note that *sitting on the bench* can mean either presiding over a court or having to watch a sports game from the sidelines. Considering the number of court cases and sports metaphors in the news, phrases involving benches are very common in my data set.
- d) *Put it to the people* means let the people decide (by voting) on an issue or candidate. Potentially confusable with the tonally very different *stick it to the man*, which means resisting and even sabotaging the powers that be and has frequently been used in a context of racial animosity.
- e) *Trolling for* (e.g., votes) means searching for or systematically generating votes. *Trolling* opposing candidates means posting negative inflammatory comments about them on the internet.
- f) Saying or reporting that someone has said *hold my beer* implies the speaker is about to engage in a physical (or even metaphorical) altercation with someone who has offended him (less often, her). Saying that *someone holds or can hold his/her beer* means that the person in question has a high tolerance for that substance.

2. Similar phrases or words that have been confused in actual news reports.

- a) "A version of the *rift* that [a certain individual] is the most electable." A *rift* is a break in something, frequently in previous relations. What was probably meant was *riff*, a newish term meaning a refrain or rephrasing of something.
- b) Something or someone was "a *shoe in*." Frequent misrendering of "shoo-in," based on the verb to shoo, which can mean to wave some person or creature in or out, while repeating a sibilant sound rendered as "shoo." The correct idiom originated in a horse-racing phrase meaning that a particular horse is certain to win.
- c) *Lynchpin*, a mistaken spelling of "linchpin" in metaphors. Metaphorically a linchpin (literally a device that keeps a wheel from slipping off an axle) refers to the central cohesive element in something. The misspelling suggests an unfortunate association with the practice of lynching.
- d) "They act as if the outcome is a *forgone* conclusion." A *foregone* conclusion refers to an outcome that has already been decided before the official voting or other method of reaching a decision. The word *forgone* without the first "e" means abstained from or relinquished.

3. Allusions that may not be understood by those not brought up in US culture or familiar with the range of English references.

Note that virtually all of these can be found easily on the internet and, given the context, the implication should be obvious. The difficulty for a translator would be to determine and appropriately render any connotation of the use of the phrase (e.g., the difference between quoting or referring to Shakespeare and referencing a comic book character), as well as the meaning conveyed by the phrase itself.

a) Highbrow

i. “Focus on the *white whale*.” An allusion to *Moby Dick*, meaning an unhealthy obsession with someone or something.

ii. “His *road to Damascus* was a long one.” The reference is to Saint Paul’s conversion on that road in the New Testament. This implies that the individual’s “enlightenment” or “understanding” was long in coming.

iii. “*Drew on a tangled web of testimony*.” The reference is to a popular line from “Marmion,” a fairly obscure poem by Walter Scott: “Oh, what a tangled web we weave/When first we practise to deceive!” Note that the implication of dishonesty is only conveyed to those who are familiar with the context.

b). Middlebrow

(including fairy tales and other children’s literature, e.g., *Alice in Wonderland* and *Harry Potter*)

i. “A *bread-crumb trail*.” A reference to the breadcrumbs Hansel and Gretel used in the forest they were banished to in order to find their way back home. Sadly, the breadcrumbs were devoured by birds, and the trail was unfollowable. The reference is to a so-called “paper trail” (now updated to “data-trail”) used to investigate a possible crime. In the bread-crumble case, the trail is implied to be virtually impossible to follow.

ii. “The boy *who cried socialism*.” A reference to the Aesopian fable about a shepherd boy who falsely claimed his flock was under attack (*cried wolf*), just to stir up excitement, so often that he was not believed when an actual wolf attack came.

iii. “She masked the moment in an *‘I will never go hungry again’* way.” The reference is to a line in the movie *Gone with the Wind*. It is spoken by the egregiously self-centered heroine vowing that she will do whatever it takes not to suffer in the aftermath to the American Civil War.

iv. “He might have been a *contender*.” This is reference to a line from what is considered one of the best movies ever made, *On the Waterfront*. In it, the hero regrets that he has thrown away his chance to become a boxing champion by deliberately losing a bout for money. It is not clear whether in context the use of this line simply means that someone could have succeeded but did not and is regretful, or brings in all the context of the movie.

v. “A *Field of Dreams* mentality.” Refers to a fantasy movie less critically acclaimed than those above. The “mentality” almost certainly alludes to the movie’s “If you build it [meaning a baseball field], they will come” trope, implying a fervent, if unfounded, hope of a planned venture’s success.

c). Lowbrow

i. “Trapped in a disjointed call and response like *Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner*.” The reference is to a series of cartoons in which the hapless coyote is always haplessly trying to catch the road runner (a bird of the American desert West). Incidentally, a “call and response” is a musical phrase in which the first and often solo part is answered by a second and often ensemble part, and in this case implies a back-and-forth communication.

ii. “Enough to make a *grumpy cat* jealous.” The term refers to cats whose facial markings make them look as if they are in a bad mood. Photos of these animals have become highly popular on the internet. The reference in this instance was to a political figure (possibly one considered grumpy) who also garners an enviable number of internet hits.

iii. “*Meanwhile, back at the White House*.” A reference to a phrase used in relatively low-budget cowboy movies, including silent ones, as an introduction to change of scene. The phrase was “Meanwhile, back at the ranch.” This phrase may or may not convey a disdainful attitude toward what was happening in the venerable building mentioned.

iv. “It’s *Mueller time!*” A headline about Mueller’s testimony to Congress. A pun on a TV ad campaign for Miller beer. The reference may possibly have connoted a lot of hype over nothing.

4. Expansions/variations of well-known idioms or metaphors.

These would seem relatively easy to parse if the translator is familiar with the original unelaborated phrase. However, if the audience for the translation is not considered to share this familiarity, an analogous metaphor may have to be devised.

a) “Comparing [some behavior of those in the news] to *shuffling deck chairs on the Titanic* insults the Titanic. This is more like shuffling deck chairs on a dilapidated canoe preassembled under an iceberg.” *Rearranging (shuffling) the deck chairs on the Titanic* is used frequently to refer to ridiculously inadequate measures in the face of a crisis. Here the journalist wanted to imply that the undertaking in question was even more ridiculously inadequate than most such measures.

b) “No matter how *loose the cannon* gets.” The phrase “a loose cannon” refers to someone whose behavior is unpredictable and potentially dangerous. (If “no matter” is included in the internet search string, it is unlikely to be found.) The original phrase refers to an untethered cannon rolling around on the deck of a ship.

c) “There are simply no more *rabbits left in his hat*.” A reference to the phrase “pull a rabbit out of [one’s] hat,” which means to do something (frequently, solve a problem) in a surprising and even seemingly impossible way. In this case, someone with a reputation for reaching such solutions is described as being out of ideas. The allusion is to a supposedly common magician’s trick.

d) “*The dog ate my* [phone call recording].” A reference to a (putatively) much-used excuse offered by schoolchildren who have failed to turn in their homework. The usage not only conveys that an excuse for not producing something is transparent but also that the person offering it is childish.

5. American stereotypes, phenomena or customs not necessarily shared by other cultures.

a) “*The kids’ table*.” A reference to the debate among less popular candidates for the Democrat nomination. In large American families that get together for the holidays or other occasions in numbers that cannot be accommodated at a single table, children may be relegated to a separate table, possibly even in the kitchen.

b) (Someone) *created another “cleanup on Aisle Five” moment*. Calls to clean up a spill on a particular aisle can frequently be heard over the loudspeaker in stores large and organized enough to have numbered aisles. I presume that this phrasing is particular to the US. In the usual context, such announcements mean that the spill or broken glass needs to be dealt with immediately by either the nearest or the designated employee. In a political context, a “cleanup on Aisle Five moment” refers to some public gaffe made by a member of a political campaign that will likely have to be explained away by other members.

c) “Not the senator *next door*.” A reference to the stereotype of falling in love with or marrying the girl or boy living next door. Meaning that the senator in question is extraordinary (for better or worse) and not just a simple, homespun, wholesome person who could even live next door to you, and for whom you might settle if no one better comes along.

d) “The *Cliff Notes* version of the Mueller report.” *Cliff Notes* are a series of booklets summarizing works of literature and other lengthy works assigned in schools. They are marketed to high school and college students as “study guides” but frequently used by them to prepare for an examination without actually reading the assigned work. This reference suggests that someone who should have or claimed to have read the Mueller report actually read some shortened “dumbed down” version instead.



The untimely passing of Russian>English literary translator Jamey Gambrell is truly tragic. The only silver lining is some very thoughtful obituaries, including this one from *The New York Times*:

www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/books/bookupdate/jamey-gambrell-dead.html

6. New words or phrases not found in the latest version of the Google Ngram Viewer. This is clearly not an ideal criterion of newness, but it is the best I can find.

- a) “Crickets.” This means no response, silence (often an embarrassing silence). According to Wiktionary, the phrase is probably derived from films in which the audible sound of crickets conveys an otherwise silent night.
- b) “Looking for their own T-shirt moment.” Said of non-leading candidates searching for something they can do or say that their adherents can wear as a slogan on a T-shirt.
- c) “Texodus.” A term originally coined to refer to Texans fleeing the state in the path of a hurricane, currently used to refer to the numerous Texans from Congress who are not running for reelection.
- d) “Outwoke each other.” “Woke” is a new term implying a high level of alertness to social (particularly racial) injustices. The phrase, used in reference to various potential candidates, implies (with at least a slightly derogatory connotation) that they are competing to be considered the one most endowed with this quality.
- e) “What about-ism.” This is a new term for the practice or examples of trying to defuse criticism from a rival, critic, or opponent by mentioning an occasion or instance where that critic committed a similar or worse offense.
- f) “Deadnaming.” This term describes referring to a transgender person by his or her previous gender-associated name.

7. Metaphor/Idiom overload.

Even if individual metaphors are clear and translatable, the frequent practice of bunching them together in a single paragraph or article may overload the translator or be unacceptable in the target culture.

- a) The following is from a letter to *The Washington Post* satirizing the overuse of metaphors and idioms in an earlier piece about “the F-35 power play.” The original piece, evidently among other interesting usages, includes the phrase “have the short end of the lever.” “I don’t want to muddle the metaphors further,” continued the letter writer sarcastically, “but wouldn’t

that make for an even heavier lift for the government in trying to straighten out the F-35 morass? Perhaps officials should put their shoulder to the wheel and throw the fulcrum into the fire or hold it against the grindstone, but taxpayers definitely won’t like it if they move it to the government’s side. They should move it to the road less travelled.” The entire letter may be found at <http://thewashingtonpost.newspaperdirect.com/epaper/viewer.aspx>

- b) Consider the metaphors/idioms below, from an article of roughly 2000 words. Note: I do not claim that all or even many of these usages will cause translation problems, just that the build-up of so many in one place may be unusually demanding for the translator.

- i. Not so much an exercise in threading the political needle as pulverizing that needle as it has existed for decades.
- ii. A “yes, but” analysis of why these assumptions may be wobbly.
- iii. Put head before heart.
- iv. A field littered with candidates mired in single digits.
- v. A message of someone who likes his porridge neither too hot nor too cold had already flopped.
- vi. Many [of his advisors] have been around the block.
- vii. The hen never cackles until the egg is laid. (Evidently this is a quote from Abraham Lincoln.)
- viii (In reference to the above) Will it be a golden egg or a goose egg?
- ix. This depends on many factors falling into place just so.
- x. While [other candidates] are strapped down doing their thing in [early primary states], the man who ducked those contests will be doing [something else].
- xi. His people are smarter than the average bears. (“Smarter than the average bear” turns out to be a line from the theme song of a popular sixties-era cartoon, *Yogi Bear*, rather than a reference to stock-market “bears,” as I originally supposed.)

There were at least 15 others in this passage, but the above are the most mixed or elaborate.

TUNE IN TO THE NEXT SLAVFILE FOR MORE!

BEANPOLE: YOUNG FILMMAKER BRINGS BREATH OF FRESH AIR TO RUSSIAN CINEMA

Reviewed by Susan Welsh



***Beanpole* (Дылда), 2019.** In Russian with English subtitles, 137 minutes. Playing in U.S. theaters. Director: Kantemir Balagov. Producer: Alexander Rodnyansky. The Russian Federation's submission to the 2020 Oscars; included on the shortlist for Best International Feature Film. Balagov won Un Certain Regard's Best Director prize at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival.

What was it like to live in Leningrad *after* the 872-day siege that left an estimated 1.5 million people dead from starvation and German bombing? What would it have been like for a woman who had served as an anti-artillery gunner and survived the war with battlefield wounds that left her unable to bear children? Or one with a concussion that gave her seizures and blackouts? Everyone in their families is dead.

Beanpole's young director, Kantemir Balagov, tells why he found the story so compelling: "It is very important to me that my story takes place in 1945. My heroes, like the city they live in, are mangled by a horrible war. They live in a city that has endured one of the worst sieges in the history of warfare. This is a story about them and about people they meet in Leningrad, the obstacles that they have to overcome, and the way they are treated by society. They are psychologically crippled by the war and it will take time for them to learn to live their normal lives."

This beautiful and disturbing film was Russia's submission to the 2020 Oscars, winning a place on the shortlist for Best International Feature Film. The two heroines, Iya (nicknamed "Beanpole," played by Viktoria Miroshnichenko) and Masha (played by Vasilisa Perelygina), are powerfully acted by young women who made their feature film debuts in this movie.

Of the Russian press coverage, an interview by journalist Yury Dud' with Balagov, producer Alexander Rodnyansky, and filmmaker Viktor Bitikov is especially noteworthy and can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=glbSMIBhY3o>. (Then there was *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, which, as far as I know, is read mainly by people who were in the Komsomol while Brezhnev was still General Secretary of the CPSU. They ran an article under the headline "How Can You Film Such Filth?!" Premier of

'*Beanpole*' with Kantemir Balagov in Attendance Ends in Scandal." It seems that a pensioner in the audience vociferously objected to the two heroines' passionate kiss, although she could not bring herself to actually articulate what the "filth" was that so distressed her.)

The film is receiving rave reviews from leading U.S. newspapers and news websites as it begins screening in this country; *The Daily Beast* called it "stunning" and headlined its coverage, "Is '*Beanpole*' the First Great Movie of 2020?" *The Wall Street Journal* wrote, "The film is an improbably thrilling work of art by virtue of its physical beauty and its relentless intensity of feeling about people." I refer readers to such publications for more about the plot and other details.

I focus instead on the fascinating young director. Balagov, age 28, was born in the North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria three weeks after the August 1991 coup attempt that prefaced the dissolution of the USSR later that year. His is the first generation of Russian youth that does not remember life in the Soviet Union. This generation was traumatized by the poverty, corruption, war, and socioeconomic collapse of the 1990s. Living standards have improved, especially in Moscow and St. Petersburg, but social stratification has worsened and, in many regions, poverty prevails.

In Kabardino-Balkaria (present population 860,000), where Balagov grew up, unemployment reached as high as 90% in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. As the economy tanked with the post-Soviet decline of tourism, separatist movements and Islamist insurgencies took off in the North Caucasus. Wars raged in nearby Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Georgia. An Islamist rebellion began in Kabardino-Balkaria in the early 2000s, including an attack on the capital city of Nalchik (Balagov's hometown) in 2005 that left at least 80 people dead; violence flared up again in 2010.

That was when internationally acclaimed filmmaker Alexander Sokurov (*Russian Ark*, *Faust*, *Francofonia*) accepted the invitation of Kabardino-Balkarian State University to come and give a film-making workshop, in a region that had never had a film industry. Balagov, who was one of the 12 graduates of the extremely rigorous five-year program (“no weekends off, no holidays,” said one graduate), described his work with Sokurov as crucial to his artistic and personal development.

So what did Sokurov teach?

The Calvert Journal asked Balagov in its Aug. 9, 2017 online issue, after the director’s first feature film, *Closeness* (*Теснота*), won high honors at the Cannes Festival. Interviewer Andrei Kartashov wrote that Sokurov, in addition to teaching practical skills, loaded the curriculum with classes in literature and history of the arts and cinema, and let the students choose their subjects freely, asking them to refrain only from excessive violence and religion, two obviously sensitive topics in the North Caucasus. “Sokurov always encouraged us to tell stories of ourselves,” said Balagov. “He would say: ‘Tell us about your life here.’”

When journalist Yuri Dud’ asked Balagov why Sokurov is not appreciated in Russia as much as he is internationally, Balagov replied that he is a complicated person, both as an artist and as a citizen: “First of all, he is responsible.”

Dud’: “What does it mean to be responsible? That the person is an activist?”

Balagov: [pause] “It is someone from St. Petersburg who comes to Nalchik to open a workshop to fight back against cultural poverty. Nobody made him come to Nalchik. He’s not from there, it’s not his home. So why?”

Beanpole producer Rodnyansky added that Sokurov’s influence is that of “an uncompromising artist, a person defending culture’s right to exist to save humanity.... He has a strong moral core.... Without being in political opposition to the government, he is a true *Intelligent*, in the classical sense that was established in 19th-century Russian culture. An *Intelligent* is a person who is not indifferent, who cannot tolerate injustice.” Sokurov intervened unsuccessfully with President Vladimir Putin in 2016 on behalf of imprisoned Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov (Sentsov was released in September 2019 in a prisoner swap).

A Voice of His Generation

Balagov believes that trauma is essential to cinema. It is what differentiates a “mass product” from a movie that is “one of a kind.” When casting his films, he always looks for actors who have experience with trauma. As he himself does.

Rodnyansky points out that the young director, in his meticulous preparation for writing and directing *Beanpole*, reading through archives and diaries from the time, learned that in Leningrad “an enormous number of people, survivors of the blockade, committed suicide. They just ran out of hope and the desire to live” (Dud’ interview).

Balagov told *Novaya Gazeta*: “In one of the diaries, I read something that amazed me: ‘During war, you have only one goal—to survive [выжить]. But afterwards, you have to go on living [выживать]. That is a lot harder than war.’”

So why do I call this grim story and its director’s perspective a “breath of fresh air”? Because unlike the usual fare of World War II patriotic adventure films, horror flicks, and endless morbid probes of dysfunctional families in a corrupt and blood-soaked society



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(*The Stoker, Leviathan, Elena, Loveless, Bury Me Behind the Baseboard*), *Beanpole*'s heroines are trying to find a way to heal themselves, to find a path forward.

In a statement to the press on the release of *Beanpole*, Rodnyansky wrote that "Kantemir has a huge advantage over some—if not most—contemporary directors: He combines true knowledge of the classical cultural tradition with the fact he is a voice of his generation. Even though he knows and appreciates the filmmaking masterpieces of the past, he transforms them through his own unique experience and makes them part of his style and message, which are very much contemporary and urgent."

Rodnyansky (b. 1961) told Dud' that Balagov has "a special talent. He is uncompromising! Look, I belong to a generation of people with a lot of apprehensions. We are constantly looking at internal zones of self-censorship, for some inner comfort. Kantemir doesn't even think about that. He doesn't stand on ceremony, calls things the way he sees them, says what he thinks needs to be said. He answers his own inner questions, rather than the questions of some social environment, and he doesn't check what he is doing against what other people may think of it. It never occurs to him to do that! ... So, I set my course on the young generation."

If Balagov is "a voice of his generation," what is that voice telling them?

To pull themselves out of their trauma, indolence, and cultural pessimism. To work, like Iya and Masha, to heal themselves, even if "not all wounds can be healed." *Novaya Gazeta* asked Balagov (May 17, 2019) how a person of the 21st century can hope to understand a person of the mid-20th century (in this case, in immediate postwar Leningrad). He replied by underlining the role that art can play: "Through literature—that's the only way. It conveys the experience of life, an exchange of experiences, the details that make up the whole substance of life. And internal changes take place through literature. Through the mood, the intonation of a film, its voices, its consonance."

Balagov describes the impact of art/literature on him in his Director's Statement introducing *Beanpole*: "The book *The Unwomanly Face of War*, by Nobel Laureate Svetlana Alexievich, was my main inspiration for this film. This book opened a whole new world for me. I came to realize how little I knew about the war and how little I knew about the role of women in the war.... Leningrad was especially important for me as it was the city that survived this terrible siege, and the consequences of the siege played an important

part in the film. It was vital for me to feel this space and background in the film, and you can feel it even now, in today's Leningrad (Saint Petersburg). We feel the consequences of war in the space where the action takes place, and in the color palette of the film. But most importantly it's in the fates of our heroes. It was important for me to show the consequences of war through people's faces, eyes, physiques, bodies, not just through abandoned or destroyed buildings."

Balagov's friend and fellow graduate from Sokurov's workshop, Viktor Bitikov, told Dud' about his personal transformation through Sokurov's mentorship. He had been successful, making decent money as a "showman," playing in comic variety shows and performing at corporate get-togethers. "I wasn't realizing myself as a person," he said. "It was just awful, plain impotence. I couldn't care less. 'Yeah, so some old lady in Ryazan had a tragedy, so what? [Да и плевать!] Yeah, there was a blockade in Piter, so what? Yeah, millions of people died in the Second World War, so what?' I'm not like that anymore.... Now I can suffer because of the Piter blockade. I think compassion like that is a very important human quality."

So Balagov and Bitikov want their generation to change, to know their history as it was lived by real people, with all their trauma and suffering and hope.

Balagov talked with Dud' about the changes he would like to see in the North Caucasus: "The first thing I want is for young people to have a way to change themselves. Some impetus. Some help for the youth. Because right now, there's complete neglect." There are places to play ball in Nalchik, but no art centers. The graduates of Sokurov's short-lived 2010-15 workshop are languishing in Kabardino-Balkaria or have left for careers elsewhere (Bitikov drives for a courier service). "We don't get any support for our self-expression. I guess I'm just lucky."

But lucky or not, his success will certainly encourage others, and he's not stopping here. Despite the discouraging situation in his native republic, he says that is where his next film will be located, "in the place I love, with the people around me. I just have to think up the story. It will be a modern history."

Susan Welsh, the originator and curator of the SlavFilms column, is a writer, editor, and translator from German and Russian. She lives in Portland, Maine, and may be reached at swelsh059@gmail.com.

SLAVFILE LITE: NOT BY WORD COUNT ALONE

Lydia Razran Stone

This is the fourth and, readers may be pleased to know, the last in a series of columns concerning my conclusions about Krylov based on the 100 or so fables I have translated.

Krylov PART IV: Was Krylov a Social Liberal? CON

Animal fables, in which analogies are drawn between the supposed intrinsic characteristics of animal species and the traits, situations and/or behavior of people, while a brilliant choice for Aesop in his attempt to teach the benefit of good behavior in a preliterate and pre-monotheistic culture, are not well equipped to espouse intrinsic equality or social mobility. If you are born a wolf you eat sheep even if you have to steal them, and if you are born a snake and convince the gods to give you the song of a cuckoo, the birds still keep their distance. Such are the suppositions underlying animal fables and Krylov makes no effort to imply that they do not apply to various “species” of humans. Animals who try to emulate other animals or people and are held up to ridicule occur frequently. At times Krylov makes absolutely explicit that the animals in his tales who refuse to accept the constraints of their species-specific natures are meant to be seen as analogous to humans who try to rise from the situation they were born into.

Here are some examples:



ВОРОНА

Когда не хочешь быть смешон,
Держися звания, в котором ты рожден.
Простолюдин со знатью не роднися;
И если карлой сотворен,
То в великаны не тянися,
А помни свой ты чаще рост.
Я эту басенку вам былью поясню.
Матрене, дочери купечкой, мысль припала,
Чтоб в знатную войти родню.
Приданого за ней полмиллиона.
Вот выдали Матрену за барона.
Что ж вышло? Новая родня ей колет глаз
Попреком, что она мещанкой родилась,
А старая за то, что к знатым приплелась:
И сделалась моя Матрена
Ни Пава, ни Ворона.

THE PEACOCK AND THE CROW

If you don't want to be the butt of mirth,
Don't try to rise above your birth.
The peasant and the noble can't be kin;
Each one thrives best where he by nature best fits in.

The first tale was a fable, but the next is true:
The daughter of a merchant, very well to do,
Decided she would marry one of high estate.
Her dowry was huge, that wasn't hard to do--
Soon she had a baron for her mate.
And the result? No one will be surprised
By all she was despised:
By her new husband's folk because they thought her low
And by her own because they felt she thought them so.
And so the bride was fully ostracized
For though she was no Peacock, nor was she a Crow.

In the fable below, an immature ear of grain berates a farmer for leaving his profitable fields open to the elements while flowers are sheltered in a green house. The farmer explains that the grain needed exposure to the elements to live. The explicit moral draws a parallel to the human world.

КОЛОСОК

«Мой друг, — хозяин отвечал, —
Я вижу, ты моих трудов не примечал.
Поверь, что главные мои о вас заботы.
Когда б ты знал, какой мне стоило работы
Расчистить лес, удобрить землю вам:
И не было конца моим трудам.
Но толковать теперь ни время, ни охоты,
Ни пользы нет.
Дождя ж и ветру ты проси себе у неба;
А если б умный твой исполнил я совет,
То был бы без цветов и был бы я без хлеба».

Так часто добрый селянин,
Простой солдат иль гражданин,
Кой с кем своё сличая состоянье,
Приходят иногда в роптанье.
Им можно то ж почти сказать и в оправданье.

THE EAR OF GRAIN

“My friend,” the farmer said, “That’s just not true;
My main concern has always been for you.
You simply do not understand
How hard I work to make this land
Just right for grain to thrive and grow.
I clear, plow, sow and fertilize
These fields you seem to so despise.
You owe your life to me you know.
Why waste my breath attempting to explain?
But you and all your fellow grain
Should bless your fate of heat and cold and wind and rain.
For life within glass walls would do you only harm,
Cause you to wither young and me to lose my farm.”

To those of lower ranks who of their fates complain
And want to live like those whose rank is high
Like that wise farmer I’d explain,
The fates of grain and men to justify.

Another of Krylov’s morals with a related theme tells of two dear friends—a clay pot and a metal one, who take a road trip together at the metal pot’s insistence. This attempt to join his friend in an adventure costs the clay pot his life. Although equality can exist along many dimensions, this fable starring an inexpensive clay pot and a more costly iron one seems to be a bald-faced call for people to stay in their economic lanes lest they suffer.

КОТЁЛ И ГОРШОК

Как странствия их были далеки,
Не знаю; но о том я точно известился,
Что цел домой Котёл с дороги воротился,
А от Горшка одни остались черепки.

Читатель, басни сей мысль самая простая:
Что равенство в любви и дружбе вещь святая.

THE IRON POT AND THE CLAY ONE

More details of their trip I have not learned,
But I can tell you this, at least:
The iron pot returned in one safe piece,
While his dear friend in pieces was returned.

Need I explain?
The moral here is plain.
If you in love or friendship would invest,
Remember that equality is best.

**ARE YOU A NEWCOMER TO SLD OR TO A PROFESSION IN SLAVIC TRANSLATION
AND/OR INTERPRETATION?**

**DO YOU HAVE SOME ADVICE TO OFFER THOSE WHO ARE OR DO YOU SEEK ADVICE FROM THE MORE
EXPERIENCED?**

WOULD YOU SIMPLY LIKE TO INTRODUCE YOURSELF TO OUR READERS?

CONTACT THE EDITORS AT THE ADDRESSES ON THE MASTHEAD.

In other fables, creatures (and even cobblestones) who try to emulate those of a “higher nature” get a clear comeuppance.

In the fable below, a diamond that has been lost on the road is found and is given a life of luxury in the Palace. A cobblestone who had lain nearby asks to be taken to the city for what he believes would be a similar fate. Although the equivalence between intrinsic nature and social class is not drawn explicitly, I include it in light of the similarity of this to other fables with explicit morals.

БУЛЫЖНИК И АЛМАЗ

Ввалился камень мой и думает, что разом
Засядет рядом он с Алмазом;
Но вышел для него случай совсем иной:
Он точно в дело взят, но взят для мостовой.

THE COBBLESTONE AND THE DIAMOND

Once in the city, he surmised
That like the Diamond he'd be prized.
Indeed he got a post that very day
To plug a pothole in the main highway.

In the following example, Krylov interprets Aesop's original fable about envy and self-importance to be about wanting to emulate one's betters.

ЛЯГУШКА И ВОЛ

Пример такой на свете не один:
И диво ли, когда жить хочет мещанин,
Как именитый гражданин,
А сошка мелкая, как знатный дворянин.

THE FROG AND THE OX

We see the like within the world of men
It happens in our country when
Some low-born prole puffs up his worth
And hopes to pass for one of noble birth.

I am struck by the animus Krylov shows in these fables, considering that his father was born into quite humble circumstances and he himself rose in society and income only because of his own innate and/or self-taught literary skills.

The liberal ideas of Krylov's time are associated with the Enlightenment and the Enlightenment with French philosophers. Krylov, who was an adult at the time of Napoleon's invasion, was no friend of the French or Enlightenment ideas. Fables with veiled morals about their perniciousness abound. One, believed to refer to the hiring of the French (and perhaps other foreigners) to care for and tutor Russian upper-class children, in which a snake applies for a job as a nursemaid, has the following ending.

КРЕСТЬЯНИН И ЗМЕЯ

«Коль это, — говорит Крестьянин, — и не ложно,
Все мне принять тебя не можно;
Когда пример такой
У нас полюбят,
Тогда вползут сюда за доброю Змеей,
Одной,
Сто злых и всех детей здесь перегубят.
Да, кажется, голубушка моя,
И потому с тобой мне не ужиться,
Что лучшая Змея,
По мне ни к черту не годится».

THE PEASANT AND THE SNAKE

“Well, even if that's true and not a lie,
Still never will I hire you, Miss Snake.
For there's a risk I cannot take,
That once the word got out
That snakes are welcome here, without a doubt,
You will be followed by your brothers,
Not the good ones, but the others,
And soon our boys and girls would start to die.
But there's another reason why:
The best of all the Snakes who've walked the earth
Could never seem to me of any earthly worth.”

One of Krylov's longest fables is about a lion king who sends his son and heir to be educated by birds, having been told that they had the most advanced society. This poem is considered to be a veiled criticism of Catherine's having her heir, Alexander I, taught by Westerners, particularly the French. When the heir returns to his father's court he is asked how he will rule.

ВОСПИТАНИЕ ЛЬВА	THE LION'S EDUCATION
<p>«Когда ж намерен ты правление мне вручить, То я тотчас начну зверей учить Вить гнезды».</p> <p>Тут ахнул царь и весь звериный свет; Повесил головы Совет, А Лев-старик позднею спохватился, Что Львенок пустякам учился И не добро он говорит; Что пользы нет большой тому знать птичий быт, Кого зверьми владеть поставила природа, И что важнейшая наука для царей: Знать свойство своего народа И выгоды земли своей.</p>	<p>"Dear father when I take your throne I promise I will try my best To teach all subjects how to weave a nest." At this, old Lion Tsar let out a groan, Too late he saw that which he should have known: Himself he had been fooling That this type of schooling Would help his only son to rule. His son was now a fool, To judge by his last words. Why teach a lion prince the ways of birds? And since o'er beasts he'd one day reign. To the old Tsar it was now plain, He should have had him taught to know his land And those of his own kind to better understand.</p>

Finally, on the question of freeing the serfs (the quintessential liberal vs conservative issue of Krylov's time), in the absence of any fables to the contrary, I cite one of Krylov's less well-known ones. It is not short but, as a crucial bit of evidence, I will give it in full.

Continued on page 29

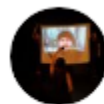
RusLit title challenge



Faith Hillis @FaithCHillis · Apr 8

Replying to @BristolRuCz and @fyodor76

O, Blomov! Mr. Blomov's neighbors are stunned when he ceases being a superfluous man and becomes a crossfit junkie.



Molodyi Teatr London @MolodyiTeatr · Apr 10

Replying to @BristolRuCz and @fyodor76

Tapas Bulba, Gogol's Cossacks take a weekend break in Barcelona.



Jo Naish @RevJoNaish · Apr 8

Replying to @BristolRuCz and @fyodor76

"Me" by Evgenii Zamyatin - The truth behind every totalitarian state, written by the ego behind the oligarchs



Aimee Arsenault @aimeearsenault · Apr 8

Replying to @BristolRuCz and @fyodor76

Bar and Peace: The story of how an epic cast of characters will feel when we can finally return to our neighbourhood pub after this long absence.
 "There is no greatness where there is not simplicity, goodness, and beer."

ВСАДНИК И КОНЬ

Какой-то Всадник так Коня себе нашколил,
Что делал из него всё, что ´ изволил;
Не шевеля почти и поводов,
Конь слушался его лишь слов.
«Таких коней и взнуздывать напрасно»,
Хозяин некогда сказал:
«Ну, право, вздумал я прекрасно!»
И, в поле выехав, узду с Коня он снял.
Почувствуя свободу,
Сначала Конь прибавил только ходу
Слегка,
И, вскинув голову, потряхивая гривой,
Он выступкой пошел игривой,
Как будто теша Седока.
Но, сметая, как над ним управа не крепка,
Взял скоро волю Конь ретивой:
Вскипела кровь его и разгорелся взор;
Не слушая слов всадниковых боле,
Он мчит его во весь опор
Черезо всё широко поле.
Напрасно на него несчастный Всадник мой
Дрожащею рукой
Узду накинуть покушался:
Конь боле лишь серчал и рвался,
И сбросил, наконец, с себя его долой;
А сам, как бурный вихрь, пустился,
Не взвидя света, ни дорог,
Поколь, в овраг со всех махнувши ног,
До-смерти не убился.
Тут в горести Седок
«Мой бедный Конь!» сказал: «я стал виною
Твоей беды!
Когда бы не снял я с тебя узды, —
Управил бы наверно я тобою:
И ты бы ни меня не сшиб,
Ни смертью б сам столь жалкой не погиб!»
Как ни приманчива свобода,
Но для народа
Не меньше гибельна она,
Когда разумная ей мера не дана.

THE RIDER AND THE HORSE

A man once trained his horse with such great skill
He barely had to touch the rein
To get his steed to harken to his will
As if it read each thought within his brain.
He mused one day, “why not ride him unbridled?”
And turned that fleeting thought into a plan,
Not knowing such ideas are often idle.
He was an expert trainer, and yet a foolish man.
He dropped the reins when riding in the pasture.
The horse at first did not respond with zest;
He simply made his pace a little faster,
And then began to prance to show he got the jest.
Then feeling that the reins were really slack,
And tasting utter freedom which before he’d lacked,
With boiling blood and flashing eye, at his top speed,
Which was extremely fast indeed,
He raced across his master’s field,
Ignoring the commands his rider tried to shout.
Refusing now to yield
To one whose rule he’d never thought to doubt.
The rider tried to reach a rein;
The horse just bucked and lunged
With speed and liberty insane.
And off his back his master plunged.
The horse raced on at breakneck pace
Ignoring time, ignoring space,
Quite blind to the terrain ahead.
On and on the mad horse dashed
Until into a gorge it crashed.
And there his limping master found him dead.
“My horse,” his injured master cried:
“How needless was your suicide;
And, too, the fact that I’m now lame.
For both of these I am to blame,
Because ‘twas I who dropped your rein,
If to maintain control I had just known.
From off your back I wouldn’t have been thrown,
And, you, poor beast, your life would have retained.”
Though liberty seems so seductive,
For the peasants (people) of our land,
It may prove equally destructive,
If its due measure they don’t understand.

I will leave it to readers to decide for themselves whether the picture evidently painted of Krylov as a social liberal in Soviet and possibly even later Russian schools is accurate.