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VOLUME 9

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Prose

Bitter Hangover **Excerpts from *Russia Bathed in Blood***

Artyom Vesoly

Translated from the Russian
by Kevin Windle

Introduction

Artyom Vesoly (1899-1938, real name Nikolai Ivanovich Kochkurov) was born in Samara on the Volga. His father was a carter and loader, and the son, who started work at fourteen, would later describe his own working career as follows: “factory – tramp – newspaper seller – cabman – clerk – agitator – Red Guard – newspaper – party work – Red Army soldier – student – sailor – writer.”¹ He joined the Bolshevik Party in March 1917, aged seventeen, and was soon involved in the Civil War of 1918-1921, though not primarily in a combat role: having enough schooling to read and write – the first of his family to acquire literacy – he was assigned to propagandist duties, travelling the front-line areas in an “agit-train” and producing propaganda material, and editing a newspaper with the title *Krasny kazak* (The Red Cossack).

When the Civil War ended, Vesoly was able to attend the Institute of Literature at Moscow State University and study the craft of writing.

¹ Artem Vesely, “Avtobiografiia,” in E. F. Nikitina, *V masterskoi sovremennoi khudozhestvennoi prozy*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Nikitinskie subbotniki, 1931), p. 173.

He did not complete the course, but soon began to publish fiction and drama, most of it based on his experience of the social upheaval brought by war and revolution. Recognized as a young writer of great promise, he was a founding member of the Pereval group of writers and briefly a member of RAPP (the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers).

The novel *Russia Bathed in Blood* (*Rossii, krov'iu umytaia*), first published in full in 1932 but further developed in subsequent editions, is the best-known of his works. In it he relied heavily on his own experience of the Civil War and on letters received from newly-literate soldiers and veterans. In the 1920s he published the novellas *Rivers of Fire* (*Reki ognennye*, 1924) and *Native Land* (*Strana rodnaia*, 1925). These were later incorporated, with some revisions, into *Russia Bathed in Blood*: *Rivers of Fire* became the chapter “Bitter Hangover” (*Gor'koe pokhmel'e*), and “Native Land,” in three chapters, became the last part of the novel.

With the Russian novelists prominently in mind, Henry James spoke of the novels of the 19th century as “large, loose, baggy monsters.” Had he lived long enough to read *Russia Bathed in Blood*, which has little else in common with the classics of that period, he might have found that it outstripped in bagginess anything he had previously read. It lacks a unifying plot, and a definite beginning, middle and end. Most of its parts can be read independently of the others as a series of extended episodes rather than a connected narrative. Nor is unity provided by the characters, though some appear in more than one chapter. It is free of heroes in the traditional sense; its focus is less on individuals than on the crowd, and the voices we hear, often of unidentified speakers, are mostly those of ordinary people with little education. The novel is unfinished: it continued to evolve throughout the author's life, and we know that he had plans for further chapters. Under the title page he placed the word “Fragment,” a term which might be applied to most of its constituent parts.

The American critic Sophie Court, who read the Russian original at an early date, found much merit in its unusual structure, observing that its “fragmentary nature makes each episode, each scene stand out more independently and gives the narrative an unforgettable vividness.” In her view, “the sparkling Russian humor, the depth of Russian sadness,

and the sincerity and naiveté of Russian pathos combine to make this novel of the Civil War a brilliant, powerful work of art.”²

While its form marks a clear break with established tradition, the work’s thematic unity is plain to see: the author’s experience of revolution and civil conflict had brought home to him that the barbaric atrocities which accompanied anarchic elemental freedom would in the end destroy that freedom, and that the adherents of such freedom were laying the ground for dictatorship. Jekaterina Lebedewa observes that this novel, like no other of its time, captured the contradiction between peasant Russia with its dreams of freedom on the one hand, and the ideas, aims and methods of the Bolsheviks, on the other. Vesoly warned, she writes, that the violent revolution would devour everything, including its own children.³ All Vesoly’s works, and *Russia Bathed in Blood* in particular, belong to the literature of moral resistance to the falsification of history that took root early in the Soviet period.

As Communist Party control over literature tightened in the late 1920s, Vesoly found it increasingly difficult to conform to its stringent ideological requirements. His short story “The Barefoot Truth” (*Bosaia pravda*), dealing with the difficulties faced by Civil War veterans in finding a place in society, published in 1929 in the journal *Molodaia gvardiia*, brought the journal a strict reprimand from the Central Committee for printing a “caricature of Soviet reality,” “of value only to our class enemies.”⁴ As Nina Malygina has pointed out, the story offended by its assertion that power in the Soviet state did not lie in the hands of those who had fought to establish it.⁵ Later his major works would be found wanting for their failure to recognize the “leading organizational role” of the Party in the revolution, the Civil War and the new society. The Party

² Sophie R. A. Court, review of Artem Vesely’s *Rossiya Krov’u Umytaya*, *Books Abroad* 8/3 (July 1934), p. 351.

³ Jekaterina Lebedewa, afterword to Artjom Wesjoly, *Blut und Feuer*, trans. Thomas Reschke (Berlin: Aufbau, 2017), pp. 624-625.

⁴ Quoted in Zaiara Veselaia, “*Rossii krov’iu umytaia* Artema Veselogo. Po materialam lichnogo arkhiva pisatel’ia,” *Novy mir* 5 (1988), p. 160.

⁵ Nina Malygina, *Andrei Platonov i literaturnaia Moskva* (St Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriia, 2018), p. 355.

demanded that history and literature record the Civil War as a clean-cut struggle between Reds and Whites, progress and reaction, right and wrong. Vesoly paints a more complicated picture, in which Reds, Whites, Greens, Cossacks, anarchists and partisans all contend for dominance, “normal” life for civilians is impossible, and neutrality is forbidden. *Russia Bathed in Blood* describes a world of anarchic chaos, social dislocation and frenzied mob violence, devoid of organization of any kind. The structure – or deliberate formlessness – of his novels reflects this.

Vesoly’s life came to an early end in Stalin’s Great Purge of 1937-1938. By that time, literature was under strict ideological supervision and Socialist Realism had been enshrined as doctrine. Free spirits such as Vesoly, who pulled no punches in his accounts of the revolutionary period, were accused of placing their talents at the service of the counter-revolution. In May 1937, the critic R. Shpunt wrote of *Russia Bathed in Blood* that “the whole book slanders our heroic struggle with our enemies, it lampoons the fighters and builders of the young Republic of Soviets,” and that it had enjoyed praise and promotion by “Trotskyites.”⁶ In June, Nikolai Ezhov, then head of the NKVD, wrote to Stalin seeking permission to arrest Vesoly “in connection with his counter-revolutionary Trotskyite activity.” “Evidence” had been assembled that he “detested the Party leadership,” had stated his “terrorist intentions,” and was planning to write a poem in praise of members of the “Trotskyite-Zinoviev center” who had been executed.⁷ He was duly arrested on 28 October 1937, the same day as Boris Pilniak, with whom he had been linked, and shot on 8 April 1938. Posthumous rehabilitation came in Khrushchev’s “thaw” of 1956, and the publication of some of his writings was again permitted.

To this extent, Vesoly has features in common with Pilniak and some others who wrote on the theme of the Civil War, for example Isaac Babel and Mikhail Sholokhov, whose *Quiet Don*, like much of *Russia Bathed in Blood*, is set in the Cossack lands. Of these, only Sholokhov,

⁶ Quoted in Zaiara Veselaia, p. 141.

⁷ See Stiv Levin, “Volzhskaiia doroga Artema Veselogo,” in *Voprosy literatury* 5 (2017), p. 197.

“Stalin’s scribe,” survived the purges.⁸ In other respects, however, Vesoly’s work is very different. Indeed, it is a unique and striking contribution to Russian literature.

The novel is characterized by a distinctive use of language in both dialogue and narrative. The author’s preferred medium is far from the literary language of pre-revolutionary times: it is the colorful, earthy Russian of uneducated people, with a strong admixture of southern dialects. Many chapters include stanzas of poetry and song, and occasional *chastushki* – a traditional genre of popular song of which Vesoly was particularly fond. Proverbial sayings are frequent, many of them not well known today. The narrative features folksy locutions, poetic inversions, grammatical forms which are not part of standard Russian, oaths and abusive terms in profusion, arresting images and turns of phrase and much unconventional use of words. In addition, the author deploys a vocabulary of extraordinary range and richness, much of it not recorded in standard dictionaries, but often traceable in the famous dictionary compiled by Vladimir Dal at the turn of the 20th century, which covers a broad range of dialects. Like a writer of a later period, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Vesoly was known to have spent much time exploring the lexical treasures to be found in it. His wife Liudmila Borisevich remembered that he filled the margins of his copy with copious notes, adding words he had heard in the course of his travels. In his prose he often formed neologisms by adding new affixes to familiar roots, after the manner of the Futurist poets Vladimir Mayakovsky, Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh, whose bold linguistic experiments he admired.⁹ His own unique style attracted wide interest, but not universal approval: one critic observed that it was difficult to penetrate the variegated textual fabric without a dictionary.¹⁰

⁸ See Brian J. Boeck, *Stalin’s Scribe: Literature, Ambition, and Survival: The Life of Mikhail Sholokhov*, (New York: Pegasus Books, 2019).

⁹ See Ignacy Szenfeld, translator’s foreword to Artiom Wiesioły, *Rosja we krwi skapana* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, 1964), p. 13, and Lebedewa, p. 627.

¹⁰ Viacheslav Polonsky, “Artem Vesely,” in V. V. Eidinova, ed., *O literature* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1988), p. 79.

In her afterword to the German edition, Jekaterina Lebedewa writes: the novel seems “wegen seiner eigenwilligen Sprache, des bildreichen Jargons und der umgangssprachlichen Redewendungen aus dem Bauern-, Matrosen- und Soldatenmilieu so gut wie unübersetzbar. Literatursprachliche Worte bilden bei Vesjoly beinahe die Ausnahme” (the novel seems virtually untranslatable on account of its unconventional language, its colorful slang and colloquial idioms from the speech of peasants, sailors and soldiers. Literary vocabulary is almost the exception).¹¹ And Viktor Shklovsky, in conversation with Ignacy Szenfeld, the Polish translator, opined that before translating the novel into any other language, one first needed to translate it into Russian.¹²

It seems therefore legitimate to wonder whether an attempt to produce a translation is a fool’s errand. The same might, of course, be said of many works of literature, especially of poetry, and there is much poetry in Vesjoly’s prose.

As in the translation of poetry, some degree of loss must be accepted, since a translation can only aspire to resemble its original – it can never be “the same.” Among the losses is the use of regional forms of language and sub-standard Russian, and with them some local color. Here the decision has been made to avoid any particular dialect of the Anglosphere, instead resorting where possible to a synthetic sub-standard, exploiting those common features that mark uneducated speech in most of the better-known varieties of English. However, where a choice has to be made, preference here has gone to the translator’s native idiom, which is British rather than North American. The interpolated fragments of song and verse, some of them *blatnye* (of the criminal classes), cannot be closely matched in translation, and the same is true of some earthy adages.

The translation has been made with a close eye to two masterly versions in other languages, mentioned above: Ignacy Szenfeld’s Polish

¹¹ Lebedewa, p. 632.

¹² Gaira Veselaia, Zaiara Veselaia, *Sud’ba i knigi Artema Veselogo* (Moscow: Agraf, 2005), p. 258.

translation (Artiom Wiesioły, *Rosja we krwi skapana*, Warsaw, 1964), and Thomas Reschke's German translation (*Blut und Feuer*, Berlin, 2017), which includes some material not available to Szenfeld. While they may at times differ in their understanding of some passages, these versions often prompt reflection on nuances of interpretation and overt and concealed meanings, and sometimes suggest a solution which can be applied in English.

In addition to vetting this English version closely, Elena Govor, a grand-daughter of the author, has brought to bear her intimate knowledge of the texts, their variants and the background to them. With other members of her family, in particular her aunts Gaira and Zayara Vesolaya, she has done much to preserve Artyom Vesoly's legacy and ensure his place in Russian literary history. For further information in Russian on Vesoly's life and works, the reader is referred to Elena Govor's website: <https://artemvesely.com>

The excerpts published here are taken from the long chapter entitled "Bitter Hangover" (Gor'koe pokhmel'e), describing a retreat by elements of the Red Army eastward across the southern steppes in 1918.

Many of Vesoly's gifted contemporaries – Babel, Pilniak, Mikhail Bulgakov, Mikhail Zoshchenko, Iury Olesha, Konstantin Paustovsky, Mayakovsky, Sholokhov and Boris Pasternak – have been widely translated into other languages, including English. Vesoly too has received the attention of German, French, Polish, Czech, Bulgarian and Swedish translators. In English, however, only a nine-page excerpt from *Russia Bathed in Blood* has appeared, in an anthology edited by Serge Konovalov in 1932.¹³ It is to be hoped that, over eighty years after his premature death, some of the recognition he continues to enjoy in Russia may yet accrue to him in the English-speaking world, and that Russia's brutal civil war, now largely forgotten in the West, may be returned to memory.

A full English translation of the novel, benefiting from Elena Govor's and Zayara Vesolaya's careful study of the numerous Russian

¹³ Serge Konovalov, ed., *Bonfire: Stories out of Soviet Russia* (London: Ernest Benn, 1932), pp. 74-82.

editions, textual variants and the censor's cuts, will be published by Anthem Press in 2020.

Kevin Windle and Elena Govor

May 2019
Canberra

* * *

*Revolution in Russia –
Fevered villages, delirious towns*

The army was assailed by lice,
the army was dying.
Autumn brought lashing rains, lead and blood.

Unharvested crops, infested with weeds, were laid as flat as felt. The orphaned grain-fields were trampled by cavalry, devastated by swarms of mice, and pecked clean by passing birds. The crimson banners of fires fluttered over the lands of the Kuban, the Terek and Stavropol. The Reds were setting fire to the homesteads and villages of rebellious Cossacks; the Whites were laying waste peasant villages and workers' settlements.

Winter was drawing in.

From the north, cold winds were more and more frequent, stripping the orchards bare and rustling the dead grass in the steppes. Morning frosts set in, covering puddles with the first fragile ice.

The troops were short of clothes and footwear.

Along the same routes, the same roads as the army, the typhus-bearing louse came crawling. The fit could manage to fight it off, the sick could not. [...]

A motor-car bounced jauntily along the steppe road. A man in military uniform dozed in his seat and was shaken awake every minute.

His tired face was grey and his gold-rimmed glasses jumped up and down on his nose.

The brigade and regimental wagons made their slow way along the road.

The car sounded its hoarse klaxon.

"Let us through, you bloody horse-eaters!" yelled the driver angrily. "Tell the front ones to stop."

The wagon-drivers snarled back: "Go screw a cow!"

Car-driver: "Pull over!"

Wagon-drivers: "Pull over yourself! There's one of you and lots of us."

The timid steppe horses shied away in panic... A field kitchen tipped over, spilling hot borshch; an ambulance wagon tipped over and the patients shrieked as they tumbled into the mud.

The car swerved and began speeding along the roadside verge, pursued by a torrent of abuse, curses and cries of "Stop! Stop!" The car ran on, picking up speed, throwing up muddy clods from its wheels. Ivan Chernoyarov overtook it at a gallop and stood his horse athwart its path: "Go on, run me over."

The driver braked. Horsemen closed in round the car.

"Who are you?" Chernoyarov asked the man in the gold-rimmed glasses. "What the hell are you doing running my men down?"

"Arslanov, authorized representative of the army's revolutionary council. What is it you comrades want? My warrant? Here it is. I..."

"Do you know Ivan Chernoyarov?" the brigade commander interrupted him.

"I've heard the name, but haven't had the honor."

"Where are you going?"

"That's none of your business."

"He's in a hurry to get to Astrakhan with a report," smirked the soldiers. "Let him go. He's no time to waste."

"I don't have to answer to everybody I meet. What's your unit? Who's in command? I'll lodge a complaint... Drive on!" he ordered his driver.

The engine revved. Nobody moved.

“Out of my way or I’ll shoot!” A nickel-plated Browning glinted in his hand.

“I’m Chernoyarov!” Ivan leaned down in the saddle and with a stroke of his saber sliced off the authorized representative’s head. “Load the car up with forage, lads!”

The horsemen whooped with delight.

The army fell back in disarray. Units became intermingled and lost touch with their supply columns, their headquarters and their victuallers. Attempts by individual level-headed commanders to impose order proved futile – nobody took any notice of orders. Only the two cavalry regiments and Ivan Chernoyarov’s brigade covered the retreat.

General Pokrovsky’s cavalry dogged their heels.

Chernoyarov’s brigade arrived in Kizlyar by night. [...]

Supplies of forage, bread and water were low.

Thatched roofs of straw and reeds were stripped for forage. Emaciated horses gnawed at the carts, the posts and fences to which they were tethered. The first troops to pass through drank all the water from the wells. Those who came later scooped only mud from the bottom. For the rearguard, nothing was left.

In the district of Kizlyar, wine flowed in rivers and spread into an ocean of wine. Barrels were rolled out from cellars and basements: the troops drank wine, poured more, and filled the horses’ troughs with it. The hungry horses, soon drunk, blundered frantically into fences and pushed their way into the flames. Bellowing men and prancing horses splashed in puddles of wine. Wine foamed and lapped, reflecting a drunken glow. [...]

Chernoyarov’s brigade dismounted in the market square, handed over their mounts to the horse-holders, and started raising their voices.

“They’ve sold us out!” yelled Chaganov, the machine-gunner with one shoulder higher than the other, who’d already found time for a drink. “Where are we going? To the slaughter? They’ve sold us out and drunk the money!”

“Cut it out, Chaganov,” said Butsoi, his pal, trying to calm him down. “Who’s sold us, and who to? Nobody would pay a penny for you and me.”

“Treachery!” cried another voice from a different group. “At the front we had to fight barefoot and naked, and here there’s whole trainloads of uniforms on fire! We were short of shells and bullets, and here there’s mountains of ’em!”

Rumblings of discontent.

“We’ve had it.”

“All our commissars and commanders are running away with full suitcases and abandoning us.”

“Their watchword is ‘Save Your Skin’!”

Chernoyarov pushed his way into the very middle of the crowd and jumped up onto a cart.

“Brothers...”

The voices abated a little, but for some time the discontented grumbled here and there and hurled oaths, like logs.

Chernoyarov spoke: “Brothers! There’s treachery all around us. We have only ourselves and our spirit! But the time for vengeance will come, and my iron hand will punish all cowards and traitors severely! Away with panic and faint hearts! We will fight on to the end! If anyone doesn’t want to stay with us he can hand in his mount, his rifle and his partisan conscience and get out of my sight! Brothers, we’re withdrawing towards Astrakhan. The way will be hard. Four hundred versts of wild Kalmyk steppe. With no water and no forage. We halt here for one day. Stock up with whatever you can. Throw out any junk. On the march you’ll need every little bunch of hay and every handful of oats. I’ll be checking your bags and holsters myself. If I find as much as one piece of surplus rag, expect no mercy. I’m ordering the horses to be shod with studs. Check all saddles, shafts, harnesses, welds, tires, and rivets; we don’t want even one loose nail. The supply train will carry five hundred pails of wine. One cup a day for the fit, three for the sick. Go easy on your horses. We move out at first light. Meeting over. Disperse to your billets, quietly.”

The forges worked through the night.

At dawn the brigade made ready, sent the supply column forward and set out on its last march. All three regiments withdrew in good order. [...]

At the limit of the Kalmyk lands, at one of the last homesteads, the brigade halted for the night.

Chernoyarov sat in a house, sucking on his pipe by an open window. The troops were asleep or playing cards for piles of Kerensky roubles, cartridges, and silver and gold.

By-passing the homestead on a road below it, a mixed detachment was on the move. Tethered to a phaeton a handsome bay horse danced along, as pretty as a picture. Chernoyarov raised his field-glasses to his eyes and called Shalim, who was sitting nearby on his outspread greatcoat, filing some notches out of the blade of his saber.

"See that, friend? Look at that bay there!" He winked. "Off you go."

Accustomed to the unbridled caprices of his friend and master, the adjutant silently untied his Kabardinian horse from the gatepost, sprang into the saddle and galloped down to the lower road. He soon returned to report:

"Derbent Regiment... Bay mare belong Beletsky, regiment commander."

Spoiled by war and no longer able to control the fire in him, the partisan leader whipped his Mauser out of its holster and laid it on the windowsill in front of him.

"Off you go, brother, and don't come back without that mare, or I'll shoot you. You know I always keep my word."

The card-players left their game, chuckling to each other as they tried to guess the outcome of their commander's fancy.

Shalim turned his head sharply, grunted, whipped up his horse and raced to catch up with the Derbents, who by now had passed the homestead and were riding down into a dip.

All watched until he disappeared from view.

Before Chernoyarov could finish his pipe, dust could be seen rising from the road. Shalim was riding hell for leather, leading a

second horse by the reins. Some horsemen were galloping after him, whooping and twirling their sabers.

"To arms!" shouted the brigade commander.

The men snatched up their rifles.

"At their hats, on the command ... fire!"

Shalim came flying into the homestead.

His pursuers halted on a rise, paused for a moment as the bullets whistled low over their heads, brandished their sabers and turned back.

Chernoyarov leapt out of the window.

"That's what I like about you, friend: your guile," he laughed, taking the reins of the golden-bay mare with dappling in the groin. "That's the way to do it: if you lack the strength, use a bit of dash ... And this is a good buy, I can see." He stroked the frightened, snorting horse.

"I cut him up," muttered Shalim gloomily.

"Cut who up?"

"Beletsky."

"Are you kidding?" The brigade commander looked intently at him. "Well, are you?"

Shalim silently produced his saber, stained red with fresh blood, from under his burka.

"Bloody hell!" Ivan frowned and stepped close to his adjutant. "Idiot. If we sent you to pray to God you'd plunder the church!"

"Wouldn't give! He shout!" explained Shalim. "I cut him: left, right!"

"Soft-headed idiot!" said Chernoyarov, but added at once as he looked at the prize, "but I do need a mare, and this is a good one, I can see."

Graceful, long-legged, of medium weight and supple as a pike, the mare gave her new owner a tender glance, twitched her little fox-like ears and shook her sleek head, as if asking to be ridden.

"What's her name?"

"In hurry. Forgot to ask," grinned Shalim, wiping down his blade with some sand and a cloth.

"I'll call her Arrow... Arrow." Chernoyarov tightened the saddle-girth, swung himself into the saddle without touching the stirrups, and galloped into the steppe to break in his mare. [...]

[One of the retreating detachments] came unexpectedly upon a lonely tent standing protected from the winds between two long barrows. The horses' nostrils flared at the scent of burning dung; they neighed hungrily and lengthened their stride.

Before they'd gone a hundred paces,
a hatless and beltless man sprang out of the tent into a
gully, thrust out the muzzle of a rifle and opened fire.

"Hey! Hey!" they shouted. "Are you mad? We're friends!"

The leading horse, a palomino, toppled over. A bullet nicked one of the Temryuk men in the shoulder.

Galagan jumped down from the cart.

"What the hell's going on? Why the shooting?"

Maxim pulled the sleeping Grigorov down from the cart by his feet.

The others took cover too.

Rat-tat-tat...

"Won't stop firing, the son of a bitch."

"Maybe it's the cadets."

"Couldn't be. How could they have got here? Looks like he's alone."

"Maybe he is, but he's in that hollow where we can't get a shot at him."

"Let's crawl up, surround him on all sides and rush him," suggested one of the Temryuk men.

"No need for any of this shilly-shallying. I'll nail that worm in two ticks, I'll..." Galagan sprang up and moved forward in leaps, crouching low.

By the time the others reached him, Galagan was already sitting astride the sniper, throttling him with his left hand while lashing his face with his right and calling him every name he could think of: "You snake... whore... wrecker... shoot at your own side, would you?... Reptile... monster... viper... spawn of Judas!"

They rushed to the tent. Inside it an elderly Kalmyk woman lay on some sheepskins, delirious with typhus. There was nobody else to be seen. They turned their attention to the sniper. Galagan picked him up from the ground by the scruff of his neck and fixed him with a furious glare: "So who are you? Tell us!"

"Don't torture me, brother," said the man, bursting into tears and wiping away some blood from his chin. "Just shoot me. For God's sake, shoot me and don't torture me!"

"Sit down and tell us your story." Galagan snatched his Colt from his belt and cocked it. "Give us the whole truth. One false word and you swallow a bullet."

All sat down by the flap of the tent.

With bruised and blackened eyes he looked at his former comrades-in-arms like a ferret caught in a trap and told his tale in a low voice, hardly moving his split lips.

"My name's Tsaregorodtsev, from the Cossack township of Pashkovskaya. Our squadron reached the sea at Lagan. From there the road runs all the way to Astrakhan. We started trying to cross the estuary. A breeze blew up from the shore – just our luck: an ice-floe broke away and got swept out to sea with us on it. Some wept, some laughed with spite, and some of us jumped and swam, relying on our horses. Lots drowned, but my mate Bondarenko, a Cossack from the village of Goncharovskoye, and me made it to the shore. We left our frozen horses behind and started running into the steppe, to warm up. It was dark, we couldn't see any tracks. "The wind should be blowing from our left," I said. And my mate says, "No, from our right." We wandered around for several days, hungry, nothing to smoke, our matches were wet and wouldn't light. We came to a settlement: not so much as a crust of bread nor a living soul in it. Dead bodies in the houses and the street, and dogs roaming among them. My feet were frostbitten; the skin started peeling off and my toes started rotting. My mate carried my kitbag and rifle. We shot a badger and ate it raw. My belly revolted. I was rolling in the sand gasping, "I'm dying!" My mate turns me on my back and starts pummelling my belly with his fists and knees. I burst into a sweat and got a bit of strength back. I wasn't exactly well, but I could stand up and

wobble on my feet. So on we go. Taking it slowly. Then we come to this tent. They had three sheep and a bit of flour. "We're weak," I says. "They'll cut our throats in the night, and the food won't last long for all of us. Let's kill 'em." Bondarenko says, "I can't do that. They ain't done nothing to us. My father in the Kuban's just as old; maybe someone there's planning the same for him." "Well," I says, "if you're so soft-hearted, turn away for a minute." He goes off and turns his back, although he doesn't want to. I pull out my pistol and shoot the old Kalmyk, and a child, and another kid and a nimble dark-skinned lad: put two bullets into him, and he's still squealing, grabbing at my gun and kissing my feet. I finished him off, but let the old woman be: thought she might give us a bit of pleasure before she died. She was still fit and steaming with heat. So we live together for a day, a week, like gypsies, and life's good. We eat noodles with mutton, fall into bed, have a good sleep, I rape the woman, we boil up some more noodles and fall into bed again. My mate's completely recovered and keeps saying, "Come on, let's be going." My feet are all swollen, so I can't get my boots on, and you can't get far barefoot. The woman gets on my nerves at night, sitting by the grave where we buried 'em, and whining so loud your hair stands on end, the bitch. I chase her away and beat her, but as soon as night falls she's at it again ..."

He fell silent for a moment, then went on: "I can see we're running out of flour and there's only one sheep's carcass left, and I had this wicked thought: my mate might leave and make off with the mutton. I start watching him. Sometimes he goes up the top of the barrow and studies all the roads. Well, he and I argue... He goes to bed, not suspecting anything... And that night I... I did it. And I'm left by myself, living with the Kalmyk woman as man and wife..."

"All clear," Galagan interrupts him. "So why, my good friend, did you start shooting at us?"

"I was scared, brother... I..."

"I see. Scared we'd eat your mutton? Well, my dear fellow, let's go. You're going to get the reward you deserve." Galagan gave him a kick to get him to his feet, led him off to one side and finished him off.

They waited for the blizzard to die down, then set out again.

They reached the main road.

The Temryuk men had the stronger horses, so they went ahead. Maxim, Galagan and Grigorov were left alone again, and their horse stopped more and more often.

“Come on, my brave steed, gee up.”

The brave steed shuffled a little further, then fell in a heap. They lifted her up. She took one more step, then another, and fell down again. A last shudder ran over her worn-out hide, like a ripple over still water.

“A beast dies, and man goes on living. Lord, thy miracles are beyond all understanding!” Galagan gave a bitter laugh and pulled his rifle and kitbag down from the cart.

Maxim took a hatchet and chopped up the shaft, hacked the cart into pieces and made a bonfire of the boards. They slept as best they could on the warm ash, and in the morning sucked on some snow and went on their way.

Along their route, on both sides of the road, lay filthy footcloths, broken wheels, smashed field kitchens and carts, abandoned saddles and crumpled human figures, all half-buried in sand.

Grigorov barely managed to put one foot in front of the other.

“We’ll soon be just like them...”

“Hold on, friend,” said Maxim, trying to lift his spirits. He himself could hardly walk, but refused to let it show. Nor would Galagan let anything get him down. To distract his companions from gloomy thoughts, he kept up an unending flow of funny stories. [...]

Word came of the death of Chernoyarov.

A group of soldiers sat in a circle on a bluff above the Volga, waiting for a ferry. They were finishing their last barrel of wine and recalling the Kuban villages and campaigns and battles past. Their daredevil leader Ivan Chernoyarov was fondly remembered too.

“Yes, those were the days!” sighed Maxim from the bottom of his heart. “A brave spirit is abroad no more... Brothers, let’s raise our glasses in memory of a true Cossack!”

A Gypsy Caprice

Yuri Nagibin

Translated from the Russian
by Clare Kitson

There's an area of northwest Moscow that the old residents still call Koptevo. It was once the location of the big village, Old Koptevo, which gave its name to Koptevo Street and Koptevo Boulevard. The outskirts of that village became Koptevo New Settlements Street back in the 19th century. I don't remember which period it was when the Gypsy tinsmiths took a fancy to it and settled there.

I was in Koptevo once, for some reason, and I remember swarthy complexions, aquiline noses, curly, disheveled hair, waistcoats over printed cotton shirts with sleeves rolled up, and burnt burlap aprons. And I remember the women's colorful skirts and the glossy black hair of their grubby children. Or perhaps I don't remember any of that and have simply peopled the Gypsy quarter with the Gypsy images we're used to. And added aprons as an attribute of their trade.

But I don't even need my faulty memory to remind me what Koptevo looked like. It was most probably like all Moscow suburbs at that time: little two-storey houses, brick-built and stuccoed, some with their upper storey of wood. Low, gloomy passages leading to litter-ridden yards with stinking scrapheaps. Dilapidated wooden fences, from behind which stunted urban trees dangled their sparsely-leaved branches. Cobbled streets and pock-marked pavements. But none of that is of great import to our story. I could, of course, spend the rest of my life finding the material for an accurate picture of that part of town in the early 50s, but I'd be sorry to lose those days – days of which I have precious few left.

Let's make do with the fact that Koptevo was not beautiful. There was nothing there to attract the eye, to cheer or touch the heart – except the Gypsies, who lent a picturesque, exotic element to this boring, scruffy, unkempt Moscow suburb.

Admittedly, today's new building style, with its tall, flat, indistinguishable apartment blocks, its straight streets, its few, exhausted little trees, its brand of existential emptiness, is even more boring, more hopeless. For the only refreshing touch of color has disappeared – the Gypsies are gone. Where did they go? Perhaps the whole band left together, tired of their settled, urban life. Or perhaps they dispersed into the countless ensembles that were spawned in the mid-50s, like puffball mushrooms after a sunny cloudburst. I don't know. But I do know – quite by chance – the fate of two residents here, the Gypsy girls I plan to tell you about.

It began with a grey Pobeda turning up on the streets of Koptevo. At that time there were already a good few of these cars in Moscow, but in Koptevo they were rarely seen at all. Old GAZ models, trophy jalopies, would appear, sometimes a brand-new Moskvich, but there was no call for Pobedas here, so this car naturally attracted the attention of passers-by – which made the driver, a broad-shouldered, balding, middle-aged blond with dark glasses, nervous. The weak April sun was not blinding, and the glasses were giving the driver problems – he was constantly taking them off, blinking a bit and putting them back on. He appeared to be looking for someone, circling the block and returning time after time to a two-storey house with a dormer extension, adjoining a public bathhouse.

Spring, wet from the thaw, was now over. The pavements were dry and little girls were playing hopscotch. Two hops on one foot, then a jump, landing with feet apart, then another hop and a jump, turning to face the other way. Several of them were also moving a flat piece of broken glass from square to square as they went. As in any activity, this had its masterly exponents, its middling and its hopeless players.

Out of the bathhouse came a fellow who'd steamed himself to the ruddiness of a ripe watermelon. Clearly smitten, he fixed his eyes on the Pobeda.

“Why are you staring?” mused the driver irritably. “You couldn’t afford it in any case, so there’s no point gaping. You should take yourself down to the alehouse – nothing better than a cold beer to cool you down after the steam room. Why are so many people having a steam bath anyway, in the middle of a working day? This fellow who’s cooked to a frazzle should be sweating at his workbench now, or wearing out the seat of his pants in the office, or toiling over a market stall. But he’s organized himself a bath-day.” And for the umpteenth time he started worrying about how many superfluous people were hanging around in Moscow: They say a lot got slaughtered in the war, but it doesn’t feel like that. We’ve got far more inhabitants than we need to get the work done. They gad about the streets, cool their heels in bars, loaf around shops, wear out the boulevard benches and beat themselves with birch switches on the sweating shelves. We ought to round them up, all these layabouts packing Moscow during the day – make a whole labor army out of them to fill the places where there’s a shortage.

He pondered this statesman-like idea of his without callousness, because he had a gentle nature, an inclination to be kind and protective to those around him. He loved them when they were a part of the People, engaged jointly in doing their country good. But that fellow staring goggle-eyed at the car had now fallen out of the ranks of the People and was unpleasant, even inimical to the driver – whose name was Peshkin, by the way. Ivan Sergeevich Peshkin.

Forestalling that idler’s clear intention to discuss the merits of this new model with him, Ivan Sergeevich put the car into gear, accelerated and drove off. In the mirror he saw the man’s expression, offended and disappointed.

If he didn’t find what he was looking for now, he’d do a rapid circuit and leave Koptevo for a couple of hours. Even now, a hostile curiosity could already be glimpsed in the eyes of passing Gypsies.

They seemed to be suspicious of outsiders penetrating their world. He had no fears – no one could do him any harm. But despite that, even slight complications or minor hiccups were unacceptable in his job.

Poorly, shabbily dressed children were playing hopscotch. Somehow he hadn’t paid attention to their clothes at first. The Gypsy girls stood out,

thanks to the bright rags they wore: little kerchiefs, shawls, multi-colored skirts beneath padded jackets. He scrutinized them closely, but did not sense the tremor in his heart that would tell him he'd guessed right.

When he'd completed the circuit and was nearing the bathhouse again, he already recognized, even from a distance, the ones he'd been looking for. Two Gypsy girls, about fourteen years old, their resemblance such that they had to be twins, were playing a skipping game. They were turning a long washing line and a flaxen-haired Russian girl, with cheeks like a chipmunk's food pouches, was skipping over it. She jumped – hands by her sides, with a fixed stare, skillfully changing feet: right, left, right, left... He'd been told all this, for the job he had to do: three friends – Gypsy twins and a Russian girl – and the location was right too: a house with a dormer extension, next door to a bathhouse. Only the game had turned out to be different.

Ivan Sergeevich stopped the car close to the curb, just a step away from the girls playing. He moved over to the passenger seat and lowered the window. The girls were so engrossed that they didn't notice his maneuvers. He understood: the Gypsies wanted the girl skipping to slip up and get caught in the rope. They sometimes turned the rope to a soporific, regular tempo, then suddenly whipped it over wildly a few times – the rope could pass under the feet of the skipping girl three times in a single jump – after which, as if tired, they changed to a gentler pace and the rope all but slipped from their now weaker grasp – and then exploded into action again. But the blonde girl with the fixed stare was on her guard and would predict correctly every time the rhythm changed. She bounced like a solid rubber ball, and just as indefatigably.

Ivan Sergeevich watched the playmates in silence, fearing he might scare them off if he spoke incautiously. And he'd done the right thing. In a few minutes, the Gypsy sisters stopped turning the rope and came up to the car. The fair-haired girl started trudging behind them, pouting, but suddenly changed her mind and went skipping off, thrashing the pavement with her rope, now doubled. That was all the better – he wouldn't have to get rid of her.

"What are you looking at?" one of the sisters asked, in guttural tones.

Ivan Sergeevich guessed she was the older. Twins aren't born in a pair, are they – one always pops out just before the other; seconds or minutes before, but sometimes it's hours. And the one who appears first – even by only a moment – is invariably the leader. Ivan Sergeevich understood that he must orient himself towards this girl.

"What's your name?"

"Aza, and hers is Zara," she replied coquettishly. She pressed her sharp little chin to her shoulder, wiggled her hips and tossed her head, while using a hand to push back black hair, braided with red ribbons. "Uh-huh, I'm Zara," the sister confirmed.

"Here you are, Aza and Zara." Ivan Sergeevich took two nutty chocolate sweets from the glove compartment and held them out to the sisters.

They took the sweets with a rapid, predatory motion, not simpering, the way Russian children do, and put them straight into their mouths.

"Why didn't you take the paper off?"

"S bigger like that," said Aza, making eyes at him.

"It's hard," observed Zara.

"What an old lady – have you lost all your teeth?" joked Ivan Sergeevich. "It's got nuts in it, of course it's hard."

"Gimme a rouble, mister" said Aza, when she'd finished her sweet.

"Oh, she's a cunning one! Tell my fortune, then I will."

"Cross my palm with silver, then I'll tell your fortune."

Ivan Sergeevich burst out laughing, using an amiable merriment to cover his unwillingness to part with a rouble.

"Do you want to come for a ride?"

"What do we get out of it?" asked Aza, rather coldly.

"Kiddies, kiddies, give me a minute, you'll have a toyshop and all that's in it," muttered Ivan Sergeevich, quoting the old rhyme, disconcerted by that sudden, coarse manifestation of adulthood. Perhaps they were a lot older than they looked? You couldn't be sure with these Gypsies. At first glance, with their bracelets and earrings... But no, they were little girls. They'd picked up their begging language and gestures from the grown-ups.

He opened the car door wide:

“Climb in!”

The little Gypsies got into the car, pushing and shoving. Now they were children again, naïve, absurd, and sweet in their comic rivalry.

Aza got in first.

“I want to sit by the window!” snivelled Zara.

“You silly nit! You’ve got your own window ‘n’ I’ve got mine.”

“Yours is better. You can see from up close – I’m too far away.”

“No arguments, girls!” And Ivan Sergeevich handed them a big, beautiful sweet each – a Mishka chocolate.

“It’s got gold on it,” said Aza when she’d unwrapped her sweet and, to her sister: “Gimme the wrapper!”

“Go to hell! I need it myself.”

“Why?”

“Same as you,” parried Zara, too slow to think up an answer.

“Give it to me, fleabag!”

Scuffling was heard and a sort of stifled squeak. Ivan Sergeevich adjusted the mirror, and saw that the girls were fighting over the wrapper. Aza won, of course, and started smoothing the crumpled paper flat over her angular knee. Zara shrank back into the corner and those dark eyes looked daggers at her sister. On their thin little faces, the sisters’ eyes looked as big as masquerade half-masks.

If they were going to carry on fighting and, on top of that, use their nails, that wouldn’t be good, and Ivan Sergeevich was worried – the Boss couldn’t stand quarrels. He wanted to rest, to relax from his boundless labors. He was working at full tilt: being responsible for all the crucial issues, he had to. What his strong constitution required was not enervating leisure time in the family circle – with a hammock at the dacha, lunches lasting all day, romps with grandchildren and meaningless domestic chatter – but hot, sweaty bouts of amorous wrestling. That was what cleared out the toxins of exhaustion, restored his freshness and maintained his capacity to bear that excessive load. Could the Gypsy girls satisfy the Boss? In general, this was not Ivan Sergeevich’s concern. The choice had, as usual, been made by the Boss himself – he didn’t trust other people’s taste. But how could the Boss have come across these swarthy girls? What was he doing in Koptevo?

But fate works in mysterious ways, and he had definitely been there, seen the girls and remembered them, and had provided accurate directions. But could something have gone wrong? What if Ivan Sergeevich had taken the wrong girls? The Boss had, after all, said they were playing hopscotch, but these girls had been skipping. He actually broke out in a sweat. Surely he hadn't fouled up? He'd never in his life had anything to do with kiddies, let alone of Gypsy stock. But no, that was nonsense – he'd no need to worry. There was no mistake. He'd seen those girls with the Boss's eyes and divined that mysterious allure, which had escaped Ivan Sergeevich's own sensibility. And, of course, it was thanks to that capacity for reincarnating himself as the Boss that the latter had drawn him close and made him his proxy in the most delicate, intimate matters. Ivan Sergeevich had never let him down and – the main thing – had never let himself down. From time to time he'd had to seek out one target or another on the basis of such scrappy, vague bits of information – a few glimpses through the thick lenses of his short-sighted Boss's spectacles, and, what's more, from a car racing down the center of the road – that it seemed physically impossible. But Ivan Sergeevich had found them. And the Boss didn't see this as miraculous – you could only work for him if you had this skill. Ivan Sergeevich understood that the Boss measured people against himself. But how could he match up? The Boss was top dog in all respects: in his position vis-à-vis Stalin, his influence on the Party, his capacity for work, his multi-faceted talents, his intelligence, his memory and his power over associates, his virility and tirelessness, his understanding of people and his success with women, even in the way he had with his hat – who else could wear it so elegantly, pulled low over his brow so that his face remained unseen while he could see everything, as if from a hidey-hole? You could crack walnuts on his bulging, hirsute chest, and his fingers, overgrown with a reddish down, could easily bend a copper five-kopeck coin.

Ivan Sergeevich did his utmost to match up to the Boss, well aware of how small and insignificant he was in comparison. But, with the towering role model he'd adopted, he had managed to achieve a great deal. When delivering girlfriends to the Boss, he never resorted to threats, still less to violence, only applying gentle pressure. That

rule came from the Boss himself, for he, unlike his other ladies'-man colleagues, scorned rough, forceful methods. Abakumov, for example, sometimes beat them up, even crippled them, not to mention the way he disposed of the evidence by dispatching his short-term bedfellows to Siberia. But not a single one of the Boss's lady-friends had suffered, and that wasn't all: they had almost all had rewards conferred on them. The only ones left without material tokens of his gratitude were those who saw their closeness to such a man as the Boss as their greatest reward and, moreover, they wanted for nothing. Women loved him for his tenderness and his passion, loved his husky, thrilling voice, his hard, shortsighted stare, his firm body and his indefatigability. But the Boss enjoyed bestowing gifts on those who'd brought him pleasure and solace. He presented them with one-room apartments and – should there be a baby – even two-room, gave them jewelry, and bestowed honorary titles, Stalin Prizes, medals and overseas business trips together with their husbands, promoting the latter up their career paths. To the husbands he was chivalrous and generous. How many new Academicians and corresponding Academicians had emerged, how many People's Artists of the USSR, deputies of the Supreme Soviet and members of the Central Committee!

There was, it's true, one sad case when a woman – a magnificent, wonderful woman, the best of all those who'd crossed the threshold of the comfortable house on Vspolny Lane – suffered greatly, but there were particular reasons for this, and the exception just goes to prove the rule.

Ivan Sergeevich, imbued with the powerful nervous energy emanating from the Boss, with his desires, interests and lascivious impulses, always found the uniquely correct tone, the mode of behavior that would work without a hitch. Sometimes complete openness was needed, almost setting conditions – not point-blank, of course, but in hints; sometimes a veil of mystery was required, revealing just a little, so as to eliminate any fear and increase curiosity; sometimes he had to inject some passion into his persuasion, a foreshadowing of the passion felt by the Boss; sometimes he'd adopt tones of kindly advice, but he had to admit that occasionally this could not be managed without a

sugar-coated lie – a delusion which, as Pushkin says, exalts us and is dearer to us than ten thousand truths. Ivan Sergeevich had had occasion to don both the artful mask of Leporello and the romantic cloak of Cyrano de Bergerac, who had wielded his pen, his words, to conquer on his friend's behalf the heart of the woman he loved. Ivan Sergeevich could be eloquent, like that musketeer with the big nose, but his main weapon was the capacity to instil a sense of boundless trust in the most varied types of women. And it was strange that, despite this, not a single one of them had manifested even a passing interest in love's emissary himself, who was possessed of an undoubted masculine allure. Perhaps they sensed that this was no more than a trial run, and that the real stallion was in the imperial stables, chomping at the bit. In this particular case there'd been one difficulty: he'd had to make the right choice among the Koptevo natives – everything else would take care of itself. All the same, he had to be very careful not to arouse the Gypsies' suspicion. And for that he had to remain in his role of the nice, guileless uncle figure, such a good magician with his bag stuffed full of chocolate. The request for a rouble had disconcerted him rather – it was too pragmatic for simple-hearted sweet-eaters. But perhaps the rouble was some kind of Gypsy symbol? Payment for exclusive rights? It would have been worth giving them that wretched rouble, rather than gagging them with Mishkas. Never mind – all that can be put right...

Now they were behaving like ordinary children who rarely have the luck to be taken for a car ride: they stared out of the windows, sometimes on their own side, sometimes the other, exchanged comments, giggled, shrieked, laughed and mimicked people. Sometimes arguments would flare up in an instant, and they'd hiss like venomous snakes and grab each other's braids. After that, Zara would sulk for a little while, even moan, but the victorious Aza's verdict was always a vindictive "Serves you right!" Then harmony and peace would reign once more.

As they neared the center of town, Ivan Sergeevich started giving explanations, like a real tour guide. There, in front of us, that's the Kremlin. Do you know about that? Course we do – seen it on the cigarette packs. And this is the University. Students study here. No response. The Bolshoi and Maly Theatres and the Metropol Hotel were

received with equal indifference, but TsUM, the old Muir & Mirrielees department store, livened them up a bit – the girls had heard of it.

Ivan Sergeevich did some thinking. It was a bit early to take them to their destination: they weren't ready yet – they were bubbling away like hot soup, keyed up by life on the street. He hadn't managed to switch them over to a calm, concentrated interest in the Moscow tourist attractions. They were excited by the passers-by, the cars, the trolleybuses, the street vendors (they'd both already had a choc-ice on a stick bought for them), balloon-sellers (and they'd each received a balloon and even managed to swap them twice, after which Aza let hers fly out of the car window and Zara accidentally burst hers), shop windows with mannequins, and people queuing. And various minor incidents: a policeman blew his whistle at an offender; someone took off after someone else; a drunk bumped into a lamp-post; a cat tried to hook a pigeon; a trolleybus's current collector broke loose of the overhead wire, sending down a blinding lightning bolt; a tiny, noseless dog, squeezing close to its mistress's legs, barked fiercely at an enormous and impassive mastiff. Such chaos flashing before their eyes was affording them unmitigated excitement. He'd have to give them something more substantial to satisfy them, to get them into a calmer state of mind.

He turned onto the Boulevard Ring and drove slowly in the direction of Tsvetnoy Boulevard.

"Well, my dears, what else would you girls like to see?"

They said nothing, just looked at him, their enormous, dark eyes perplexed. Then Aza blurted out:

"Horses!"

"Uh-huh," confirmed Zara. "Horsies."

"What horsies?" asked Ivan Sergeevich, taken aback.

"Good ones. Black. Peppy," said Aza.

And Zara suddenly broke free of her sister's meshes.

"And they've got to have a little star on their forehead!"

Ivan Sergeevich recalled that Gypsies were inveterate horse-lovers. But the girls had grown up among settled artisans who'd never in their lives travelled with their band, never traded horses at the fair. So why this hankering after horses? Was it in their blood? And then he

remembered one tragicomic story that had caused quite a stir in Moscow. Yanikovsky, an actor at the Romen Gypsy Theatre and brother of the theater's leading actress – a man of quiet disposition, good reputation, and no spring chicken – stole some horses from the racecourse. And he carried out that outrageous, daring operation, doomed a priori to fail, with extraordinary cunning and skill, as if he'd been a life-long horse-thief. Having lured a herd away, he did not try to conceal it, still less sell it – he simply galloped off at the head of his magnificent drove, heading nowhere in particular and belting out songs. When arrested, he did not resist, and in court he listened to his sentence with a dreamy smile: ten years' incarceration. They'd overdone it, of course. They'd ruined the fellow's life for a childish prank. Well never mind that – where can we get our hands on some horses? He thought there might be a horse pavilion at the farming exhibition.

“Off we go to the horses,” said Ivan Sergeevich, setting off in that direction.

But then there was a hitch. The exhibition displays were not fully set up, and Gospolitizdat, the Central Committee's publishing house, had a marquee up in the “Horse” pavilion – housing an exhibition of political literature.

That was just what his Gypsy girls needed! And it was the same everywhere: either not open yet or already closed, or they were closed for stocktaking or repairs, for a cleaning day or a move. Even the most modest wish proved impossible to fulfil. But there was one place where unforeseen snarl-ups were out of the question, for what counted there was hard cash – the race-course. True there was no racing at this time of year, but training continued and you could see horses, not only in the stables but also on the harness-racing track. He bought both the girls a sticky, rooster-shaped lollipop, and assured them that there would be horses.

After a short visit to the “special department” all the doors and gates of the race-course were opened wide to Ivan Sergeevich and his “nieces from Moldavia”. They stepped into the windy, bitterly cold expanse of the race-course. Wherever you looked, there were horses – black, bay, cream, dappled grey, sorrel; spirited and calm; amiable and

ill-natured; proud and indifferent; disciplined and cranky – measuring out the track with its shallow, iridescent puddles, in long strides. The girls got terribly excited, exchanging short, angry Gypsy words, rolling their eyes and pinching each other, bracelets jingling. Aza took one of her braids in her mouth and started gnawing at it.

An old harness driver called Ratomsky drove up on his American-style sulky, with bicycle wheels. Ivan Sergeevich had known him since before the war, when he'd had to take care of a case relating to the tote. The driver doffed his cap – blue with a broad, black peak – and greeted them with a deep, old-time bow. Ratomsky's horse was smallish for a Russian trotter but appeared to have the right build for it. The girls started flitting round the horse, enveloping it in a bird-like keening and a staccato series of gestures. Then they started applying the palms of their small hands to its eyes and nostrils.

"Not a bad little horse!" said Ivan Sergeevich, in the tone of a connoisseur.

Ratomsky gestured dismissively:

"He's a cripple. Shoulder muscles no good. The slightest effort and he falls. We'll write him off."

"Fancy that! But he looks good."

"I'm unlucky here," said the old driver sadly. "There's not a horse in the section that's any good. I've stopped even thinking about prizes."

"Bad horse!" said Aza suddenly, and spat on the ground.

"Bad horse!" confirmed Zara, grimacing in disgust.

The girls had not heard their conversation. What could they have understood, anyway, at that distance from the driver's voice, now muffled by the wind? Why ever were they condemning the horse? Ivan Sergeevich began to feel uncomfortable – he didn't like things he couldn't fathom.

"Seen enough?" he asked, rather sullenly. "Anything else you'd like?"

After a moment's silence they looked at each other and said, with one voice:

"Grub!"

For some reason, that cheered him up.

“Right! Let’s get some grub.”

The mansion that was familiar to all Muscovites and at the same time seemingly non-existent – people never talked about it, never looked in its direction, never walked past it – rose above a solid wall, with only its roof and stove pipes visible. The comfortable, prosperous house was lost among the black, naked branches of old lime trees. A guard looked out from his booth, recognized the car and immediately retreated. Ivan Sergeevich hooted, the gate opened a little, just enough for the Pobeda to pass, and immediately closed. Out of the corner of his eye he watched his passengers. All this secrecy had made no impression. The girls were so far removed from the Moscow way of life that they took everything as right and proper: the accepted way in this foreign, unknown and enticing world.

Ivan Sergeevich proposed that the sisters should take a bath before eating, and change into clean clothes: little printed cotton robes and soft, heel-less slippers were ready for them. They unwillingly agreed, although, judging by their hands, necks and braids, they did not have a close acquaintance with water. The marble bath, recessed into the floor, was big enough to accommodate not just two skinny teenagers but a whole Gypsy family as well. The girls undressed quickly, not at all shy of Ivan Sergeevich, lowered themselves cautiously into the water, and started splashing about.

Ivan Sergeevich let them play around for a bit, and then got down to work. He gave their hair a good lathering with shampoo and gave their skinny, swarthy little bodies a thorough wash with a hard loofah. They didn’t object, only giving occasional, plaintive moans. The girls were a strange and touching mixture of child and adult, with thin little arms, protruding ribs and sharp, pointed shoulder-blades. But in their flexible spines and narrow hips was womanly grace.

The girls ate hungrily and messily, arguing tirelessly over their food, both grabbing one and the same piece, and almost coming to blows over a bottle of lemonade. Second to her sister in initiative and acumen, Zara tried not to yield to her in anything relating to the material side of life. Which was why she argued about her place in the car, latched on to a sweet wrapper she had no need of, and started squabbles at table.

This irritated Ivan Sergeevich, but he hoped a square meal would do something to calm the passions. And so it proved. Soon he took the girls, who had now eaten their fill and become rather drowsy, to the bedroom. In it, a quadruple bed was made up. He put them to bed and told them not to fool around. The master of the house would be here soon, and he was nice, but strict. They'd have to do whatever he told them and then they'd receive splendid presents.

"Will he give us a rouble?" asked Aza.

"He'd better not come without the rouble," said Zara, taking up the refrain.

To hell with that rouble! The Boss loved making gifts, but couldn't stand scroungers. Ivan Sergeevich took out of his pocket an old-maidish kind of purse and took from it two one-rouble notes.

"Look, I'm going to put a rouble for you and one for Zara into your pocket. And I don't want to hear any more about it or I'll get cross."

He left the room feeling they'd understood him – but was it really possible to trust these little savages? Their duality lay not only in their bodies. He wanted to think they'd assimilated his order with the adult part of their minds. But even so, a vague disquiet stayed with him. When he'd done the washing up and put the remains of the food away in the refrigerator, he went to the door between the dining room and bedroom and had a look through a secret spyhole. The Boss himself didn't know about the spyhole – Ivan Sergeevich had made the opening at his own risk. You never knew if a "people's avenger"¹⁴ might turn up among the Boss's partners and smother the inamorato when he'd trustingly dozed off with his head by her shoulder. Or if he might suddenly be taken ill – he was, after all, no youngster. And there was another advantage: from time to time, when he got bored, Ivan Sergeevich would open the spyhole a little and observe the love play of the Boss, who was highly inventive in this area, and sometimes share in another man's pleasure. But adolescents did not excite him – he just wanted to be sure they weren't up to any mischief. He put his eye to the spyhole.

¹⁴ Name by which Laisat Baisarova, an Ingush woman killer, was known.

Leaning on the bedhead, the sisters were scrutinizing *Stalin and Beria on a Visit to Keke* ¹⁵, an enormous painting by Illarion Tupadze ¹⁶, which hung opposite them. The artist, elderly, eminent and brainless as they come, had presented this picture to Stalin. Beria, in an access of trust – these would come on him sometimes after a particularly well-spent night – had told Ivan Sergeevich that Keke, a real babe in her youth, had been well known in the town as a whore, which her ambitious son could never forgive her. If the poor woman had known she was to become mother to the leader of peoples, she'd have worn a chastity belt. There was as much truth in this canvas by the founding father of Georgian servility in art as there'd been in the yarns spun by People's Con Artist Shervashidze ¹⁷. When Stalin received the unasked-for gift, he flew into a rage and ordered Beria to remove that daub immediately. The latter was only too happy to take the picture, and hung it over his bed, allowing the sinful Keke and virtuous Soso ¹⁸ to observe the fleshly, bacchanalian revels. This clearly aroused him. Ivan Sergeevich understood that behind the dog-like devotion to his leader, which Beria never tired of demonstrating, lurked fear and hatred. But this was none of his business.

The spyhole afforded Ivan Sergeevich an astonishing revelation: the little Gypsies had failed to recognize not only Beria but Stalin as well. He wouldn't have believed there was anyone in Moscow who didn't know what Stalin looked like. He gazed out from every shop window, frequently in place of any goods, from every newspaper page and, on important holidays, even from the sky. But he remained unknown to the Gypsy children. So whatever did they see in the clouds? A kite with human features or a Gypsy god? The sisters' conversation turned out to be no less interesting.

"Which one d'you want to sleep with?" asked Aza.

¹⁵ Stalin's mother, Ekaterine Giorgis asuli Jughashvili.

¹⁶ Seemingly fictional, but possibly based on Dmitri Nalbandian.

¹⁷ Not totally clear which of the Shervashidzes this is. A likely candidate is Soviet dramatist Amiran Dzhemilovich Shervashidze.

¹⁸ Stalin's pet name as a child.

“What about you?”

“No, you say which one you want and I’ll have the other one.”

“OK, that one!” And Zara poked her finger at Iosif Vissarionovich.

“That’s lucky!” exclaimed Aza, feigning joy. “And I’ll have that one. What a handsome man!” she crooned, stretching eagerly towards the pink-faced, sweetly smiling Beria, whom the housewifely Keke was plying with quince jam.

“No, I want that one!” cried Zara, and started hissing like a snake.

“All right. You take him,” conceded Aza, acquiescent. “I’ll have the one with the moustache.”

The Gypsy heart was in thrall to the nefarious black moustache, for Zara too felt an intense passion for that one. But there’s no point fighting, girls – you can forget about the black moustache. It’s another suitor who draws near...

Life is a very crude dramatist, adoring unnatural conjunctions: the bedroom door opened and in came Beria. In a red satin robe with tassels, a red fez, and his bare feet in slippers with turned-up toes. He probably thought this was how a seductive Gypsy gallant should look.

Ivan Sergeevich closed the spyhole. He had to do a bit of work on the light supper he would serve them “in the bedding”, which was how Beria – whose Russian language skills were shaky ¹⁹ – described it.

Having dealt with the domestic matters quite quickly, Ivan Sergeevich went to see how things stood on the lovemaking front. The bed was in a state of total mayhem, and the small sector of which the spyhole offered a view did not allow Ivan Sergeevich to piece together the overall scene. He took as his reference point the red fez, and discovered it sitting on Aza’s head, while Aza herself was sitting astride Beria. Of the latter, only his fat, hairy stomach was visible, and his large nose with its open pores, poking out from among the pillows. It took a long time to locate Zara, until, at both sides of the Boss’s head – which could be identified by the nose – two spindly legs emerged, like tentacles, so that he resembled a crab. The team was all present and correct and they were all busy. Ivan Sergeevich could relax.

¹⁹ His native tongue was Georgian.

He dozed in the armchair until awakened by the bell. Jumping up, invigorated, he donned a white, starched apron, smoothed his hair and wheeled into the bedroom a glass-domed serving trolley, set with all manner of foodstuffs and juices.

His appearance elicited an outburst of merriment. The girls pointed at him and just dissolved into laughter. Ivan Sergeevich knew he cut a comic figure in his white, lace-trimmed apron and military breeches tucked into box-calf boots. The Boss had even wanted him to wear special headgear, to prevent any hair falling into the food. He didn't insist on Ivan Sergeevich looking quite like that – like a waiter – but he was demanding with regard to the outward appearance of the people serving him. Even a man's external appearance must be appropriate to his occupation. He offered a choice: wide harem trousers, of the kind on which drowsy Georgians were inclined to spill the froth of red wines, a silk cummerbund and waistcoat, a white, Indian dress suit, or the kind of trousers a diplomat might wear, with a black jacket as worn by *mâitres d'hôtel* in expensive restaurants. "I'm a military officer," Ivan Sergeevich had said, firmly and sadly, "but I'm already wearing a suit jacket. Leave me some military uniform, if only on my lower half. And why do I need to put a cap on my bald pate? But I'll wear an apron. There's no shame in that." Ivan Sergeevich had spent almost the whole war at the front, in a retreat-blocking detachment, shooting down our own troops at point-blank range when they advanced in the wrong direction. These detachments had emerged after Stalin's celebrated, though also secret, order saying that the Soviet people were cursing the Red Army. It was in summer 1943, when the Germans, having broken through our defences, were bearing down on the Volga and the Caucasus. Full of holy hatred for the Red Army soldiers who had turned tail and fled from the enemy, Ivan Sergeevich had cut them down ruthlessly. Three war decorations celebrated his military efforts. He finished the war with the rank of captain, but now, serving Beria, had risen to that of colonel. The humble dignity of the officer standing helpless before him had aroused respect in the Marshal of State Security, and he agreed. And in fact the equivocal appearance of Ivan Sergeevich raised no more than a fleeting smile from the Boss's usual clients, but these two were ignorant little girls – what can you do?

"Tea or coffee?" he asked.

"Coffee for me, answered Beria, wiping his sweaty face with the quilt cover.

"Me too!" cried Aza.

"And me!" Zara, petulant, fell into line.

"No coffee for small girls," said Beria, like a strict father. "Bad for their little hearts. Give them some tea, not too strong, not too weak."

Ivan Sergeevich carried out the order, then went away till the end of supper, reassured as to the outcome of the operation: the Boss was in a good mood. That meant the little Gypsies had satisfied him.

Then he took the trolley out – the team, having worked so hard, had polished off all the food, down to the last crumb. Leaving a drink on the bedside table, he switched on some quiet music and went off till morning.

No matter how he'd spent the night, Beria always got up at eight o'clock exactly. After a shower and a light breakfast he would go to his study, make some phone calls, then leave for work.

As per usual, at a quarter to nine Ivan Sergeevich went to the study. He took with him the talking dolls in boxes that he'd been instructed to get, to show the Boss.

"What's that?" asked Beria, irritated, brows knit. He already had his overcoat on and felt hat pulled low. "Oh, those two..." And suddenly, almost spitting in Ivan Sergeevich's face: "Into the disinfection station!"

Ivan Sergeevich was taken aback. He was expecting anything but that. Everything had gone so well – the Boss had seemed cheerful and satisfied the previous evening. Whatever could have happened overnight? What had they done?

At the door, Beria looked round, spectacle lenses flashing.

"They're used goods!" he snapped, his voice gruff, throaty – and slammed the door after him.

Good heavens! But he already knew yesterday, didn't he, what sort of girls he'd be consorting with, and it hadn't worried him at all. What were they guilty of? Love among the Gypsies starts early – it's the last place you'd look for virgins. He should have gone to the kindergarten.

The house already had this "disinfection station", as Beria called it, before Ivan Sergeevich's arrival but, with the exception of one case alone,

it had had different uses, unrelated to Marshal Beria's leisure activities. That particular case concerned the beauty Ariadne Petrovna, widow of Marshal Bekas. Back in the Tsaritsyn ²⁰ days, a gallant, quick-witted artilleryman had caught Stalin's eye and was gradually promoted up the ranks to that of marshal. Stalin entrusted all the Red Army artillery to him. He'd had no military education, but Stalin supposed that, close to such great military commanders as Budenny and Voroshilov, the ex-artilleryman would master the heights of military scholarship. Bekas did not master them, and caused the shameful collapse of two crucial operations during the Second World War. He was demoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel and died of grief. And then Beria remembered his beautiful widow.

In his time working for Beria, Ivan Sergeevich had seen plenty of beautiful women, but they all looked like housemaids next to Ariadne Petrovna. She had the bearing of a Tsarina. She moved smoothly, fluidly, as if underwater. When she lowered her eyelids slightly, her pistachio-colored eyes became lilac. And any man on whom the gaze of those ever-changing eyes fell had the urge to perform a heroic deed there and then. She was an aristocrat, daughter of the Finnish Governor-General. Clearly this, along with the fact that her first husband was shot as an enemy of the people, had obliged her to take shelter under the wing of that idiot Bekas.

Ivan Sergeevich was ordered to deliver the ex-marshal's widow to the house on Vspolny Lane. She seemed neither surprised nor perturbed – as if she'd been expecting this summons. She only asked – her dark lips, unacquainted with lipstick, slowly extending into a smile – “With my things?” He was embarrassed: “No, no – what things... what for?” “Can I say goodbye to my daughter?” “Why? You won't be away long.” It turned out to be forever.

For the first and last time Beria invited Stalin. Together they had their way with Ariadne Petrovna all night, and in the morning, as they said their farewells in the study – “to be continued?” asked Beria. “Get rid of her!” snapped Stalin. Ivan Sergeevich was putting the bathroom

²⁰ Previous name of Stalingrad/Volgograd.

in order and, white with terror, heard the whole conversation. "What harm's she doing anyone?" "It doesn't look good for old Bolsheviks to amuse themselves with the wife of an enemy of the people." "Surely Bekas wasn't an enemy of the people? He was just an old fool." "And you're a young fool. I'm talking about the first husband – the one who was executed. And her father was a governor-general. Perhaps that doesn't matter to you? That's your business. But for the leader of peoples it's not a good idea." "I still don't understand..." "Well I'm telling you. With a person, there's a problem. Without – no problem." Stalin spoke calmly, slowly, as if inserting punctuation marks, but Ivan Sergeevich sensed a threat in his voice. Beria also sensed it. He saw Stalin to the door, then called in Ivan Sergeevich, who had managed to escape from the bathroom, and told him to: "Give all the men a turn with her, then off to the disinfection station!" In his attempt to save Ariadne Petrovna, Beria had shown weakness and now he wanted to rehabilitate himself in the pitiless eyes of the leader. Stalin would get to know everything – of this there was no doubt.

Ivan Sergeevich didn't like to recall this, but he had no memories that were sweeter or had affected him more deeply. He had gone second, after Nikolasha, the stove man. The woman lay corpse-like, but inside she was charged with electricity. Ivan Sergeevich thought he was going to die or let out a terrible roar, or else burst into tears. They had to pull him off her – he was barely conscious. But as for Ariadne Petrovna, when it was all over she proved to be in full possession of her faculties. She was ordered to stand up, and she stood up. Wet from others' labors, but retaining a strange dignity. It was as if nothing that had happened had any bearing on her. And in a sense that was indeed the case. "Where to now?" she asked, her voice steady. But she knew everything...

And now it was to be the "disinfection station" again. Last time, you could understand it: it was what Stalin wanted. But why now? What danger could these pathetic little girls – from an obscure little Gypsy corner, what's more, with no connections to the rest of the town – pose the Boss? Ivan Sergeevich could not, at that stage, know that here, too, Stalin had played a role. Things would subsequently become a little clearer.

Beria had been due to attend the presentation of a report to Stalin, together with Academician Kurchatov. The leader wanted to know how things stood with regard to the atom bomb. But Beria had phoned, seeking confirmation that he was expected. "The Academician is already here," Stalin had said, in that ponderous voice that came on him when playing a dirty trick. "You're not needed. We're no dullards ourselves." And he'd hung up. Not needed! What the devil... Who was in charge of the bomb and all the atomic business? No dullards, indeed! That great specialist had had trouble getting through *Physics for Entertainment* ²¹. What did he want? To push Beria aside and appropriate all the success for himself. His usual style. He'd taken the Civil War away from Trotsky, the Second World War away from Zhukov, and now he was going to take the bomb away from Beria. Or might Kurchatov be up to something? He'd made the wrong choice there, going for that beardy rather than Alikhanov. The latter was selfless, abstracted, absentminded and a true scholar, the former a trickster and careerist with sharp elbows... Wasn't there something about a heart condition? With a person, there's a problem. Without – no problem. He'd deal with Kurchatov. Stalin would be harder. You've thought something up, *genatsvale* ²² – I'll be on my guard. He'd chosen the wrong time for that caper with the Gypsy girls. Stalin couldn't stand that sort of thing, probably because of his daughter. So squeamish – who'd have thought it. Other people have daughters too, better, prettier than his red-headed, freckled simpleton. Never mind – that was all cheap sentiment. Without the Gypsies, there'd be no problem. What good were those deflowered little girls to anyone...?

Ivan Sergeevich sat in the store-room for a good while, mulling over the Boss's instructions, and then went on with his life. He went to fetch the girls' clothes, which had been laundered and ironed, took the dolls, blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked and flaxen-haired, from their boxes and

²¹ Books of 1913 and 1916 by Yakov Perelman, who was renowned for his popularizing of science.

²² A Georgian word indicating the closest possible affection for a friend or family member.

listened for a moment to their rasping “Mama!” – and went on to the bedroom.

At the door he stopped, hearing reedy, plaintive tones. He listened attentively. The girls were singing, their thin voices slightly hoarse. They sang in their Gypsy tongue. Several words were repeated, and he could clearly distinguish them, while not knowing their meaning.

Bidoma... bidoma... ai, bidoma-a-a...

Chaventa... chaventa... romale... oi-oi-oi...

Strange that children could sing with such heart-rending melancholy. They didn’t feel it, of course, they were just copying the adults.

Bidoma... bidoma...

Chavale... oi-oi-oi...

... sang two tremulous voices.

Ivan Sergeevich pushed the door open with his foot and went in, holding the dolls in outstretched hands.

The girls stopped singing, their dark eyes widening in fright. But seeing the dolls they started laughing, squealing, hurriedly fixing each of their little pigtails, and jumped out of bed to grab the presents from Ivan Sergeevich’s hands.

“Now you’ll go for a shower,” he said, “then get dressed, and I’ll take you home.”

The girls, busy with the dolls, weren’t listening. Aza was pretending to feed hers, pressing its mouth to her small breast, under her robe. As for Zara, she was taking pleasure in the wheezy “Mama!” and replying “What’s the matter? Don’t cry – Mama’s here.”

“Off we go!” said Ivan Sergeevich.

They complied mechanically, deaf and blind to everything but their nicely turned-out little “daughters”. The mean idea flashed through Ivan Sergeevich’s mind that he should take the dolls away from them – why waste the magnificent toys he’d scoured all Moscow for? But then again, they wouldn’t be needed any time soon – perhaps not ever. And if he did take them, the girls might smell a rat.

They went down a long corridor, the girls lulling their “daughters” to sleep, Ivan Sergeevich carefully carrying the bundles of unnecessary clothes. How long that corridor was – it seemed endless.

But here was Nikolasha's equipment store and Nikolasha himself, with his child-like smile, his fat, kind-hearted face.

"Why so late?" he asked. "I haven't had breakfast yet."

"We'll have breakfast together," said Ivan Sergeevich, barely moving his lips.

Why did the girls suddenly take fright? There was nothing sinister, nothing suspicious. Yesterday they'd gone into the bathroom without a moment's hesitation. What were they imagining here? They were savages, of course, little animals, with the unerring instinct of animals. And they'd got wind of something through the thick walls, some secret whisper had penetrated their hearts. They refused to move, wouldn't be budged. Then they tried to run away, not letting go of the dolls. Nikolasha had to gather them up and use force to get them into the gas chamber.

Afterwards, over breakfast, Nikolasha assured Ivan Sergeevich that the victims don't suffer, that the Zyklon gas takes effect almost instantly. That could be true, but has anyone put it to the test ...?

The Boss wasn't at all angry with Ivan Sergeevich. He called during the day with an order to bring him, that evening, the wife of Professor Korobchinsky, the well-known throat specialist. She herself was an erudite lady, who taught music history at the Conservatory. At six o'clock that evening, the grey Pobeda slowly turned off Herzen Street into the Conservatory forecourt and stopped within easy reach of the staff entrance.

Man is Book to Man

Vladimir Rabinovich

Translated from the Russian
by Yura Dashevsky

My first cell was “No. 185.” It was in the new wing of the prison, and it had two beds. My cellmate was a triple-dyed old thief, Vovan “Vostry” – Vovan “The Sharp One.”

On the first day, as I was settling in, Vovan inquired, “Play any games?”

“Yes, I do. I play chess.”

“So let’s play us some chess,” said Vovan, with palpable disappointment.

He absolutely couldn’t play chess, and was losing one game after another, without even getting the least bit upset.

“Vovan,” I said, bored by this supremely meaningless waste of time, “you can’t play goddamn chess for the life of you.”

“The fuck else I’m supposed to do in here?” he replied. “I’m biding time till they bring over the newspaper.”

Indeed, soon the flap in the cell door opened, and the daily *Pravda* has arrived.

“Yo, boss!” Vovan roared into the opening. “Now, give us a *normal* newspaper!”

“And which one would that be?” replied the guard.

“Give us *The Evening Minsk*.”

“Makes no difference what you wipe your ass with.”

“My ass says, ‘Thank you, boss,’ for caring so deeply about it!”

Obviously insulted, the guard slammed the flap shut in Vovan's face."

"All right. Let's see that *Pravda*, then," said Vovan.

He shuffled back to his bed, perched on it, comfortably cross-legged, and started in on *Pravda's* front page, his lips moving silently.

At this point I was already drowning in a sea of boredom, and so, for some entertainment – just a bit would do, anything – I said to Vovan, teasingly, "Hey, looks like you're reading the masthead, too."

Vovan put the paper down, looked at me intently, and said, "Do you know prisoner's main skill?"

"No, I don't. Pray tell."

"It's killing time. Seen a dog sleeping when he's got nothing to do, when his gut is full, when he's warm? Dogs don't suffer time. *You* can't do that. Know why? Because you are, I'm sorry to say, a Jew. I noticed this about your kind long ago – your kind suffer in jail more than others. Me? I can make like that dog."

He looked at *Pravda* again, got out a cigarette, lit up, and continued: "I'll tell you more. I can remember every thing I've read. I can tell you by heart Khrushchev's speech to the XXII Communist Party Congress. That was my first stint in the clink. Now – you are an "anti-Soviet element," so how come you don't speak English?"

"Because I studied German in school."

"Who the fuck uses German these days? The Germans lost! They're all going to speak English soon. If you want, I can write the English-Russian dictionary into your little notebook, up to the letter 'E.' I read it for two months while in treatment at Glubokoye. Then they got me to Volodarka, after my case got picked up again. My partner opened his big mouth, so they found some new stuff on me. But let me tell you, book-wise, Volodarka is the worst. The librarian there brings you a list of thirty books, you get to pick two per cell, each inmate gets one. That's why I hate small cells. A big cell can take sixty books. I can read any book at all. There are some I don't understand, but it don't matter. Worse comes to worst, I'm not even afraid of the solitary. The whole prison library is already in my head. I know more than any academician. There aren't any people like me no more."

I could only shrug at that tirade.

Vovan took it as an insult, and went on heatedly: "Well, you think you're pretty smart – wanna bet I've read more books than you?"

"I have no doubt about that. But there's no need to read *all* the books."

"Bullshit," Vovan said, very irritated. "You're playing with words. What you haven't read does not exist. 'Man is book to man' – you know who said that?"

"I don't."

"I did. Let me ask you – who's your favorite writer?"

"Solzhenitsyn," I said.

"What have you read of him?"

"*One Day In the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. A long time ago, though."

"Wouldn't you want to read it again *now*, when you're in the clink yourself?"

"I would."

"*Novy mir*, 1962, the November issue."

"Yes, of course I would."

"It's gonna cost you a pack of *filtered* cigarettes."

Vovan stretched out on his back, stayed silent for a minute, and then began, as if he were reading it off the ceiling: "At five o'clock that morning reveille was sounded, as usual, by the blows of a hammer on a length of a rail hanging up near the staff quarters. The intermittent sounds barely penetrated the windowpanes on which the frost lay two fingers thick, and they ended almost as soon as they'd begun. It was cold outside, and the camp guard was reluctant to go on beating out the reveille for long."²³

²³ Translated from the Russian by Ralph Parker, 1963.

Essays



Peasant Letters as Background to Russian Literature

Alexander Nakhimovsky

Letters As Historical Documents

Letters to immediate family are often historical documents of striking clarity and detail. If they come from barely literate old people living in a traditional society they often convey the common sensibilities of the generation of their childhood. A Russian peasant born in 1880 and writing a letter in 1939 would have never read Tolstoy but would be likely to express the kind of sensibilities and attitudes that Tolstoy observed and presented in his writing. A letter in the future becomes evidence for a creative process in the past.

After a brief perspective on peasant letter writing, this paper presents three letters from older people written in 1939. The scope is deliberately narrow: we compare attitudes to aging and death in the letters and in two short stories, Tolstoy's "Master and man" and Chekhov's "Peasants." No attempt is made to broaden the range of topics, or bring in additional data from abundant autobiographical narratives recorded after 1990. All such attempts are relegated to further work. The goal of this paper is to introduce the concept and to illustrate it on a few concise examples.

Peasant Letters Before 1939 and the Current Corpus

Very few personal letters by peasants survived from the years 1917-1939. The number may, in fact, be just one – a 1932 letter

from parents to their son in the city included in Danilov 1999, vol.1, p. 663. The odds for a letter to survive are illustrated by a striking historical episode that occurred in 1928-1932, the onset of collectivization and “dekulakization” (raskulachivanie). The most common initial response from the peasants was stunned disbelief. Official information was sketchy and did not really connect to the events unfolding on the ground. Rumors were swirling. It was natural to appeal for clarity to those who were out of the village in the bigger world, e.g., young men from the village serving in the army. According to 1926 statistics, more than 75% of army soldiers were of peasant origin. (Tarkhova 2006, pp. 82-85). When collectivization broke out they started receiving letters from home asking for information and advice. Unsurprisingly, this was immediately registered as a dangerous development. Already in January 1928 there was a high-level meeting of chief political officers of all military districts. One of their directives to the subordinate hierarchy of political officers down to the company level was to “carefully study all the moods of Red Army soldiers related to the carrying out of the party policy in the village, especially the latest measures [i.e., collectivization – AN], and describe those moods in your regular informational reports.” (Tarkhova 2010, p. 95)

There are no reliable estimates of the number of letters from the village to the army, but the metaphor “flood of letters” (поток писем) was common. In one piece of anecdotal evidence, the garrison of Novocherkassk (a city in North Caucasus) consisting of 5,000 men received thousands of letters *per day* in early 1928. (Tarkhova p.98, quoting a secret summary report (сводка) of Feb. 14, 1928, Tarkhova p.309) Multiplying by days and garrisons, the order of magnitude has to be in the hundreds of thousands of letters. In a remarkable testimony to the chaos of peasant life and the efficiency of the security apparatus, not a single one of those letters has survived.

Against this background of total loss, the letters of 1939 stand out as a minor historical miracle that happened at the intersection of a grotesque war and a remarkable biography. The year 1939 saw both the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact that divided Europe into spheres

of influence, and the start of WWII, whose initial purpose was to implement that division. Germans invaded Poland on September 1 and the Soviets moved in two weeks later. Continuing with the plan, Soviets moved troops into the Baltic republics “for their protection” as a prelude to annexation in 1940. Finland was next. Soviets suggested territorial concessions and military bases but the Finns declined. After a staged provocation, the Soviets attacked on November 30. The war lasted 105 days; Soviet losses were about 150,000 troops, more than those suffered by the entire Union Army in the entire four years of the American Civil War.

The winter of 1939 was very cold, and the corpses were well preserved, together with all the letters from home that were on them. Finns carefully collected all the documents, and made many of them available to foreign correspondents covering the war. Among them was a Russian émigré, Vladimir Mikhailovich Zenzinov. While in Finland, waiting for a visa to the US, he collected or copied hundreds of letters and wrote a book based on them. The book includes the complete texts of 276 pieces of mail numbered 1 through 277, with number 149 inexplicably missing. Some of them contain more than one letter from family members, or one letter with small additional notes. Altogether, there are over 300 letter writers, about half of them from peasants or “recent peasants” who had recently migrated away from the village. In the rest of the paper this body of data is referred to as “the Corpus.”

Once in New York, after several unsuccessful attempts to find a publisher (nobody wanted to publish unflattering things about the Soviet Union in 1942-44) Zenzinov published the book on his own modest means, with a copyright page declaring: “Copying and translating permitted.” (Zenzinov 1944). His friend Vladimir Nabokov wrote him a letter describing the book as “the most valuable book about Russia of all those that have appeared during these twenty-five despicable years.” (Boyd 1991, pp. 84 and fn. 22).

A detailed discussion of the language of the letters, with multiple quotes, is included in Nakhimovsky (forthcoming 2019). This paper addresses only one thematic line in them, attitudes to aging and

death. We present excerpts from three peasant letters and juxtapose them with quotes from Tolstoy and Chekhov. The hope is that literary scholars will see additional anthropological detail in the stories, and historians will recognize with more precision what persevered and what had been lost in the peasant worldview by 1939.

Life is Hard, Nothing to Regret

About 150 letters or short notes in the Corpus are from peasants. Since all the addressees are roughly of the same age – all were army conscripts – the senders fall into three clearly delineated generations: Old (parents, godparents, uncles and aunts); Young (wives, siblings, siblings-in-law, friends, girlfriends; Very young (children, godchildren, nieces and nephews, much younger siblings). By far the best represented is the generation of wives. In the parents' generation, there are about 30 letters, including shorter notes. Three of them explicitly talk about aging and death. The common attitude is fatalistic: life is so hard that there is no reason to fear or regret death. The author of Example 1, a middle-aged woman who is still working and supporting herself, articulates the idea with a touch of bitter irony.

Example 1. Letter #257.²⁴

Дорогой Леня здравствуй! Письмо твое я получила, так рада что ты цел и невредим. [...]

Живем занимаемся житейскими делами, носим молоко продавать 8 р. за чет. дорог корм дорого и молоко [...] До марта хватит корму, а там купим, будет потеплее. Купили мешок

²⁴ The letter is preceded by Zenzinov's note: "Letters 257-268 were collected by me on March 9, 1940, at the front near Lemetti (north of lake Ladoga). The battle at Lemetti took place Feb 29. During the battle the Finns destroyed the 34th Tank Division; the Finns collected 2050 Russian corpses on the battlefield."

овса за 50 р. для кур, дров хватит назиму, а там кто жив будет. Рубликов на 50 за работаю на шитье, только очень устаю хожу почти каждодневно в город, туда молоко, а оттуда хлеб, зато помирать будешь жалеть не будешь жизни.

Translation

Dear Lenya, hello. I have received your letter, so happy that you're alive and well. [...]

We live, do the usual things, take milk to market at 8 rubles a gallon: feed is dear, milk is dear. There's enough feed till March, then we'll buy more, it'll be warmer. We bought a sack of oats for 50 rubles for chicken, there's enough firewood for the winter, then we'll see who is still alive. I will make about 50 r. sewing, but I get very tired, go to the city almost every day, take milk, bring bread, the good thing is you won't feel sorry about your life when it comes to dying.

This is one of the more literate letters in the corpus. The addressee is a doctor or a medic in the military. The writer, who seems to be his older sister, is a единоличница (a non-kolkhoznik).

Death as Relief: An Old Man

If life is so hard then death is perhaps a relief, especially in the old age. In practical terms, the problem is: how do you live the last years of a long life in a world without pensions or health care? If this problem has persisted over many generations, and is shared by many people at any given time, a cultural attitude of fatalistic endurance is likely to develop. This is expressed very clearly in the next example, a letter from an old man. He is not dying yet, but he is waiting to die and certainly does not "feel sorry about his life." He lives alone; his wife lives in town with their daughter, a schoolteacher. The phrase "что поделаешь" (What can you do) repeats twice in this short passage.

The original is written as a continuous flow of text. Paragraph breaks and some punctuation are added in translation.

Example 2 Letter #227, to son in the army

Здорово мой дорогой сынок Коля сопщаю о себе живу пока благополучно. от мамы и Любы и Нasti письма получаю часто меня просят чтобы я к ним приехал хотя на одну неделю после перевыборов. Надо у них побывать. придется нанять лошадь А не менее нужно платить денег 50 руб взят имперот Аденьги я уже потратил которые вы мне посылали. [...]

Мне сильно хотелось повидать тебя. но что поделаешь. нужно все переживать А я уже сильно постарел волосы стали совсем белые. И плохо вижу. только могу видеть у себя под носом. А на воле рядом не могу узнать человека. конечно дело неважно нечто поделаешь надо доживать как нибудь досм[ерти] [the word is cut off]

Коля тебе в тех письмах все описывал как живут в колхозах живут неважно хлеба были плохие гот бил сырой. я сам себя обработать не в силах А существовать надо [...]

Translation

Hello my dear son Kolia. I inform about myself. I live so far OK. From mama and Liuba and Nastia I receive letters often. They ask me that I come visit at least for a week [...] I should visit them. I'll have to rent a horse. But this will cost money at least 50 rubles there and back. But I already spent the money that you sent me. [...]

Kolia I miss you. It didn't work out for you to visit home i.e. on leave. I very much wanted to see you but what can you do. You have to carry on. But I'm already old, my hair is completely white.

I see poorly, I can only see what's under my nose. But outside I can't recognize somebody next to me. Of course, things are bad but what can you do, you have to live somehow till death.

Kolia in those letters I described to you how life is in kolkhozes. Life is not very good. The grain harvest was bad, the year had been wet. I don't have the strength to provide for myself. But we have to exist [...]

The last sentence of the second paragraph is more paradoxical in the original – it literally says: I have to live somehow until I finally get to death. Life and death are not intrinsically connected: life is something to endure, death is a separate event that brings an end to it. A similar paradox with an additional twist is captured in perhaps the most striking saying by Platon Karataev: На болезнь плакаться – Бог смерти не даст (Complain too much about illness – God will not give you death.) (*War and Peace*, vol. 4, Ch. XIII.)²⁵ Here you only get to death when it is granted to you, and it can be withheld if you do not have the right attitude – which the old man in the letter does seem to have. In particular, neither he, nor the woman in Ex. 1, shows any fear of death. They do not make statements to that effect but the attitude is clear.

Death as a Relief: Tolstoy

The subject of attitudes to death is elaborated in great detail in the story “Master and Man.” The landowner Vasili Andreich²⁶ and the peasant Nikita are badly lost in a violent snow storm. At some point Vasili Andreich, an active, proud, enterprising man, strikes out on his own on horseback. Nikita is left lying in the cart, alone with his thoughts.

²⁵ Complete works in 90 volumes, vol. 12, p. 153, online at <http://tolstoy.ru/online/90/12/>.

²⁶ This non-standard transliteration is adopted from the Louise and Aylmer Maude translation.

Example 3. “Master and Man,” Chapter VII ²⁷

Мысль о том, что он может и даже, по всем вероятностям, должен умереть в эту ночь, пришла ему, но мысль эта показалась ему ни особенно неприятной, ни особенно страшной. Не особенно неприятна показалась ему эта мысль потому, что вся его жизнь не была постоянным праздником, а, напротив, была непрерывающей службой, от которой он начинал уставать. Не особенно же страшна была эта мысль потому, что, кроме тех хозяев, как Василий Андреич, которым он служил здесь, он чувствовал себя всегда в этой жизни в зависимости от главного хозяина, того, который послал его в эту жизнь, и знал, что и умирая он останется во власти этого же хозяина, а что хозяин этот не обидит.

Translation

The thought that he might, and very probably would, die that night occurred to him, but it did not seem particularly unpleasant or frightening. It did not seem particularly unpleasant, because his entire life had not been an uninterrupted holiday, but on the contrary the time of unceasing work of which he was beginning to feel tired. And it did not seem particularly frightening, because besides the masters he had served here, like Vasili Andreevich, he always felt himself dependent on the chief master, who had sent him into this life, and he knew that in his death he would still be in that Master's power and would not be ill-used by Him.

Two parallel explanations elaborate on the two strands in Nikita's thought. The first is entirely socioeconomic, and completely in the spirit to our Examples 1 and 2. The second follows from Nikita's faith and finds no correspondence in the letters that make

²⁷ References to Tolstoy's work are from the 90-volume edition, on the Web at <http://tolstoy.ru/creativity/90-volume-collection-of-the-works/>

no intimations about their authors' religious belief. Even if they had had it in the past, by 1939 it would have been gone or deeply hidden after years of persecutions, destruction of churches, arrests of priests, and relentless propaganda of atheism. Faith appears in the letters only in formulaic, albeit deeply felt, pleas to protect the life of a young soldier.

Class Divisions and a Chekhov Digression

Curiously, Nikita himself recognizes that there is a socioeconomic component in his equanimity before death. When still together with Vasili Andreich and hearing him fidget uncomfortably in the cart, Nikita feels sorry for him:

Example 4. "Master and Man," Chapter VII

«Тоже, я чай, сердечный, сам не рад, что поехал, – думал он. – От такого житья помирать не хочется. Не то, что наш брат».

Translation (by AN)

"Methinks he too, the poor fellow, isn't happy himself that he set to travel," thought Nikita. "With life like his, you wouldn't want to die. It's not like our kind."

Chekhov's "Peasants" (1897), written two years after Tolstoy's "Master and Man," expresses the same idea as Nikita, but bluntly, without a trace of sentimentality or folksy language:

Example 5. Chekhov, "Peasants," Chapter VIII

Смерти боялись только богатые мужики, которые чем больше богатели, тем меньше верили в бога и в спасение души, и лишь из страха перед концом земным, на всякий случай,

ставили свечи и служили молебны. Мужики же победнее не боялись смерти. Старику и бабке говорили прямо в глаза, что они зажились, что им умирать пора, и они ничего. [...] А Марья не только не боялась смерти, но даже жалела, что она так долго не приходит, и бывала рада, когда у нее умирали дети.

Translation

Only rich peasants were afraid of death, and the richer they became the less they believed in god and salvation of the soul, and only because of their fear of their earthly end, just in case, they put up candles and did prayer services. Peasants who were not so rich were not afraid of death. An old man and woman would be told to their faces that they have lived way too long and it's time for them to die, and they wouldn't mind. [...] And Marya not only was not afraid of death but was sorry that it takes so long coming, and she was glad when her children died.

Since it is very likely that Chekhov had read "Master and Man," a brief comparison is in order. In addition to just noted, there is only one more point of agreement: a complete disconnect between true faith and the rituals of the Russian Orthodox Church. Example 5 contains a very close reference to the passage in "Master and Man," in which Vasili Andreich, facing the horror of imminent death, is trying to pray the way he used to pray in church to the icon of Nikola-Chudotvoretz.

Example 6. "Master and Man," Chapter VIII

Но тут же он ясно, несомненно понял, что этот лик, риза, свечи, священник, молебны – все это было очень важно и нужно там, в церкви, но что здесь они ничего не могли сделать ему, что между этими свечами и молебнами и его бедственным теперешним положением нет и не может быть никакой связи.

Translation

But he clearly and indubitably realized that the face in the icon, the vestments, the candles, the priest, and the prayer service, though very important and necessary in church, could do nothing for him here, and that there was and could be no connection between those candles and prayer services and his present disastrous plight.²⁸

Apart from these two points of agreement – very approximate, because for Tolstoy faith is the central concern, while Chekhov ignores or rejects it – everything else in Chekhov's passage is a direct affront to what Tolstoy was saying about peasants' attitudes to illness and death. Unsurprisingly, Tolstoy found Chekhov's story reprehensible, "a sin against the people." And yet Tolstoy himself read it out loud to his family, more than once. The subject seems to need further contemplation.

Back to Nikita

Nikita survives the night because in the end Vasili Andreich, transformed by his fear of death, sacrifices his life to save Nikita. Years later, when it comes time for Nikita to die, he is accompanied in his dying with the familiar two strands of thought: death is a relief from life of hardship; afterlife will be better.

Example 7. "Master and Man," Chapter X

He died at home as he had wished [...] under the icons with a lighted taper in his hands. Before he died he asked his wife's forgiveness and forgave her for the cooper. He also took leave of

²⁸ Two small changes have been made in this translation to correct lexical errors.

his son and grandchildren, and died sincerely glad that he was relieving his son and daughter-in-law of the burden of having to feed him, and that he was now really passing from this life of which he was weary into that other life which every year and every hour grew clearer and more desirable to him.

Nikita was thus completely unaffected by the fear-of-death experience that was transformative for Vasili Andreich. His life remained a simple straight line, sloping towards the end. The same trajectory, condensed to essentials, is presented in Example 8, one of the shortest letters in the Corpus.

Death as Disappearance

Example 8 is a letter from an old woman to her son. Although the language of the letter clearly indicates that she is a peasant woman, the return address is in a big city. She probably lives with her relatives and, unlike the old man of Example 2, does not have to worry about physical need. The family even has a radio, unavailable luxury in most villages. The letter consists of three very short parts separated by an address to her son: Pasha or Pavlusha. (As in most peasant there are very few, if any, paragraph breaks, capital letters, or punctuation.) The first part is a summary of recent correspondence, and the second is about family affairs. In the final part she talks about herself, but instead of giving everyday detail she reflects on the overall trajectory of her life.

Example 8. Letter #12, the ending

паша осебе я пишу я живу ты знаеш как ты видел и так и сечас
может тебе дождся тебе и моя жызн будит другая ничево буду
тебе ждат если тебе нибудет то и мене нибудит до свидание
тебе целую остается твоя мат

Translation

Pasha, I write about myself. I live you know how, you saw, and it's still the same. Perhaps I will live to see you, and my life will be different. Oh well, I will be waiting for you. If you are no more, I am no more. Good by, I kiss you, and remain, your mother.

This woman's life, like Nikita's, is a straight line without change. "There are no events, everything is the same as you saw it." But: "If you come back, then my entire life will be different, it will have an event: my son came back home alive." And finally: "If you are no more, then I am no more." It is difficult to convey in English the impact of this sentence because it has only one content word, the verb "to be." The rest are pronouns, conjunctions, and the negative particle that she spells together with the verb: "If you not-will-be then me too not-will-be." If Pasha is not back there is nobody to notice her death.

Conclusion

Not a single letter in the Corpus mentions icons in the house or the expectation of an afterlife. What persists from older times is quiet acceptance, with no complaints.

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A Selection from *Letters on the Good and the Beautiful*

D. S. Likhachev

Translated from the Russian
by Maurits Westbroek

Translator's Introduction

I was first introduced to Dmitry Sergeyevich Likhachev when a Russian teacher suggested that I watch an interview with him in order to experience the beauty and elegance of the Russian language at its finest: as used by Likhachev, admiringly dubbed Russia's last *intelligent* by that same teacher.

Dmitry Likhachev, a medievalist by education and a survivor of the notorious Soviet prison camp on the Solovetsky Islands and the Siege of Leningrad, is widely admired in Russia not only for his impressive scholarly career but also his moral clarity, dedication to Russia's beauty and cultural heritage, and as the face of all that is good and wise in his people, which experienced so many upheavals, and so much suffering, during his lifetime.

This selection of letters is intended to give an impression of the issues and questions that animated Likhachev's subtle intellect and which he approached with eloquent lucidity and simplicity. These letters, which were intended primarily for young readers but which have enduring relevance to audiences of all ages and walks

of life, vary in tone between the benign didacticism of a wise man in the twilight of his life and an intellectual's sense of wonder at the profundity of thousands of years of human history and culture. Above all, Likhachev's unwavering conviction that kindness, compassion, and beauty are both the proper means and ends of life, and that this kernel of timeless truth needs to be passed on to today's youth, can only inspire that same admiration that I share with my Russian teacher and countless others.

* * *

Letter One: The Big in the Small

In the material world, you cannot fit the big inside the small. Yet in the realm of spiritual values, it's different: something much bigger can fit in the small, yet if you tried to fit something small in the big, then the big would simply cease to exist.

If a person has a great aim, then it should show in everything – even in what would seem to be something insignificant. You must be honest in the inconspicuous and incidental: only then will you be honest in fulfilling your greater duty. A great aim envelops the entire individual, is expressed in his every deed, and one must not think that one can attain a good end by evil means.

The saying “the end justifies the means” is pernicious and immoral. Dostoevsky showed that well in *Crime and Punishment*. The main protagonist in that book, Rodion Raskolnikov, thought that, having murdered a repulsive usurious old woman, he would obtain some money with which he would then achieve his grand aims and benefit humanity, but he suffers a mental breakdown. His aim is remote and unrealizable, but his crime all too real; it is terrible and cannot be justified. One cannot and may not strive for a lofty goal through low means. One must be equally honest in the big as in the small.

The general rule is: it is necessary to observe the big in the small, including, particularly, in science. Scientific truth is more precious than anything, and it must be pursued in all the details of scientific enquiry and in the life of the scholar. If one strives for “minor” goals – proof by “force,” contrary to the facts, for the “interestingness” of a conclusion, for their effectiveness, or to any forms of furthering one’s own interests, then the scholar will inevitably suffer a crisis. Maybe not immediately, but ultimately! When one begins to exaggerate the results of one’s research or even slightly manipulate the facts and scientific truth is given second priority, then science ceases to exist, and the scholar himself sooner or later ceases to be a scholar.

One should decidedly reckon with the big in everything. Then everything is easy and simple.

Letter Three: The Biggest Thing

What is the main purpose of life? I think that it is to increase the amount of good in our environment. And the good is, more than anything else, the happiness of all people. It consists of a lot of things, and time and time again life confronts people with challenges which one must know how to face. It is possible even in the little things to do good by someone, and one can consider the grand scheme of things, but one must not separate the little things and the grand scheme. Many things, as I talked about before, start from the small, and originate in childhood and that which is close to you.

A child loves his mother and father, brothers and sisters, his family, his house. As his affections continue to broaden, they extend to his school, village, city, his whole country. And that is already very much a great and deep feeling, even though he may not yet stop there and should also love the individual in each person.

He should be a patriot, but not a nationalist. There is no need to hate every family you don’t know simply because you love your own. There is no need to hate other peoples because you are a patriot. There is a profound difference between patriotism and nationalism.

The first signifies love for your country, the second – hatred for everyone else.

The main purpose of the good begins with the small – with wishing the ones close to you well; but, as it broadens, it encompasses an ever-larger number of questions.

It's like ripples in the water. Only, ripples, as they broaden, weaken. Love, however, and friendship, as they thrive and extend, acquire new force, become ever more elevated, and the individual, at their centre, wiser.

Love shouldn't be irrational; it should be intelligent. That means that it should be connected to your ability to notice flaws, and to combat them – both in a loved one and the people around you. Love should be connected to wisdom, with the ability to separate the necessary from the senseless and false. It shouldn't be blind. Blind ecstasy can lead to terrible consequences. A mother who constantly delights in and encourages everything her child does may raise a moral monster. Blind ecstasy about Germany ("Germany soars above everything" – words from a chauvinist German song) led to Nazism, and blind ecstasy about Italy to fascism.

Wisdom is the unity of intellect and kindness. An intellect without kindness equals deceitfulness. Deceitfulness, however, gradually turns sour and, sooner or later, turns against the deceitful person himself. That is why deceitfulness needs to be hidden. Yet wisdom is open and reliable. It does not deceive others, let alone the person himself. Wisdom brings the wise person a good name and enduring happiness, a reliable and long-lasting happiness, and the kind of easy conscience that is more valuable than anything else in old age.

How to express the common thing, that is to say, between my three theses: "The big in the small," "Youth is forever," and "The biggest thing"? It can be expressed in a single word, which can become a motto: "Truthfulness." Truthfulness to those main principles by which a person needs to be guided in the big and the small, the truthfulness of his pure youth, his homeland in the wide and the narrow sense of the word, truthfulness to his family, friends, city, country, and people. Ultimately, truthfulness means truthfulness to truth: eternal truth and the truth of justice.

Letter Seven: What Unites People

The levels of worry. Worry strengthens relationships between people. It bonds families, it bonds friendships, it bonds people from the same village, inhabitants of the same city, the same country.

Take a look at a person's life.

Someone is born, and the first worry about them is the mother's; gradually (in a matter of a few days) enters into direct connection with the child the father's worry about it (before the child's birth the worry about it was already there, but it was to a well-known degree "abstract" – before the child appeared, the parents prepared themselves and dreamed about it).

The feeling of worrying about someone else appears very early, especially in girls. A little girl who can't speak yet will already try to worry about her doll and nurses it. Boys, when they're still very young, like picking mushrooms and going fishing. Little girls also like picking berries and mushrooms. Indeed, they pick them not only for themselves, but for their whole family. They bring them home and prepare them for winter.

Over time, children become objects of every greater worry and themselves begin to demonstrate real and broad worries – not only about their family, but also about their school, which is what their parents also worry about, about their village, city, and country...

Their sense of concern widens and becomes increasingly altruistic. Instead of about themselves, children worry about their elderly parents, when they can no longer worry about their children. And that concern for elderly people, and then for the memory of their dead parents, merges, as it were, with a concern for the historical memory of one's family and homeland in general.

If one's concern is directed only at oneself, one becomes egotistical.

Concern unites people, strengthens the memory of the past and is altogether directed at the future. It is not a feeling in itself – it is the concrete manifestation of a feeling of love, friendship, or patriotism. A person should have concerns. A person who doesn't worry or doesn't have any is more than likely to be an unkind and unloving person.

A sense of compassion is in the highest sense characteristic of morality. In compassion lies a consciousness of one's oneness with humanity and the world (not only people and peoples, but also with animals, plants, nature, and so on). A sense of compassion (or something close to it) forces us to fight for cultural monuments, for their preservation, for nature, individual landscapes, for respect for remembrance. In compassion lies an awareness of one's solidarity with other people, one's nation, people, country, the universe. And this is why the forgotten notion of compassion demands a fully-fledged revival and development.

It's a surprisingly true thought: "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

One can come up with thousands of examples of this: how it's perfectly easy to be good to a single person, but to become good towards all of mankind is incredibly difficult. One cannot fix mankind, but to fix oneself is simple. Feeding your child, helping an elderly person cross the street, giving up your seat on the underground, doing your work properly, being polite and courteous ... and so on and so forth – all of that is simple for an individual, but unbelievably difficult for everyone at once. That's why one should start with oneself.

The good cannot be stupid. A good deed is never stupid, for it is selfless and doesn't pursue personal gain and a "clever result." One can only call a good deed "stupid" when it clearly could not achieve its goal or was only "pseudo-good," mistakenly good, that is to say, not good. I'll say again that a genuinely good deed cannot be stupid, it is outside of rational or irrational assessment. In that it is kind and good.

Letter Fifteen: On Envy

If a weightlifter sets a new world record in lifting heavy things, do you envy him? And what about a gymnast? Or a record-holding diver?

Begin by listing everything you know and what you can be envious of: you will notice that, the closer to your line of work, specialism, of life, the stronger the proximity of your envy. It's like in the game: cold, warm, still warmer, hot, you got burnt!

Ultimately you, with your blindfolded eyes, have found something that the other players had hidden. It's the same with envy. The closer someone else's achievement is to your specialism, to your interests, the more the burning danger of envy grows.

It's a terrible feeling, from which he who envies suffers above all.

Now you will understand how to get rid of the exceedingly painful feeling of envy: develop in yourself your own individual aptitudes, your own uniqueness in the world that surrounds you, be yourself, and you will never be envious. Envy develops, above all, where you don't know yourself. Envy develops, above all, where you are not different from others. If you envy, it means you have not found yourself.

Letter Seventeen: To Be Able to Argue with Dignity

In life, one very often has to argue, object, rebut the opinion of others, disagree.

One shows one's good upbringing best of all when one is having a discussion, arguing, defending one's convictions.

In a discussion, educatedness, logicity of reasoning, politeness, the ability to respect people, and self-respect are immediately revealed.

If, while arguing, a person worries not so much about the truth as much as about his victory over his opponent, lacks the ability to hear out his opponent, tries to "shout down" his opponent and frighten him with accusations – then that is a vapid person, and so is his argument.

So how, then, does a smart and respectful debater have a discussion?

Above all, the hears out his opponent – the person who disagrees with his opinion. Moreover, if something about the positions of his opponent is unclear, he asks him additional questions. And also: even if all his opponent's positions are clear, he chooses the weakest points in his opponent's convictions and asks again whether indeed he maintains that position.

In attentively listening to his opponent and asking again, the debater achieves three goals: 1) the opponent cannot object that

he was “misunderstood,” that he “did not make that claim”; 2) the disputant, with his attentive attitude towards the opinion of his opponent immediately wins the sympathy of those who are watching the debate; 3) the debater, while listening and asking again, wins time to contemplate his own objections (and that is also not unimportant) and clarify his positions in the argument.

Subsequently, while objecting, it will never be necessary to resort to impermissible methods of arguing and to adhere to the following rules: 1) object, but not accuse; 2) to not “read into the heart,” to not try to penetrate the motives for the convictions of one’s opponents (“you hold that point of view because it is convenient to you,” “you say this because that is the way you are,” and so on); 3) not to deviate from the topic of the debate; one should be able to follow the debate through to the end, which is to say either until the refutation of the thesis of the opponent, or until the acceptance of the opponent’s rightness.

I want to pause in particular at my last statement.

If you, from the beginning, have the debate politely and calmly, without arrogance, then in doing so you ensure a calm, dignified retreat.

Remember: there is nothing more beautiful in a debate than calmly, if necessary, acknowledge the full or partial correctness of one’s opponent. In doing so, you win the respect of others. You, as it were, are calling for your opponent to show pliability; you are forcing him to moderate the extremities of his position.

Of course, one may only acknowledge the rightness of one’s opponents when it does not concern your general convictions, your moral principles (they must always be paramount).

One should not be a wind vane and concede to one’s opponent only in order to be liked by him, or, God forbid, out of cowardice, or for the sake of one’s career, and so on.

But to concede with dignity in a matter which does not force one to abandon your general convictions (I hope, lofty ones), or to accept one’s victory with dignity, without gloating at the defeated, without jubilating or offending the self-esteem of the opponent – how beautiful that is!

One of the greatest intellectual pleasures is to follow a debate which is being carried out by skilful and intelligent debaters.

There is nothing more silly in a debate than to debate without argumentation. Remember the conversation between two ladies in Gogol's *Dead Souls*:

"My dear, what a pretty chintz!"

"Ah no, it's not pretty!"

"Ah yes, it is pretty!"

When a debater lacks arguments, simple "opinions" appear.

Letter Twenty: How to Speak in Public?

Public speeches are, today, common in our lives. Everyone needs to be able to deliver a speech at a gathering, and, perhaps, with lectures and reports.

Thousands of books have been written through the centuries about the art of orators and lecturers. It's not necessary here to repeat everything that is known about the art of orating. I will say only one, the most simple, thing: to make a speech interesting, the speaker himself needs to find it interesting to deliver the speech. He needs to find it interesting to set forth his point of view, to convince others of it, the material of the lecture needs to be attractive to himself, and to some extent, surprising. The speaker himself should be interested in the subject of his speech and to be able to convey that interest to his audience – to force them to feel the degree of the speaker's interestedness. Only then will it be interesting to listen to him.

And also: in the speech, there shouldn't be several thoughts and ideas of equal importance. In every speech, there should be a dominant idea, a single thought, to which the others are subordinated. Then the speech will not only arouse interest, but it will be remembered.

Essentially, one should always speak from a position of benignity. Even a speech against an idea or thought one should aim to construct as support for that, which is positive in the objections of the person who is arguing with you. A public speech ought always to

be made with regard for the public interest. Then it will be met with sympathy.

***Letter Twenty-Four: Let's Be Happy
(A Response to a Letter from a Schoolboy)***

Dear Seryozha! You are completely right to love old buildings and old things – everything that accompanied man in the past and accompanies him in his present life. All this has not only entered man's consciousness, but it has itself, as it were, received something from people. It would seem that things are simply material, but they have also become part of our spiritual culture, merged with our internal world, which might, tentatively, be called our "soul." After all, we say "from the bottom of my soul," or "my soul needs that," or "done with heart and soul." And so it is! Everything that is done with the soul, that comes from the soul, that we need for the soul – that is our "spiritual culture." The more a person is surrounded by that spiritual culture, submerged in it, the happier he is, the more interesting it is to live, for him, life acquires richness. Yet in a strictly formal attitude towards work, studying, friends and acquaintances, music, and art there isn't this "spiritual culture." That is "spiritlessness" – the life of a mechanism that feels nothing, is unable to love, sacrifice itself, to have moral and aesthetic ideals.

Let's be happy people, which means to have affections, to love deeply and seriously something meaningful, to be able to sacrifice oneself for the sake of a loved cause and loved people. People who don't have all of that are unhappy, live a boring life, dissolve themselves in empty acquiring or minor, base, "perishable" delights.

Letter Twenty-Seven: The Fourth Dimension

Memory and knowledge of the past enrich the world, they make it interesting, meaningful, exalted. If you do not see its past behind

the world surrounding you, then it is empty to you. You feel bored, melancholy, and you are, ultimately, lonely, for even friends are only truly friends if your shared past connects you to them: perhaps you finished school or higher education with them, or you worked together, and old men remember with particular tenderness those with whom they fought or lived through difficulties.

Let the houses past which we walk, let the cities and towns in which we live, let even the factory in which we work, or the ships on which we sail – be alive to us, that is, to have a past! Life is not the momentariness of existence.

Let us know history – the history of everything that surrounds us on large and small scales. After all, that is the fourth, and very important, dimension of the world.

But we should not just know the history of everything that surrounds us, starting from our own family, and continuing with our town or city and ending with our country and the world, but also preserve that history, that immeasurable depth of our surroundings.

Notice that children and young people particularly love customs and traditional feasts. For they are taking in the world, taking it in with its traditions and history. Let us more actively defend what makes our life meaningful, rich, and exalted.

Letter Forty-Five: The Cosmic Hermitage

Once, about a decade or two ago, the following image came into my head: the Earth is our tiny home, flying in an immeasurably large space. Then I discovered that that image simultaneously with me came into the head of tens of publicists. It is so obvious that at the point of being hatched it is already trite and cliché, although it does not lose its power and credibility because of it.

Our home! And yet Earth is home to billions and billions of people who lived before us! Helplessly flying in a colossal space, it is a museum, a collection of hundreds of thousands of museums, a narrow assemblage of the works of hundreds of thousands of geniuses (ah, if

only to approximate how many universally acknowledged geniuses there have been on this Earth!) And not only the works of geniuses! So many customs, pleasant traditions. So much has accumulated and has been preserved. So many possibilities. The Earth is completely strewn with jewels, and underneath them so many diamonds are still waiting to be polished, made into jewels. That is something inconceivably precious.

And the main thing is: there is no second, other life in the Universe! That is easy to prove mathematically. Millions of preconditions needed to converge to create human culture.

And that there, before that incredible value, are all our national ambitions, quarrels, personal and national vendettas (“retaliatory action”)!

A Hermitage, shooting through cosmic space!

Letter Forty-Six: The Ways of Kindness

This, then, is the final letter. There could have been even more, but it is time to take stock. It’s a shame to stop writing. The reader has noticed how, gradually, the topics of my letters became more complex. The reader and I went along, climbing the stairs. It could not have been otherwise: what would be the point of writing if one stays at the same level without gradually ascending the steps of experience – moral and aesthetic experience. Life demands complications.

It’s possible that the reader has formed an image of the author of these letters as of an arrogant person who tries to teach everyone everything. That’s not entirely correct. In these letters I did not only “teach,” but I also learned. I was able to teach precisely because I was learning at the same time: I learned from my experience, which I attempted to generalize. A lot of things came into my mind as I was writing. I did not only expound my own experiences – I analyzed them. My letters admonish, but, in admonishing, I also admonished myself. The reader and I together ascended the steps of experience, not only my own, but the experience of many people. In writing these letters I

was helped by the readers themselves – they were conversing with me inaudibly.

So what is the most important thing in life? The most important thing might lie in the various shades of what is peculiar and unique about everyone. Still, everyone needs to possess something important. Life shouldn't fall apart into trivialities, dissolve into everyday concerns.

And further, the most essential thing is that this main thing, whatever it may be for everyone individually, should be good and meaningful.

A person needs to be able to not only ascend, but rise above oneself, above one's personal daily worries and to think about the sense of one's life – to look back at the past and peek into the future.

If one lives only for oneself, for one's minor concerns about one's own well-being, then, of everything one has lived through, not a trace will remain. If, however, one lives for others, then those others will preserve that which one served, what one dedicated one's efforts to.

Has the reader noticed that everything bad and trivial in life is quickly forgotten? People may continue to feel displeasure at a bad and egotistical person, at the bad things he has done, but they already don't remember the person himself, he has been erased from memory. People who are never concerned with others, "fall out," as it were, from memory.

But people who served others, who served intelligently, who had in their lives a good and meaningful purpose, will be remembered for a long time. Their words, deeds, their appearance, their jokes, and sometimes their eccentricities are remembered. Stories are told about them. Evil people are talked about much more rarely and, doubtlessly, with hostile feelings.

In life one needs to serve – serve some sort of cause. Even if it is something small, it will become big if one is true to it.

In life nothing is more precious than kindness, and, indeed, understanding, purposeful kindness. Intelligent kindness is the most valuable thing in a person, the thing that is most beneficial to him and the thing that is, in the end, the most true on the way to personal happiness.

He who attains happiness is the person who strives to make others happy and is able, at least for a while, to forget about one's own interests, about oneself. That is an "incommutable rouble."²⁹

To know this, to always remember it and to follow the ways of kindness is very, very important. Believe me!

²⁹ Неразмennyй рубль: an expression pertaining to a folk belief about a rouble that will always magically return to one's pocket, thus providing its owner with lifelong prosperity and luck.

The Praxiteles Syndrome³⁰

Tatyana Apraksina

Translated from the Russian
by Patricia Walton and James Manteith

The Artist and the Viewer

Maybe there really are artists who care little about what the viewer thinks. At least, I have heard of such cases. For me, though, I confess, the viewer's perception has endless intrigue. Without influencing my own assessment, it always lends me a new psychological perspective, enables a fresh reading of familiar material – in other words, helps contemplate what would not otherwise have come to mind.

A painting always speaks about what an artist is running from or striving for, whether that entered his plans or not. As for interpretation, I find any viewer's version no less competent than the author's; often, in fact, the viewer perceives the painting more fully and subtly than does its creator. It would probably be a mistake for the viewer to try to look at artwork through the eyes of its author, whose motives basically should not affect perception of the image, just as knowing individuals' ancestry should not sway an assessment of their personal characteristics.

³⁰ Praxiteles (Greek: laborer). Ancient Greek sculptor. "Praxiteles rendered precisely the love he suffered, / Drawing the archetype from his own heart." – Athenaios, fragment 13.519A.

The outside viewer's fresh impression is not tied to the departure point of the painting's origin. This enables him to see what escapes the attention of the author, who overlooks what he had no prior knowledge of. Each viewer is able to offer his own version, to give his own explanation, projecting the seen onto his own system of preferences, which means the variety of interpretations, the number of viewpoints can be endless. This helps the artist better understand himself, expands his vision of his own creativity.

Analyzing a completed work, I am a viewer alongside the rest, with my opinion only one among many and practically meaningful only for determining where my work goes next. This is the conclusive stage of the entire process of creating a painting, its retrospective, evaluative part. As for artistic practice, the creative act as such, analysis is inevitable in that as well – true, though, as a different sort of analysis, examining conditions and determining the “trajectory and direction of the flight.” Each makes calculations in his own way, whether subconsciously, intuitively, “the hand knowing what it’s doing,” or from the head, from logical constructs. I have never felt tempted to blindly submit to chance impulses; I like to give myself a reckoning of what I am doing. This does not mean dry deliberation, although in any circumstances I should be certain I will not fail (and my vision is too good to let myself move randomly). This is why well-known creativity formulas like “It just turned out that way” or “It just worked out that way” are not part of my vocabulary (more likely would be “I just wanted it that way”), and somehow it seems to me that they do not really flatter an adult, certainly not a professional. I doubt anyone would object to what I say, were we not speaking of artists: who would like it if a pilot rolled out onto the runway, unsure whether or not he would “turn out” able to lift the plane into the air? Nor would he earn much respect if he complained that a landing “just didn’t work out.” A pilot simply ought to know how and what to do in concrete situations to fulfill his concrete task.

The artist answers for his work in the same way. And the artist, like the pilot, has his “autopilot,” intuition, which can come to his rescue in extreme circumstances or, on the contrary, free him to soar at will – on a previously set route, of course.

The Artistic Consciousness as Elemental Power

Art is one of the most productive forms of knowledge, especially when it moves toward its goal in an academic progression, developing into a completed system, creating an independent space of cosmogonic and cosmographic conceptions. These same processes of modeling a picture of the world are observable in any branch of fundamental knowledge, although perhaps not as vividly and accessibly as in art.

Human understanding is a child of nature, its part. It is bound by the same natural laws as every other living thing. Academic knowledge in its completed forms, freed from its originating experience, possesses the weight and persuasiveness of an ocean wave that has passed its full cycle of formation. Whenever I listen to a real scholar, I have a sense of collision with powerful natural forces, of immersion in them, of taking them into myself. That feeling of intoxicating scope of intellect resembles the regenerative and liberating effect of communion with nature. In engagement with genuine knowledge, its overwhelming coherence and freedom bespeak mastery of material to a degree more commonly associated with hereditary orientation in a natural habitat (“like a fish in water”), with each uttered word belying the captivating presence of a massive deep-water foundation of acquired intellectual resources calling the word to life. Ocean of water or ocean of knowledge, it is one and the same elemental power bringing us forth, intelligent; for this reason, in touch with their source, the mind and body feed from it, replenishing themselves with fresh vigor.

The element of human consciousness has as rich a plurality as the element of nature, and this permits placing signs of equivalency between any forms of rational expression, as long as they share a basic trait: meeting an “academic” standard, which primarily means having high qualifications – that is, quality, depth and freedom in mastering a given subject, be it science, or art, or a craft, or any other sort of sentient activity.

Derivatives of the intellect in their most sublime manifestations demonstrate an amazing natural harmony, mirroring the harmony

inherent in the elements. The mental world's harmony is like an upper layer of the physical harmony known and obvious to everyone. The musical harmony of nature (the music of spheres, or of the circular movement of planets, or of the interaction of molecular structures, of microparticles or whatever else, in an endless array) always has been and always will be. The harmony of the enlightened human consciousness begets its own music – and that glorious music has been and will be as long as there are humans. It differs from nature's elemental music only as the fruit of a different embodied elemental power, the power of human consciousness, whose fullness, transfigured as sound, gives the world a special phenomenon – the art of music.

This, then, is what I consider one of my works' central subjects. I call it "music as an absolute form of expression of human consciousness."

The Visual Form of Music

I am generally described as an artist who paints about music (I prefer to call myself an alchemist). To be more precise, an overwhelming majority of my paintings are based on true-life material supplied by the field that for many years has been my subject of study, namely musical activity, primarily performance. Typically professional. Typically classical. If you ask why classical (and people do ask that a lot), I will answer that I hold it dear for its metaphorical openness, its concentration, its universality, and because it commands "academic" certainty, attaining an extreme, declarative level of expressiveness.

My chosen object, a whole independent universe, with its life's minutest features honed and strengthened by tradition, with an internal ethical, ritual code of law, where all is subject to a single sacred content, mingled with it, has required thorough study and exploration. Yet in closely focusing on everything that serves the creation of music, I emphatically avoid any attempt at "direct transposition," at transforming music into painting. I have never tried to clothe musical impressions, in and of themselves, in visual forms with the help of artistic means. I do not share the most popular attitude toward music as standard fuel for

the imagination. The various experiments with music and color, whether based strictly on scientific method or on intuitive sensory preference, likewise fail to convince me (for a whole range of reasons), although I cannot say I have never had occasion to reflect on them. Without question, the color spectrum chosen for each of my paintings is dictated by a musical influence, but primarily as a generalized impression, a compressed emotional trace. Relying on my own observations, I have come to a conclusion, which I find singularly valid, that the actual organic synthesis of sound and visual forms (not only musical) unfolds in the most natural, proper way precisely in the sphere of the plainly expressed. The specific case of music demonstrates this very vividly: the particular organic plasticity of musicians' posture and movement, the color and form of instruments, the graphic eloquence of musical notation – all of this embodies an external, apparent intonation which satisfies the demands of music, born of action.

Turning to the question of “musical fantasizing,” I have to admit right away that I find it to a significant extent artificial and limited. It seems to me that paintings of that type always contain a certain affectation. Music by its nature is not meant for narrow interpretations. This, in part, is the secret of its potency, its celebrated power over people. To each person it speaks in his own language, secret from others. If, for instance, an audience of a thousand in a concert hall listens to a certain rendition of a certain composition, each of the thousand perceives what he hears in the context of his own individual experience and knowledge, and interprets the musical impression with the aid of his personal metaphorical flight, overlaid on the ever-changing ground of that moment's physical and emotional state. If we could peer into the imagination of each of these thousand listeners, we could probably not find two even similar pictures to accompany one and the same passage of music. Even more: If we return tomorrow and the same people are listening to the same composition, they will be experiencing completely new impressions, seeing new colorings. Even when we listen to the same recording at home, it does not return us to the same “played out” images, but rather has a way of endlessly giving birth to something new – except, of course, for those melodies directly linked in our memory with concrete life situations.

The singular version an artist captures might be fantastic and expressive, but what relationship does it have to music? A good thing about music is namely that it frees the imagination from any set obligations; its influence provokes spontaneous movement in spaces untouchable by outsiders, and this experience is unique and matchless for everyone and every time.

The musician is another matter. He always is, and is always one and the same musician. Without the musician there is no music; he is the central condition of its existence, and he is also its material attribute, the material side of its presence, its natural palpable and visible form. This obvious dependency, by the simplest logic of things, seems impossible to ignore, and yet, on the other hand, “legitimate” artistic traditions deny this clear logic frequently and dramatically. Trying with all their might not to notice the distracting presence of the musician, they favor the convenience of devoted engagement with a nominally abstract idea of music. As for the musician himself, on the contrary, it is somehow accepted not to consider his existence’s causal dependence on music (by definition), but rather to detach him where possible, discharge him from that unnecessary activity and value him primarily as a “person,” an “individual,” maybe to actually think his precious “individuality” suffers unimaginable oppression from music’s cruel tyranny, rather than that the profession gives him a magnificent chance for fulfillment.

Not counting groups of contrived, exalted personages embellished by their creators’ fantasies in various types of art, the canonical image of a musician can be wholeheartedly affirmed as the most authentic medium for visually representing music.

Any stylistic overload, alien interference, shifting of emphasis to superfluous details divert us from the essence of the subject, whether in a painting or in life. The music will falter. This is why it is so essential for my work that the musician depicted on the canvas knows his craft no less than in true life. The more strongly I love something, the more exactly I depict it. This is an extraordinarily important condition, for indeed if I am to achieve precise musical expression, this depends first of all on maintaining correspondence to the music’s source. Frail ethereal elves and impish

demons are absolutely not equipped for inspired music-making, so the sounds they produce will never match the tones of the true instrument in professional hands. The model's professional qualities are so important that no finesse of mine can force me to enthusiastically portray a musician who is weak or inexpressive (synonyms, really). The organic matter of music is cultivated through years of daily work, discipline and self-improvement. Participation by the soul also plays far from the smallest role here. A musician's bodily harmonies are functional down to the last iota, which leaves no chance to veil their imperfection (moreover, their absence) with excess expressivity. Also extremely functional is the canonical strictness of the musical rite; in its hierarchy and subordination to an elaborate code, it suggests comparison with religious ritual. The question of "self-expression" humbly cedes place to a higher preordination, the priestly service of art. Whether he realizes it or not, takes pride in it or rues it, the musician is always a priest or soldier and, like them, unchanged and universal. Forgetting himself, his personality, in the name of music, is a condition of his professional competency. Yesterday, today and tomorrow, he is always the same musician as ever, independent of what he calls himself, of what epoch he belongs to, as a nameless and eternal legionnaire of all times and peoples.

The arch-human in the human, the human freed from the secondary and inessential, building up knowledge in an absolute, purified form – this is the main thing I see in the living metaphor of the musical act.

Ends and Means

The musician who captivates me is a hero neither lyrical nor Olympian. He is more like an artisan, a Praxiteles of music, a sculptor with many faces, who brings his creation to life by how strongly he loves it. Only love and mastery can form new life where there was none before. An artist is also an artisan (as is a poet, a ballerina or a scholar). As a tool for his search, he chooses visual means. How they are used is dictated by the artist's individual inquiry. Everything depends on what he seeks. The question of creative method resides in the domain of methodology of knowing.

An artist is someone who seeks truth with his eyes and hands. Much like a sculptor, he works with material, interacting with it, transforming it, which formulates answers to his questions. Technical process, style, direction – these are the path the author chooses to reach his goal more truly, the mechanisms handiest and preferable for him, the language letting him express himself more clearly. They hardly take the place of a work's core idea, although no doubt significantly influencing the nature of its exposition. The final result's success depends on them greatly: you can get where you're going on foot or by limousine. Each has its advantages. (Words, too, have a way of making an idea follow them, of steering it, but never definitively.)

The question of priorities, of which is more important, the ends or the means, is complex and, it must be said, not only so for art. The ends are known to justify the means sometimes, but are means enough of a substitute for ends? In that sense, art knows no competitors, as it scintillates with such an abundance of conceits that cost nothing to elevate instantly into dogmas, sweeping the feet out from under anyone starting to feel fit to referee.

There is what is in style, and there is what is beautiful. There is what is ugly, yet also timely. There is what incites nausea, yet always has value ...

However alluring, technical greatness still does not make a painting a painting. (For the record, a famed French Post-Impressionist proposed that a painting be seen as a "flatness covered with paint." By now we, wiser, already know that, to count as a painting, the flatness does not even need paint – the swift development of progressive thought has freed it from that unnecessary burden. In some instances, the flatness itself also proves expendable, with just a frame enough, while at times lacking even a frame is no obstacle – a tag already tells all the essentials.) Technical means are just means, and means they will stay for all time, however much we might be tempted by permissive delusions on that front. The manner is merely the manner, just as words are only words that I use or reject. That is all no more than syntax serving the idea. Of course, if there is no idea, it is always possible to pretend none is needed, or that the idea has been carefully concealed. The author is silent, turned

arrogantly away, or spouts a flood of incoherent idioms. Let the trusting viewer work up a good sweat on the off chance his mind can manage to scrape together something palatable and meaningful ... Intriguing! If there is, after all, an idea, it will find an appropriate way to express itself, will cast itself in a form contoured by the volume and mass of its own body. Namely a certain questioning state of consciousness serves as a magnet for the needed image.

Inner content asks for an image, inner completeness seeks an image which speaks to it, which can hold it. It would be too naive to believe the passion to create has a utilitarian or crude mechanical source. True passion lies where there is a need to conform to an image, to fill it with one's feeling. In other words, a subject's purely external merits are not in themselves attractive enough in my eyes, do not cause me any twinge of impatience. I almost never begin work because of "itchy hands." Quite the opposite. My hand starts itching out of having something to say.

Questions of technical process, like specialized terminology, belong to a narrow professional code language devoted to craft. Its place is confined to the production cycle. That is what it was made for. In general, I find talk of "means of rendering" justified only until the rendering is complete; in assessing the result, technicalities merit the same attitude as government, which is best, the less attention it draws to itself.

Furthermore, art makes a claim to universality, convertibility in any consciousness open to it. Semantics and ciphers have, of course, an independent meaning for the expert, the professional, the historian and the psychiatrist. But that does not mean the uninitiated viewer should deny himself the right to his direct live impression. A painting should be a painting for everyone, so each person can see it holds some sort of content on his own individual plane. The viewer is absolutely not required to know the whole lowdown on the artist, his childhood hangups, "cultural context," or, especially, to probe the nuanced manufacturing process. He receives a finished product, like a car, about which it's enough to know just one thing — that it can be driven. Let someone find in a painting feeling, another beauty, a third philosophy

and a fourth historical and ideological allusion. As for interpretation, the viewer is always right — within the bounds of his personal relationship to the artwork, of course. And to be sure, the author has no judge but his own taste and conscience. He is who he is, and it matters little what that means. He has the right to be himself. Let others be themselves. Art is universal for him as well, offering him a chance to be unique.

This, it seems, should serve to guarantee lack of competition in art. There are simply no grounds for it. I am not very interested in what other artists are working on. I have my own errand, which I myself determine. It is my personal commission, independent of what the rest do. That is why I find my bearings exclusively through my own task — like a snake biting its own tail, I chase myself, not allowing myself to stop.

The Artist and the Object

It would be hard to contemplate that I might sometime choose to paint, for example, an excavator. For that, I would have to fall in love with it or hate it. Art is my way of dying of love. The only person who really knows what I need is me. That is why, in the vast world, full of all sorts of things, I will choose only what rouses my feelings. The inner substance I accumulate can only be imparted to a coinciding object — which means, one having its own suitable content, its own important sense for me. If, for instance, I need a book for a still life, it will not be a directory or an advertising brochure, however enticing they may look. I agree there are no unworthy subjects. A plastic cup can elicit feelings of tenderness, and a drunken fistfight by a trash heap is simply an apotheosis of the picturesque. The world is without limits, but not the artist, so he declines to live as an omnivore.

To give my soul to a subject, I must respect, value and love it. That is the key to my egoism; it does not allow me to make mistakes or waste attention on something I consider secondary or false. That sums up the catechism of my selectiveness.

Assessment Criteria

The conditions of my artistic practice obligate only me and are regimented by the uniqueness of my task. Any other artist (or alchemist) can say the same about himself.

Any artwork in any form represents an imprint of its author's personality, his autonomous model, always as unique in its way as the master who made it, and that means in assessing works of art there cannot and should not be general criteria or mandatory attributes other than those which this or that human personality is judged by, namely, moral-ethical or aesthetic: gentle or crude, smart or dumb, beautiful or ugly, etc. In a word, a painting wants most of all to be treated like a person. It makes no plea for lifelong friendship (except in lapses of good taste), but a narrow-minded assessment insults it.

Of course, there are general tendencies, there are mass notions of beauty and style, but simultaneously, each person has his own individual taste, individual inclination, individual requirements. The main thing is that they not be vaunted into norms required for all, any more than personal principles of creativity should be. Categorical judgments about art have proven their futility many times over, especially when calibrated by disparately seized subordinate features such as the notorious "stroke," contextless "coloration," subject, genre or school, or style. This always reminds me of pronouncements like "A lady should always wear gray," or "I don't like men in ties." Art, like life, should have no general qualifications. Real, direct choice occurs not between blondes and brunettes but between one concrete person and another. By the way, penchants for appraising paintings like wallpaper or picking them like comic books merely illustrate art's place in a general cohort of values of individual life.

If a painting moves you, remains in your memory, that is the most convincing evidence of its worth. If you want to take it into your life, that means it deserves it.



Poetry

Three Poems

Tatyana Apraksina

Translated from the Russian
by James Manteith

Walls of Petersburg

These Petersburg walls
Licked up and down by fog
These walls brought high
In pain in shrieks and in silence
In heavy late daybreaks
In soft plastilene
Heart failure
These walls creased
With looks rains verse
Backs of those
Who have
No other to lean on

The city like a piano
Depends on its maker's honesty
A solitary drake
At the granite bridge paddles
The cityscape unrecognized
Dropped in dark water
Grayish faces

Merge with dirty walls
Unfeeling
Streets courts and entryways
Packed full
With prints
Of feet voices anticipation

Oh Petersburg
Your citizens
Mean nothing
Beside you
Made to stand
Apart
Only in true love for you

Your walls tender
Tired elephant skin
Aged in human service
What tells me
You noticed
When I
Called your name
As the name of fate
I don't recall myself
Just why it was
But will believe
If you say
Without you I am nothing

My blood
Will flow in your rivers
My tears spill
Rain on your granite
That is the best
They

Tatyana Apraksina, trans. from the Russian by James Manteith

Can do
My voice will drape
A dusky dove wing
On dark asphalt of your roads
In morning night unwalked
My hand
Eternally shelter your heart
Even if
You are heartless to me
Pressed to your walls
Which forget they are stone
I am in you forever

1999

St. Petersburg

To the Island of the Santa Lucias

I implore you,
my not distant enough island,
save me from vulgarity,
as from terms of jail or hideous hard labor,
as from the plaguing parasite of the sensuous,
which casts a half-decayed covetous profile
across all ends of a half-smothered earth.

Lead me into your deserts, good shepherd,
before the lure, a broad and flowering pasture,
poisoned by flocks enticed by profit,
has turned into a pestilent graveyard.

Lead me
where no filth has touched the well,
shield me with your holy mountain.
I will become a field
for your beloved rams,
I will become grapes for your deer
on the raised shoulders of your zeal,
of summits' indestructible bastion.
Your steadfast hand
alone a welcome home.

December 15, 2003
California

The Scale of Stones

The scale of stones available from history is uniform,
Although no pair of cobbles, chronologically, are equal.
At first, the Universe prompts plural portraiture,
And yet its essence comes to this: a stone is faithful.

As heavy firma formulates a monolith,
The strata's imagery imprinted there forever,
Its counterpart, each human magnet, also shifts
Life's whorls into the soul, a granite figure.

That ancient strain of stone can lightly lift its load –
A brace whose sturdiness transcends its native weight and level.
Not down, not sideways – upward we all grow,
Refuting limits where the race's nature settles.

Viewed separately from winglessness, the slots of blotted years
Cease to resolve into continuums of *a priori* prosework
Amalgamations of a typical calendal register
With unforeseen stretches of disarray and random swerving.

The scale of firmness holds Aeneids' state of liberty
And stones of fealty to note the crossing of the Jordan:
They are not for new pyramids to rise in scaffolding,
But simply for the sake of sense not harboring deception.

December 31, 2017
Oakland

Sailor, Tie Your Knots a Little Tighter

Alexander M. Gorodnitsky

Translated from the Russian
by Zina Deretsky

Sailor, hitch those knots good 'n tight –
trouble follows close on our heels.
The water and wind are fixin' to fight,
the same as our captain feels.
Let the waves open their maws in our wake,
let the tight sail continue to groan –
you'll forget them all once you awake,
as soon as we get back home.

Heed not your woman, heed the wine,
don't expect good from ladies gay:
today they can not enshrine
in memory what was yesterday.
Sit your friends down in long rows
and recite a song or a poem –
from envy, she will just about blow
as soon as we get back home.

Don't cry oh sailor for the far reach,
that past the bulwarks does slip.
Your palms they may be covered in pitch,
your heart 'though: without but a drip.
Envelop your face in the cold smoke,
anoint it with salt water foam,

and again you shall be a young bloke,
as soon as we get back home.

Yea mate, hitch those knots good 'n tight –
trouble follows close on our heels.
The water and wind are fixin' to fight,
the same as our captain feels.
There is no way back from here,
like the wake that follows our stern like a comb.
And nobody can tell you when it will be,
that we will come back home!

And even the devil can't tell you when it will be,
that we will come back home!

1965

Sisters – Heaviness, Tenderness

Osip Mandelstam

Translated from the Russian
by Yevgeniy Sokolovsky

Sisters – heaviness, tenderness – identical are your tokens.
Diligent wasps and honeybees suckle the heavy rose.
Man departs, sand cools off, afterwards the heartbroken
lift upon a black bier the late sun in repose.

Oh, the honey and webs, ever heavy and tender,
repeating your name is hardest, it is sublime!
There is only one task in the world I attend to –
the golden task of negating the burden of time.

I imbibe the dark water – the air – feeling giddy,
time is turned by the plow, the rose is bequeathed,
fatefully heavy and tender, the roses unhurriedly eddy –
heaviness, tenderness – two roses making a wreath!

Two Poems

Anna Prismanova

Translated from the Russian
by Nora Moseman

The Fall Leaf

The days have the specific gravity of gold
as fall begins: there's heaven's shine,
the leaf-fall setting all the woods afire,
the heavy honey and abundant bread.

By night, rain pours into the dales
to give the earth the sap that it requires,
and yet the autumn day, long, glimmering,
sends blessings after rain upon the fields.

Have mercy on the gleam of autumn leaves –
those structures made of dryness and of light.
Fall leaves are fruit of rot – their flesh
is insubstantial, but their death is radiant.

Publication

Near autumn, thought sits on the bank
and catches shining fish with skillful hands.
Although I keep my feelings well at bay,
at the root of thought a feeling's often found.

Yet I grew up in an austere land,
where buildings down blind alleys wore tall spires.
Those rooftops honed my mind –
I'm drier than most creatures.

My hand obeys my head.
I bear the stain of reason. My confession
(dare I?) – the secret pages of my diary
I write for publication.

Four Sonnets on Shirts

Genrikh Sapgir

Translated from the Russian

By Dmitri Manin

Priapus

I am a member – but not of any guilds!
I am an organ! – but not the one to squeal to ³¹
A god that everyone loves to appeal to
A gear on which the Solar System builds

Your progeny is all my toil and swelter
From birth I'm bearded and completely bald
A holy fool... The fiend that made Eve falter...
Frayed nerves time place: I'm volatile and galled

You're hot? So what if I am not inclined
I'm just a rag. A useless bow. Look buddy
Your doctor will not help you in this bind

But lo – I feel it! Rising by and by –
A warrior that hears a battle cry –
I stand an iron rod rotund and ruddy

³¹ Organs of government – in particular, state security.

Suitcase

I gluttoned on his rags and trinketry
I was obscenely fat and so he tied
A rope around my bulging bursting hide
His bony ass pressed firmly into me

The airport bustled like a busy bee
He stood all agitated by my side
My guts were out for everyone to see
Disgraced messed up with nowhere left to hide!

And then – shut close picked up and swept along...
He's roamed the world and still is going strong
Believing in his talent's piercing ray

But I grew gaunt and lean and worn with cares
Why am I destined to live out my years
A gypsy suitcase of an émigré?

Frieze Destroyed

a heavy fold a few
racked wings an eagle's eye
A forceful handprint where the residue
the dust of eons lies

of a car glass gloss bonsai
dizzy swirling all snafu
and fly
into the blue

split silently asunder
lity untwined
cool smooth like new

laid onto another
angelic leonine
no clue!

Frieze Restored

On gray we see a heavy fold a few
Curled locks of hair cracked wings an eagle's eye
A forceful handprint where the residue
Of passing time the dust of eons lies

A fender of a car glass gloss bonsai
The world is dizzy swirling all snafu
Two marble heels flash in the sun and fly
Across the mirrors floors into the blue

The universe split silently asunder
One half of the reality untwined
The stone is still the same cool smooth like new

But strangely overlaid onto another
The profile still angelic leonine

no clue!

Young Masters

Taras Shevchenko

Translated from the Ukrainian
by Anatoly Belilovsky

Young masters, if you were to go
where children do in misery grow,
you would not praise your God in vain,
you would not speak of knowing pain,
nor laugh while listening to cries,
nor call a “rustic paradise”
a poor hovel in a marsh
where I began my poor, harsh,
and hungry life. Upon its floor
my first tear fell; its crooked door
kept light without and dark within,
the evil deeds of Devil’s kin
and spawns of Hades, may they rot,
were daily suffered in this hut.
Young masters, tell me, in what wise
does this resemble paradise?

While wrapping me in swaddling cloth
my mother sang. She bore her cross
with sadness as befit a slave,
starved, beaten to an early grave,

soon after that, one summer day
my father died while on corvee,
my sisters worked as hired maids
till gray ran through their maiden braids,
my brothers shaved and sent to war
as new recruits. I, youngest, bore
buckets of water for young men
who sat and learned in school. What, then,
can I recall as paradise,
when I had with my own eyes
seen so much evil. Thou knowest best,
O Lord. Is all this then a jest,
a shared joke at our expense
between you and your high-born friends
who rule above us here on Earth?
I cannot fathom which is worse:
the thought that masters do Thy will
when they rob us and do us ill,
or that Thou disapprovest, yet
mayst shed a tear and stop at that,
and though Thou canst, Thou shalt not tell
our masters not to turn to hell
our earthly lives. Thy works include
our fertile fields, our quiet woods,
green meadows, and the singing brook
where willows bathe their branches. Look,
here, obscured from Thy sight
people, not willows, weep. Light
does not reach us, though its rays
warm others. Why, then, do we praise
Thy works, and raise a joyful noise
when masters think of us as toys,

Taras Shevchenko, trans. from the Ukrainian by Anatoly Belilovsky

as playthings, pets, as mindless beasts,
as brutes, as lowest of the least,
as slaves fit only to plough the earth?
O Lord! Hast Thou, too, been cursed?

Contemporary Russian Poetry

A Personal Anthology

Selected and translated
by Philip Nikolayev

Evgeny Khorvat (1961-1993)

When you recall those days of viscous frosts'
vicious attacks,
the prickliness of those Varangian mitts
and knitted socks,
and too the whole fragmentary delight
and tricky mess
that make up the kaleidoscope of white
plates smashed for happiness.

In rhyme, in rhyme a-cussing Europe,
no Graecian calends we await
nor in a black snowless December hope
for snow up to the waist,
but we transport ourselves directly
into the core of being,
and may I have there 200 ml exactly
of vodka, darling?

Я'll turn away like the Latinate R
to face the blank wall. Seek not the ideal
in life. You yourself must set an example
for someone, yes, you, all wrapped as you are
wrapped in your blanket. The question is, whom
does one address here, it wouldn't by any
chance be oneself? In the midst of this gloom
hope for another would border on funny.

Lie in the morning, don't run anywhere,
not even toward the gunfight in your head,
being past knowing which side of the bed
to get up on, in what sort of affair,
each blessed morning. So simply reverse-
map these white nights, their transocular dark:
what you derive at the end of the verse
are, inescapably, days of pitch-black.

Lie on the floor that's as lovely as the
woman you wish, watch the ceiling, up there
seeds of the future are sprouting, to be
being the key verb here, and changing forever.

1980

Oleg Dozmorov (b. 1974)

In a Park

Here is a boy on a bench by his mother,
a pirate is writ large all over him.
From here, his life is clear right to its other
End, to the closing credits, like a film.

He'll live to be a poet of distinction,
as my best friend and perhaps even I,
or possibly (thought this is sad to mention)
he'll be a killer, cause my brain to die.

Or maybe he'll grow up to be a nobody,
a happy fellow, a complete nonentity
whom neither light of heaven can enthuse
nor splendors of this pretty earth seduce.

Last night they opened a new pizzeria.
The mid-aged bugler blew his flourishes
amid a racket of gifts and bulimia,
ethnic diversity and screaming kids.

They filled with helium many a balloon,
hung flowers on the door and shook their booty.
How boring's life. How pitiful is man.
What falsity and meanness hide in beauty.

Northern Song

You'd think I would find it a bother
that this is the north, and freezing,
but I love the godawful weather –
floridity isn't my thing.

I prefer the cornfield and forest
that are free of all frills and bare.
Rhymes, too, are best at their simplest:
the plainer and poorer, the better.

Timur Kibirov (b. 1955)

Their Lord and Ours

That nation's Lord is second to none!
He's been a true hero since day one!
A fearless warrior, he's always gone
Into battle the moment it's begun,
Leading the faithful to martial fun!
His crescent sword shines in the sun,
His horse cannot be outrun!
As to our Lord – take a good look, my son –
He is riding a donkey – clippety-clop –
On the path toward his own death.

Those folk's Lord too is an awesome one,
He both is calm and makes you calm,
He gives and is true peace and calm,
Silent in a lotus position,
Nothing can tempt him to succumb,
Amid this mundane and fickle realm,
To its passions and pandemonium!
As to our Lord – take a good look, my son –
He is riding a donkey – clippety-clop –
On the path toward his own death.

And those people's Lord is a mighty one!
He owns this world, which is his to own!
He rules, he controls with might and main
This earth, this age, and even this brain!
A dancing crowd around his throne,
Humankind chants “Evan Evoe,”

Even you, even I, and everyone!
But our Lord – take a good look, my son –
Is riding a donkey – clippety-clop –
On the path toward his own death.

He rideth to face his terrible death,
And yours, and mine in the same one breath,
So cry not: wherever death hideth,
Our Lord findeth, for to trample it by death!

Dennis Novikov (1967-2004)

Whenever a forecast comes true
(so disbelievers beg for mercy)
other communications too
start to be taken seriously.

But the old diary of news
and Tolkunova's wailed hysteria
don't have a clue that they's imbued
with a mysterious fresh flavor.

To Ye. M.

Blessed is he who, trusting echoes
among this woman's slenderness,
the flowers wilting in the vase,
and the absolute emptiness

of verses that in seeming ardor
are pouring forth so smooth, so fine,
finds there the harmonies of order
or signs of magical design.

i shall not break this silence
siesta dead and deep
may thus your sons the finest
enjoy their final sleep

come poetry bring by request
each son a colored dream
aim slightly higher to the left
make sure to hit us clean

Sentimental Song

Burst into a derisive laughter,
laugh at me too, at me as well,
as at a foreign Gastarbeiter –
say, hey, go home, pal, or to hell.

Don't recognize my sacred talent,
at any cost, no matter what,
just do not kill me – that's sufficient,
bury me not, bury me not.

Rain will pour from ledges, shake its rattle,
bringing recollections in the fall.
I'm like rain, I challenge ferrous metal.
When I pass you will recall.
Rain will drum its head against the pavement
(wrench tears out of stones, if you insist).
I'm like rain, I don't exist completely,
yet it's thanks to me that you exist.

what you're dealing with here is a different man
who no longer supposes himself
oscar wilde come from gaol with a lifeless old cane
and a sinister rot on his lip
why are fate's rented lodgings all furnished like crap
uninviting and sad to the max
while the artist forever gets played for a sap
by rank wannabes ignorant brats

Sergey Gandlevsky (b. 1952)

For Dmitry A. Prigov

Our fatherland, stuff of legend, heroism...
Back in the day, say, an express train's coming,
But the rail track's dismantled, human error,
So a wreck seems inevitable. The train
Is full of people. Enter a Soviet boy scout
Upon the site of danger. Removing
From his thin neck his scarlet neckerchief,
He waves it in the air. The engine driver,
Sticking his head out of the locomotive,
Soon realizes something isn't right.
He pulls a lever with his practiced hand –
And the catastrophe has been prevented.

Another example: an express train's coming,
But the rail track's dismantled through human error,
A wreck seeming inevitable. The train
Is full of people. Enter the old switchtender
Upon the site of danger. With a jack-knife,
He opens his veins, reddens a rag with his blood,
And waves it in the air. The engine driver,
Sticking his head out of the locomotive,
Soon realizes something isn't right.
He pulls a lever with his practiced hand –
And the catastrophe has been prevented.

And what about today? A fast train's coming,
The track, intact, extends to the horizon,
And otherwise conditions are also perfect,

Whether you choose to study, work, or combine
Working with taking courses by correspondence.
Everything's changed now. The boyscout has grown
To ripe adulthood, gained weight, settled down,
He has become a big boss at the railroad
And yells at the old switchtender and threatens
To send him into rehab for alcoholics.

To get hired as a long-haul trucker
And sing that “black revolver” song.
Never to visit your old mother
In as long as ten years are long.
Transiting from Gazli, down south,
To score a lay, to bite her mouth,
In thrusting throes of moonshine joy
To get her preggo with a boy.
The greasy spoon serves stew on Wednesday,
On Thursday it’s green cod with peas.
To brag to pals at lunch how gladly
You’ll kick your supervisor’s ass.
Crossing the watershed of 30,
Peddling state timber on the side
On each illicit early ride,
To sing the “black revolver” ditty.
And in between gigs, to surrender
To sleep, perchance to dream, and to
Grimly, on waking up, remember
Last month, the big brawl in Baku.

1983

Sergey Kutanin (b. 1952)

Could you kindly prescribe me a med,
One more powerful even than senility,
So that I might entirely forget
That fake tsardom with tales of futurity,

And forget what I've read in news media,
And with whom had discussions at length,
What can happen for real in this lifetime, dear,
And what could never happen till death,

So my world shrinks all right – to my nearest
And my dearest, to what is at hand.
While much knowledge is just so much risk,
Little knowledge is peace without end.

A Summer's Love

The sky-blue ovals of your fingernails
Are tiny coves of my recollections.
Your glances prickle softly,
Like a branch of a Crimean pine.
We were descending some narrow streets
Between tall walls
Behind which miniature magic palaces were lurking
And the big grandfather clock of the funicular
Was moving its weights directly overhead,
Counting off the precious days of joy and anxiety.
The sun would set wherever it deigned,
And we too slept wherever we pleased.
It was simple: I was the object of your desire
And you were the universe of my attraction.
We would lie side by side on the beach,
Ashamed neither of our youth nor of our maturity,
Hot and salty to the tongue like seaside pebbles,
Our shoulders touching like wave and counterwave,
Neither reflected by nor concerned with the clouds,
While all the while gently edging summer's end,
With its bated breath, into autumn.

The stern northern lakes of your eyes
Flashing their scintillations,
We were remote parts of the world to each other,
Yet united here for the first time,
Welcomed and joined together by the South.
We would first dive into the cold depths,
Maneuvering among fish and rocks,
And then emerge back into the layer of warmth
And other people, celebrating the blessed right
To be no different than everybody else.

After that we would leave for the mountain,
Slowing our pace under shady trees,
Or find an eatery where I would devour
A lunch three times as big
As what I eat today...

My silly ideas of love, so divorced from reality,
Combining with your own trust issues,
Caused a Wever and Bray effect
Followed by the homeward bound train,
The carpet of golden leaves now rolled up and stowed away.
The high voltage power transmission lines
Were buzzing continually, but I had no one to buzz.
The fall became winter. A winter to nowhere.
Snow was covering,
Wrapping in deafness the last echoes of summer...

We will never be there again, together.
Our happiness has been smashed
Like a blind kitten against the fence of the magic palace.
The funicular has collapsed into my heart.
Your time and mine
Are no longer in the same millennium,
Barring the sun's return from behind the sea,
Barring the whole direction of life turning backwards.

It's a leaf rain – or a snow of leaves?
Or perhaps the shedding of all hopes...
Man, put on a sweater, pretty please,
While the woods lose their deciduous clothes.
It's not foliage, those are years in flight,
Harvested with quick dexterity.
What a pity: when the head turns white,
The mind hardly finds new clarity.

Andrey Toropov (b. 1978)

We read our Salinger when we were eighteen,
Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus, and others,
We know how to bend, to grovel, to demean
Ourselves, while asking “Why?” with the eyes.

Why? Just because love is always stronger,
Just because it will surely come no matter
What, though it hurts the more the longer
It takes with its sign: “Extreme Danger! Enter!”

It’s the last idea we can save in words
And sleep with ever after, with some luck;
Apart from that, we are deaf, blind, and idiot birds,
Woodcocks lekking. Hey, come join the lek!

Know what, we will never grow old,
Like Thyl or Nele, or like poems,
We'll merely turn rich, fat, and bald,
Hoarders of too much junk in homes.
The years will work their magic on us,
Yet they are powerless to reverse
Or tame the liberties of youth,
The stupid treasure troves of verse.

Alexander Kabanov (b. 1968)

Postsoviet

The first time I saw, at fifteeniftyfive,
a parcel of deer on a bright dappled day,
they came out so colorful, as if alive,
whereas you and I came out fuzzy and gray.

We soared up, unable to rise from our knees,
my ships turned all scurvy upon the high seas,
the high pickled seas with those olives of seals
we found in the morning, to learn how it feels.

But should you let scatter your bonbons of reindeer
or grow tired of treading on cupmoss and lichens,
you will be expunged from all records forever
by Motherland, famous indigenous woman.

The white vinyl's hissing at times with wild cussing,
the dictionary's brewing, the blizzard is chilling:
lo! – Grandfather Lenin is mounting a seal and
our Lenin-the-Maiden his antlers is raising.

What would it take for us to acknowledge our mistakes?
That we've brought in the scumbag thieves on our own backs,
That we, romantics, we, children of living dads,
have turned into a sect of witnesses of the dead.

He who goes against us must certainly come to harm,
like the Venus of Milo, her Kremlin's hand and arm
all withered away. So why do we shake and bawl?
It's because we invested all and we've lost it all.

All our promises to you are, frankly, for the birds,
for truth sticks to money while verity clings to words.
So these hands are clean, and clear are these eyes, have a look.
God has melted our clocks into cauldrons, by the book.

Those who go against us must live to regret it, yes.
Does it matter who burns like a cross in the Donetsk steppes
or who'll next embrace revenge as the holy word?
Father in heaven, give us today our daily sword.

I forgive you, blind fools, new history's engines, it's not your fault,
masquerading skoptsy of the self-castrating cult,
who despise and deride and generally treat like dung
this my precious Ukrainian Russian native tongue.

The night steppe burns, and the flames rise curling
As blind rainfall sews the lips shut tight.
Someone new will come along to surely
Win the Nobel Prize and kick the bucket.

The old supernova then will bloom
Over us, the Slavs, and them, the Goths.
Life is filled with loves and vacuum
And free death galore, which takes for good.

So break out the tinfish and the pickles
With a bottle of the best you've got.
As through a glass darkly, all your troubles
Will release their grip in just a shot.

Streaming in a cold flickering blade,
the steppe burns on for reasons unknown.
As our poetry, so Russian God:
now is here and now – behold – is gone.

Yuly Gugolev (b. 1964)

Odors, those varieties of smell,
can be good at swimming. Far they go,
like the bubble, straw and bast-shoe tale,
or the mellow tune of "Suliko."

Take this eatery. Amid all these
goodies, fruit-starch drink and cottage cheese,
one will sometimes catch a pong of chlorine,
of the morgue, of desiccated pine.

Other times, you come to say goodbye
to a corpse, and smell a sudden a whiff,
by the morgue, of baking apple pie,
and the sun shines, and leaf clings to leaf...

Alexey Alexandrov (b. 1968)

It is possible, inserting your hand into a sack,
to pull out nothing but a toolkit, to drink
a quantity of kvass to cope with hunger.

Crop failures, the bird that totally looks
like a burned shrub, and the kind words
of technical support, all flake in tufts.

Because the sun, the river and the wind
are fear, grief, and ultimate despair of
explaining anything to the focus group.

These are not mere difficulties
of translation; these are arrows
and pictograms, basic colors and sounds.

23.06.2016

Tatyana Shcherbina (b. 1954)

On the Murder of Boris Nemtsov

In Russia, the true medal is the bullet.
A gold pistol embroiders crosses
In crude white thread over golden heroes'
Black case files, as knots for memory.
A blood trickle's red thread escapes
Across ages, exploding into a fountain,
When the sling is vested with such power:
In the order of the mantle of the bloody lining
Execution rhymes with executive branch.

March 2015

Olga Chugai (1944-2015)

The Garden

The clear-eyed, chiseled chillness of September,
The orchard wicket, the old stairs, the door –
The world's encased in a deciduous armor,
In falling foliage, all a yellow blur.

This garden Eden stretched from door to wicket
Will in the coming days strip slowly naked,
The next thing you will know is that October
Has set in for a long continual shower.

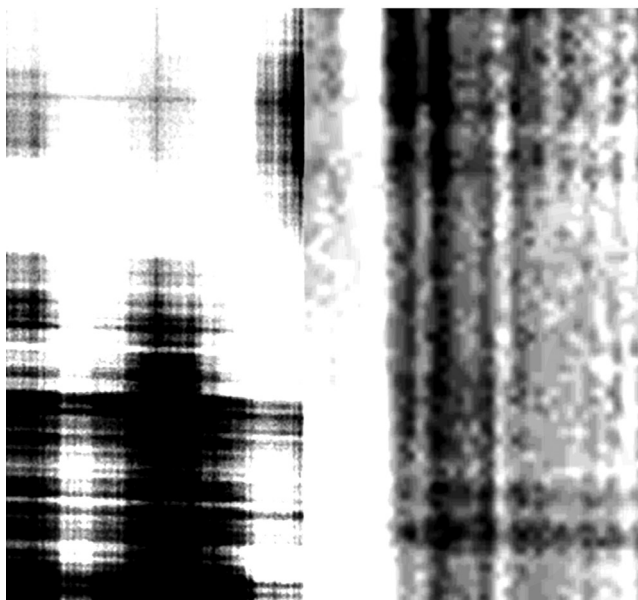
How little, in this life, one really needs:
A love tryst on a day of falling leaves,
The latch click like the safety of a gun,
And a firm, warm arm easy to lean on.

I meet in grief and fear each passing day
And pray, sweet autumn, for a brief delay,
Since all that's burning here, quietly warming
Us, will soon disappear without warning.
Burn on, but in no haste to burn away!

On a red light, toward a nightingale's
Or highwayman's hoot in a chilly coppice,
My soul, vacating thus this body's office,
Flies like the last leaf on the last of calls.

And possibly, nightmoths toward the light,
And maybe, too, children toward some danger,
Fly, sensing in the same uncertain manner
The last moment, but seeing only light.

The Art of Translation



Teffi: Translator and Translated

Edythe Haber

A reviewer of my book, *Teffi: A Life of Letters and of Laughter*, asked about Teffi's knowledge of foreign languages. One language in which she was surely proficient was French, since she lived in France for over thirty years after fleeing revolutionary Russia in 1919. But Teffi's mastery of the language long preceded her emigration, for during the previous decade she and her younger sister Elena Lokhvitskaya co-translated several large-scale works from the French: Guy de Maupassant's *Sur l'eau* (*Na vode*, 1911, in vol. 22 of his collected works); Georges Lenotre's *Paris révolutionnaire* (*Parizh v dni revoliutsii*, 1912; their translation revised and republished in 2006 as *Everyday Life of Paris during the Great Revolution*); André Rivoire's play, *Le bon roi Dagobert* (*Korol' Dagober*), translated in rhymed couplets and staged in Moscow in 1915. In emigration Teffi read French literature widely in the original (it was said that Proust was a favorite), although her spoken language was far from flawless, if one is to believe her assertion that her daughter Valeria "painstakingly (with concealed horror) corrects my mistakes in French."

As for other foreign languages, evidence is sketchier. Teffi did take English lessons in the 1930s, and in her notebooks she occasionally jotted down an odd English phrase ("Every dog has his day"). But she invariably refers to English-language works by their French titles (e.g., Graham Greene's *Troisième homme*), suggesting limited reading ability. The other language, aside from French, in which Teffi achieved some command was Polish (the first language of her former husband and her daughters). In an interview given while visiting Warsaw in 1927 she demonstrated a wide knowledge of contemporary Polish literature, singling out the poetry – and translations from the Russian – of the outstanding poet, Julian Tuwim.

It was in Poland, indeed, that Teffi's works in translation enjoyed the greatest success. Her popularity was such that during her 1927 visit, she "was besieged by Polish journalists," according to one report. She owed much of her celebrity to her daughter Valeria, whose translations of her mother's works were published widely in newspapers and as separate collections. (Tuwim also translated a small book of Teffi's stories.) Such success in Poland, however – and in her daughter's translations – while no doubt gratifying, in the larger scheme of things counted it for very little in Teffi's estimation. "Who needs it!" she wrote of translations into Polish and another Slavic language, Czech. She was eager to appear in a "European language," she wrote – not only because it might lead to greater recognition in the West, but also for purely pecuniary reasons. The reason she was trying to get published in Sweden, she explained, was "because it is a hard currency country."

Yet Teffi was singularly unsuccessful in getting books published in any "European language." Although scattered stories appeared in many languages (French, German, Polish, Czech, Bulgarian, Serbian, English, Spanish, Georgian, Chinese, Swedish, and Turkish, according to her own testimony), the only books published in translation were an Italian version of *An Adventure Novel* (1933?) and two collections of stories in French, which came out shortly after the war (none of which attracted much notice). Teffi, in a clipping preserved in her archive, noted the particular difficulty faced by writers in exile: "Music, painting, dance are understood everywhere. But the art of the word is doomed to loneliness among alien nations." Teffi, with her verbal acrobatics, had particular difficulty overcoming this "loneliness." As the writer Alexander Amfiteatrov (Teffi's great champion in Italy) noted, he saw "a great deal over which a translator would have to rack his brains."

Aside from the difficulty of translating Teffi's language, the economic and political realities of the interwar years presented further barriers. The Depression hit publishers hard and Russians (both Soviets and émigrés) were looked upon with increasing suspicion, since, as Teffi's Swedish translator wrote her, the publishers "fear Bolshevik propaganda." And the post-war period saw no improvement. A few of Teffi's stories came out in German and Spanish in the 1940s, but

her pieces were rejected by the *New Yorker*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and elsewhere – not surprisingly, given the awkwardness of the translations (preserved among Teffi's papers), which failed to convey her wit and sparkling style. Moreover, the anti-Russian sentiment engendered by the Cold War presented an added obstacle, leading Teffi's translator, R.D. Pollett to suggest that Teffi pass off a film scenario as the work of "some Smith from Minnesota," since she "captured . . . the primitivism of American psychology." The ruse, not surprisingly, did not work.

Teffi would have to wait until well into the 21st century for her works to receive their due in English, thanks to the fine renderings by Robert Chandler and his team of translators. If she could only know, she would no doubt be gratified and – with her acute sense of irony – amused that her goal was fulfilled more than sixty years after her death.

Pyotr Vyazemsky

Three Youthful Epigrams, and Poems of Gloomy Old Age

Peter France

Prince Pyotr Vyazemsky (1792-1878), close friend of Pushkin, was for Yevgeny Baratynsky (1800-1844) the “star of our scattered constellation” (the *Pléiade* of the Golden Age) and a central figure in the literary world of his time. Unlike most of his fellow poets, though, he lived through the 19th century, dying in 1878 at the age of eighty-six. Wealthy, noble and privileged, the young prince was a close associate of the slightly older Vasily Zhukovsky (1783-1852) and Konstantin Batyushkov (1787-1855), an iconoclastic disciple of Voltaire and one of the founding members of the modernist Arzamas circle, directing shafts of wit at the pillars of dullness, pomposity and traditional literary values. Before he was twenty, he had fought at Borodino; later he took up an official post in Warsaw, but was dismissed on account of his subversive views. In the long decades that followed, however, as his friends died or went mad, Vyazemsky had to come to terms with a detested regime, accepting a series of government appointments, including that of chief censor. The writers of the new generation regarded this one-time rebel as a dyed-in-the-wool reactionary.

All this time, in addition to a magnificent range of prose works and letters, he continued to write poetry, remaining true to the rather classical style of his youth (though he was a great champion of Romanticism). Even in his last years, in poor health and low spirits, he still turned to verse to express himself, these last poems being strikingly outspoken and sharply written.

The translations offered here represent the two extremes of his career. I begin with three epigrams written when he was barely twenty, and puncturing respectively an obscurantist journalist, a bad poet, and the justice system. Then comes a leap of sixty years, to a group of grim short poems – the vigorous testament of a disappointed man who has outlived his time. The final poem looks back to his famous “Farewell to a Dressing-Gown” of 1817, where the dressing-gown stands for the freedom of independent literary life.

*

“Friend of Enlightenment,” the journal
of poor Kartuzov proudly claims.
O changing times! O age infernal!
Such are the friends our age proclaims!

*

On a Certain Poem

Kutuzov’s sword has saved the fatherland
from the new bogeyman in human shape,
but from your verse, where common sense is banned
Russia could not escape.

*

Why do our poets and our sculptors paint
Justice equipped with scales and sword?
The sword to smite the innocent,
the scales to weigh the piles of gold.

*

from Spleen, with Bright Intervals

I.

At night I take a draft of chloral
like Mithridates, poison's friend,
and seek sweet rest, the consolation
of dreams, until they too will end.

Life weighs on me, I want oblivion
and not to know I am alive;
I want to free myself from living
and everything that life can give.

Unbroken sleep, annihilation,
calm after the tempestuous day,
pay me for all my tribulations,
for life, so burdensome to me.

II.

Life and life's incidents appear
to me in a confusing dream,
and painfully, all I have seen
takes on a different face for me.

What made me happy makes me grieve,
what once I loved annoys me now;
disease like a bitter draft fills me
with bile, turns all my feelings sour.

In me two warring principles
struggle incessantly. My mind
constantly labours, but my will
and spirit have been undermined.

With reason's glass I scrutinize
the struggle going on in me;
with a detached, observant eye
I watch its progress carefully.

And consciously I blame myself
for this disorder, but the blame
has no effect, my feebleness
and misery remain the same.

Mere consciousness does little good,
it gives me neither life nor zest
and serves as just another goad
that drives into my injured breast.

The humble slave of my sad fate,
I don't dispute or strive with it;
no, like a fearful combattant,
without a struggle I submit.

III.

Vicious, unruly feelings have made
their nesting-place deep in my soul;
I hate the healthy, and I hate
the happy people of this world.

In them I see what I have lost.
It seems to me that life has bred

brazen usurpers who have brought
destruction down upon my head;

that with their cruel, mocking joy,
when life conspires to drive me mad,
they take health from me and enjoy
the happiness that once I had.

IV. *Riddle*

They set me down to read a book
that's hard to read, for it is just
a mix of truth and made-up stuff –
the truth is dull, the rest is guff.

How many misprints it contains!
How much to fuddle readers' brains!
I haven't the strength or inclination
to read it through in just one session.

Now, by a lantern's dwindling light,
waiting for darkness to descend,
in sadness and disgust I sit
and concentrate upon the end.

It's all experience, they say –
you must be patient, see it through –
then promise me as consolation
that there will be a sequel too.

Thank you! One's quite enough for me!
This volume has so got me down
that I would groan in agony
to have to read another one.

V.

Born in the vegetable kingdom,
I must have sun and shade and air;
For life and all its tribulations
I am too lazy, full of care.

Here, in the vale of tears and struggles,
are worries, sacrifices, pain –
a baffling puzzle for poor mortals,
and my head cannot stand the strain.

With gloomy self-reproach I say it:
I wasn't born equipped to fight;
by Destiny I was created
unfit for nature and for life.

No, in my vegetable kingdom
I feed on the warm light of day,
And life with all its tribulations
Is too laborious for me.

VI.

He went off to Rostov
– Dmitriev

So-and-so's dead. So what? He lived, he died.
Yes, died! That's it. We all meet the same end.
His number came up in the book of life.
"He went off to Rostov" – that's all it said.
We're all bound for Rostov. Some will go sooner
and others later, bound for the same berth.
Everyone has a ticket in his pocket.

For every one of us death comes from birth.
And then? Aye, there's the rub. How can we know
why we should come, then go? A mystery...
And earthly pilgrims nurse a single thought:
mysterious Rostov, what will it be?

1876?

*

With age, our life's a threadbare dressing-gown;
ashamed to wear it, we can't let it go.
Close as a pair of brothers we have grown;
we can't be mended or once more made new.

As we have aged, so it has aged. Our life
in tatters hangs on us, it too is worn,
spattered and scribbled on – and yet we love
these inky stains more than some fine design.

They are the traces of a pen through which
in days of happiness or cloudy grief
we poured our hidden feelings out, our rich
conceptions, and the miseries of life.

On life too, days gone by have left their mark;
it bears the scars of much that did us harm.
The shadow of our sorrows makes it dark,
but in this shadow there's a wistful charm.

The past lives in it, a familiar voice
still sounds in the heart's memory of loss;
the morning's freshness, noon's resplendent face,
return to us even as the daylight goes.

Peter France

At times, I still feel love for my old life
with all the pains and sorrows I have known.
A soldier with a cloak shredded by strife,
I love and honor my old dressing-gown.

1874/1877

Isn't that a Splendid Song: On Rolling "Kolobok" into English Verse

Siân Valvis

I came across this Russian folk-tale during my MA studies at Bath University. After a year of muddling through texts that were legal, technical, or political, our teacher set us one final task: "Kolobok." Perhaps she sensed that we needed something joyful – something inspiring!

We had 72 hours to render a translation free of inaccuracies and faithful to the style and form of the original. As always, I started by scrupulously poring over each and every word, gingerly shaping the text into a story.

The source text was written in prose. Only Kolobok's little song, repeated throughout the tale, was in verse. The song brought to mind Roald Dahl's famous Revolting Rhymes – a wickedly charming retelling of popular fairy tales – which I channeled as I tried to find a rhythm and rhyming pattern that worked.

I kept the rest diligently close to the Russian. However, in my effort to be accurate, I couldn't help but feel I'd failed to convey the life and spirit of the original text. As I tried to make sense of why this might be, I noticed little rhyming parts peppered throughout the Russian version – for example, "По амбару помети, по сусечкам поскреби – вот и наберётся." These added rhythm and buoyancy, even without a rhyming pattern.

Gradually, I allowed myself to play with the odd rhyme here and there. In doing so, I became inspired: it was as though the rhyming version was already within, trying to emerge, and it was up to me to peel bits away. As it began to flow, I would come up with the first line of the couplet, and the second line would follow, almost automatically.

However, upon finishing, I took stock of the piece again: the entire translation was now in rhyming couplets. The original was 400 words, and my version was 800 words. “Морда” (“snout”) had become “nose.” I felt a wave of dread wash over me – in search of the spirit, had I strayed too far from the form?

With the deadline looming, all that was left was to produce a commentary detailing my process with reference to translation theory. In the last seconds before submitting, by which point my every thought was in verse, I decided that the best way to contextualize my thinking was to continue as I’d started:

Commentary

The commentary for this may leave a lot to be desired,
For it was just at 6 am that I was thoroughly inspired,
To put my almost finished text entirely into verse,
I promise, though, I’ll stop before I make it any worse!

I uploaded my translation and waited for a response. After what felt like an eternity, finally it came:

Feedback

Improvements or corrections? I won’t make a single one.
There’s little I can comment on, except to say “Well Done”!

*

Once upon a time in a land quite far away,
Lived an old man and his lady who was just as old and grey.

“Bake me a little bun, Old Girl?” asked the man one day.
“From what? We have no flour left!” she said, to his dismay.

“Just rummage round the granary and gather up the crumbs,
You’re sure to find enough for one delicious, little bun.”

The woman did just so: she scratched and scraped up all the flour,
She kneaded it together, before adding in the sour –
Cream and rolled into a little bun, a round and sunny fellow,
She fried the bun – the *kolobok* – till he was golden yellow,
She teetered on the wooden stool and laid him on the sill,
She made sure he was comfortable and left him there to chill.

Alas, the little kolobok got bored of lying down,
He rolled and rolled and rolled until he landed on the ground,
From windowsill to bench and from the bench onto the floor,
He was aiming for the courtyard as he bounded through the door.

As the little kolobok rolled along the way,
He came upon a RABBIT who turned to him to say:
“Oh, Little Kolobok! I’ll eat you up in one!”
“Oh no you don’t, you cheeky hare! Not till you’ve heard my song!”

As the rabbit listened on,
The kolobok began his song:

“I’m a little kolobok – a jolly little bun!
In the granary they scraped me,
Out of crumbs they patacaked me,
Into sour cream they dipped me,
In the frying pan they flipped me,
On the windowsill they slipped me,
But Grandpa couldn’t catch me,
And Grandma couldn’t snatch me,
You can try to eat me, too,
But Rabbit – I’m too smart for you!”

And off went the kolobok, till he was out of sight.

As the little kolobok rolled along the way,
He came upon a WOLF who turned to him to say:
“Oh, Little Kolobok! I’ll eat you up in one!”
“Oh no you won’t, you grey, old wolf! Not till you’ve heard my song!”

Then, before the wolf had time,
The kolobok began his rhyme:

“I’m a little kolobok – a roly, poly bun!
In the granary they scraped me,
Out of crumbs they patacaked me,
Into sour cream they dipped me,
In the frying pan they flipped me,
On the windowsill they popped me,
But Grandpa couldn’t stop me,
And Grandma couldn’t snatch me,
And Rabbit couldn’t catch me,
You can try to eat me, too,
But Wolfy – I’m too smart for you!”

And off went the kolobok, till he was out of sight.

The kolobok continued through the woods without a care,
When crashing through the bushes came a great big bolshie BEAR.

“Oh, Little Kolobok! I’ll eat you up in one!”
“Oh no you can’t, you clumsy bear! Not till you’ve heard my song!”

As the bear was sitting pretty,
Kolobok began his ditty:

“I’m a little kolobok – a happy, scrappy bun!
In the granary they scraped me,
Out of crumbs they patacaked me,

Into sour cream they dipped me,
In the frying pan they flipped me,
On the windowsill they popped me,
But Grandpa couldn't stop me,
And Grandma couldn't snatch me,
And Rabbit couldn't catch me,
Wolfy tried to eat me,
You can try to eat me, too,
But Bear – I'm just too smart for you!"

And off went the kolobok, till he was out of sight.

As the little kolobok rolled along the way,
He came upon a wily FOX who turned to him to say:

"Well, goodness me! Who could this be? This fine and dandy fellow!
I dare say it's a kolobok – all soft and golden yellow."

Kolly-bolly kolobok got ready to begin,
While foxy sidled closer and listened with a grin:

"I'm a little kolobok – a merry little bun!
In the granary they scraped me,
Out of crumbs they patacaked me,
Into sour cream they dipped me,
In the frying pan they flipped me,
On the windowsill they popped me,
But Grandpa couldn't stop me,
And Grandma couldn't snatch me,
And Rabbit couldn't catch me,
Wolfy tried to grab me,
And Bear tried to nab me,
You can try to eat me, too,
But Foxy – I'm too smart for you!"

“Well, isn’t that a splendid song!” said foxy, drawing near,
“But since I’m old, I hate to say, I’m struggling to hear.
Perhaps, my little kolobok, allow me to propose,
You sing your song, just one more time, but this time on my nose?”

Delighted was the kolobok, so proud of what he’d sung,
With a mighty little jump onto the fox’s nose he sprung:

“I’m a little kolobok – a jolly little bun...”
When – “GULP!” went the wily fox and ate him up in one!

Sergei Khmelnitsky: Tantamount to Death

Kevin Windle

Sergei Khmelnitsky's reputation as a poet, resting on a slim collection of striking verse, has been overshadowed by his accomplishments in a different field, as a long-serving KGB informer and collaborator. The historical context of this poem is vital. It refers to the day in 1964 when the poet's former friends Yury Bregel and Vladimir Kabo ("you boys") spoke at the defence of his doctoral thesis and declared that in 1949 he had fabricated the evidence on which they were sentenced to ten years in a labour camp. Unable to deny the irreversible misdeed alluded to in the second stanza, Khmelnitsky felt the public humiliation as tantamount to death.³²

In 1966, when two other close friends, the writers Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuly Daniel, were charged with anti-Soviet activity, Khmelnitsky appeared at their trial. It emerged that he had been instrumental in revealing to the KGB the identities behind their pseudonyms, and had supplied ideas to Daniel.³³ Vivid pen-portraits of the *poète provocateur*, fully acknowledging his talent, can be found in Kabo's memoirs and Sinyavsky's novel *Good Night*.³⁴

³² For more detail, see Kevin Windle, "The Belly of the Whale Revisited: The History and Literature Surrounding a Character in Terts's *Spokoinoi noch*," *Slavonic and East European Review* 76, no. 1 (January 1998), pp. 1-27.

³³ A valuable account of these events may be found in the memoirs of Igor Golomshtok, "Vospominaniia starogo pessimista," *Znamia* 3 (2011): <http://magazines.russ.ru/znamia/2011/3/go85.html>; in English as *A Ransomed Dissident: A Life in Art Under the Soviets*, trans. Sara Jolly and Boris Dralyuk (London: I. B. Tauris, 2019).

³⁴ Vladimir Kabo, *Doroga v Avstraliu* (New York: Effect Publishing, 1995); in English as *The Road to Australia*, trans. Rosh Ireland and Kevin Windle (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1998); Abram Terts, *Spokoinoi noch* (Paris: Sintaksis, 1984); in English as *Goodnight!*, trans. Richard Lourie (London: Viking, 1991).

The poem is of interest for the light it sheds on what Sinyavsky called “the dark, magical night of the Stalinist dictatorship” and the mind of a servant of that regime. It derives its effect from its simple colloquial language shaped into classical iambic tetrameter, with a discreet pattern of rhyme. The fact that English words are generally shorter means that added syllables with little material content are needed to replicate the original meter. The translator also faces the perennial problem of avoiding forced or trite rhymes in a language that is relatively poor in rhyme. The original prosody must be reproduced as far as possible, since a bald rendering of the semantics alone would convey little sense of the poet’s verbal artistry.

*

A year or so ago today
a falling archway took my life.
Some falling brickwork crushed my back.
No, no, you boys are not to blame.
Good heavens no!
Who told you that?
No, quite the opposite, in fact.
It would have happened just the same.

I felt its weight upon my head
and saw that wrong can’t be set right.
The Lord forgive your falling arch
and cloying dust which clogged my eyes.
I wasn’t forced to leave; I fled,
forlorn and out of luck that night
a year or so
ago today.

June 29, 1965

AUTHORS

Tatyana Apraksina is known as an artist and author engaged with the world of music, as well as for producing the cultural magazine *Apraksin Blues*. A native of St. Petersburg, she has worked with soloists and ensembles including the St. Petersburg Philharmonic and the original Borodin Quartet. She has exhibited at music and art venues in Europe and North America. She has created an extensive body of art and writing while based in California. In the United States, her work has been shown under the auspices of the Soros Foundation.

Anatoly Belilovsky was born in a city that changed hands six or seven times in the last century; he watched tanks roll through it on their way to Czechoslovakia in 1968. After being traded to the US for a shipload of grain and a defector to be named later, he learned English from reruns of *Star Trek*. He is an SFWA member with over 50 publications, and blogs about writing at loldoc.net.

Yura Dashevsky is a screenwriter and a translator residing in Brooklyn, New York.

Zina Deretsky, a Leningrad-born adoptive daughter of California, is a medical and science illustrator with a penchant for all things oceanic and wild. Aleksandr Gorodnitsky's song illuminated her imagination as a child and continues to give her life flavor when she swims around the tall ships in San Francisco Bay.

Peter France lives in Edinburgh, where he was professor of French until 2000. He has published widely on French and Russian literature and on literary translation. His translations include prose works by Diderot and Rousseau, and Russian poetry by Baratynsky, Batyushkov, Lermontov, Annensky, Mandelstam, Mayakovsky, and Gennady Aygi. His most recent publication is devoted to Konstantin

Batyushkov, *Writings from the Golden Age of Russian Poetry* (Columbia University Press, 2017).

Alexander Gorodnitsky is a Russian bard who has a PhD in geophysics. Many of his songs touch on his personal experiences sailing in the Arctic aboard a scientific research vessel.

Sergei Khmelnitsky (1925-2003) was an architect, aesthete, poet, and friend of Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuly Daniel. He was exposed in 1964 as a long-term KGB informant.

Clare Kitson came to translation late, after forty years working in cinema and television. She began translating from Russian, following an inspiring summer school, with a variety of short pieces including the Teffi gem, “Que faire?” Since then she has mainly been translating Solzhenitsyn, notably one, as yet unpublished, volume of *The Red Wheel*.

Dmitri Likhachev (1906-1999) was trained as a medievalist and achieved renown as a scholar of Old Russian language and literature. In 1928, he was arrested and spent almost five years in a penal camp on the Solovetsky Islands for criticizing the spelling reforms of 1918. After the Second World War, having survived the Siege of Leningrad, he embarked on a distinguished academic career and was elected a Member of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR in 1970. He became well known to the wider public for his efforts to promote and preserve Russia’s cultural heritage and his support of numerous dissidents, including Andrei Sakharov. In his final years, he was greatly admired by many Russians as a defender of Russian moral and aesthetic values, and it is in this role that he wrote *Letters on the Good and the Beautiful*.

Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938), who came of age in St. Petersburg and was a central figure in the Acmeist movement, is recognized as one of the major poets of the 20th century.

Dmitri Manin is a physicist, programmer, and translator of poetry. His translations from English and French into Russian have appeared in several books, and his Russian-to-English translations have been published in journals. In 2018 he won the Compass Award for his translation of a poem by Maria Stepanova.

James Manteith is a translator, writer, and musician. He studied at Middlebury College and St. Petersburg State University. His writings on and renderings of works by Tatyana Apraksina stem from a key mentorship with the artist, author, and editor-in-chief of *Apraksin Blues*. In addition to her *California Psalms* (Radiolarian), his book-length translation credits include *Physics in a Mad World* and *Under the Spell of Landau*. He also translates for singing, exploring Russian and other musical traditions, and writes settings of Russian poetry as well as original songs.

Nora Moseman is a writer, translator, and bookstore clerk who was shortlisted for the Compass Translation Award in 2012. She fell in love with the poetry of Anna Prismanova after a chance encounter in an anthology.

Yuri Nagibin (1920-1994) became a Red Army commissar at the outbreak of World War II and later a war correspondent. After the war he devoted himself to writing and was extremely prolific in a variety of genres: film scripts (co-writing the Oscar-winning *Dersu Uzala*), short stories, novellas, and some novels. His subject matter ranged widely, reflecting his dramatic times and an action-packed personal life. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, three years before his death, inspired a series of frank stories about Soviet political life.

Alexander Nakhimovsky grew up in Leningrad. After an honorable discharge from the Soviet Army with the rank of sergeant, he received an MA in mathematics from Leningrad University (1972). He also studied both at the Herzen Pedagogical Institute and at Tartu University, where Yury Lotman was one of his teachers.

He immigrated to the United States in 1975 and received a PhD in linguistics from Cornell University in 1982, with a graduate minor in Computer Science. He taught at Colgate University in the Computer Science Department until 2013, and served as the Director of its Linguistics Program until 2018. He is the author, co-author, or editor of a number of books and articles on computer technologies and Slavic linguistics. His most recent publications are on the history of the Russian language in the 20th century.

Philip Nikolayev is a Russo-American bilingual poet living in Boston. He is a polyglot and translates poetry from several languages. His poetic works are published in literary periodicals internationally, including *Poetry*, *The Paris Review*, and *Grand Street*. Nikolayev's collections include *Monkey Time* (Verse/Wave Books) and *Letters from Aldenderry* (Salt). His translations of selected poetry by Alexander Pushkin will be brought out by Littera Publishing later this year. He co-edits *Fulcrum*, a serial anthology of poetry and critical writing.

Anna Semyonovna Prismanova (1892-1960) was born and raised in what is now Latvia, and lived briefly in Moscow and Petrograd before fleeing to Paris, via Berlin, in 1921. She published four books of poems. Her verse is remarkable for its intricate web of repeated images and its obsessive yet playful interrogation of self, muse, and nature.

Vladimir Rabinovich was born in Minsk in 1950. He worked as a loader, scene decorator at a state puppet theater, as an EMT with a mobile psychiatric emergency unit, and served in the air defense forces. In 1980 he was convicted under Article 160 of the Belarus SSR Criminal Code (prohibited trade) and sentenced to two and a half years in prison. In 1987 he emigrated to the United States, and worked as a cab driver in New York City. He began to write in 2014, on Facebook, where he published about 700 short stories. Rabinovich's first collection of short stories, titled *Rabinovich, Have You No Shame?*, was published in Minsk in 2019.

Genrikh Sapgir (1928-1999), a prolific poet, writer, and translator, was one of the leaders of the avant-garde Lianozovo Group. Before Perestroika, only his children's poetry was published and widely known in Russia.

Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861) was born a serf, learned basic grammar from a church deacon, taught himself to read, write, and paint, and became one of the greatest Ukrainian poets before being bought out of serfdom by a consortium of Russian artists. He promptly lost his newfound freedom after being convicted for political activism by the tsarist government, but he continued to write. "Young Masters" is an example of the work for which Shevchenko was imprisoned and exiled.

Yevgeniy Sokolovsky was born in Kyiv, Ukraine, in 1974, and moved to the United States in 1992. He graduated from Columbia University, where he pursued a major in Russian literature and a concentration in Mathematics. He currently works as an academic librarian at Berkeley College, New Jersey. His translations of Russian poetry have been published in *Slovo/Word*, *Time and Place*, *Metamorphoses*, and *Cardinal Points*. His book of translations of Igor Guberman's quatrains, *75...*, came out in 2012.

Siân Valvis is a freelance interpreter and translator, based in São Paulo. She translates from French, Russian, Greek, and Portuguese, with a keen interest in poetry and children's literature.

Artyom Vesyoly (1899-1938) was a Soviet-era novelist, best-known for *Russia Bathed in Blood* (first published 1932). He was executed in the Great Purge on suspicion of support for "Trotskyites."

Prince **Pyotr Vyazemsky** (1792-1878) was a close friend of Pushkin and a key figure in Russian literature of the time.

Patricia Walton graduated with a BA in Russian Language and Literature from Dartmouth College in 1981. She completed a year of

study in 19th-century Russian history at Leningrad State University, and received an MA in International Relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. She has provided Russian translating and interpreting logistics and training for international corporations in the former Soviet Union.

Maurits Westbroek recently finished his BA degree in Russian and History at UCL's School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies and is studying for an MSc in Russian and East European Studies in Oxford.

Kevin Windle is an Emeritus Fellow at the Australian National University. His major publications include *The Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies* (co-edited with Kirsten Malmkjær) and a biography of Alexander Zuzenko. For his translations from various languages he has received international awards.

PRE-SUBMISSION GUIDELINES FOR TRANSLATED POETRY

Boris Dralyuk

Before sending poetic translations to Cardinal Points, think about your audience. Our intended reader is a person sensitive to English as it is spoken, susceptible to the effects of verse, and at least somewhat familiar with the Anglophone poetic tradition. These are the people who browse through the poetry shelves at the local bookstore, who open literary journals and flip to the poetry section, who see a box of text with an unjustified right margin in their newspaper and consider giving it a read. In other words, any poetic translation you choose to send out into the world must be good English – and good English verse, at that.

Things to avoid:

1. Unnatural phrasing. If one can't imagine a native English-speaker saying a certain phrase to another native English-speaker, then the phrase must go.
2. Poetic inversions (at least when translating most post-18th C. poetry).
3. Padding to fill out metrical lines.
4. Forced rhymes.

Many translators of Russian poetry believe it their duty to hew closely to a poem's original form. It serves to remember that, to today's

Anglophone reader (and not just today's, really), the persistent use of exact rhyme produces a comic effect, especially when coupled with a clangorous short-lined meter like the trochaic tetrameter. If you want your translations to appeal to Anglophone readers, consider loosening the metrical grip – which doesn't necessarily mean abandoning meter, just playing closer attention to rhythm, diversifying the lines, leaving some ictuses unfilled. The original meters are often a trap: they don't mean the same thing for an Anglophone reader as they do for a Russian, with the trochaic tetrameter being a case in point. If you find that you need to add words in order "to fill out" a line, then your line is too long. And don't contort natural syntax in order to fit a rhyme scheme.

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