

Vladimir Nabokov

TO RUSSIA / К РОССИИ

«Отвяжись, я тебя умоляю...»

לרוסיה

מתחנן בי: עזבי, אין לי כוח!
ליל מורא. השתתק השאון.
אני אפס, כמעט ומנוח
מגליך בים ערוון.

העוזב ברצותו המולדת
ליבב בצמרת רשאי.
אך לעמק הספקתי לרדת,
אל תעזי לגשת אלי.

אתחבא לי. אמחק מהדעת
את שמותי – גם בזה אעמד.
כדי שאף בחלום בי לגעת
תכשלי – לא אחלם חלומות.

ספרית הבחירה כבר נגנזת.
אדמם, אסרס את עצמי
ואמיר בברבורת לוועזת
את הוני היחיד – לשוני.

רק שְׁדֵרָה דִמְעַת מִתְמַדָּת,
וּדְשָׁאִים שְׁעַל שְׁנֵי הַקְּבָרִים,
וּקְלֶפֶת הַשְּׁדָר הַרוֹעֵדָת,
וְכָלִי מֵרֵאשִׁית הַחַיִּים –

אֶל תְּבִיטִי בִּי, רוֹס הָעֵוֶרֶת,
רַחֲמֵי – זֹאת אֲנִי מִבְּקָשׁ:
אִם בְּבוֹר הַפָּחַם אֶת נֹבְרֶת
אֶת חַיִּי אֶל נֹסִי לְמִשְׁשׁ!

כִּי עֵדֵן הַתְּחִלָּף כָּבֵר בְּלוּחַ,
עַל בּוֹשָׁה, יְסוּרִים וְיִגוֹן
אֶף אֶחָד לֹא יָשִׁיב, זֶה בְּטוּחַ,
וְנִפְשֵׁי לֹא תִסְגֵּר שׁוּם חֲשׁבוֹן.

1939

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TRANSLATOR'S POSTSCRIPT:

It's hard to argue with literary idols. And yet—"thou shalt not make unto thee..."

For me, Nabokov is one of the three greatest names in twentieth-century literature (the other two are Borges and Kafka—ranking them feels unnecessary). Naturally, during my translation of *Eugene Onegin*, I ended up memorizing Nabokov's commentary on the novel almost by heart. I should note that his commentary was far more meaningful to me than Yuri Lotman's—not because Lotman isn't a brilliant scholar, but because he wasn't a poet. He viewed the novel

through a non-poetic lens, missing alliteration and many other intricacies. In other words, I came to see Nabokov as a poet in no small part thanks to his commentary on Pushkin—strange as that may sound.

And yet—I chose to translate *Onegin* into Hebrew with strict metrical equivalence. In fact, I always try to preserve the prosody of the original as completely as possible. Here is why: I once noticed that in memoirs about Mandelstam, Khodasevich, and Mayakovsky—three very different poets—there are strikingly similar passages. In each, we’re told that the music came first. Sometimes it was like a noise in the head; Mandelstam even shook his head to try to “expel” it. Why is that? And why does it matter?

I sometimes give lectures on poetry translation into Hebrew, and I always start by asking: what is poetry? Of course I’m familiar with the Russian philologist Mikhail Gasparov’s book, but still... well? The audience is usually at a loss. So I offer a clue: what is drama? We quickly reach agreement—drama is literature written to be performed (on stage, on screen, in the circus—doesn’t matter). And poetry? Then I suggest this answer: “*Poetry is literature written to be heard.*” Or put another way: poems must be ‘read with the ears.’ If a text cannot be perceived aurally, then it isn’t poetry.

To *read with the ears* means that the author’s message is conveyed not only—or sometimes not even primarily—through verbal meaning, but through additional means. These include meter (and playful deviations from it), rhyme, alliteration, a wide range of phonetic devices, usage, homonyms, deliberate linguistic imprecision (from misplaced stress to “incorrect” forms), and much more. Many of these tools are directly borrowed from music—or at least have clear musical parallels. All of this is part of the poem as a literary work.

A poetic translation, then, is a translation that strives—wherever possible—to preserve this delicate poetic matter. Metrical equivalence is the minimum requirement, and a necessary one. If all the “for-the-ear” content is lost, then translate it as prose—or better yet, translate prose.

