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## THE TRANSLATION WARS

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In the early seventies, two young playwrights, Christopher Durang and Albert Innaurato, collaborated on a satire about nineteenth-century Russian literature called "The Idiots Karamazov." In their liberal interpretation of Dostoyevsky, Father Zosima is a gay foot fetishist. Which causes the angelic monk Alyosha to wonder, "How can there be a God if there are feet?" The main character is based not on any figure in Dostoyevsky but, rather, on his first and most enduring English-language translator, a woman of Victorian energies and Edwardian prose, Mrs. Constance Garnett.

In the first production of "The Idiots Karamazov," at the Yale Repertory Theatre, Garnett was played by a student at the drama school named Meryl Streep, who portrayed the aged "translatrix" as a muddled loon. The mangling of the translator's craft is a main plot point. The Russian for "hysterical homosexual," Mrs. Garnett insists, is "Tchaikovsky." When she recalls for the audience the arduous process of translating "Karamazov," she confuses the four brothers with the "Three Sisters," a stumble that leads inevitably to the musical number "O We Gotta Get to Moscow!" Mrs. Garnett closes the proceedings by reciting a conjugation of the verb "to Karamazov."

Poor Mrs. Garnett! Translators suffer a thankless and uneasy afterlife. (Or they never get that far: until the King James commission, English translators of the Bible were sometimes burned at the stake or strangled--or, as in the case of William York Tyndale, both.) Translators are, for eternity, sent up, put down, nitpicked, and, finally, overturned. The objects of their attentions dread their ministrations. Cervantes complained that reading a translation was "like looking at the Flanders tapestries from behind: you can see the basic shapes but they are so filled with threads that you cannot fathom their original lustre." And yet they persevere: here comes Edith Grossman, four centuries later, quixotically encountering the Don and his Sancho on behalf of a new generation of English readers.

Without translators, we are left adrift on our various linguistic ice floes, only faintly hearing rumors of masterpieces elsewhere at sea. So most English-speaking readers glimpse Homer through the filter of Fitzgerald or Fagles, Dante through Sinclair or Singleton or the Hollanders, Proust through Moncrieff or Davis, Garcia Marquez through Gregory Rabassa--and nearly every Russian through Constance Garnett.

As a literary achievement, Garnett's may have been of the second order, but it was vast. With her pale, watery eyes, her gray hair in a chignon, she was the genteel face of tireless industry. She translated seventy volumes of Russian prose for commercial publication, including all of Dostoyevsky's novels; hundreds of Chekhov's stories and two volumes of his plays; all of Turgenev's principal works and nearly all of Tolstoy's; and selected texts by Herzen, Goncharov, and Ostrovsky. A friend of Garnett's, D. H. Lawrence, was in awe of her matter-of-fact endurance, recalling her "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. That pile would be this high--really, almost up to her knees, and all magical."

Without Garnett, the nineteenth-century "Rooshians," as Ezra Pound called them, would not have exerted such a rapid influence on the American literature of the early twentieth. In "A Moveable Feast," Hemingway recounts scouring Sylvia Beach's shelves for

the Russians and finding in them a depth and accomplishment he had never known. Before that, he writes, he was told that Katherine Mansfield was "a good short-story writer, even a great short-story writer," but now, after reading Chekhov, she seemed to him like "near-beer." To read the Russians, he said, "was like having a great treasure given to you":

In Dostoevsky there were things believable and not to be believed, but some so true they changed you as you read them; frailty and madness, wickedness and saintliness, and the insanity of gambling were there to know as you knew the landscape and the roads in Turgenev, and the movement of troops, the terrain and the officers and the men and the fighting in Tolstoy. Tolstoy made the writing of Stephen Crane on the Civil War seem like the brilliant imagining of a sick boy who had never seen war but had only read the battles and chronicles and seen the Brady photographs that I had read and seen at my grandparents' house.

Among the most astringent and authoritative critics of Garnett were Russian exiles, especially Vladimir Nabokov and Joseph Brodsky. Nabokov, the son of a liberal noble who was assassinated at a political conference, left Russia in 1919. He lived in Europe until 1940, when he came to the United States. In "Lectures on Russian Literature," there is a facsimile of the opening pages of his teaching copy of the Garnett "Anna Karenina." On the blank left-hand page, Nabokov has written a quotation from Conrad, who told Garnett's husband, Edward, "Remember me affectionately to your wife, whose translation of Karenina is splendid. Of the thing itself I think but little, so that her merit shines with greater lustre." Angrily, Nabokov scrawls, "I shall never forgive Conrad this crack"--he ranks Tolstoy at the top of all Russian prose writers and "Anna" as his masterpiece--and pronounces Garnett's translation "a complete disaster." Brodsky agreed; he once said, "The reason English-speaking readers can barely tell the difference between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky is that they aren't reading the prose of either one. They're reading Constance Garnett."

Garnett's flaws were not the figment of a native speaker's snobbery. She worked with such speed, with such an eye toward the finish line, that when she came across a word or a phrase that she couldn't make sense of she would skip it and move on. Life is short, "The Idiot" long. Garnett is often wooden in her renderings, sometimes unequal to certain verbal motifs and particularly long and complicated sentences. The typescripts of Nabokov's lectures, which he delivered while teaching undergraduates at Wellesley and Cornell, are full of anti-Garnett vitriol; his margins are a congeries of pencilled exclamations and crabby demurrals on where she had "messed up." For example, where a passage in the Garnett of "Anna" reads, "Holding his head bent down before him," Nabokov triumphantly notes, "Mark that Mrs. Garnett has decapitated the man." When Nabokov was working on a study of Gogol, he complained, "I have lost a week already translating passages I need in 'The Inspector General' as I can do nothing with Constance Garnett's dry shit."

A less imperious but no less discerning critic, Kornei Chukovsky (who was also a famous writer of children's books), esteemed Garnett for her work on Turgenev and Chekhov but not for her Dostoyevsky. The famous style of "convulsions" and "nervous trembling," he wrote, becomes under Garnett's pen "a safe blandscript: not a volcano, but a smooth lawn mowed in the English manner--which is to say a complete distortion of the original."

Garnett (1862-1946) was one of eight children. Her father was paralyzed, and when Constance was just fourteen her mother died of a heart attack from the exertion of hoisting her husband from chair to bed. Constance won a scholarship to read classics at Newnham College, Cambridge, and after graduation she married a publisher, Edward Garnett, the scion of a family of English literary aristocrats.

When the Garnetts were setting up housekeeping, Edward began to invite various Russian exiles as weekend guests. Constance was entranced by their stories of revolutionary fervor and literary ferment. In 1891, when she was confined with a difficult pregnancy, she began to learn Russian. Soon, she tried her hand at translating minor pieces, beginning with Goncharov's "A Common Story" and Tolstoy's "The Kingdom of God Is Within You" and then moving on to her favorite of the Russians, Turgenev. In 1894, she left behind her infant son and her husband and made a three-month trip to Russia, where she drove long distances through snowstorms by sleigh, visited experimental schools, and dined with Tolstoy at his estate.

When Garnett returned to England, she began an ascetic lifelong routine of housekeeping, child-rearing, and translating. Mornings, she made porridge for her son David, and then, according to her biographer Carolyn Heilbrun, "she would go round the garden, while the dew was still on the plants, to kill the slugs; this was a moment of self-indulgence." Garnett was a sickly woman, suffering from migraines, sciatica, and terrible eyesight, and yet her ailments did not deter her from working as a translator. She turned down an offer from Tolstoy's close friends Louise and Aylmer Maude to collaborate on a translation of "War and Peace" and did it on her own. (So, too, did the Maudes, her only rival in Tolstoy.) Garnett went nearly blind working on "War and Peace." She hired a secretary, who read the Russian text to her aloud; Garnett would dictate back in English, sometimes grabbing away the original text and holding it a few inches from her ailing eyes.

Hemingway recalls telling a friend, a young poet named Evan Shipman, that he could never get through "War and Peace"--not "until I got the Constance Garnett translation." Shipman replied, "They say it can be improved on. I'm sure it can, although I don't know Russian."

Richard Pevear was living in Manhattan in the mid-nineteen-eighties when he began reading "The Brothers Karamazov." He and his wife, a Russian emigree named Larissa Volokhonsky, had an apartment on the fourth floor of a brownstone on West 107th Street. To earn money, Pevear built custom furniture and cabinets for the emerging executive class in the neighborhood. He had always earned just enough to get by: in New Hampshire, he cut roses in a commercial greenhouse; he worked in a boatyard repairing yachts. He'd published verse in *The Hudson Review* and other quarterlies, and he'd worked on translations from the languages he knew: French, Italian, Spanish. He'd translated poems by Yves Bonnefoy and Apollinaire, and a philosophical work called "The Gods," by Alain, a teacher of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone Weil.

Larissa was born in Leningrad; her brother Henri is a poet who was a rival of Brodsky. While Larissa was still living in Russia, she learned English, sat in on a translation seminar, and, using a smuggled copy of *The New Yorker*, translated a story by John Updike. After she emigrated, in 1973, she translated "Introduction to Patristic Theology," by John Meyendorff, a Russian Orthodox priest and thinker.

One day, when Richard was reading "Karamazov" (in a translation by one of Garnett's epigones, David Magarshak), Larissa, who had read the book many times in the original, began peeking over her husband's shoulder to read along with him. She was outraged. It's not there! she thought. He doesn't have it! He's an entirely different writer!

As an experiment, a lark, Pevear and Volokhonsky decided to collaborate on their own "Karamazov." After looking at the various translations--Magarshak, Andrew MacAndrew, and, of course, Constance Garnett--they worked on three sample chapters. Their division of labor was--and remains--nearly absolute: First, Larissa wrote out a kind of hyperaccurate trot

of the original, complete with interstitial notes about Dostoyevsky's diction, syntax, and references. Then, Richard, who has never mastered conversational Russian, wrote a smoother, more Englished text, constantly consulting Larissa about the original and the possibilities that it did and did not allow. They went back and forth like this several times, including a final session in which Richard read his English version aloud while Larissa followed along in the Russian. Their hope was to be true to Dostoyevsky, right down to his famous penchant for repetition, seeming sloppiness, and melodrama.

When they had a text they liked, they sent a copy to an editor at Random House. It came back with a brief letter that said, in Richard's reading, "No, thanks. Garnett lives forever. Why do we need a new one?" Then they tried Oxford University Press. The editors there sent the text along to an Oxford don, who objected to Alyosha Karamazov being called an "angel"; in the margin he wrote instead "good chap"; another marginal note said, simply, "balls." Oxford University Press turned them down. They did not despair. Pevear and Volokhonsky had in the meantime armed themselves with enthusiastic letters of endorsement from some of the country's best Slavic scholars--including Victor Terras, at Brown; Robert Louis Jackson, at Yale; Robert Belknap, from Columbia; and Joseph Frank, Dostoyevsky's supreme biographer, from Stanford--and sent the manuscript out to Holt, Harcourt Brace, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, and a couple of others. There was only one bite: Jack Shoemaker, from North Point Press, a small house in San Francisco (now defunct), called, offering an advance of a thousand dollars--roughly a dollar per page. They estimated that the translation would take five to six years--more than twice as long as it took Dostoyevsky to write the novel. Although translators of long-dead authors do not have to share royalties, the arithmetic was unpleasant. Pevear called back and shyly asked if, perhaps, North Point could come up with a bit more money. Shoemaker offered six thousand. "P/V," as they would come to be known in the academic journals, went to work on "The Brothers Karamazov." In time, they would become the best-selling and perhaps the most authoritative translators of Russian prose since Constance Garnett.

A few months ago, I visited Pevear and Volokhonsky in Paris. They moved to France in 1988, convinced that France would be cheaper than the Upper West Side. They live in a small ground-floor apartment on a side street called Villa Poirier. They are both in their early sixties and have two grown children. Pevear is a mild, friendly man with a gray goatee and the sort of untraceable accent that comes off a little high-end. Volokhonsky is earthier, more reserved than her husband, though hardly retiring. Sometimes Pevear would barge uninvited into his wife's sentences, but she did not easily relent. The rooms are spare and light, and reminded me of apartments I had visited in many Russian cities, apartments of a particular intellectual variety, with the entranceway lined with bookshelves and volumes in Russian, English, French, and other languages. Russian intellectuals always seem to display pictures not only of the family but also of their cultural icons; Larissa kept photographs above her desk of John Meyendorff and another venerable Orthodox thinker, Alexander Schmemmann.

Pevear and Volokhonsky made it clear that their work is a collaboration--her Russian, his English--but they work in adjoining offices, alone. "We don't want to work over short passages together," Pevear said. "Larissa does an entire draft first. The first draft for 'The Brothers Karamazov' took two years, and thankfully we had an N.E.H. grant"--for thirty-six thousand dollars--"which we stretched out."

"We thought it would last forever!" Larissa said. "We'd never had anything like that kind of money. We moved to France illegally on a tourist visa, and it was finally a policeman who told us that we needed to 'regularize our situation,' as he put it."

Unlike Garnett, who started small and then worked her way up to the big, baggy monsters of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, Pevear and Volokhonsky began with the bulkiest and most complex masterpiece imaginable. "The Brothers Karamazov" is, to use Mikhail Bakhtin's famous term, the most polyphonic of Dostoyevsky's novels, the one with the most voices, tones, and textures braided into the text. Tolstoy and Chekhov are far clearer, more serene; perhaps, among the main nineteenth-century texts, only Gogol's "Dead Souls," with its singular vocabulary and jokes, is as difficult for a translator.

"We thought, if we can do this together, we should start with the book that meant the most to us and had suffered the most from previous translators," Pevear said. "Dostoyevsky's marvellous humor had been lost. The Divine Comedy is divine, a religious work, but it's also funny; there are comic moments. The same with Dostoyevsky, and the comedy comes when you least expect it. Ilyusha is dying. His shoes are outside the room. His father is banging his head against the door. A prestigious German doctor comes from Moscow to treat the boy. The doctor comes out of the room after seeing him and the father asks him if there is any hope. He says, 'Be pre-pared for an-ny-thing.' Then, 'lowering his eyes, he himself prepared to step across the threshold to the carriage.' Dickens would never have joked at such a moment. He would have jerked all the tears he could have from us."

"Yes, that's true," Larissa said. "Translators too often look for the so-called Russian sensibility, and, lo and behold, they find it: the darkness, the obsessiveness, the mystic genius. All of that is there, of course. But there is also a lightness, a joyful Christian lightness, too. There are deaths, suicide, the death of a child, Ivan goes mad, Mitya goes to prison--and yet the book ends with joy."

Dostoyevsky's detractors have faulted him for erratic, even sloppy, prose and what Nabokov, the most famous of the un-fans, calls his "gothic rodomontade." "Dostoyevsky did write in a hurry," Pevear said. "He had terrible deadlines to meet. He wrote 'Crime and Punishment' and 'The Gambler' simultaneously. He knew that if he didn't finish 'The Gambler' on time he would lose the rights to all his future books for the next nine years. That's when he hired his future wife as a stenographer and dictated it to her. Tolstoy was better paid, and he didn't even need the money. And yet Dostoyevsky's roughness, despite the rush and the pressure, was all deliberate. No matter what the deadline, if he didn't like what he had, he would throw it all out and start again. So this so-called clumsiness is seen in his drafts, the way he works on it. It's deliberate. His narrator is not him; it's always a bad provincial writer who has an unpolished quality but is deeply expressive. In the beginning of 'The Brothers Karamazov,' in the note to the reader, there is the passage about 'being at a loss to resolve these questions, I am resolved to leave them without any resolution.' He stumbles. It's all over the place."

"And this is how people speak," Volokhonsky said. "We mix metaphors, we stumble, we make mistakes."

"Other translators smooth it out," Pevear said. "We don't."

In his preface, Pevear points out that the narrative voice in the novel is full of hedged assertions, mixed diction, wandering syntax, weirdly incorrect compound modifiers ("Ivan Fyodorovich was convinced beyond doubt of his complete and extremely ill condition"), "fused" clichés (as when he refers to a monk from Obdorsk as "the distant visitor"--combining "visitor from far away" and "distant land"). In order to re-create some sense of the tone of the original, Pevear and Volokhonsky have to rely on their own literary instincts, but they have also devised a set of guidelines. For instance, they will not use an English word that the Oxford English Dictionary says came into use after the publication of the novel they are

translating. In the Sidney Monas "Crime and Punishment," the translator uses "pal" instead of something like "old boy." "We won't do that," Pevear said, making the face of a child who has inadvertently eaten a Brussels sprout.

Also, Volokhonsky said, "Dostoyevsky doesn't use slang, really, though sometimes there is a vulgarism. For example, he uses *profiltrivat'sya*--'to filter through,' say, into a society--or *stushevat'sya*, which Dostoyevsky seems to have invented, meaning 'to efface yourself out.' " There are no real obscenities. In "The Demons," a Holy Fool--a religious idiot savant--curses, but Dostoyevsky uses dashes instead of the word itself. Pevear and Volokhonsky are hardly prudes, but their reading tastes have limits. Even when they desperately needed the money, they refused an offer to translate Victor Erofeev's fantastically dirty novel, "Russian Beauty." Nor did they find much to admire in a recent scandalous text from Russia, Vladimir Sorokin's "Blue Lard." "It was the only book I ever asked to have removed from my house," Volokhonsky said. "I said, 'Take it back, rid me of its presence. We are not amused.' "

To compare the Garnett and the Pevear-Volokhonsky translations of "The Brothers Karamazov" is to alight on hundreds of subtle differences in tone, word choice, word order, and rhythm.

"These changes seem small, but they are essential. They accumulate," Pevear said. "It's like a musical composition and a musician, an interpretation. If your fingers are too heavy or too light, the piece can be distorted."

"It can also be compared to restoring a painting," Volokhonsky said. "You can't overdo it, but you have to be true to the thing."

Volokhonsky's sense of fidelity has obvious roots: she is confounded by any translation that has little sense of the original's qualities as they play on a Russian ear and sensibility. Pevear's fidelity to Dostoyevsky's "sloppiness" comes from a rather grand ambition. "I began as a writer, as a poet, not as a translator, so I started out with that set of problems," he said. "It seemed to me that English prose had become textureless, flavorless, flat, naive, a kind of dull first person. 'I woke up. I saw the window. I felt very bad. The sun was rising over the hills.' Now, Dostoyevsky writes often in the first person, but there's a richness of texture and idea and voice. So one subliminal idea I started out with as a translator was to help energize English itself.

"Hemingway read Garnett's Dostoyevsky and he said it influenced him," he continued. "But Hemingway was just as influenced by Constance Garnett as he was by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Garnett breaks things into simple sentences, she Hemingwayizes Dostoyevsky, if you see what I mean."

The Pevear-Volokhonsky translation of "The Brothers Karamazov" won almost uniformly positive reviews and the PEN prize for translation. "In the Wichita Eagle, we got an amazing full-page review with the headline ' "karamazoV" still leads creative way,' " Pevear said as we broke for lunch one day. "The only problem is that they used a photograph of Tolstoy."

Traditionally, translating was part of a Russian writer's work. Before the nineteenth century, the sum total of great Russian literature--after taking into account a twelfth-century epic, "The Song of Igor's Campaign," a few comic playwrights, and some stars of the Westernizing eighteenth century, such as Derzhavin, Radishchev, and Karamzin--was relatively negligible. The upper, reading classes automatically thought of literature as a European import. Some read the works in translation, others in the original. In "Eugene Onegin," Pushkin provides us with Tatiana Larina's reading list--"From early on she loved

romances, / they were her only food"--and it is all foreign: Richardson, Rousseau, Lovelace, Sophie Cottin, Madame de Stael. And in Chapter 2 of Pushkin's story "The Queen of Spades" an old countess calls on a young officer, her grandson:

"Paul," cried the Countess from behind the screen, "send me some new novel, only pray not the kind they write nowadays.", "What do you mean, grand'maman?", "That is, a novel in which the hero strangles neither his father nor his mother, and in which there are no drowned bodies. I have a great horror of them.", "There are no such novels nowadays. Would you like a Russian one?", "Are there any Russian novels?"

During the Soviet period, citizens were deprived of censored works but could read countless translations: Boris Pasternak's "Hamlet," Vasily Zhukovsky's "Odyssey," Nikolai Gnedich's "Iliad." Pushkin paid epigrammatic tribute to Gnedich:

Poet Gnedich, renderer of Homer the Blind,  
Was himself one-eyed,  
Likewise, his translation,  
Is only half like the original.

As part of the Revolution's project to educate the masses, Maxim Gorky initiated a publishing house in 1918 with the plan of producing at least fifteen hundred volumes of "the most outstanding works of world fiction"; the project came to a halt in 1927, having turned out a hundred and twenty books. As socialist realism was imposed on Soviet writers, one form of permissible resistance, of finding an inner freedom, was to read translations of foreign writers. No private library was complete without Hemingway, Faulkner, London, Fitzgerald, Steinbeck, Salinger--all officially permitted as "progressive writers" exposing the "ulcers of the capitalist world." There were also stodgy classics that had long ago gone out of fashion in the English-speaking world (especially Sir Walter Scott), as well as some minor writers like A. J. Cronin and James Aldridge. It was common, as in the case of Aldridge, for writers to be translated because they were Communists or, at least, sympathizers. Among the essential pillars of culture in the Soviet era was the journal *Innostrannaya Literatura*--Foreign Literature--which published stories and novels in translation.

One of the forbidden lights of Russian literature during the Soviet era was Vladimir Nabokov. None of his books, not the early Russian-language novels written in France and Germany or the later works, written in English when he lived in the United States and Switzerland, were approved by the authorities. He was considered dangerously "anti-Soviet" and banned outright. Even his translation of "Eugene Onegin"--with its three accompanying volumes of commentary (notes so Nabokovian, so joyful, intricate, and erudite, that they seem like the apparatus to one of his novels, like the "commentary" of "Pale Fire")--even this was impossible to find in the pre-Gorbachev Soviet Union except in illegal, smuggled editions.

Pevear and Volokhonsky told me that they considered Nabokov's "Onegin" one of the great triumphs of translation, even though it is nothing like their own work. Nabokov, who regarded "The Gift" and "Lolita" as his best novels, thought that his "Onegin" was perhaps the most important project of his life and, at the same time, like all translation, innately futile. In 1955, just as he was setting out on the project, he published a poem in this magazine on the impossibility, the insult, of translation:

What is translation? On a platter,  
A poet's pale and glaring head,

A parrot's screech, a monkey's chatter,  
And profanation of the dead.  
The parasites you were so hard on,  
Are pardoned if I have your pardon,  
O Pushkin, for my stratagem.  
I travelled down your secret stem,  
And reached the root, and fed upon it;  
Then, in a language newly learned,,  
I grew another stalk and turned,  
Your stanza, patterned on a sonnet,  
Into my honest roadside prose--,  
All thorn, but cousin to your rose.

The poem, which is written in Pushkin's signature stanza form--fourteen lines, a hundred and eighteen syllables in iambic tetrameter, with a regular scheme of feminine and masculine rhymes--is both tribute and apology, to Russian and to Pushkin.

Nabokov worked on "Onegin" for nearly a decade. His intention, as he makes clear in the introduction, is not to provide a traditional "poetic" rendering, a pleasurable English "Onegin," like Avrahm Yarmolinsky's, James Falen's, or Charles Johnston's noble attempts. Such efforts, he felt, had necessarily ended in failure.

Not long before publishing his own "Onegin," Nabokov took to the pages of The New York Review of Books and, like the lepidopterist he was, picked the wings off a translation by Walter Arndt--which, to his rage, went on to win the Bollingen Prize. Nabokov could not bear Arndt's "Germanisms," his freewheeling sacrifice of semantic accuracy for rhythmic "beauty." Of all the sins of a translator, he would later write, "The third, and worst, degree of turpitude is reached when a masterpiece is planished and patted into such a shape, vilely beautified in such a fashion as to conform to the notions and prejudices of a given public. This is a crime, to be punished by the stocks as plagiarists were in the shoebuckle days."

For his part, Nabokov intended to provide the reader with a literal-minded "crib, a pony," as he once told an interviewer. "And to the fidelity of transposal I have sacrificed everything: elegance, euphony, clarity, good taste, modern usage, and even grammar." He had no hope for "Onegin" as an English poem. His purpose was singular and clear. Just as Dante wrote the Divine Comedy to move a reader toward Scripture (or so he said), Nabokov wrote his translation to inspire his reader to know the poem in Russian:

It is hoped that my readers will be moved to learn Pushkin's language and go through EO again without this crib. In art as in science there is no delight without the detail, and it is on details that I have tried to fix the reader's attention. Let me repeat that unless these are thoroughly understood and remembered, all "general ideas" (so easily acquired, so profitably resold) must necessarily remain but worn passports allowing their bearers short cuts from one area of ignorance to another.

Despite the stubbornly eccentric and unlovely texture of Nabokov's "Onegin," the work was generally well reviewed, especially by those who understood and accepted his intention and did not go looking for an English poem. The most notable exception was Edmund Wilson, who decided in July, 1965, to wage battle against the translation in the pages of The New York Review.

Since 1940, just after Nabokov's arrival in the United States, Wilson and Nabokov enjoyed a warm friendship, a constant Dear Volodya&#8211;Dear Bunny correspondence full of mutual instruction, jocular competition, one-upmanship, and traded enthusiasms. They



were well matched: both were self-confident, supremely intelligent, and well trained in the art of polemics. Wilson had been extraordinarily kind to Nabokov, making introductions for him that led to teaching jobs, a Guggenheim fellowship, contracts with book publishers, and publication in *The New Yorker* and *The New Republic*. And yet there was an uncommon, almost frightening honesty in the relationship. Wilson did not hesitate to tell Nabokov that he did not like "Bend Sinister," "Lolita," "Ada," and other major works. (He never bothered to read "The Gift.") Nabokov, despite his debts to Wilson, treated him, especially on Russian matters, with a breezy condescension: "Dear Bunny, I am going to steal an hour from Gogol and thrash out this matter of Russian versification, because you are as wrong as can be." Wilson was bemused by many of Nabokov's literary judgments, his disdain for Mann's "asinine" "Death in Venice," Pasternak's "vilely written" "Dr. Zhivago," Faulkner's "corncobby chronicles"--anything that smacked of journalese, local color, big ideas, or political propaganda. And yet, for a quarter century, despite any friction or jealousies, the friendship seemed to thrive on its directness. "I like you very much," Nabokov told Wilson in 1945, to which Wilson replied, "Our conversations have been among the few consolations of my literary life through these last years--when my old friends have been dying, petering out or getting more and more neurotic." In the end, however, the relationship could not survive Wilson's attack on Nabokov's "Onegin." The assault was too fierce, too presumptuous, and Nabokov's amour propre was never quite restored.

Despite his imperfect, book-learned Russian, Wilson betrayed no doubt that he was capable of taking on Nabokov. In the course of his career, he learned several languages in order to "work up" his projects: Russian and German to write on Marx and Lenin in "To the Finland Station," Hebrew for "The Dead Sea Scrolls," Hungarian to read Endre Ady and other poets. He was especially earnest about his Russian, consulting grammars, Dahl's dictionary (a more antiquarian sort of Russian O.E.D.), and, quite often, his emigre friend.

When it came to Russian literature, the correspondence between Nabokov and Wilson was rather like that between an amused, patient teacher and an eager, overreaching student. Wilson's publication of "The Strange Case of Pushkin and Nabokov," in *The New York Review of Books*, was an assault from the back of the class:

This production, though in certain ways valuable, is something of a disappointment; and the reviewer, though a personal friend of Mr. Nabokov--for whom he feels a warm affection sometimes chilled by exasperation--and an admirer of much of his work, does not propose to mask his disappointment. Since Mr. Nabokov is in the habit of introducing any job of this kind which he undertakes by an announcement that he is unique and incomparable and that everybody else who has attempted it is an oaf and an ignoramus, incompetent as a linguist and scholar, usually with the implication that he is also a low-class person and a ridiculous personality, Nabokov ought not to complain if the reviewer, though trying not to imitate his bad literary manners, does not hesitate to underline his weaknesses.

Wilson not only disapproved of Nabokov's "bald and awkward language"; he also discerned in his friend a desire to "torture both the reader and himself" by "flattening out" Pushkin. In "The Wound and the Bow," Wilson found the key to imaginative art in the injuries and humiliations suffered by a writer in his youth--in Nabokov's case, the humiliation of being stripped of his homeland, of being forced to wander the world far from his home and his language. Nabokov's revenge, he feels, is "sado-masochistic," and it expresses itself in an infuriating perversion of Pushkin:

Aside from this desire to suffer and make suffer--so important an element in his fiction--the only characteristic Nabokov trait that one recognizes in this uneven and sometimes banal translation is the addiction to rare and unfamiliar words, which, in view of his declared intention to stick so close to the text that his version may be used as a trot, are entirely inappropriate here. . . . He gives us, for example, *rememorating*, *producement*, *curvate*, *habitude*, *rummers*, *familistic*, *gloom*, *dit*, *shippon* and *scrab*.

In all, Wilson accused Nabokov of "actual errors in English," an "unnecessarily clumsy style," "vulgar" phrases, immodesty, inaccurate transliteration, a "lack of common sense," a "tedious and interminable appendix," a poor grasp of Russian prosody, an "overdone" commentary that suffers from "information which is generally quite useless," and--"to try to get all my negatives out of the way"--"serious failures" of interpretation. The particulars take up the bulk of Wilson's attack, though he closes with some lapidary tribute to Nabokov's mini-essays on Pushkin's period, cohort, and influences.

After reading Wilson's piece at home in Montreux, Nabokov cabled the co-editor of the Review, Barbara Epstein, in New York: "Please reserve space in next issue for my thunder." If Wilson saw his essay as simply an elaboration of an ongoing game, his target did not. Nabokov, whose sense of humor was so supreme on the page, was not at all amused, and his counterattacks, published in *Encounter* and *The New York Review*, filleted Wilson personally as well as in the philological particulars:

As Mr. Wilson so justly proclaims in the beginning of "The Strange Case of Pushkin and Nabokov," we are indeed old friends. I fully share "the warm affection sometimes chilled by exasperation" that he says he feels for me. In the 1940s, during my first decade in America, he was most kind to me in various matters, not necessarily pertaining to his profession. I have always been grateful to him for the tact he showed in refraining from reviewing any of my novels. We have had many exhilarating talks, have exchanged many frank letters. A patient confidant of his long and hopeless infatuation with the Russian language, I have always done my best to explain to him his mistakes of pronunciation, grammar, and interpretation. As late as 1957, at one of our last meetings, we both realized with amused dismay that despite my frequent comments on Russian prosody, he still could not scan Russian verse. Upon being challenged to read Eugene Onegin aloud, he started to do this with great gusto, garbling every second word and turning Pushkin's iambic line into a kind of spastic anapest with a lot of jaw-twisting haws and rather endearing little barks that utterly jumbled the rhythm and soon had us both in stitches.

Like an admiral commanding a flotilla that his underfunded opponent cannot hope to match, Nabokov lords his superior command of Russian language and prosody over his opponent. After a while, his methodical counterattack seems unfair:

In translating *slushbat' shum morskoy* (Eight:IV:11) I chose the archaic and poetic transitive turn "to listen the sound of the sea" because the relevant passage has in Pushkin a stylized archaic tone. Mr. Wilson may not care for this turn--I do not much care for it either--but it is silly of him to assume that I lapsed into a naive Russianism not being really aware that, as he tells me, "in English you have to listen to something." First, it is Mr. Wilson who is not aware that there exists an analogous construction in Russian, *prislushivat'sya k zvuku*, "to listen close to the sound"--which, of course, makes nonsense of the exclusive Russianism imagined by him, and secondly, had he happened to leaf through a certain canto of *Don Juan*, written in the year Pushkin was beginning his poem, or a certain Ode to Memory, written when Pushkin's poem was being finished, my learned friend would have concluded that Byron ("Listening debates not very wise or witty") and Tennyson ("Listening the lordly music") must have had quite as much Russian blood as Pushkin and I.

Wilson never relented in his argument that Nabokov's translation was nearly unreadable as a poem (and here he was right), but, with time, he seemed to regret the affair. On rereading his original article, Wilson admitted that he had sounded "more damaging" than he had intended. But it was too late. The correspondence with Nabokov, once so robust and warm, now dwindled and ceased. Wilson felt the loss acutely. There were a few last desultory letters in the years left to them, but Nabokov could never fully forgive the "Onegin" affair and other slights, including a wounding passage about his wife, Vera, in Wilson's memoir "Upstate." A quarter century of intense friendship ended. In a letter to the Times Book Review in November, 1971, Nabokov wrote, "I am aware that my former friend is in poor health but in the struggle between the dictates of compassion and those of personal honor the latter wins." Wilson died in June, 1972.

Pevear and Volokhonsky may be the premier Russian-to-English translators of the era. They are certainly the most versatile and industrious and the only such team in which one member, Richard Pevear, does not really speak the language. Pevear told me that he has not even spent much time in Russia--just one three-week trip to St. Petersburg to meet his wife's old friends and family.

"I've never been curious to see Russia," he said during one of our conversations in Paris. "I'm not curious to see the city of Moscow. Should I be?"

Larissa looked faintly embarrassed by her husband's incuriosity. "I don't know what to say."

By listening to Larissa talk with her emigre friends in Paris, by reviewing thousands of small matters of translation, Pevear has certainly picked up a great deal of Russian, but not its outlandishly rich vocabulary, the complicated grammar, with its maddening various verb conjugations, shades of tense, reflexivities, cases, endings, gerundial gymnastics.

Parenthetically, it's impossible for me not to sympathize with him. Russian was the bane of my academic life. I've never given a subject more time and concentration only to feel broken before the task. In college, to the dismay of the two emigree dominatrixes who were my teachers, I spent hundreds of hours poring over a brown-and-blue text called Stillman and Harkins (and, later, a more advanced green one by Charles E. Townsend), hundreds more hours in language laboratories mispronouncing verbs, and all to very little avail--so little that I dropped out of school for a year and, upon return, shifted to the sunny promise and mathematical logic of French. Later, I resumed my Russian studies with a young tutor from Novosibirsk, who, upon hearing me attempt a participial phrase with a reflexive, heavily prefixed verb of motion in the anchor position--a maneuver that I considered the triple salchow of my conversational repertoire--wincing, as if stabbed, rolled her eyes into the back of her skull, and, upon recovery, seemed eager to return to the communal apartment she had shared in central Siberia. She produced a blue text called "Russky Yazyk dlya Vsyekh"--"Russian for Everybody"--a beginning grammar published in Moscow, and said, "So, we start from page one, yes?"

As a teacher, Nabokov revelled in the difficulties of the language almost to the point of serene confidence that no student would ever quite surpass what he called the *Kak-ty-pozhivaetye-ya-pozhivayu-khorosho* (How-are-you-I-am-fine) level of Russian. Nabokov was especially focussed on pronunciation. "Please take out your mirrors, girls," the future author of "Lolita" instructed his students at Wellesley, "and see what happens inside your mouths." Many of his students went into his courses hoping to read Tolstoy in the original (as I did) and left satisfied if they could mutter a simple "These boys are standing on those bridges."

Larissa Volokhonsky is a less imperious professor to her husband than Nabokov ever was to the women of Wellesley. Her drafts and proofs provide literal renderings of the original and plenty of signposts, but the final authority is his. "In English I make mistakes," she said, "but there is enough to explain to Richard what is going on in the Russian text and to collaborate."

Since the great success of "The Brothers Karamazov," Pevear and Volokhonsky have translated (for a variety of publishers) all of the major Dostoyevsky novels and many of his stories; Mikhail Bulgakov's "The Master and Margarita"; a selection of Chekhov's short stories and one of his short novels; and, most famously, Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina."

Strangely, Pevear spoke readily, and with confidence, about Tolstoy's language. He said that the hardest part of starting a long project like "Anna Karenina" was "getting the voice," capturing the narrative tone that will run throughout the book. "Tolstoy's style is the least interesting thing about him, though it is very peculiar," he said. "It seems like most, translators included, are insensible to the crudeness of Tolstoy's style, but Tolstoy liked to be crude, he was crude provocatively. 'Anna Karenina' is interesting very often for how the prose is deliberately not smooth or fine. Nabokov apologizes for Tolstoy's bad writing. But Tolstoy himself said the point is to get the thing said and then, if he wasn't sure he had said it, he would say it again and again."

Pevear and Volokhonsky agree with the majority of their critics that they are best at Dostoyevsky and, perhaps, Tolstoy. Gogol is notoriously difficult for everyone, Chekhov deceptively simple.

"Chekhov has his own difficulties," Larissa said. "His tone seems to be very simple and ordinary, almost banal, and yet it is very hard to catch. It almost falls into trivia, near-cliche."

Richard interrupted, saying, "Yeah, there is a weary rhythm. 'And they saw . . . And then they could see . . . And if it was clear they could move on . . .' One thing after another, without any evident passion, a monotony. Look at 'The Steppe' --one of Chekhov's best-known longer stories. "The rhythms and paragraphs are on the same level all the time. The task is to maintain that level without falling into banality. Remember, this is the author of 'A Boring Story.' He takes banal people and puts them into banal situations, but he has hope for them. As a doctor, he knew that life is horrible, and if we all knew that, we would hang ourselves. And yet there is a hidden source of light in his work; the source is unknown and unclear. He talks of the horror of life in 'In the Ravine.' And yet there is radiance somewhere in the corner. Dostoyevsky was a Christian and so there is a transcendent clear light. With Chekhov, the light is milder, but it is there."

Pevear and Volokhonsky finished "Anna Karenina" in September, 1998--or so they thought. Despite their growing reputation in the United States, they failed to impress the editors at Penguin in London. "They told us the book was unreadable," Pevear said. "They told us it had to be more 'reader-friendly.' But Tolstoy himself is not reader-friendly! They said it was not at a stage to be copy-edited."

Pevear thought that he had solved the problem by taking out some of Tolstoy's more repetitive or overemphatic passages. "Then we got a persnickety copy editor who kept telling us that things might read obscene in a way we hadn't intended," he said. "For example, Kitty says, 'I love balls.' This editor was good enough to tell us that this might read funny. But Kitty liked going to balls! What were we supposed to do? And one sentence read, 'Did you come recently?' Oh, it was all pretty painful. And then they started blue-pencilling in alternate translations from Rosemary Edmonds, dozens and dozens of times. I was out of my mind with

rage. There were more than a hundred cases of that. It took me two weeks, working twelve-hour days, to restore everything."

Finally, in 2000, the book was published in the U.K. Penguin sold a few hundred copies in England. At Viking-Penguin in New York, Caroline White, a senior editor, ordered a print run of thirty-two thousand, with the hope that some strong reviews would mean that the new edition would displace Garnett, the Maudes, and other translations on the academic market.

Then, one day in the spring of 2004, White called Pevear in Paris. She had big news. Oprah Winfrey was selecting "Anna Karenina" for her book club. Neither Pevear nor Volokhonsky quite understood the commercial implications. In fact, they had no idea who Oprah Winfrey was. "I thought she was a country singer," Richard said.

White informed them that Viking-Penguin would print an additional eight hundred thousand copies of their translation in a single month. Soon the buses, subways, and coffee shops of America were filled with people reading Tolstoy. I asked Richard and Larissa what "the Oprah moment" meant for them.

"It means I have an accountant," Richard said.

"Notes from Underground" now sells eight thousand copies a year, "Crime and Punishment" twelve thousand, "The Brothers Karamazov" fourteen thousand, "Anna Karenina" twenty thousand. Flush, though not rich, Pevear and Volokhonsky split their time between the apartment in Paris and a farmhouse in Burgundy. They have been thinking about future projects, including the stories of Nikolai Leskov, famous for "Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District." But they cannot look too far ahead, because the publisher Everyman has engaged them to translate the novel that E. M. Forster insisted was the greatest of all, and that is certainly the longest volume in the nineteenth-century lineup: "War and Peace." Volokhonsky is about two-thirds of the way through with her first draft, and Pevear about six hundred pages into his.

"There is a real challenge in 'War and Peace,' a vast amount of historical detail," he said. "The novel has five hundred historical figures and fictional figures, so we have to write commentaries for the historical ones, which are the vast majority. In the battle scenes, we have to come up with the words for particular kinds of guns and cannons, for military tactics. There is a huge hunting scene, so we have to find very particular words for the wolves, the foxes, the kinds of dogs, the horses, the color of the horses, their gaits, the shape of their paws and hooves and the way they wagged their tails. Tolstoy knew all this as second nature. Or the terms of fashion and high society. In the opening scene, the aunt, *ma tante*, is dressed in 'high ribbons.' Elena Kuryagina is dressed in *liútya i mokh*--'leaves and moss.' What do we do with that? We'll have to call our friend Sasha Vasiliev, a stage designer, who has a collection of old stage costumes."

Their deadline is at the end of 2006. Although they prefer Dostoyevsky to Tolstoy, they are finding "War and Peace" to be immensely satisfying. "Even when people go to war, with tragedy and grief, there is still a safe and harmonic world," Larissa said. "Natasha has babies while living in a world that might not be there tomorrow."

Pevear, especially, has read some of the theory about translation: Walter Benjamin, Jose Ortega y Gasset, Roman Jakobson, and, of course, Nabokov. He said that he takes the most inspiration from a turn-of-the-century French poet and translator named Valery Larbaud. At the end of our last conversation in Paris, Pevear went to his shelves and pulled down a volume in French, and read a prayer by Larbaud addressed to St. Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin. Following the line with his finger, Pevear squinted and, slowly,

translated: "Excellent Doctor, Light of the Holy Church, Blessed Jerome. I am about to undertake a task full of difficulties, and from this moment on I beg of you to help me with your prayers so I can translate this work into French with the same spirit with which it was composed."

Pevear snapped the book shut and picked up the Maude translation of "War and Peace," which he'd been reviewing for his own work.

"I know how he feels," he said. "It's the same thing that sits on our heads when we start up."

Early this fall, Penguin announced the publication of a new translation of "War and Peace"--it was by Anthony Briggs, a British academic. Briggs, who won generally positive reviews, sounded like an attractively modest sort. One of the British papers, the *Daily Telegraph*, quoted him as saying, "Professional translators are generally mediocre people like me, not great poetic geniuses." The Times Literary Supplement published a short, curious article pointing out that Briggs had, unlike some of his predecessors, rendered all Tolstoy's French into English and even spelled out some of General Kutuzov's obscenities. (Tolstoy had obscured the profanity with ellipses.) What Rosemary Edmonds, the last translator of the novel, had as "It serves them right, the b---- b----s!" Briggs has as "They asked for it, the fucking bastards!"

In the meantime, Pevear and Volokhonsky were working on their translation at their farmhouse in Burgundy. I wrote to them about the Briggs approach and hoped for a response, even a prickly one. It came a couple of weeks later:

We're well and had a busy but fruitful summer. I'm about to lose the battle of Austerlitz (W&P vol 1 pt 3). . . . About your questions: I don't know how "new" it is to translate the French passages in "War and Peace." Edmonds keeps only the "*Et bien, mon prince*" of the opening speech, but puts the rest in English, whereas Tolstoy has the first ten lines in French, along with many other extended dialogues in the opening chapters. There are also French words and phrases all through the novel. The Maude and Garnett versions translate all of it into English, as they do, for instance, Napoleon's letter to Murat, and the German of Weyrother's disposition before Austerlitz. If, as you say, Anthony Briggs also translates it all, then as far as I know ours will be the only version that DOESN'T. We do as Tolstoy does, and, like the Russian editions of the novel, put the translations in the footnotes. , Tolstoy used French for a reason, or for several reasons: to give the tone of the period; to play on the ironies of a French-speaking Russian aristocracy suddenly finding itself thrown into war with France; to suggest a certain frivolity and uprootedness in characters like Prince Vassily and the witty Bilibin. . . . Interestingly, when Napoleon banters with his troops, he does so in French, but when he talks seriously, Tolstoy lends him Russian., About Kutuzov's purple patch, again we'll do as Tolstoy did. He would never have written out "fucking bastards," and in any case Briggs has not been very inventive. None of us can figure out what epithet Tolstoy had in mind for Kutuzov, but it seems to have involved the mistreatment of mothers., With best wishes from us both . . .