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**Что такое злой человек
(Несколько фраз из повести Достоевского)**

Every translator from Russian into English, or French or German, has been forced to grapple with the dearth of adequate and precise lexical equivalents for accurately conveying the fundamental religious and moral concepts implicit in two cultures. One of the most striking illustration of such "missing equivalents" is the beginning of Dostoevsky's tale, *"Записки из подполья"* (1864). **"Я человек больной... Я злой человек. Непривлекательный я человек."**¹ All three of these adjectives – and especially "злой" – give rise to a plethora of problems. What does a Russian speaker really mean when he says that someone is a злой человек, or, for that matter, a добрый человек? What kind of person does an English speaker have in mind when he describes him as "mean" or "nasty?" Or as "good" or "kind?"

The various ways people see themselves – and each other – and the words and concepts used by one culture often mean very different things within a different linguistic and cultural tradition. The range of differences in descriptions of character and personality between Russian and English speakers can cause not only thorny linguistic problems, but also mutual misunderstanding and unnecessary conflicts. And a major source of such problems lies in the use of "злой. An American may not even think of people as primarily "good" or "kind" or "mean" or "nasty," but rather as "sensitive," "caring," "interesting," "bright," "intelligent," "unpleasant," difficult," or "awful." Attempts to find a common denominator to questions such as "что такое злой человек," and to provide comprehensive answers to this question can be found in hundreds of weighty tomes and dissertations on philosophical, religious and moral issues.

Literary scholars of all schools, currents and trends have had a field day analyzing the bold and blunt beginning of *Записки из подполья*. Firing off three staccato sentences, the anonymous, disgruntled narrator introduces himself to the reader in a highly negative description of his physical state: – "Я человек больной," – his character – "Я злой человек," and how others relate to him: "Непривлекательный я человек."

The specific lexical items used, the sentence structure, syntax and style are of vital importance for both the translator and the literary scholar. All three sentences consist

of three words, and all include the first person singular pronoun. In the first two sentences "я" is in first place, and in the third it is in second place. All three Russian epithets are long form adjectives, pointing to a permanent rather than a temporary state of mind or being.

All three sentences contain the generic term человек, a word applicable to any human being, but open to a range of translations in other languages. "The noun человек reveals that the central problem concerns not just one individual, but all people, humanity in general,"² wrote Michael Katz, one of the American translators. While theoretically and grammatically speaking the first three sentences of the original could refer to a female as well as to a male, both usage and context make it crystal clear to the Russian reader that the speaker is a man, as confirmed three sentences later by the masculine past tense verb "лечился." And while "Я больной" is a full sentence in Russian, the addition of человек stresses that a specific individual, namely the narrator, is the speaker here.

Not surprisingly, in rendering человек all eleven English-language translators opt for "man." "Person" or "individual" would break the staccato rhythm of the sentences. One French translation opts for "homme" ("man") – "Je suis un homme malade,"³ emphasizing that the speaker is male. Another translation uses the adjective "malade" preceded by the indefinite article "un,"⁴ a common French construction with the adjective functioning as the unstated noun. All of the available German translations use the word "Mensch," the literal German equivalent of человек.⁵

At first glance the initial sentence, "Я человек больной," sounds like a description of the narrator's physical state, an assertion that he is literally "sick" or "ill." The fourth sentence of the text, "Я думаю, что у меня болит печень," appears to back that assumption. Both Garnett and Katz translate this utterance as "I think my liver is diseased." A literal rendering, "I think my liver hurts/is painful" would not make much sense. Yet the phrase "Я думаю" – "I think" that it hurts, following the first three grating statements and implying that the narrator is uncertain as to the nature of the illness, immediately informs the reader that this is an illness affecting the narrator's mind as well as his body, his psychological as well as physical state. In the next sentence, the narrator's rejection of even the assumption that he knows what is ailing him – "Впрочем, я шиша не смыслю в своей болезни и не знаю наверно, что у меня болит" – is translated by

Katz as "Then again, I don't know a thing about my illness; I'm not even sure what hurts." Garnett proposes, "However, I know nothing at all about my disease and do not know for certain what ails me." "Illness," "disease" and "ails" all point to a chronic problem.

Nine of the eleven translations into English are worded, "I am a sick man." MacAndrew has "I'm a sick man," perhaps slightly too colloquial for the narrator's self-important, hectoring tone, and in the earliest of the translations (1913) Hogarth proposes the rather stilted "I am ill."

The notion conveyed by "Я человек больной" is of chronic illness, of being "sickly," though that word is now outdated. This is not a person who is presently "sick" and is expected to recover, but rather someone who is "ailing," a "sick person." "Ailing" however, is not nearly as idiomatic as "sick."⁶ The choice of nine of the translators, "I am a sick man," specifically emphasizes the narrator's intrinsically poor health and could be equally applicable to a physically or a mentally ill individual.

Both French and German have basically one adequate candidate for "больной". Since "malade" is the only logical choice, the French translators do not have a problem in translating "больной."⁷ The only question here is whether this is "un malade" (Bienstock) or "un homme malade" (Markowicz), the same difference as between "я больной" or "я больной человек." The German translators, too, do not have much of a lexical choice. All four German translations are identically worded, "Ich bin ein kranker Mensch," the literal equivalent of "Я человек больной."

The narrator is not only a "больной человек"; we learn that he is also a "злой человек." The word "злой" recurs frequently throughout the text in descriptions of the narrator's feelings, moods and states of mind. While there is relative agreement among the translators in rendering "больной," such is not the case for "злой." In his 1913 translation Hogarth suggests the rather quaint-sounding "I am full of spleen." Six of the eleven English-language translators opted for the adjective "spiteful." Five write, "I am a spiteful man," and one prefers the slightly more colloquial contraction, "I'm." MacAndrew has "I'm a mean man," Shishkoff "I am a nasty man," and Coulson "I am an angry man." While "spiteful" does convey the narrator's simmering anger and resentment at the world around him and at himself, "mean" emphasizes a petty rancor expressed through doing "nasty things" to other people. "Nasty," though, is somewhat too low in register for the

narrator's intensity of feeling. While the weather can be "nasty," or someone trying to be cutting can make a "nasty" remark, this adjective does not have the bite of "spiteful" or even of "mean." "Зол на кого-то" could be rendered by "angry," but this English word is somewhat limited in scope, suggesting "сердитость" rather than intense resentment or the deliberate wish to cause others harm.

Pevear and Volokhonsky opt for a much stronger word: "I am a wicked man," asserting that,

"Zloi" is indeed at the root of the Russian word for spiteful, "zlobnyi," but it is a much broader and deeper word, meaning "wicked," "bad," "evil." The "wicked witch" in Russian folklore is "zlaia ved'ma"... the opposite of "zloi" is "dobryi" – "dobraia feia."⁸

While English does speak of the "wicked witch" and the "good fairy," the word "wicked" is much more closely linked to the concept of unmitigated evil than is the case for "spiteful" or "mean." Pevear and Volokhonsky go on to argue that,

the translation of "zloi" as "spiteful" is not inevitable or a matter of nuance. It speaks to that habit of substituting the psychological for the moral, of interpreting a spiritual condition as a kind of behavior, which has so bedeviled our country, not least in its efforts to understand Dostoevsky."⁹

While it is profoundly true that for decades the language of pop psychology has tended in the US to replace the language of morality, this does not change Dostoevsky's meaning or intent.¹⁰ Злой and зло are two distinctly different concepts in Russian. "Злой человек" describes a mean, spiteful, unpleasant, angry and resentful individual, but not one who is necessarily wicked or evil in the Biblical sense of "зло" as opposed to "добро": "древо познания добра и зла – the tree of knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:9). Russians today are still far more likely to characterize a person as "добрый or злой" than is an American to speak of someone as "good" or "bad/evil/wicked/nasty/spiteful/mean/loathsome/vicious/unkind" etc., all of which contain moral assessments of character.

For Pevear and Volokhonsky, "wicked" as the antithesis of "good" (добрый) is the appropriate translation of "Я злой человек." The translators see the entire story as framed between "wicked and "good," for during the narrator's hysterical breakdown at the end of the tale he sobs, "Мне не дают... я не могу быть... добрым!"¹¹ – "They won't let

me...I can't be...good!"¹² Such an artificial construction of "wicked" as the presumed opposite of "good," however, fails to justify the choice of this word as a translation of "злой" in the second sentence of the tale. A narrator who calls himself "spiteful" or "mean" is quite a different person from one who labels himself "wicked," damning himself from the start in the eyes of the reader and thus distorting Dostoevsky's intent.

Another literal opposite of "good," namely, "bad," contains the same moral "нагрузка" as does the Russian "плохой" – "плохой человек" – a "bad man." But if Dostoevsky had wanted to write "плохой" rather than "злой" he would have done so, and "spiteful" is clearly closer to "злой" than "bad," which implies that the individual is "a bad person" rather than merely "spiteful" or "mean."

In the course of rendering portraits of people, however, the English-Russian translator is very likely to encounter specifically this problem of the "language of morality" vs. "the language of psychobabble." How is the translator to convey in Russian that people are "caring," "sensitive," "reaching out," "nurturing," "committed" or "judgmental?" And how does the Russian-English translator sketch a portrait of someone who is "цельный," "принципиальный," "солидный" "сухой" or "мягкий"? The problems encountered in rendering these concepts into modern prose are not all that different from those that puzzled Dostoevsky's translators.

Other renderings of "злой" could include "malicious" ("злобный", "злой"), implying the mean desire to do ill to others, or "malevolent" ("злорадный," "недоброжелательный,") wishing others ill. While both are adequate equivalents, these longer words of Latin origin are poorly suited to the rhythm and tone of Dostoevsky's sentences. As is so often the case, English words of Anglo-Saxon origin are more blunt and forceful than lexical items derived from Latin roots.

Both of the French translators of "злой человек" use the same adjective:

Je suis méchant (Markowicz)

Je suis un homme méchant (Bienstock).¹³

The word "méchant" works nicely here precisely because it is highly polysemantic. Depending on context, "méchant" can mean a person who is nasty, vicious, cruel, spiteful, hateful, malevolent, wicked, horrible or, if used to describe a misbehaving child, "naughty" or "bad." Most of the French equivalents of many of these English words,

however, such as "malveillant," "cruel" "haineux" "vilain," "fielleux" or "acrimonieux," would not work in this context. They are either too strong ("cruel," – cruel, "haineux" – hateful, "fielleux" – venomous), too colloquial ("vilain," – nasty, disagreeable), or would break the tenor and rhythm of the sentence ("malveillant" – malevolent, "acrimonieux" – acrimonious). When used to describe an inanimate object (an impossibility with "злой" or "spiteful") "méchant" points to something "bad," "pathetic," "mediocre," "wretched" or "miserable." "Un méchant livre" is "a pathetic/miserable book." This wide range of meanings with an emphasis on "nasty" and "spiteful" make "méchant" a logical choice for rendering "злой."

Two of the German translators opt for "ein böser Mensch," one for "boshafter," and two for "schlechter."¹⁴ Of these "schlechter," a direct equivalent of "плохой"/"bad" is the least desirable choice. While other two adjectives are both adequate renderings, "ein böser Mensch" has the meaning of an "evil," "nasty" or "angry" person (with precisely the same sense as "зол на кого-то"). The optimal choice would seem to be "ein boshafter Mensch," which conveys the sense of someone both "malicious" and "spiteful," as implicit in "злой."

In the third sentence, "Непривлекательный я человек," Dostoevsky's "sick" and "spiteful" narrator turns to how he relates to other people. Seven of the English translators opt for "unattractive,"¹⁵ one for "There's nothing attractive about me,"¹⁶ one for "I am an unpleasant man,"¹⁷ and Hogarth (1913) translates the second and third sentences with one line: "I am full of spleen and repellent."¹⁸

"Unpleasant" – неприятный is not the same as "unattractive," and "repellent" is much too strong a word, giving the narrator an active rather than a passive role. A "repellent" individual actively "repels," "repulses," "revolts" or "puts off" other people, while an "unattractive" person's appearance or behavior simply fail to attract others to him. In English the word can mean either physically or psychologically "unattractive," and often implies both. "There's nothing attractive about me" attempts to underscore the speaker's unpleasant character, but produces a lengthy sentence that breaks with the nervously brisk pace of the original.

In rendering this sentence both the French and the German translators run into a similar problem regarding the speaker's relatively active or passive behavior. Bienstock

proposes "Je ne suis guère attrayant," and Markowicz "Un homme repousoir." The former is a literal translation of "I am not at all attractive," while the latter is much stronger: "A man who repels/repulses." All four German translations use "ein abstossender Mensch" – "a repulsive/repellent person," rather than a more literal and less "aggressive" rendering such as "unattraktiv" – "unattractive." Since Dostoevsky did not write "отталкивающий" or "отвратительный человек", and since the narrator's truly "repellent" character will emerge soon enough in the telling of the tale, it hardly seems necessary to stress that he is actively engaged in repelling other people rather than that he is passively failing to attract them. The choice of the majority of the English-language translators, "I am an unattractive man," indeed seems justified since it is the notion of being "unattractive" rather than "repulsive" that should be emphasized in the translations into all of the languages. Of all of these variants, "I am a sick man... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man" – the wording chosen by Garnett and Katz – seems to best convey the sense of the original text.

As we have seen, these three seemingly simple sentences, the opening lines to Dostoevsky's "*Записки из подполья*", have caused major problems for translators working from Russian into English, French and German. The issues here are stylistic, syntactic and structural as well as lexical and semantic, and all of these elements are extremely significant for both the translator and the literary scholar seeking to grasp the sense of Dostoevsky's tale.

The narrator bursts into the reader's consciousness, spitting his staccato phrases onto the page. As he warms to his subject (himself!) he begins to speak in longer sentences. In rendering the first three sentences nearly all the translators have opted for a fairly neutral, colloquial style. Two of the English translators (MacAndrew, Kentish) opt for the colloquial form "I'm" rather than "I am," and MacAndrew uses the contraction "There's" ("There's nothing attractive about me").¹⁹ Two of the four German translations drop the pronoun "I" in the last two of the three sentences: "bin ein schlechter/boshafter Mensch... bin ein abstossender Mensch."²⁰ The brevity of the declarative sentences does not leave the translators much room for stylistic maneuvering.

The word order of all three sentences is different, however, and the translators must decide how to render these distinctions within the syntactic boundaries of English, French and German. All three Russian sentences consist of three words, the first person singular pronoun ("я"), a noun ("человек"), and an adjective ("больной", "злой", "непривлекательный"). In the first two sentences "я" is in first place, and in the third phrase it is in second place. The adjective moves from third place in the first sentence (Я человек *больной*), to second place in the second sentence (я *злой* человек), to first place in the third sentence (*Непривлекательный* я человек). Moving up the adjective serves to underscore its importance and highlight the three negative epithets through which Dostoevsky's narrator introduces himself to the reader.

The rules of English syntax do not provide the English-language translators with broad options for reversing the word order here. "An unattractive man am I" would sound affectedly literary, almost like a line from a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta ("A wandering minstrel I") and would grate against the sharply colloquial and brusque tonality of the tale's initial paragraph. Rather than keeping to the pronoun-verb-adjective-noun- construction of all three English sentences ("I am a sick man," "I am a spiteful man," "I am an unattractive man"), several translators try to render the emphasis provided by Russian syntactical changes through modifiers of the last of the three adjectives, "attractive," or by dropping the pronoun "I" to highlight the importance of the adjective: "A *truly* unattractive man;" (Shishkoff), "There's *nothing* attractive about me" (MacAndrew); "An unattractive man" (R. Pevear and K. Volokhonsky (1993)).²¹

Both of the French translators try to compensate for the impossibility of reversing the word order in French by adding modifiers to the third sentence to underscore its importance: "Je ne suis *guère* attrayant" (Bienstock). In Markowicz's longer construction, "Un homme repoussoir, voilà ce que je suis," (the emphatic "*voilà*" stresses the importance of the adjective непривлекательный – "A repulsive man, that is what I am."

The rules of German syntax allow the translators somewhat more flexibility in terms of rearranging word order, and two of them choose to underline the adjective's importance by moving it up ("foregrounding") the word within the sentence: "ein abstossender Mensch bin Ich."²²

Reproducing the prosody of the Russian lines in English, French or German is a daunting if not an impossible task. If the sentences are analyzed in terms of meter (though Dostoevsky was obviously writing prose and not poetry!) The rhythm of the Russian sentences is replete with tertiary metrical forms such as dactyls (– ' ') , amphibrachs (' – ') and anapests (' ' –) that serve to create a string of jerky utterances:

Я человек больно́й... Я зло́й челове́к. Непривлекате́льный я челове́к
– ' – ' – ' – ' ' –. ' ' ' – ' ' – ' ' –.

Several of the English versions try to imitate this rhythmic pattern:

I am a **sick** man. I am a **spiteful** man. I am an **unattractive** man.
' ' ' – ' ' ' – ' ' ' ' – ' ' '.

French, with its fixed end stress, cannot hope to imitate this pattern of uneven stresses. All the translators can do is to add a word or two to keep imitate the rhythmic pattern of these lines:

Je **suis** un (**homme**) **malade**... Je **suis (un homme) méchant**. Je ne suis **guère** **atrayant**.

' – ' – ' –. ' – ' – ' –. ' ' ' – ' ' –.

Though German with its mobile stress makes it slightly easier to replicate the rhythms of the original, the translations still contain far less anapests and amphibrachs than the Russian original:

Ich bin ein **krank**er **Mensch**. Ich bin ein **bos**er **Mensch**.
' ' ' – ' –. ' ' ' – ' –.

Ein **abstoss**ender **Mensch** bin **Ich**.
' – ' ' ' – ' –.

Of course, Dostoevsky was not writing poetry, and the translator cannot be expected to reproduce *in toto* the syntax and rhythm of sentences of the original language. The problems encountered in these attempts to do so merely serve to illustrate the difficulty of reproducing in translation the style, syntax and structure of the Russian text, let alone the problems regarding lexical choices, differences in mentality and cultural contexts discussed in the first part of this article.

It is hardly surprising that these blunt, aggressive initial sentences of *Записки из подполья* which charge head-on at the reader, the narrator's convoluted ruminations and

his subsequent masochistic behavior have spawned several satirical responses and parodies both in Russian and in English. Soon after the tale's publication, in a pamphlet entitled "Стрижи", Mikhail Saltykov-Schedrin wrote of a tale in which

Записки ведутся от имени больного и злого стрижа. Сначала он говорит о разных пустяках: о том, что он больной и злой, о том, что все на свете коловратно, что у него поясницу ломит, что никто не может определить, будет ли предстоящее лето изобильно грибами...²³

By turning the narrator into a bird Saltykov-Schedrin belittles and mocks the suffering psyche of Dostoevsky's human character. In the twentieth century, the American humorist Woody Allen parodied the initial utterances of Dostoevsky's narrator in a well-known essay, "Notes from the Overfed (After reading Dostoevsky and the new "Weight Watchers" magazine on the same plane trip)." In this merger of Dostoevskian self-loathing with the psychobabble of an obese individual, Allen makes fun of both the American craze for Freudian-style self-analysis in vogue in the 1960s, and the national obsession with dieting:

I am fat. I am disgustingly fat. I am the fattest human I know. I have nothing but excess poundage all over my body. My fingers are fat. My wrists are fat. My eyes are fat. (Can you imagine fat eyes?) I am hundreds of pounds overweight.²⁴

Allen's parody of Dostoevsky later came out in Russian translation in a collection of the humorist's essays published in St. Petersburg:

Я жирный. Я отвратительно жирный. Жирнее не придумаешь. Все мое тело – избыток жира. Жирные пальцы. Запястья. Даже глаза! (Можете себе представить себе жирные глаза?) Во мне сотни избыточных фунтов жира.²⁵

While the Russian translation chooses to ignore several elements of Dostoevsky's style that would easily lend themselves to parody, such as the use of the pronoun "я" in all three sentences, translating Allen's specifically "New York neurotic" English is such a daunting job that the translator can hardly be blamed for taking liberties with the Russian text. And Allen's parody serves to illustrate how, more than a century after it was written, the opening lines of "*Записки из подполья*" still resonate with modern readers, prompting contemporary writers to imitate the narrator's growl as his persona intrudes on the reader's consciousness.

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- ¹ Ф.М. Достоевский, "Записки из подполья," Полное собрание сочинений в тридцати томах (Ленинград: Наука), 1973, V, стр. 99.
- ² Katz, *op cit.*, p. xii.
- ³ Dostoevski, *Carnets du sous-sol*. Traduit du russe par André Markowicz. Babel, Acts Sud, 1992.
- ⁴ Dostoevski, *Le Sous-sol*. Traduit du russe par J. Bienstock. Carpentier et Fasquelle, 1923.
- ⁵ 1) Author unknown, cited in <http://www.nachwelten.de/vB/printthread/php?s=90f975a308ab847cbb3ec512a428711&threadid=6317>
- 2) Bernd Liepold-Mosser, cited in <http://www.tlentscout.com/article-erzaehl.html>
- 3) Jutta Miller and Horst Dinter, cited in <http://members.aol.com/hutchi/buchangaenge.htm>
- 4) Svetlana Gaier, nee Poll, Dostojewski, *Samtliche Romane und Erzählungen*, vol. 20 (München, 1920)
- ⁶ Given the cult of "positive thinking" and of "wellness" prevalent in America today, being "sick" or a "sick person" is not to one's advantage, particularly in work situations. Unless he is suffering from a really serious illness, an American will often say that he is "under the weather" or "not feeling well" rather than admitting that he is "sick" or "ill."
- ⁷ Je suis un homme malade...Je suis un homme méchant. Un homme repoussoir, voilà ce que je suis. Dostoevski, *Les Carnets du sous-sol*. Traduit du russe par André Markowicz. Babel, Actes Sud 1992. Je suis un malade...Je suis méchant. Je ne suis guère attrayant. *Le Sous-sol*, traduit du russe par J. Bienstock, Carpentier et Fasquelle, 1923.
- ⁸ Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, translators. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*. Everyman Library (Alfred A. Knopf: NY 1993), xxi.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xxii.
- ¹⁰ As shown by a recent lengthy article in the *New York Times*, this issue of the meaning of "evil" as opposed to psychological explanations is a topic of debate in the American press. "Theologians and philosophers have long debated the nature of evil. But psychiatrists and psychologists have shunned the term, instead blaming bad child rearing, societal pressure or genetic proclivity for heinous acts. Now some social scientists are arguing that it is time to use the "E" word." Benedict Carey, "For the Worst of Us, the Diagnosis May Be 'Evil,'" *New York Times*, 2/8/05, "Science Times," p. F1.
- ¹¹ Ф.М. Достоевский, V, 175.
- ¹² Pevear and Volokhonsky, xxii.
- ¹³ *Op. cit.* The differences between "Je suis méchant" and "Je suis un homme méchant" are similar to the difference between "Je suis un malade" and "Je suis un homme malade" (Я человек больной) discussed previously..
- ¹⁴ Internet 6327 – "böser"; Miller and Dinter, "boshafter;" Liepold-Mosser and Geier – "schlechter."
- ¹⁵ Katz, Garnett, Coulson, Ginsburg, Shishkoff, Pevear and Volokhonsky, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁶ MacAndrew, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁷ Matlaw, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁸ Hogarth, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁹ Andrew MacAndrew. *Notes from Underground*. New York: New American Library, 1961; Jane Ken-tish, *Notes from Underground and The Gambler*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- ²⁰ Bernd Liepold-Mosser, cited in <http://www.tlentscout.com/article-erzaehl.html>; Jutta Miller and Horst Dinter, cited in <http://members.aol.com/hutchi/buchangaenge.htm>
- ²¹ Serge Shishkoff. *Notes from Underground*. New York: Crowell, 1969. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. *Notes from Underground*. New York: Knopf, 1993.
- ²² Svetlana Gaier, nee Poll, Dostojewski, *Samtliche Romane und Erzählungen*, vol. 20. München, 1920, and <http://nachwelten=6327>.
- ²³ Ф.М. Достоевский, "Записки из подполья," Полное собрание сочинений в тридцати томах V, стр. 382.
- ²⁴ Woody Allen, "Notes from the Overfed," *Getting Even*. New York: Random House, 1968.
- ²⁵ Вуди Аллен, "Записки обжоры: после чтения в самолете Достоевского и свежего номера журнала "Диета." Перевод А. Захаревича, *Записки городского невротика*. Санкт Петербург: Симпозиум, 2002, стр. 65.