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Socks

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In *Anna Karenina*, the day after the fateful ball, resolved to forget Vronsky and resume her peaceful life with her son and husband (“my life will go on in the old way, all nice and as usual”), Anna settles herself in her compartment in the overnight train from Moscow to St. Petersburg, and takes out an uncut English novel, probably one by Trollope judging from references to fox hunting and Parliament. Tolstoy, of course, says nothing about a translation—educated Russians knew English as well as French. In contrast, very few educated English speakers have read the Russian classics in the original and, until recent years, they have largely depended on two translations, one by the Englishwoman Constance Garnett and the other by the English couple Louise and Aylmer Maude, made respectively in 1901 and 1912. The distinguished Slavic scholar and teacher Gary Saul Morson once wrote about the former:



Photofest

Vivien Leigh in Julien Duvivier's adaptation of Anna Karenina, 1948

I love Constance Garnett, and wish I had a framed picture of her on my wall, since I have often thought that what I do for a living is teach the Collected Works of Constance Garnett. She has a fine sense of English, and, especially, the sort of English that appears in British fiction of the realist period, which makes her ideal for translating the Russian masterpieces. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were constantly reading and learning from Dickens, Trollope, George Eliot and others. Every time someone else redoes one of these works, reviewers say that the new version replaces Garnett; and then another version comes out, which, apparently, replaces Garnett again, and so on. She must have done something right.

Morson wrote these words in 1997,¹ and would recall them bitterly. Since that time a sort of asteroid has hit the safe world of Russian literature in English translation. A couple named Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky have established an industry of taking everything they can get their hands on written in Russian and putting it into flat, awkward English. Surprisingly, these translations, far from being rejected by the critical establishment, have been embraced by it and have all but replaced Garnett, Maude, and other of the older translations. When you go to a bookstore to buy a work by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Gogol, or Chekhov, most of what you find is

in translation by Pevear and Volokhonsky.

In an article in the July/August 2010 issue of *Commentary* entitled “The Pevearsion of Russian Literature,” Morson used the word “tragedy” to express his sense of the disaster that has befallen Russian literature in English translation since the P&V translations began to appear. To Morson “these are Potemkin translations—apparently definitive but actually flat and fake on closer inspection.” Morson fears that “if students and more-general readers choose P&V...[they] are likely to presume that whatever made so many regard Russian literature with awe has gone stale with time or is lost to them.”

In the summer of 2015 an interview with the rich and happy couple appeared in *The Paris Review*. The interviewer—referring to a comment Pevear had made to David Remnick in 2005—asked him: “You once said that one of your subliminal aims as a translator was ‘to help energize English itself.’ Can you explain what you mean?” Pevear was glad to do so:

It seemed to me that American fiction had become very bland and mostly self-centered. I thought it needed to break out of that. One thing I love about translating is the possibility it gives me to do things that you might not ordinarily do in English. I think it’s a very important part of translating. The good effect of translating is this cross-pollination of languages. Sometimes we get criticized—this is too literal, this is a Russianism—but I don’t mind that. Let’s have a little Russianism. Let’s use things like inversions. Why should they be eliminated? I guess if you’re a contemporary writer, you’re not supposed to do it, but as a translator I can. I love this freedom of movement between the two languages. I think it’s the most important thing for me—that it should enrich my language, the English language.

This bizarre idea of the translator’s task only strengthens one’s sense of the difficulty teachers of Russian literature in translation face when their students are forced to read the Russian classics in Pevear’s “energized” English. I first heard of P&V in 2007 when I received an e-mail from the writer Anna Shapiro:

I finished the Pevear/Volokhonsky translation of *Anna Karenina* a few weeks ago and I’m still more or less stewing about it. It leaves such a bad taste; it’s so wrong, and so oddly wrong, turning nourishment into wood. I wouldn’t have thought it possible. I’ve always maintained that Tolstoy was unruinable, because he’s such a simple writer, words piled like bricks, that it couldn’t matter; that he’s a transparent writer, so you can’t really get the flavor wrong, because in many ways he tries to have none. But they have, they’ve added some bad flavor, whereas even when Garnett makes sentences like “Vronsky eschewed farinaceous foods” it does no harm.... I imagine Pevear thinking he’s CORRECTING Tolstoy; that he’s really the much better writer.

When I leafed through the P&V translation of *Anna Karenina* I understood what Anna Shapiro

was stewing about. The contrast to Garnett glared out at me. Garnett's fine English, her urgent forward-moving sentences, her feeling for words—all this was gone, replaced by writing that is like singing or piano playing by someone who is not musical. For example:

Garnett: All his efforts to draw her into open discussion she confronted with a barrier that he could not penetrate, made up of a sort of amused perplexity.

P&V: To all his attempts at drawing her into an explanation she opposed the impenetrable wall of some cheerful perplexity.

Or:

Garnett: After taking leave of her guests, Anna did not sit down, but began walking up and down the room. She had unconsciously the whole evening done her utmost to arouse in Levin a feeling of love—as of late she had fallen into doing with all young men—and she knew she had attained her aim, as far as was possible in one evening, with a married and honorable man. She liked him very much, and, in spite of the striking difference, from the masculine point of view, between Vronsky and Levin, as a woman she saw something they had in common, which had made Kitty able to love both. Yet as soon as he was out of the room, she ceased to think of him.

P&V: After seeing her guests off, Anna began pacing up and down the room without sitting down. Though for the whole evening (lately she had acted the same way towards all young men) she had unconsciously done everything she could to arouse a feeling of love for her in Levin, and though she knew that she had succeeded in it, as far as one could with regard to an honest, married man in one evening, and though she liked him very much (despite the sharp contrast, from a man's point of view, between Levin and Vronsky, as a woman she saw what they had in common, for which Kitty, too, had loved them both), as soon as he left the room, she stopped thinking about him.

If these examples are not convincing, let me try to demonstrate Garnett's brilliance as a translator with a passage in chapter 8 of book 3 of *Anna Karenina*. We are at Dolly Oblonsky's country estate where she is spending the spring and summer with her six children, while the philandering Stiva remains in Moscow. Dolly is taking the children to the village church for a Sunday mass. During the previous week she had been preoccupied with the making or alteration of the children's clothes for the service. Now the coach is at the door, the beautifully dressed children are sitting on the steps of the house, but their mother is still inside, primping. After she finally appears, dressed in a white muslin gown, Tolstoy pauses to explain the careworn, self-sacrificing Dolly's uncharacteristic concern with her appearance. Garnett's translation of the passage reads:

Darya Aleksandrovna had done her hair, and dressed with care and excitement. In the old days she had dressed for her own sake to look pretty and be admired. Later on, as she got

older, dressing up became more and more distasteful to her. She saw that she was losing her good looks. But now she began to feel pleasure and interest in dressing up again. Now she did not dress for her own sake, not for the sake of her own beauty, but simply so that as the mother of those exquisite creatures she might not spoil the general effect. And looking at herself for the last time in the mirror, she was satisfied with herself. She looked nice. Not nice as she would have wished to look nice in old days at a ball, but nice for the object she now had in view.

Here is P&V:

Darya Alexandrovna had done her hair and dressed with care and excitement. Once she used to dress for herself, to be beautiful and admired; then, the older she became, the more unpleasant it was for her to dress; she saw that she had lost her good looks. But now she again dressed with pleasure and excitement. Now she dressed not for herself, not for her own beauty, but so that, being the mother of these lovely things, she would not spoil the general impression. And taking a last look in the mirror, she remained satisfied with herself. She was pretty. Not as pretty as she had once wanted to be at a ball, but pretty enough for the purpose she now had in mind.

The key Russian words here are *krasivaya* and *khorosha*.² Tolstoy uses the first, meaning “beautiful” or “pretty,” in the sentence referring to the old days when Dolly dressed to be admired. He uses the second, meaning “good” or “fine,” in writing of Dolly’s present selfless purpose. Garnett’s “She looked nice” conveys the sense of the passage as no other translator of *Anna Karenina* into English has conveyed it. Louise and Aylmer Maude (some readers prefer their version of the novel to Garnett’s) write “She looked well,” which is better than P&V’s “She was pretty.” But Garnett’s “She looked nice” is inspired.

There is a popular conception of Garnett as a scatterbrained Edwardian lady who dashed off her translations at a mad pace, making huge mistakes in her haste, and writing in an outdated language that has necessitated the retranslations that have followed. A famous description of her by D.H. Lawrence established the sense of her hurry and carelessness. Lawrence recalled Garnett



Estate of David Garnett
Constance Garnett and her son David, known as Bunny, mid-1890s

sitting out in the garden turning out reams of her marvelous translations from the Russian. She would finish a page, and throw it off on a pile on the floor without looking up, and start a new page. The pile would be this high...really almost up to her knees, and all

magical.

You can feel the condescension. The garden setting, the impetuous flinging of the “marvelous” and “magical” pages. A serious translator would be indoors working with orderly deliberation. Garnett did make mistakes, but correctable ones, as an excellent revised edition by Leonard Kent and Nina Berberova demonstrates.³ As for the charge that Garnett writes in an outdated language, yes, here and there she uses words and phrases that no one uses today, but not many of them. We find the same sprinkling of outdated words and phrases in the novels of Trollope and Dickens and George Eliot. Should they, too, be rewritten for modern sensibilities? (Would you really want that?)

Another argument for putting Tolstoy into awkward contemporary-sounding English has been advanced by Pevear and Volokhonsky, and, more recently, by Marian Schwartz,⁴ namely that Tolstoy himself wrote in awkward Russian and that when we read Garnett or Maude we are not reading the true Tolstoy. Arguably, Schwartz’s attempt to “re-create Tolstoy’s style in English” surpasses P&V’s in ungainliness. Schwartz actually ruins one of the most moving scenes in the novel—when Kitty, fending off her sister’s attempt to comfort her for Vronsky’s rejection, lashes out and reminds her of her degraded position vis-à-vis the womanizing Stiva. After the outburst the sisters sit in silence. In Garnett’s version:

The silence lasted for a minute or two. Dolly was thinking of herself. That humiliation of which she was always conscious came back to her with a peculiar bitterness when her sister reminded her of it. She had not expected such cruelty from her sister, and she was angry with her. But suddenly she heard the rustle of a skirt, and with it the sound of heart-rending, smothered sobbing, and felt arms about her neck.

Schwartz writes:

The silence lasted for a couple of minutes. Dolly was thinking about herself. Her humiliation, which was always with her, told especially painfully in her when her sister mentioned it. She had not anticipated such cruelty from her sister, and she was angry with her. Suddenly, however, she heard a dress and instead of the sound of sobs that had been held back too long, someone’s hands embracing her around the neck from below.

Perhaps a slip of the copy editor’s pen created this ungrammatical muddle. The following instance of Schwartz’s obtrusive literalism was clearly deliberate. It occurs in an exchange between Stiva and his servant Matvey about the upset in the Oblonsky household following Dolly’s discovery of his affair with the governess. Stiva wants Matvey’s opinion of whether Dolly will take him back. Garnett writes:

“Eh, Matvey?” he said, shaking his head.

“It’s all right sir; it will work out,” said Matvey.

“Work out?”

“Yes, sir.”

Schwartz writes:

“Eh, Matvei?” he said, shaking his head.

“It’s all right, sir, things will shapify,” said Matvei.

“Shapify?”

“I’m certain of it, sir.”

The neologism “shapify” is Schwartz’s attempt to render Tolstoy’s neologism *obrazuetsia* (derived from the word *obraz*, meaning image or form). Tolstoy reintroduces his invention a few pages later. “Stepan Arkadyevich liked a good joke. ‘And perhaps things will shapify! A fine turn of phrase: *shapify*,’ he thought. ‘I must repeat that one.’” But where the Russian neologism is funny, the English one is merely weird. It stops the reader in his tracks.

No other translator fell into the trap Schwartz fell into. The other translators—including Pevear and Volokhonsky—evidently understanding that the Slavic languages’ capacity for playfulness (or what you could call playing-with-itself-fulness) is not innate to English, made no attempt to create an English neologism. (Rosamund Bartlett and P&V come closest to *obrazuetsia* with “things will shape up” and “it’ll shape up.”) Sometimes, of course, the attempt has to be made, as in Chekhov’s story “Tonitch,” where a character talks in “his extraordinary language, evolved in the course of prolonged practice in witticism and evidently now become a habit: ‘Badsome,’ ‘Hugeous,’ ‘Thank you most dumbly,’ and so on.” But in the case of Matvey, whose language is not usually extraordinary, an elaborately badsome English neologism is uncalled for.

Or is it? What side are you on? Whose interests should the translator serve? Those of the reader of simple wants, who only asks of a translation that it advance rather than impede his pleasure and understanding? Or those of the more advanced (or masochistic) school who want to know what the original was “like”? I am speaking here of translations of fiction. Poetry and humor are untranslatable in the view of some readers. But surely novels can be successfully translated. The basic myths they transform into stories of their time belong to all cultures and can be retold in any number of languages. Let me give one more example of the point I have been belaboring on behalf of the reader of simple wants.

While the Kent/Berberova edition of *Anna Karenina* contains thousands of revisions, it essentially remains Garnett’s translation. “That she made errors and that her heritage dictated pruderies which occasionally mute some of Tolstoy is certain,” Kent and Berberova write, “but that her language and syntax almost always faithfully reproduce both the letter *and* the tone of

the original is no less true; indeed, we remain as unconvinced as many others that her translation has ever been superseded.” Kent and Berberova deftly change “he eschewed farinaceous and sweet dishes” to “he avoided starchy foods and desserts.” They correct a truly serious error in the passage where Vronsky first lays eyes on Anna at the train station. Garnett writes that he “felt he must glance at her once more; not that she was very beautiful...,” which seems odd, since Anna’s exceptional beauty is one of the novel’s givens. In the corrected version “not that” becomes “not because,” and all falls into place.

However, there are revisions that subvert, you could almost say Pevearise, the Garnett translation. In book five, chapter 3, Tolstoy writes with delicious malice of the ridiculous young man Vassenka Vesselovsky’s realization that his fancy new hunting outfit is wrong while the tatters Stiva wears are the height of chic. In the original Garnett version Stiva is dressed “in rough leggings and spats, in torn trousers and a short coat. On his head there was a wreck of a hat.” Kent and Berberova properly remove “spats” but substitute some mystifying “linen bands wrapped around his feet.” What are these bands? In their version, the Maudes solve the mystery for the reader: “Oblonsky was wearing raw hide shoes, bands of linen wound round his feet instead of socks, a pair of tattered trousers...” There are no socks in the Tolstoy original. The Maudes just decided to help out the reader. Whether you think they were right or wrong to do so says something about where you stand in the current controversy about the translation of Russian fiction.

1 In correspondence with the writer. ↵

2 The reader should not be misled into thinking that I know Russian. A Russian speaker kindly supplied these words. ↵

3 Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, introduction by Mona Simpson, translated by Constance Garnett, translation revised by Leonard J. Kent and Nina Berberova (Modern Library, 2000). ↵

4 Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, translated by Marian Schwartz, edited and with an introduction by Gary Saul Morson (Yale University Press, 2014). ↵
