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Some Notes on Translating Arseny Tarkovsky's "Field Hospital"
by Philip Metres

Despite its pitfalls and limits, translation has always been a necessary, vital, and sometimes transcendent *literary* activity. Just as when we gaze at photographic reproductions of classic paintings (*pace* Walter Benjamin), we can have an experience of art, so too, when we read a translation, we can have a primordial encounter with a version of "the work." We may miss the thickly applied gobs of paint of a Van Gogh, or the sullen glooms of Rembrandts, but we catch much of what's happening, we have an experience, we don't miss all its meaning. But too much talk of translation is about loss. Sometimes a misheard phrase in a song on the radio has saved me from hearing the actual, more disappointing one; sometimes, it's been the beginning of a new song.

In this essay, I'd like to demonstrate, through my translation of Arseny Tarkovsky's "Field Hospital," what I mean by the possibilities of translation as a kind of rebirth. Recently, when asked to discuss my process of translation of a single poem by Sergey Gandlevsky to a class of novice translators, I talked for nearly an hour, and barely scratched past the surface of the thing. Gandlevsky, who happened to be in the room during this exegesis, said that he felt as if he understood his own poem in a new way. There is no doubt that good translators take hard the losses that come with each translation decision, but certainly there are moments when the reverse occurs—when, in the new language, something new is born. Perhaps that is what a good translation can do; just as, when we speak a "foreign language," we need to create another voice, another self to inhabit that voice, a good translation is another life for the poem. It is not identical to the original poem, but it is that poem if it had to travel overseas, settle among strangers, and get down to the business of communicating oneself, and living.

Now, such instant gratification that Gandlevsky afforded me is not forthcoming in the case of translating Arseny Tarkovsky. But Tarkovsky deserves his due. After all, Tarkovsky has not yet had a full-length collection of poems published in English translation. This seems fundamentally unjust, when new translations of eminently worthy poets such as Mandelstam, Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, and other contemporaries emerge every decade or so. If only Tarkovsky had been a martyr, then perhaps he would be read in America! My cynicism aside, Tarkovsky's genius—his ability to compose modern lines of classical concision and beauty—makes him even harder to translate, since the effect of this ease attenuates in the sweated-over words of the translator.

Now, onto examining Tarkovsky's "Field Hospital," a stark poem about the poet's near-death experience from a war wound during the Second World War. First, the poem in Russian, and then my translation, stanza by stanza. What I would like to do is demonstrate how, in English, this translation aspires to poetry, and perhaps becomes its own poem, while carrying forth a basically accurate "reproduction" (to return to our visual art metaphor) of Tarkovsky's original. In this reproduction, I have attempted to retain the voice, tone, scene and movement of the piece, while adapting some formal elements to the American-English poetic context.

Арсений Тарковский

Полевой госпиталь

Стол повернули к свету. Я лежал
Вниз головой, как мясо на весах,
Душа моя на нитке колотилась,
И видел я себя со стороны:
Я без довесков был уравновешен
Базарной жирной гирей.

Это было

Посередине снежного щита,
Щербатого по западному краю,

В кругу незамерзающих болот,
Деревьев с перебитыми ногами
И железнодорожных полустанков
С расколотыми черепами, черных
От снежных шапок, то двойных, а то
Тройных.

В тот день остановилось время,
Не шли часы, и души поездов
По насыпям не пролетали больше
Без фонарей, на серых лапах пара,
И ни вороньих свадеб, ни метелей,
Ни оттепелей не было в том лимбе,
Где я лежал в позоре, в наготе,
В крови своей, вне поля тяготенья
Грядущего.

Но сдвинулся и на оси пошел
По кругу щит слепительного снега,
И низко у меня над головой
Семерка самолетов развернулась,
И марля, как древесная кора,
На теле затвердела, и бежала
Чужая кровь из колбы в жилы мне,
И я дышал, как рыба на песке,
Глотая твердый, слюдяной, земной,
Холодный и благословенный воздух.

Мне губы обметало, и еще
Меня поили с ложки, и еще
Не мог я вспомнить, как меня зовут,
Но ожил у меня на языке
Словарь царя Давида.

А потом

И снег сошел, и ранняя весна
На цыпочки привстала и деревья
Окутала своим платком зеленым.

1964

Field Hospital

The table was turned to light. I lay
My head down, like meat on scales,
My soul throbbing by a thread.
And I could see myself from the outside:

Alone, I weighed no more
Than a greasy market weight.

It was

In the opening, Tarkovsky sets the scene of a critically injured person, more meat than man, lying on a “table” (an operating table, or any table where the injured would be placed). Literally, we might read Tarkovsky’s opening line as “They turned the table toward the light,” but by eliminating the definite article “the,” the line bathes the table itself in the light—as if the table itself were being transformed into light. In a poem about someone on the verge of death, the imagery of light and subsequent lines create that frequent image of those who have nearly died—that they can see themselves as if from above, their body more an object than a self, with the entire scene imbued in light. (Of course, there’s a third meaning that echoes as well; in English, there is the cliché of “the tables were turned,” which means that someone experiences a reversal, they “get a taste of their own medicine.”) Further, the enjambment of “I lay/my head down,” without a comma, plays two meanings—that he is laying his head down himself, and that he is lying, with his head down; in other words, in the translation, we are not sure whether he is giving up or too helpless to move. Finally, in the third line, I’ve adapted Tarkovsky’s echo (which also exists in English) of the idea of someone’s life “hanging by a thread.” What I mean to demonstrate here is that a good translation must also open itself to its own ambiguity; however, this ambiguity, this multiplication of possible meanings, does not mean that I condone ambiguousness or complete confusion. Rather, a good translation should be richly possible, should not exhaust itself in a single reading.

Overall, I should also note, Tarkovsky appears to be writing in a generally iambic pentameter line, with some lines going eleven syllables, and without any rhyme. My understanding is that this meter has a long heritage in Russian poetry, including Pushkin and

Blok; in English, iambic pentameter without rhyme is called “blank verse,” which many of the greats employed (Milton, Wordsworth, etc.). However, this poem’s lack of rhyme does more than follow a traditional pattern, it also seems to suggest the muteness of the traumatic situation near death. As a translator, I have not chosen to retain this “blank verse” line because of a profound difference between Russian and English in terms of syllabics; Russian words tend to have far more syllables than English, and thus, a Russian line translated into English will sound bloated if one attempts to retain the exact syllables. Instead, I often opt for the tradition of alliterative and syllabic verse, where one counts stresses, not syllables, and uses other “sound” devices to anchor the poem’s music. I can see now, despite the elasticity of my lines, that I’m leaning toward words that alliterate: “table was turned,” and “throbbing by a thread.”

In the middle of the shield of snow,
Pocked in its western side,
In the circle of never-freezing swamps
Of the trees with fractured legs
And of small railway stations,
Their skulls split, their snowy caps
Blackened
Again and again.

In the “second” stanza (actually, strictly speaking, it’s the same stanza, since there is no space break, but he has broken the previous line to create a feeling of shift), Tarkovsky moves outside, toward the source of the light—the sun glinting off the snowy landscape, the Russian land as pocked and wounded and broken as the person inside the makeshift field hospital. I’m not quite sure how the snowy railway stations resemble split skulls, but somehow they do; it’s possible that he’s also showing damaged or bombed buildings. This problem underscores another typical problem of translation from Russian into American English; in general, English tends to require a greater adherence toward a kind of transparent visuality, whereas, in general, in Russian, there is a greater leniency regarding language that is not immediately understandable as

visual image. Though both traditions have plenty of examples of abstract, paronymasiac, and surrealist poetry, the default position of English poetry seems to tend to be more visual, more photographic, than Russian. Here, the sound of the poem persists in its iambs (again, even if the lines don't add up to ten syllables), with attendant harmonies of alliteration ("split skulls") and assonance ("fractured" "blackened" and "caps")

On that day time stopped.
The clocks halted, the souls of trains
Upon the gray flippers of their vapor
No longer flew along the lampless levees. There,
Where no crow weddings, no snow storms,
No thaws broke this limbo,
I lay in disgrace, in nakedness,
In my own blood, outside the gravity
Of the future.

Here in the "third" stanza, Tarkovsky reveals the "limbo" of a timeless present, suggested in the opening, where no future is possible. In the second lines, I've tried to adapt an English equivalent for the Russian version of stopped clock; instead of "the clocks didn't march," an unusual phrase, I chose "halted," which somehow retains that military metaphor, for a poem about war. What is particularly effective about Tarkovsky's lines here is the parataxis, where each addition to the sentence adds a kind of dramatic tension to the overall sense of imminent death. Further, the use of syntactic repetition, as in "in disgrace, in nakedness,/in my own blood," piles on the misery of the speaker's situation (note too, that some assonance persists in the translation).

But then the shield of blinding snow
Started to turn on its axis.
And over my head buzzing low
Some seven planes turned back,
And gauze, like tree bark, grew
Hard on my body, and someone else's
Blood was pouring into my veins,
And I breathed like a fish on sand,

winter of dying, and ushers in early spring. It is as if, like Job (notice again how the poet's lips "were covered with sores"), the poet gets another chance to live, despite the devastation that he's suffered. As a final touch, my translation brings back a bit of rhyme (name/came) and near rhyme (trees/green), to evoke again that sense of miraculous transformation, of rebirth, of resurrection, that the poem dramatizes.

Part of translation is a scientific search for analogues and likenesses, through the mazes of dictionaries (both living and bound) and thesauri. But part of translation is beyond explanation; in the writing of this essay, I've found myself engaging in explication (this is what I think the poem means), theorization and self-justification (now why did I do that?!), and even some slight dabbling revisions (*pace* Bonnard). However, all is in vain if the English-only reader picks up the poem and doesn't have an encounter with *the real*. What Tarkovsky's poem dramatizes is what every translator needs to remember, in Bob Dylan's words, "That he not busy being born/Is busy dying."