

Translating Teffi's Evocation of Pilgrims in "Solovki"

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Teffi (pseudonym of Nadezhda Lokhvitskaya, 1872-1952), though very famous in her lifetime, was—like many other émigré Russians—largely forgotten during the first few decades after her death. She is still often thought of as a light humorist, but she herself set a higher value on her more serious stories, and especially on her explorations of religious experience. She had a deep knowledge both of Russian folk religion and of Orthodox practice and thought. "Solovki," about a pilgrimage to one of Russia's most important holy sites, is one of her finest stories on these themes.

Semyon, a moderately well-off peasant, has discovered that his wife Varvara has been unfaithful to him. In his unrelenting fury, he takes her, against her wishes, to the Solovetsky monastery on the White Sea, so that she can confess and carry out a penance. During the celebration of the Eucharist, Varvara is one of several women who fall into a state of demonic possession—what the Russian Orthodox call *klikushestvo*. Varvara is undergoing a church penance and would not have normally have received communion until she had completed this penance. To Orthodox understanding, however, someone possessed by demons is no longer considered responsible for his or her state. Varvara is, therefore, given Communion bread and wine, after which she appears to attain some kind of spiritual enlightenment. There is, however, nearly always some ambiguity in Teffi's treatment of these themes; the story can also be read as an account of a nervous breakdown, with Varvara eventually becoming some kind of mindless zombie.

Russian religious ways are, by and large, alien to a contemporary Western reader. The most important task for a translator of this story is to find a way to present the religious scenes with absolute clarity without oversimplifying them or somehow adapting them to meet Western expectations. A more surface difficulty—which I shall not dwell on—is the near-impossibility of faithfully reproducing the laconic peasant speech of some of the characters.

The three following extracts constitute about one-fifth of the story.

1.

Подошли к Соловкам утром рано под заутренний звон.

На берегу встречать вышли монахи и чайки.¹

Монахи все худые и строголикие. Чайки крупные, плотные, чуть не с гуся величиной, ходили в перевалку и озабоченно по хозяйски переговаривались. Пароход разгружался медленно.²

Еще часть богомольцев собирала свои котомки, как уже вернулась со Святого озера успевшая выкупаться в его ледяной воде старуха, жена кудрявого рыбака. Она шла в чистой холщовой рубаше и умиленно³ улыбалась фиолетовыми от холода губами.

Отец—гостинник, высокий монах с расчесанной бородой, распределял приезжих, кого куда. Народу наехало много, и, за неимением места, Рубаевых поместили в дворянскую комнату. Эта дворянская комната, большая, беленая, в два окна, перегороджена была на три закуточки. Одну занимал учитель с женой, другую, самую большую с тремя кроватями и диваном, целая компания: приезжий игумен восточного типа,⁴ красивый и нарядный, переодетый священником для удобства в пути.

— Монахов, заметил я, не любят и за все осуждают. Зачем курит, и зачем рыбу ест, и зачем чай с сахаром.... А где в дороге устав соблюдать? Ну, вот, в священническом одеянии соблазну меньше.⁵

В той же закутке помещался купец с дылдой гимназистом и старый ханжа чиновник. Все родственники.

Третью закутку, темную, отдали Рубаевым.

2.

Снова бродили по берегу, по монастырским коридорам.

Смотрели картинки страшного суда и притчей Господних. Огромное бревно, упирающееся в глаз грешника, видящего «сучец в глазу ближнего». И дьявол, прельщающий красотою, выраженный⁶ художником в виде песьей, довольно симпатичной морды, мохнатых лап с перепонками, хвоста винтом и скромного коричневого передничка, подвязанного на животе. И душистая легенда о цветах именуемых липки, как молилась братия во храме, а дьявол ходил между молящимися и невидимо наделял

1.

They reached Solovki as the bells were ringing for matins.

On the shore to meet them were monks and seagulls.¹

The monks were all thin, with severe faces. The gulls were large and stout, almost the size of geese. They waddled about proprietorially, exchanging preoccupied remarks.

Unloading and disembarkation took a long time.² Some of the pilgrims were still packing their knapsacks when one old woman, the wife of the curly-haired fisherman, returned from the Holy Lake, having already bathed in its icy waters. She was wearing a clean linen shirt and smiling beatifically,³ her lips purple with cold.

The hosteller, a tall monk with a combed beard, was organizing the new arrivals, arranging who should sleep where. Since there were crowds of people and little space, the Rubaevs were put in what had once been the best room; with two windows and whitewashed walls, it was now divided into three by partitions. One part had been given to a teacher and his wife, and the biggest part, with three beds and a sofa, had been given to a party of four. The head of this party was an Oriental-looking abbot.⁴ Handsome and well turned out, he had chosen, for convenience while travelling, to abandon his monastic dress for that of a priest:

“People, I understand, have little love for monks, and they criticize them for everything: *Why’s he smoking? Why’s he eating fish? Why’s he got sugar in his tea?* But how can a man observe the rule when he’s on the road? Dress as a priest—and you don’t tempt people to judge.”⁵

Together with the Father were a merchant, a lanky young *gymnasium* student—and a hypocritical old bigot of a public official. All three were family.

The remaining little cubicle, with no window, was allocated to the Rubaevs.

2.

And then they would all wander along the shore again, or along the monastery corridors.

They looked at the paintings of the Last Judgement and the Parables of Our Lord. A huge beam planted in the eye of the sinner who so clearly beheld the mote in his brother’s eye. And the temptation of beauty, illustrated⁶ by a devil—with a rather appealing canine muzzle, shaggy webbed paws, a twisting tail and a modest brown apron tied around his belly—and a sweet-scented legend: as the brothers were praying in church, the devil had moved unseen between them, handing out the pink flowers known as

их розовыми цветами, и кому доставался цветок, тот не мог больше молиться, а тайком уходил на волю, в соблазн весеннего солнца и трав, пока не был дьявол уличен святым старцем. И всякие мытарства и хождения по мукам, грехи и мучения, грехи и мучения....

3.

Чуть шевелясь, чернели в стенных нишах тихие фигуры монахов с застывшими четками в руках. Струйкой зыбилась толпа, пропуская вперед причастников. Монастырский хор, высоко до самого купола забирая детскими голосами послушников, затянул херувимскую, и вдруг резкий женский голос исступленно закричал: — Куда! Куда! Куда!(7)

Кричал все громче, все неистовее.

—Кликуша! Кликуша кудахчет!—зашептали бабы.

—Куда, куда-а.(8)

И еще вскрикнул кто-то и заголосил и залаял заливистым собачьим лаем.

Варвара крепко стиснула руки, увидела, как, закачавшись, поплыла в бок паникадила, почувствовала, как ноги и плечи задрожали быстрой и крупной дрожью, как лицо вытянулось, словно облепило скулы, как вздулся живот, подкатился под горло и из самой темной глубины тела, корча и разрывая его и ударяя красными светом в темя, вылетел дикий крик: — Аа-й. Да-а. Да-а.(9)

Мгновение подумалось: —Остановиться бы....

Но что-то заставляло напрягаться все сильнее и сильнее, кричать громче, сжимать все тело, помогая судороге. Все равно было что кричать. Первым звуком вырвалось: «Да-а». Так и наладилось, и только бы не остановиться, только бы сильнее, крепче изойти в крик еще, еще, вот еще.... Ах, не помешали бы, дали бы дотянуть.... Так трудно дотянуть, сил не хватит....

— Да-а. Да-а (10). Ах, еще бы, еще как сладко будет....

house lime. Whoever received a flower had been unable to go on praying; charmed by the spring sun and grasses, he had stolen out to freedom—until in the end the devil was caught by the Holy Elder. And ordeals and hardships of every kind, and sins and torments, sins and torments.

3.

In the alcoves the monks' silent, shadowy figures were barely stirring, their prayer beads as if frozen in their hands. A ripple passed through the congregation as people stepped back to let the communicants through. The choir had already begun the Cherubic Hymn, the youngsters' high voices soaring right up to the cupola, when a woman's piercing voice began shrieking frenziedly, "Kuda-a-a! Ku-u-da-a-a! Ku-da-a-a!"⁷

Her shrieks grew ever louder, ever more violent.

"She's possessed," whispered the peasant women.

"Possessed good and proper!"⁸

Then someone else let out a scream and a wail—and began to bark like a dog, not letting up.

Varvara clenched her hands tight. The chandeliers swayed, slid to one side—and she felt her legs and shoulders begin to shudder, swiftly, violently, while her whole face stretched as if clinging tight to her cheekbones, and her stomach swelled, climbing right up to her throat, and a wild scream flew out from the darkest depth of her body, twisting her whole body, tearing her body apart, smashing red lights against the crown of her head: "Ai-i-i! Da-a-a! Da-a-a!"⁹

A momentary thought: "Should I stop?"

But something made her tense herself more and more powerfully, forcing her to cry out more and more loudly, to clench her whole body, to will on the convulsions. The words didn't matter. The first sounds to burst out had been "A-i-i!" and "Da-a-a!"—and so she'd continued. What mattered was not to stop, to expend more and more of herself in the cry, to give herself to it more intensely, yes, more and more of herself: *Oh, if only they didn't get in her way. Oh, if only they let her keep going....* But it was so hard. Would she have the strength?

"A-a-a! A-a-a!"¹⁰ If only.... If only.... How sweet.... How sweet that would be...."

Notes

- 1 An example of a sentence where it is possible, by changing the syntax, to follow the Russian word order almost exactly. Needless to say, this is not always desirable, but here it works well.
- 2 In the original, this sentence comes at the end of the preceding paragraph. Russian writers often end a paragraph with a sentence that, in English, comes more naturally at the beginning of the following paragraph.
- 3 First I had "with tender emotion," then "tremulous." A colleague wrote to me that "this is a smile of someone who has had a religious experience. Teffi uses a word that, in this context, echoes *Umilenie* [умиление], as in the icon of Our Lady of Tenderness. The old woman has the smile of someone with peace in her soul."
- 4 The literal meaning of the Russian is "an abbot of an Eastern type" [игумен восточного типа]. I was unsure, at first, what this meant. I now think it probable that he was an Armenian or, possibly, Georgian. Armenian priests often dress very finely indeed.
- 5 The Russian is vaguer: literally, "and there is less temptation." But it is important to make it clear that it is not the abbot himself who is being tempted. According to the monastic rule, monks were allowed to follow a less strict diet when they were travelling.
- 6 A complex passage, made still more complex by a textual variant. The first publication (in the journal *Zhar-ptitsa* [Жар-птица], 1921, 1) gives *d'yavol, prel'shchayushchii krasototoyu, vyrazhennyi khodozhnikom* [дьявол, прельщающий красотой, выраженный художником], whereas the second publication, in the collection *Vechernii den'* [Вечерний день] (1924), gives *vyrazhennoi khodozhnikom* [выраженной художником]. In the first case, it is the devil who is "portrayed" by the artist in a particular way; in the second case, it is beauty that is portrayed in this way. At first I thought there were two figures—a devil, and a beautiful woman (or image of a woman) with which he was tempting men. Then I thought the devil was himself pretending to be a beautiful woman. Finally, I understood that *vyrazhennyi* must be the correct reading, that there was *no* beautiful woman and that the temptation the devil was holding out to the monks was simply the beauty of the natural world. Such a way of thinking is so alien to most people today that it seemed crucial to do

everything possible to clarify this central point. I have rearranged the passage in order to link the dog-faced devil more clearly to the flower legend.

7 Teffi evidently chose this word *kuda* [куда] both for its sound and for its meaning: “whither.” In English it is impossible to reproduce both, so we have transliterated, reproducing the sound alone.

8 In the original: “Klikusha [Кликуша]. Klikusha kudakhchet [Кликуша кудахчет].” The word *klikusha* is the standard term for a woman in the grip of demonic possession. The verb *kudakhchet* literally means “to cluck” or “to cackle”. Neither English verb fits here, and the women have clearly chosen this word simply because it picks up the *kuda* [куда] of the possessed woman’s cry. Since this effect cannot be reproduced in English, I thought it best simply to emphasize the theme of possession.

9 *Da* means “Yes.” Important though this is, I have been unable to do more at this point than simply transliterate. It is, of course, also important that Varvara’s “Ai-da!” echoes the first woman’s “Ku-da!”

10 In the original, this is *Da-a! Da-a!* In English the simpler “A-a-a!” better conveys her excitement. And there is an affirmative quality, like a “Yes”, about a long-drawn-out “A-a-a!”

Few translators are likely to acquire the knowledge required to enter fully, and in detail, into all the different worlds where their work will take them. If at all possible, it is always worth asking an expert to check through one’s work. With regard to this story, I am deeply grateful to Christine Worobec, who knows a great deal about Russian religion and folk religion and who has corrected several serious misunderstandings on my part.

The translation of Teffi’s story above, by Robert and Elizabeth Chandler, is based on the publication in *Vechernii Den’* (1924). Our translation will be included in *Other Worlds: Peasants, Pilgrims, Spirits, Saints* (NYRB Classics, 2020).