Singable and "Obolenskian" Approaches to Translating the Songs of Vladimir Vysotsky

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Vladimir Semyonovich Vysotsky (1938–1980) was and remains a colossally popular and influential Russian singer-songwriter (or *bard*, as these poets are known in Russian culture), as well as a strictly "literary" poet and beloved actor of the screen and stage. He is perhaps the single most iconic figure associated with the innovative director Yury Lyubimov's Taganka Theater in Moscow, especially in his role as Hamlet, which he premiered in 1971.[1] His songs of the occasionally criminal underside of Soviet society were only belatedly accepted into official Soviet literary life. He performed them at first in small circles, where his listeners began taping them, reproducing the recordings, and circulating them in huge volumes entirely outside the Soviet system of literary censorship—a phenomenon dubbed *magnitizdat* ("magnetic publishing"). The scholar of Russian culture Birgit Beumers (Aberystwyth University) has concluded that with his signature anthem of defiant anticonformism, "Wolf Hunt" ("Okhota na volkov"), written in 1968, Vysotsky "replaced [Sergei] Esenin as Russia's most genuinely popular poet."[2]

Recently I attempted a singable, equirhythmic, and rhyming English translation of Vladimir Vysotsky's "Pesnia o druge" ("Song about a Friend," 1966), which belongs to the "mountaineering" cycle composed for the film *Vertikal'* (Odessa Studios, 1967, dir. Stanislav Govorukhin and Boris Durov). My basic lexical and stylistic orientation was toward informal, somewhat jockish US youth English more or less of the 1960s, an idiom with which I grew up in the suburbs of Philadelphia.

This translation came about circuitously, through a friendly collaboration with the translator and recording artist Vadim Astrakhan. Astrakhan, who emigrated to the United States as a young man, is a daring, inventive translator of Vysotsky's

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1 English-speaking readers interested in a comprehensive introduction to Vysotsky's biography and his significance to Russian culture will find a wealth of material in English at the official site of the Vysotsky Foundation, authored by Mariya Shkolnikova (© 1996–2002), at http://www.kulichki.com/vv/eng/. This resource includes many English translations of Vysotsky's songs by Serge Elnitsky, Sergei Roi, and many others—including the songs treated here.

2 Birgit Beumers, "Vladimir Semenovich Vysotskii 1938–1980, Poet and Songwriter," in Neil Cornwell, ed., *Reference Guide to Russian Literature* (London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998), 896.

songs into his adopted US English. To date he has recorded three audio CDs of his own performances of Vysotsky in English with occasional guest musicians and producers (Yuri Naumov, Polina Goudieva) and various approaches to instrumentation and arrangement.[3] After reviewing the first of these CDs in print,[4] I began corresponding and consulting in detail with Astrakhan on his translations of many songs. Our exchanges regarding his draft of an English "Pesnia o druge" in the early summer of 2010 resulted, unexpectedly for me, in two quite different verse translations of the same original, one by each partner, with a number of lines in common. Astrakhan graciously gave me co-author credit for the version of "Pesnia o druge" that appears on the published audio CD by Astrakhan and Naumov, *Two Fates: Vysotsky in English II* (Vadim Astrakhan, 2011), titled "If Your Friend." The lines I contributed to it are 7, 8, 9, 11, and 18. In my own version, I adopted the rhyme solutions of my colleague's lines 13, 19, and 20. Readers interested in comparing the two versions should seek the audio recording of Astrakhan's version, which can be downloaded on Amazon (see the author's site vvinenglish.com). Astrakhan's version, which contains many altogether admirable and original solutions, is meant to be heard—and deserves to be heard—in the context of his overall translatorly stylistics and his musical approach, with its lush production values. My own translation emerged almost of its own accord as I considered and reconsidered new approaches to each line of Astrakhan's draft, especially the characteristic internal masculine rhymes separated by a single weak beat. As the character of my own translation grew more and more distinct from that of Astrakhan's, I began comparing the process to cell division. The analogy is a rough one, of course, and cannot be pressed particularly far. I would be content to leave it as "collaboration as meiosis" rather than mitosis, in that the result was genetically different "daughter cells" (not *four* of them, to be sure, as happens in biological meiosis, but only two).

I should note that the rhyme *ice / no dice* appears in at least one other English translation of this song that I discovered subsequently on the Internet. It is indeed a most inviting rhyme solution. "Scale the shale" can also be found in other English contexts.

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3 For details, see Astrakhan's "About the Project" page, http://www.vvinenglish.com/about.php.

4 Timothy D. Sergay, review of Vadim Astrakhan, *Singer Sailor Soldier Spirit. Translations of Vladimir Vysotsky* (self-released, 2008), *Slavic and East European Journal* 54.4 (Winter 2010): 728-30.

In line 12, I use the verb "punt" intransitively in the sense "cease doing something; give up" (thefreedictionary.com). In that line I substitute one of Vysotsky's rhyme schemes (+ internal rhyme, – end rhyme) for another, the one Vysotsky employs in the corresponding line (– internal rhyme, + end rhyme with preceding line), but this very maneuver has its own precedent in the original, where line 3 of stanza 1 (– internal rhyme, + end rhyme with line 4) does not fit the pattern of line 3 in stanzas 2 and 3, which are + internal rhyme, + end rhyme with line 4. Likewise, in stanza 3, Vysotsky's line 4 is a departure from the pattern of line 4 in stanzas 1 and 2, which lack the internal rhyme. I think the translation can claim a similar degree of freedom and yet be recognized as essentially faithful to Vysotsky's difficult mix of end and internal rhymes.

Of course, the practice of recreating meter and rhyme, as all verse translators discover, imposes on the translation some degree of semantic deformation of the original, just as imposing metrical, rhyming, and strophic patterning on the composition of original verse "deforms" what we might term the poet's raw "thought," "intention," or "content" (this dynamic is richly explored in Yuri Tynianov's classic *Problem of Verse Language*).[5] Imagery, like the rhetorical dimension of a text, is not an *acoustic* feature: imagery is strictly a matter of denotation, of "content," of the cinematic, mental picture evoked by the text in a receptive, attentive, visualizing reader. My singable English version of "Pesnia o druge" conveys quite comparable imagery at key points: we see a friend "roped" to the narrator on a strenuous climb, the friend's setting foot cautiously on ice, his stumbling, his being excluded from further climbing excursions, the fall suffered or potentially suffered by the singer's "advisee" in line 19. But I must note that in pursuing meter and rhyme, I sacrificed (or "omitted") certain secondary elements of imagery, for instance, the friend's abandoning the climb and heading back down the slope in line 10, and his shouting in line 12. Similarly, I *supplied* an element of imagery of my own devising in line 19: the original makes no reference whatever to *pitons* or any other climbing equipment except for rope. I concluded that by *concretizing* the scenario of a fall and rescue given in the original, naming a physical cause for it ("that piton was gone!"), I could tell the requisite story and reproduce the four identical internal and end rhymes (in Russian,

5 Yuri Tynianov, *The Problem of Verse Language*, trans. Michael Sosa and Brent Harvery (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Press, 1981). Translation of *Problema stikhotvornogo iazyka* (1924).

on –*ál*) in lines 19 and 20 in the requisite place: *piton / gone / wan / on*. (In Russian translation studies, this would be termed an instance of *otsebiátina*, the insertion into the target text of material of any sort that is literally "from oneself," devised by the translator rather than the author.) One looks to conformity with the overall rhetorical or narrative arc of the original to justify such local maneuvers.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Where singability or recreation of sound patterns is not included (or does not figure prominently) in the translator's brief (or *skopos*), translators naturally find it possible to hew considerably closer to the sense of the original in prose. The precedent and model for this practice in Russian verse translation into English are the "plain prose" renderings by Prince Dimitri Obolensky in his *Heritage of Russian Verse* (1962), which he set in continuous, nonlineated blocks directly below each Russian poem. This exact format was consciously adopted by Donald Rayfield and his co-editors for *The Garnett Book of Russian Verse* (2000). Compared to lineated texts on facing pages (the format adopted here), "Obolenskian" translations save considerable space, especially when the English is set in a smaller point size (as it is in both the Obolensky and Rayfield anthologies). For my purposes here, we may refer to nonrhyming and nonmetrical translations of Russian verse as either "prose," as Obolensky and Rayfield do, or "free verse." I do not sense that setting such translations in nonlineated or lineated format *of itself* determines whether to regard them as prose or free verse. We should look primarily, I would argue, to stylistic, linguistic, and acoustic properties of a text rather than modes of its graphic presentation when considering whether and how far to distinguish the categories of prose and free verse—a theoretical matter that lies outside the scope of these remarks. My point here is that satisfactory Obolenskian renderings are by no means as easy and straightforward to produce as might be presumed given the liberation of the translator from the requirements of rhyme and meter. They do not all but compose themselves through the conscientious calquing of syntax and substituting for each foreign lexeme one of the standard solutions offered in bilingual dictionaries. Nor are they devoid of expressiveness and invention. In my own practice I have written several such translations of Vysotsky. The translations accompanying this article include my Obolenskian rendering of Vysotsky's "Spasite nashi dushi" ("Save Our Souls," 1967).

In my translation of "Spasite nashi dushi," liberation from meter and rhyme certainly simplified the task of reflecting fairly technical nautical and even medical terminology. Even so, I found myself resorting again to such maneuvers as *concretizing* an image in the interests of narrative coherence: I interpreted *"rogataia smert',"* "horned death," as referring clearly enough to a World War II-era underwater horned mine, and substituted the concrete term *mine* for Vysotsky's semantic generalization *death:* "A deadly horned mine!" This may well have been a failure of nerve on my part, or a lack of faith in my audience's readerly acumen, since the parallel terms "rogataia *mina"* and "horned *mine,"* may well be comparably frequent in their respective languages (c. 543 Google hits for the Russian term, c. 776 for the English).

Although I am inclined to defend the dignity, the difficulty, and the artistic respectability of Obolenskian renderings of Russian verse, I must certainly concede that "formal," metrical and rhyming translations—the only ones whose worth is recognized by Boris Pasternak and many Russian literary traditionalists—take incomparably longer to produce. Many "formal" English translations of Pushkin's thirty-line masterpiece "Prorok" ("The Prophet," 1826) have been published, for example, the one by Avrahm Yarmolinsky (1921). Producing one of my own took me several months.[6] Producing my formal translation of Vysotsky's "Pesnia o druge" took far longer than producing an Obolenskian translation of his "Spasite nashi dushi." One's linguistic imagination lives and grapples day and night with the problems of representing the original imagery, style, rhetorical and narrative arcs, lexical registry, and prosody in the target text. Prosodic solutions crystallize out of the unconscious at odd times, while drifting to sleep, while driving. One scribbles them down in haste, with a momentary thrill, and proceeds to analyze and reject them over subsequent days, regretting them at leisure, always recalling T. S. Eliot's "time yet for a hundred indecisions…. For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse." My confidence that these famous lines from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" reflect at least in part Eliot's personal experience of composing verse underscores the enduring attractiveness of the "singable"

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6 See Timothy D. Sergay, *"'Prorok'* Sevenfold: Some Recent and Not-So-Recent Translations of Pushkin's 'The Prophet,'" *SlavFile,* Newsletter of the Slavic Languages Division of the American Translators Association 11.3 (Summer 2001): 11–13, http://atasld.org/sites/atasld.org/files/slavfile/summer-2001.pdf.

approach to verse translation: precisely because of its inherent difficulty, it allows us to live for a time, in our imaginations, as the "secret sharers" of our favorite poets.