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**New But Hardly Improved:
Are Multiple Retranslations of Classics
the Best Cultural Use to Make of Translation Talent?**

Timothy D. Sergay

The notion of *audio remastering* seems to inform the way literary “consumers” conceive of retranslations of classic works today.¹ This is almost certainly because the two operations—remastering and retranslation—are such natural cousins. Retranslation seems to imply, at the very least, continuous improvement of the literary product in the target language, that is, the elimination of earlier translators’ errors in construing the source text and the ever more adequate recreation of the original author’s stylistics. How close this seems to the idea of “cleaning up” an audio signal, improving the “signal-to-noise ratio,” enhancing *fidelity*—this critical term, along with *loss*, is common to translation and audio engineering. Surely the literary source text is comparable to an original “master tape”; surely retranslations deliver a “reproduction” that has been restored to the closest possible conformity to that “master.” (I set aside for now the question of whether translations, however adequate semantically, simply *age* and require periodic refreshing or updating—a Homer, a Dante, a Proust “for *our* generation” and so on.) When shopping for a new copy of a familiar recording, how naturally we favor the most recent repackaging of that recording, which is inevitably labeled as “remastered.”

When shopping for a translation of a classic, when selecting a translation to adopt for literature survey courses, how naturally we do the same: we presume that the latest published versions represent an improvement in fidelity over their predecessors. Surely that is how they are marketed: not as creatively “revoiced,” alternative interpretations or performances, which is how a few aficionados and scholars may view

¹ The present article is based on a talk presented at the 48th Annual Southern Conference on Slavic Studies in Gainesville, Florida, on March 26, 2010. My thinking on the problem of retranslation has benefited from comments on that talk offered by Stephen Pearl, Anna Muza, Galina Rylkova, Alexander Burak, Anne Fisher, and Jonathan Brent.

them,² but as *definitive* renderings, as the *supersession* of preceding versions, not your father's Dostoevsky, a Tolstoy we hardly suspected, a text more faithful to the idiosyncrasies and nuances of the original than has ever before appeared in English. Such rhetoric has been vital to the reviewing and marketing of retranslations of Russian classics by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky since the publication of the team's *Brothers Karamazov* in 1990, but it is by no means limited to that singular industry.

But what if contemporary retranslations of familiar classics are not only proliferating and competing with one another for sales and attention; what if they are also riddled with their own unique patterns of denotative errors and stylistic lapses? What if the "signal" these new editions deliver is actually as noisy as ever, or even noisier than before, despite the effusive blurbs by critics and scholars on their back covers? What conclusions should we draw at various levels, from the literary-critical to the practical and economic?

Thanks mainly to the phenomenon of Pevear and Volokhonsky, it is possible to say (simplifying matters somewhat) that since 1990 we have been living in a second great cycle of translation of classical Russian literature into English. This current cycle is one of *retranslation* of a body of almost exclusively prose works first translated into English starting about a hundred years earlier by Constance Garnett, Louise and Aylmer Maude, Isabelle Hapgood, Samuil Koteliansky, and Leonard and Virginia Woolf, among others. The first cycle was dominated quantitatively by Garnett; the current cycle is dominated by Pevear and Volokhonsky. The odds are now very good that the Russian prose

² See, e.g., Peter Constantine, Bradford Morrow, and William Weaver, eds., *Conjunctions: 38, Rejoicing Revoicing* (New York: Bard College, 2002). Reviewing the proliferation of English versions of Lermontov's *Hero of Our Time*, for example, Robert Reid proposed in 1986 that multiple translations of a single classic constitute a kind of aggregate work in a state of internal dialogue, a "corporate text." See Robert Reid, "The Critical Uses of Translation: Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*," *Essays in Poetics—The Journal of the British Neo-Formalist School* (Sept. 1986), 11(2): 55-90; discussed in George Hyde, "Nineteenth-Century Fiction," in Peter France, ed., *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 587-88 (online at <http://www.jrank.org/literature/pages/7241/Nineteenth-Century-Russian-Fiction.html>; (all URLs verified 17 May 2011). George Hyde remarks in this article that "many of the classic [i.e., early 20th-century — TDS] translations are so impressive that later ones have little to add by way of accuracy, insight, or felicity (though there are, of course, some laughably bad ones)."

classics assigned to anglophone students are being read in English translations created by Larissa Volokhonsky and revised by Richard Pevear.³ The current “P/V” cycle is even seen as a kind of belated but decisive correction of the Victorian “domesticating” distortions perpetrated by Garnett.⁴ It is a “counter-Garnett” cycle that has retramped the grapes of the Russian nineteenth century and rolled forward into the twentieth all the way through Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*, which was released in its Pevear and Volokhonsky version from Pantheon in October 2010. The publisher’s blurb on Amazon announced—suggesting, again, the familiar rhetoric of audio remastering—that the two translators “have restored the rhythms, tone, precision, and poetry of Pasternak’s original, bringing this classic of world literature gloriously to life for a new generation of readers.”

Whether Pevear and Volokhonsky quite deserve all the credit they have been given for *restoring* the “real” language and stylistics of the Russian authors they have retranslated into their frequently quizzical English has been questioned by a number of bilingually competent specialists, both native anglophones and native russophones.⁵ The

³ Richard Pevear protests that “rumors of my ignorance of Russian are somewhat exaggerated” (<http://readingroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/10/29/the-art-of-translation/?page=2#comments>),

but the salient fact is that ferrying the Russian text across the language barrier *into* English remains Volokhonsky’s responsibility, while rewriting the resulting text *within* English into its final published form remains Pevear’s. Maintaining that it is Volokhonsky who translates while Pevear revises is a matter of terminological rectitude. Speaking just as strictly, Pasternak can be said to *translate* Goethe and Shakespeare, whose texts he was able to read without mediation, but in producing his translations of Baratashvili and Chikovani, he has “poeticized” interlinear translations of Georgian originals into Russian provided by others. Not being Russianists, Leonard and Virginia Woolf learned enough Russian to collaborate on seven translations from Russian for the Hogarth Press with Samuil Koteliansky. Koteliansky produced the initial non-native-English translations from his native Russian, just as Volokhonsky does today; the Woolfs revised these into publishable form in consultation with him. Yet Virginia Woolf wrote in 1932, “I scarcely like to claim that I ‘translated’ the Russian books credited to me. I merely revised the English of a version made by S. Koteliansky” (see John H. Willis, *Leonard and Virginia Woolf as Publishers: The Hogarth Press, 1917-41* [Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1992], 83-84).

⁴ See David Remnick, “The Translation Wars,” *The New Yorker*, 7 Nov. 2005, 98-109.

⁵ See, e.g., Gary Saul Morson, “The Pevearsion of Russian Literature,” *Commentary*, July/August 2010, 92-98; Timothy D. Sergay, “On Glossism” and subsequent entries in a *New York Times* discussion, “The Art of Translation,” 2-8 Nov. 2007, at <http://readingroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/10/29/the-art-of-translation>; Dmitry Buzadzhi

present essay on the current “remastering” cycle of retranslations as a whole has been occasioned not by the P&V team’s own output, but rather by the work of younger translators. I first began questioning the rhetoric and presumptions of this cycle when I examined the egregiously overrated *Norton Complete Babel* of 2002, for which most of Babel’s oeuvre, even the *1920 Diary*, which had been published in an English translation by H.T. Willetts only five years earlier, was retranslated in breakneck haste by Peter Constantine.⁶ In this article, I turn to recent retranslations of Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time*, one for The Modern Library (2004) by Marian Schwartz and another for Penguin Classics (2009) by a young translator, Natasha Randall. I concentrate on the newer translation by Randall, which is the second translation of this novel for the Penguin Classics series. The first, by Irwin Paul Foote, first published in 1966 and revised in 2001, is still in print and appears in Penguin’s catalogues and websites alongside Randall’s.⁷ In the space of an article, I can do no more than pose a cluster of questions on the state of English retranslation practices in an age of the authoritative “remastering” of Russian literature. Resolving these questions, if they even admit of resolution, will be a matter of discussion and debate, a matter of years.

and Sarah Gombert, “Transparent Sounds and Fury или С прозрачных звуков на чистую воду,” 19 Oct. 2007, <http://www.thinkaloud.ru/reviews/buz-gom-pevear.html>; Michele Berdy and Viktor Lanchikov, “The Sweet Smell of Success? Russian Classics in the Translation of R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky,” first published in Russian in the translation journal *Mosty* № 1 (9), 2006, <http://www.thinkaloud.ru/feature/berdy-lan-PandV-e.html>; Catriona Kelly’s review of the Penguin *Anna Karenina* in *Translation and Literature* (Autumn 2002), Vol. 11: 2, 283-87; Robert Dessaix, “Anna Karenina...,” *Lingua Franca* with Jill Kitson, 21 April 2001, transcript <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/ling/stories/s280459.htm>; Richard Lourie, “Raskolnikov Says the Darndest Things,” *New York Times*, 16 April 1992.

⁶ Timothy D. Sergay, “Isaac Babel’s Life in English: The Norton *Complete Babel* Reconsidered,” *Translation and Literature* Vol. 15, Part 2 (Autumn 2006), 238-53. A much smaller collection of Constantine’s Babel translations, re-edited by Gregory Freidin, was published in December 2009 as a Norton Critical Edition. However, not even the most surreal and indefensible of Constantine’s mistranslations have been altered in the running text of the new book. Instead, they are in effect *refuted* in explanatory footnotes by Freidin that begin diplomatically “In the original...” (e.g., p. 150, nn. 1-2.). Each such footnote leaves readers to puzzle over why the translation was left at such odds with the contents of “the original.” This unsatisfying arrangement was presumably the result of negotiations with the translator and represented the best option obtainable.

⁷ Randall’s translation is blurbed with Ed Siegel’s remark in *The Boston Globe* of 23 June 2009 (“smart, spirited new translation”). See <http://ppi-pwf.texterity.com/ppi/literature/2009/?pg=122#pg122>.

Natasha Randall's new version of Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* has been praised by James Wood in the *London Review of Books*.

Natasha Randall's English, in her new translation, has exactly the right degree of loose velocity—this sounds like someone taking notes, patching it together as he goes along and unable to make up his mind. (Nabokov's version, the best-known older translation, is a bit more demure than Randall's, less savage.)⁸

Wood's remark on "exactly the right degree of loose velocity" seems to echo a remark in Randall's own introduction—a remark that seems dubious: "Lermontov's language is constantly moving—a motion that becomes clear to a translator only upon achieving enough pace to feel the momentum of his writing."⁹ One might conclude with dismay that Randall believed that translators cannot appreciate the distinctive "motion" of their source texts without keeping vague pace with it themselves, or worse, that the secret to achieving fluency or "momentum" in one's own text is to produce the work hastily. And yet in an interview, Randall made clear that her work on Lermontov was strenuous and protracted, involving at least a year of labor, several different desks, and no fewer than seven drafts, which she revised while studying enlargements of the Russian text pinned to the wall.¹⁰ Haste was presumably not involved. How, then, has Randall fared linguistically and stylistically at the task of "enhancing fidelity," and more generally, how strictly should retranslations of frequently translated classics be judged?

A Hero of Our Time has been translated into English probably over a dozen times, including the famous translation of 1958 by Vladimir Nabokov and his son Dmitri, with extensive explication of difficult passages and lexicon. In my view, it follows axiomatically that an authoritatively packaged retranslation of this novel should have virtually *no errors at all* of elementary misunderstanding of the Russian text. The intercultural labor of *construing the sense of the text into English* has long since been done. The only artistic or intellectual justification for

⁸ *LRB*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 11 Feb. 2010, 19-21.

⁹ Natasha Randall, "Introduction," in Mikhail Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*, trans. Natasha Randall (New York: Penguin, 2009), xxv.

¹⁰ "Natasha Randall on Translating *A Hero of Our Time*," *NYFA Current*, 24 June 2009; http://www.nyfa.org/nyfa_current_detail.asp?id=17&fid=1&curid=777.

undertaking yet another English translation of this classic is, presumably, to make stylistic improvements while scrupulously conserving everything that earlier translations have achieved semantically. And yet Natasha Randall's translation introduces many "original," unprecedented denotative errors that a glance at Nabokov or Foote should have prevented, and is at the same time stylistically uneven. In places, Randall's English is not only as ungainly as a slapdash managerial memo, it is even outlandishly ungrammatical. To a much lesser degree, the earlier retranslation of *Hero* by Marian Schwartz is marred by comparable linguistic faults, if not stylistic ones.

I must cite some particulars to support these claims, but first I must say a word about *interlinguistic scrutiny* in translation criticism. It has become common for both translators and their critics to reject anything that smacks of "gotcha criticism" as so much petty-minded captiousness, smug pedantry, and "creativity envy." In a public exchange occasioned by the release of the P&V translation of *War and Peace* in December 2008, Richard Pevear told readers of the *New York Times* "Reading Room Blog," "Potshotting at words and phrases is one of the worst sorts of translation criticism. Anyone can do it, and the results in terms of understanding are minimal."¹¹ What indeed could be more disagreeable than seizing on local verbal faults in a translation and blowing them out of all proportion, with tiresome appeals to dictionaries and grammars of the source language? The rejection of such fault-finding allows us to focus on global effects, on tone, flow, "domestication" versus "foreignizing," the "visibility" or "invisibility" of the translator, on the distinctive *skopos* or brief of the translation, and other issues of strategy. It saves time and effort, too, since rigorous linguistic comparison against the source text is very labor-intensive. But it also gives a free pass to fundamentally deficient translation. Captiousness is of course always objectionable, but in rejecting the ad hominem spirit of "gotcha," we risk abdicating the very dimension of translation criticism for which specialists in the source language are most responsible.

¹¹ <http://readingroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/10/29/the-art-of-translation/?apage=2#comments>. Pevear's stance of rejecting in principle such "potshotting" by critics at individual lexical choices and yet inviting admiring attention to such choices in his own introductions and elsewhere is at the very least inconsistent. An example of the latter practice is P&V's discussion of why *zloi* in Dostoevsky's *Zapiski iz podpol'ia* is best translated as "wicked" rather than "spiteful" (foreword to *Notes from Underground* [NY: Vintage, 1993], xxii-xxiii).

Interlinguistic scrutiny must still be recognized as the due diligence of translation criticism, and it must of necessity focus on deficiencies at the level of word and collocation. In this discussion I will distinguish two categories of “fundamental” deficiency, semantics and stylistics/usage, giving priority to semantics. Translation criticism must begin by asking whether the “granular” content of the source text has been adequately construed in the translation. Perhaps better, does the semantic (or denotative) error rate of the translation seem reasonably low given the scholarly and intercultural status of the source text? For source texts like *Hero of Our Time* that are not particularly paronomastic or otherwise ambiguous—and that have long since been extensively annotated and accurately rendered in the target language—that error rate, I argue, actually should approach zero. It should certainly not exceed the error rate of previous “classic” translations. Regarding stylistics, we must ask to what extent the translation succeeds at representing, in a way likely to be found convincing by native speakers of the target language, the original’s general stylistic register and the author’s distinctive voice within that register. Regarding usage, we must ask to what extent the translation succeeds at recreating the original’s relationship to standard usage of its source language: are the translator’s departures from usage motivated by comparable departures in the original or do they suggest carelessness within the target language alone?

I compared a number of almost random passages in Natasha Randall’s translation to Lermontov’s original, a procedure I liken to coring rock or ice. I found a number of good lexical choices, such as her handling of Lermontov’s opposition of *priiateli* to *druzhba* in “Princess Mary” (May 13th):

Мы друг друга скоро поняли и сделались *приятелями*, потому что я к *дружбе* неспособен: из двух друзей всегда один раб другого...

We quickly understood each other and *became friendly*, because I am not capable of *true friendship*: one friend is always slave to the other... (84, italics mine)

The construction “became friendly” is a shrewd improvement on both Nabokov’s “pals” (92) and Schwartz’s “chums” (83), since those terms do not at all reliably imply a lesser degree of friendship than the word *friend*

(they could easily imply the reverse); Foote’s “close acquaintances” (78-79) had likewise improved on Nabokov, but was more stilted and obtrusive than “became friendly.” I also found that some longer periods in Randall’s text flow very well indeed, for instance, Pechorin’s thoughts later in “Princess Mary” (120, June 5th) on loving his enemies, but not in the Christian way. But her syntax here is extremely close to Foote’s (113) while her lexical choices are less convincing. (Foote, once again, had already improved on Nabokov’s curious “they amuse me, they quicken my *pulses*” [136, italics mine] with “they amuse me, stir my blood” [113].) Elsewhere Randall’s “word-by-word” solutions indicate worrisome unfamiliarity with common Russian phraseology, as in Pechorin’s remark about the interest he arouses in the women at Pyatigorsk in the very opening of “Princess Mary”:

... петербургский покрой сюртука ввел их в заблуждение, но...

My Petersburg-cut frock coat *led them to an initial illusion*, but...
 (76, italics mine)

Compare Foote’s “They *were taken in for a moment* by the Petersburg cut of my coat, but...” (71, italics mine) and the equally natural “*misled them*,” used by Nabokov (82, italics mine) and Schwartz (76, italics mine).

Eventually I entered nine serious errors by Randall of both semantics and stylistics (mostly semantics) into a table that allows for convenient comparison of Lermontov’s original Russian to four successive translations, Nabokov’s, Foote’s, Schwartz’s, and Randall’s.

TABLE 1.

Original Russian	Nabokovs, 1958	Foote, 1966, Rev. 2001	Schwartz, 2004	Randall, 2009
Но видно, Русь так уж сотворена, что все в ней обновляется, кроме подобных нелепостей.	But apparently Russia is created in such a way that everything in it changes for the better,	Russia seems to be made in such a way that everything can change, except absurdities like this... (3)	Russia has evidently been created such that everything in it is brought up to date except for	But, apparently, Rus is a creature in whom everything is constantly renewed

Original Russian	Nabokovs, 1958	Foote, 1966, Rev. 2001	Schwartz, 2004	Randall, 2009
	except this sort of nonsense. (2)		absurdities such as this. (4)	except nonsense such as this. (1)
Боже его избави от такого невежества! Ему просто было весело рисовать современного человека, каким он его понимает....	The Lord preserve him from such benightedness ! He merely found it amusing to draw modern man such as he understood him... (2)	Heaven preserve him from being so naïve! It simply amused him to draw a picture of contemporary man as he understands him... (4)	May Heaven spare him such ignorance! He merely finds it amusing to draw modern man such as he understands him... (4)	God cure him of such audacity! It simply amused him to paint the contemporary person, one that he understands... (2)
Будет и того, что болезнь указана, а как ее излечить — это уж бог знает!	Suffice it that the disease has been pointed out; goodness knows how to cure it. (2)	Let it suffice that the malady has been diagnosed— heaven alone knows how to cure it! (4)	We will find that the disease has been diagnosed, but how one is to cure it—God only knows! (4)	
(стихи) Много красавиц в аулах у нас, / Звезды сияют во мраке их глаз, / Сладко любить их, завидная доля...	We have many beautiful girls in our villages, / Stars are ablaze in the dark of their eyes. / Sweet is to love them— an enviable lot.... (18)	Our country has many a maid that is fair, / With eyes starry black like the midnight air, / Happy the lad who gains love's ecstasy... (16)	The women are beauties in these mountains of ours, / Their eyes in the night, even brighter than stars, / To love them is sweet, a lot you may envy... (18)	The many lovely girls of our land, / their dark eyes sparkle with stars and, / Love them: a sweet and enviable destiny.... (17)
Но предание, несмотря на надпись, так укоренилось, что, право, не	But the legend, despite that inscription, has become so deeply rooted,	But in spite of this inscription, the legend is so well	But the legend, despite the inscription, has taken such firm root that	But the legend, ignoring the engraving, has taken root such that

Original Russian	Nabokovs, 1958	Foote, 1966, Rev. 2001	Schwartz, 2004	Randall, 2009
знаешь, чему верить, тем более, что мы не привыкли верить надписям.	that one really does not know what to believe, especially since we are not accustomed to believe inscriptions. (33)	established that you do not know what to believe, especially as we are not used to believing what we read on inscriptions anyway. (29)	indeed you don't know which to believe, especially since we are not used to trusting inscriptions. (30-31)	really, you're not sure whom to believe, which is only added to by the fact that we aren't used to believing engravings anyway. (30)
...оборванные хозяева приняли нас радушно.	The ragged proprietors received us cordially. (34)	Our ragged hosts gave us a warm welcome. (30)	... our ragged hosts greeted us gladly. (32)	We interrupted the hosts , who took us in cordially. (31)
бешенство придавало мне силы...	... my rage gave me strength ... (77)	My fury gave me extra strength . (67)	... fury gave me strength . (69)	Rage imparted me with strength ... (69)
Хорошенькая княжна обернулась и подарила оратора долгим любопытным взором. Выражение этого взора было очень неопределенно, но не насмешливо, с чем я внутренне от души его поздравил.	The pretty young princess turned her head and bestowed a long curious glance upon the orator . The expression of this glance was very indefinite, but it was not derisive, a fact on which I inwardly congratulated him with all my heart . (87)	The pretty young princess turned and bestowed a long, curious look on the speech-maker . The feeling conveyed in her look was very hard to define, but it wasn't scorn— on which I felt Grushnitsky was to be warmly congratulated . (75)	The pretty young princess turned around and bestowed upon the orator a long, curious gaze . The expression of this gaze was rather vague, <i>but amused</i> , for which I privately congratulated her in all sincerity . (80, italics mine)	The pretty princess turned around and gifted the orator with a long and curious gaze . The expression of this gaze was very ambiguous but not mocking, for which I applauded her from my innermost soul . (80, italics mine)

The shading indicates translation errors. It was, of course, a given that Randall's column would be entirely shaded, but notice that as we proceed right to left, going backward in time, except for two exceptions in the Schwartz translation, none of Randall's predecessors had stumbled over these places in Lermontov's text. None, for instance, had misconstrued the adjective *oborvannyi*, "ragged, tatty, shabby," in the phrase "oborvannye khoziaeva priniali nas radushno" ("our ragged hosts greeted us gladly," [Schwartz, 32]). To render this phrase as "We interrupted the hosts, who took us in cordially" (31, italics mine) is a wild semantic error. Randall has supplied an entirely new independent clause in English, "we interrupted the hosts," which is not at all suggested by Lermontov's text, in order to make sense of the participial adjective *oborvannye* as a pure participle from the verb *oborvat'* as in "cut off, cut short, interrupt something (e.g., a conversation)." To be sure, a person whose conversation has been interrupted is very seldom described in Russian as *oborvannyi*—as a rule, only the thing interrupted (a text, a conversation) is described with the participle, as *oborvannyi*. (We might compare the ratio of hits on google.ru for "ia byl *oborvan*" in the sense "I was interrupted" versus "menia *oborvali*"—1: 4,110). The use of the participle to describe the person is more typical of English ("I was rudely interrupted"). As with *nesmotria na* ("despite"), subsequent tokens of this same word, *oborvannyi*, are handled correctly in Randall's translation, but she never corrected the earlier tokens.

The unavoidable impression is that *the translator is learning the Russian language as she goes along*—her errors are understandable ones for advanced anglophone students of Russian, but they are not excusable in an authoritative retranslation of a well-annotated classic. Elsewhere, Randall's command of English verb government momentarily fails her, and no copy editor at Penguin questioned the result: "Rage imparted me with strength" (69, italics mine). The verb *impart*, of course, is not governed like *endow*: rage can impart strength to me, but it cannot impart me with strength. No analogous departure from standard usage in Lermontov's Russian is involved. This is a strictly "target-language" error. It takes no more than this to turn the sound of English literary prose into dialogue balloons of hokey "high-style" English for Prince Valiant, Silver Surfer, or Thor comics.

I must pause especially over rows 4 and 9 in Table 1:

Original Russian	Nabokov, 1958	Foote, 1966, Rev. 2001	Schwartz, 2004	Randall, 2009
Будет и того, что болезнь указана, а как ее излечить — это уж бог знает!	Suffice it that the disease has been pointed out; goodness knows how to cure it. (2)	Let it suffice that the malady has been diagnosed— heaven alone knows how to cure it! (4)	We will find that the disease has been diagnosed, but how one is to cure it— God only knows! (4)	(2)

This final and crucial sentence in Lermontov’s introduction is entirely omitted in Natasha Randall’s translation. Her “Foreword” simply ends on the preceding sentence, from which the words “i vashemu” (“and *your* misfortune as well”) were likewise omitted. This same sentence is garbled by Marian Schwartz, who did not recognize the construction “budet i togo, chto...” as synonymous with “khvatit i togo, chto...” and construed it as “budet to, chto...”: “We will find that the disease has been diagnosed....”

Original Russian	Nabokovs, 1958	Foote, 1966, Rev. 2001	Schwartz, 2004	Randall, 2009
Хорошенькая княжна обернулась и подарила оратора долгим любопытным взором. Выражение этого взора было очень неопределенно, но не насмешливо, с чем я внутренне от души его поздравил.	The pretty young princess turned her head and bestowed a long curious glance upon the orator. The expression of this glance was very indefinite, but it was not derisive, a fact on which I inwardly congratulated him with all my heart. (87)	The pretty young princess turned and bestowed a long, curious look on the speech-maker. The feeling conveyed in her look was very hard to define, but it wasn’t scorn— on which I felt Grushnitsky was to be warmly congratulated. (75)	The pretty young princess turned around and bestowed upon the orator a long, curious gaze. The expression of this gaze was rather vague, <i>but amused, for which I privately congratulated her in all sincerity.</i> (80)	The pretty princess turned around and gifted the orator with a long and curious gaze. The expression of this gaze was very ambiguous but not mocking, for which I applauded <i>her</i> from my innermost soul. (80, italics in final column mine)

To my ear, the construction “to gift somebody with something” sounds like strictly legal language for the conveyance of funds and property. Here I appear to be a “conservative” in Paul Brian’s book *Common Errors in English Usage*: “Conservatives are annoyed by the use of ‘gift’ as a verb. If the ad says ‘gift her with jewelry this Valentine’s Day,’ she might prefer that you give it to her.”¹² The Russian construction *darit’/podarit’ kogo chem* as opposed to *darit’/podarit’ komu chto* is archaic to begin with (Evgen’eva, *Malyi akademicheskii slovar’*); Randall’s predecessors did well to handle it with the elevated *bestow upon*, while Randall’s choice of “gifted the orator” creates unwelcome associations with today’s legal and advertising jargon. Far worse, however, is the complete garbling of the sense of the final clause of this sentence. Why should Pechorin applaud or congratulate *the princess* for the momentary seriousness of her regard for his rival, Grushnitsky, whom he holds in polite contempt at this point? Mistaking *ego*, “him,” for *eë*, “her,” is of course an elementary error. Again, this same error is committed by Marian Schwartz, who also misconstrued “no ne nasmeshlivo,” “but not mocking,” as something like “no rassmeshënnoe” and translated it as “but amused.”

The cumulative effect of such garblings for readers is almost certainly a misleading impression of mystery and incoherence. There appears to be greater “signal loss” in recent “remasterings” of *Hero of Our Time* than there was in the previous versions of this novel that the English-speaking world already had on its shelves.

I asked earlier what conclusions we might draw at various levels, from the literary-critical to the practical and economic. Scholars and critics of literary translation have written of the positive value of a “universe” of variant translations of one and the same original, a “corporate text,” to use Robert Reid’s term (see note 2), of mutually enriching, complementary performances or interpretations. Such corporate or aggregate “texts” can be viewed synchronically, as a circle of simultaneously available variations, or diachronically, as a line describing an evolution or tradition. These two perspectives are not necessarily compatible: if the point is to “let a hundred flowers bloom” *all at once*, that is, to luxuriate—culturally, aesthetically, semiotically—in variability of solution, then we should probably stop greeting new retranslations as “standard” and “definitive,” clearly implying a hierarchy of rankings in which the newcomer is king and his

¹² See <http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/gift.html>.

predecessors are deposed forever. The rhetoric of “remastering” in today’s translation criticism is consistent with this strictly competitive, linear model of the diachronic “corporate text.” (Vikentii Veresaev argued for an alternative, strictly noncompetitive and collectivist model of the translatorly tradition in the late 1940s.¹³) It remains to ask, in light of the retranslations examined here, what claims this “corporate text” has on retranslators in principle as they work, and whether gaining membership in that text for each successive retranslation should not be viewed as problematic.

Retranslators take various stances toward their predecessors. Stephen Pearl, for instance, as we read in his contribution to this issue, tries to keep his mind utterly innocent of predecessors’ texts as he composes, so as to avoid prejudicing both his interpretation of the original and his choices as a translator. Robert Chandler views reckoning with preceding translations as unembarrassing and even obligatory.¹⁴ Each choice carries its advantages, costs, and risks. A reasonable policy, it seems, would be to avoid stepping oneself in preceding versions during the initial drafting of a retranslation, but then to read a near-final draft of the new work against *at least one* predecessor, probably the one regarded as the most accurate to date, to control for basic misconstruction of the original. This step cannot safely be entrusted to the publisher’s staff or to russophone consultants (“Russian language editors”). Omitting this step leads to the category of denotative errors that I have examined here. The key for the translator is strict honesty with oneself about the limits of one’s proficiency in the source language; the safer practice, obviously, is to err by underestimating rather than overestimating one’s mastery of that language at every step.

Membership for a new retranslation in the “corporate text” of all the prior translations is an abstract critical notion in which the multiple corporate text is opposed to the singular “definitive” or “standard” text. I would argue that even after publication, membership in that corporate

¹³ See Yu.D. Levin, “Ob istoricheskoi evoliutsii printsipov perevoda (K istorii perevodcheskoi mysli v Rossii),” in M.P. Alekseeva, ed., *Mezhdunarodnye svyazi russkoi literatury* (Moscow: Akademiia nauk, 1963). I have written sympathetically about this perspective; see Timothy D. Sergay, “Translation and the Individual Talent: The Splendid Isolation of Our Retranslators of Russian Classics,” *Translation Review*, No. 71 (2006), 37-40.

¹⁴ See the introduction to *Russian Short Stories from Pushkin to Buida*, ed. Robert Chandler (Harmondsworth, 2005), xviii.

text should not be regarded as automatically conferred. There is certainly a threshold of denotative accuracy and stylistic skill below which new retranslations should be viewed not as “variants” but simply as failures, or as essentially private comprehension or composition exercises by learners of either the source or the target language, presenting negligible interest for literary process and translation studies. Neither of the retranslations considered here falls *as a whole* into this category or anywhere near it. But until they are published in strictly corrected re-editions, their membership in the “corporate text” of English *Heroes of Our Time* should be regarded as somewhat qualified.

Meanwhile, for the careers of translators and the future of literary translation, the economic dimension is critical. Translated literature accounts for only about 0.7% of annual publishing in the U.S., according to the founders of Open Letter Press and the online literary translation resource Three Percent.¹⁵ I suspect that by investing in retranslations of classics rather than previously untranslated contemporary literature, publishers are seeking high-school and college course adoptions, where there is still some real money to be made; at the same time they are of course avoiding royalty complications and expenses, and betting conservatively on literary reputations that are ready-made, golden, and permanent. Likewise, retranslations of Russian classics evidently represent the “big leagues” for literary translators of Russian: working in this area is probably their best chance at earning a decent rate. The end of the Cold War meant an end to ready funding and sympathetic audiences for a stream of dissident, repressed contemporary Russian literature. Were Aleksandr Zinoviev alive today, one doubts that Random House would eagerly acquire a new 800-page title like his satirical political allegory *Ziiaiushchie vysoty* (*The Yawning Heights*) as it did in 1980. An admirer of Zinoviev (but not of Zinoviev’s fiction), Maksim Kantor, has published a far stronger satire of post-Soviet intellectual life, *Uchebnik risovaniia* (*A Drawing Textbook* [Moscow: OGI, 2006]). The book has attracted significant international notice, but the author can hardly get emails returned from his literary agent in London. Aksyonov in his American period, Pelevin, Sorokin, Bitov, Ulitskaia, Tolstaia, Voinovich, Petrushevskaiia, now Ol’ga Slavnikova—all these “nonclassical” Russian authors have, of course, been published in English translations since 1991, but often these translations are the work of exclusive or nearly

¹⁵ See <http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepercent/index.php?s=about>.

exclusive favorites of the given authors (Andrew Bromfield, Jamey Gambrell, Susan Brownsberger, Sally Laird). Translators at any stage in their career need offer no apology for seizing a chance to produce a retranslation of a nineteenth- or twentieth-century classic in the public domain.

But what are the cultural consequences of producing multiple, even *simultaneous* retranslations of the same classics? Il'f and Petrov's *Zolotoi telenok* has just appeared in two new retranslations, one by Konstantin Gurevich and Helen Anderson published by Open Letter Books, the other by Anne Fisher published by *Russian Life*. *Russian Life* has a promotional website featuring a toe-to-toe comparison of the two versions that is as almost as competitive in tone as a car commercial.¹⁶ An acrimonious exchange of postings on the two volumes' relative merits between publishers Chad Post of Open Letter and Paul Richardson of *Russian Life* drew the bemused attention of journalist Anna Clark, who summarized the episode in a blog titled "Translation Throwdown."¹⁷ Seven Stories Press published Marian Schwartz's new *Oblomov* in December 2008, only two years after Bunim and Bannigan put out the new version by Stephen Pearl. Since James Falen's translation of Pushkin's *Evgenii Onegin* was first published by Oxford in 1990, at least nineteen new or revised English translations of the same title have appeared (the next English *Onegin* to appear will be the thirty-ninth since the Spalding translation of 1881).¹⁸ The author of a self-published English *Onegin* of 2008, Henry Hoyt, reports having reproduced well over a hundred lines of Nabokov's prose translation of *Onegin unwittingly*, by sheer parallel invention.¹⁹ Between November 2006 and December 2008, three different English versions of *War and Peace* were published, in translations by Antony Briggs (Penguin, 28 Nov. 2006), Andrew Bromfield (the "original" draft of 1866, Harper, 2 Sept. 2008), and finally Pevear and Volokhonsky (Vintage, 2 Dec. 2008). In the age of "remastered" Russian classics in English translation, volumes of prose and lines of poetry are simply blundering into one another, jockeying awkwardly for position like ships at a crowded pier. During any period, there is only a finite amount of literary translation talent available for any

¹⁶ See http://www.russianlife.com/lgc_translate_compare.cfm.

¹⁷ See <http://isak.typepad.com/isak/2010/02/translation-throwdown.html>.

¹⁸ See <http://www-users.york.ac.uk/~pml1/onegin/>.

¹⁹ See the review by Timothy D. Sergay in *SLAVONICA*, Vol. 16, no. 2 (November 2010), 165-66.

given pair of source and target languages. This is an implacable biological fact. Should we anglophones be throwing so much of our Russian-to-English talent at “remakes” of “remakes”? Is it not time to ask whether, at least in cultural terms, the proverbial returns are not diminishing?

The recent appearance of technically unreliable retranslations into English of the same Russian classics only confirms, in my view, that the time has come to reconsider the gains and the opportunity costs of retranslation itself. This is not a painless prospect. Apart from commercial considerations, the powerful scholarly and artistic impulse to “rescue,” to “redeem” a beloved author who has been particularly ill-served by the most recent or best-selling translations is, of course, understandable and laudable. But the cultural gains in such cases represent the difference between a long-known foreign work that has been deficiently translated and the very same work substantially better translated (the ideal translation, naturally, is unattainable and recedes before us forever). Here, of course, in the exaggeration of such gains, is where the rhetoric of “remastering” has its crucial role to play in the culture of retranslation: ah, but *these* are songs we had never *really* heard before, never heard in their purity and truth, in authoritative, definitive reproductions. These works are entering English literary culture *as if* for the first time, *as if new*. Our theory and practice of literary translation has advanced a hundred years between the first and second great cycles of Russian-English translation. We know better now than to “domesticate,” than to “smooth”; we no longer presume to impose our own poetics, our own ethos, finally, on the wild and rough contours of the source text. We can finally harness the resources of our language to giving adequate, authentic voice to the untamed cultural “other.” But there is a great deal of mythology at work in such thinking. In practice, largely for lack of adequate and completed linguistic training on our translators’ part, for lack of editorial oversight on our publishers’ part, for lack of interlinguistic scrutiny by our critics and even scholars of translated literature, we are far too often inscribing in our “authoritatively” packaged retranslations of Russian classics a curious journal of a foreigner’s sometimes elementary discoveries about the lexical, idiomatic, and syntactical systems of the Russian language. The common Russian adverb *bezdarno*, for instance, in P&V’s new *Doctor Zhivago* is calqued into the English semineologism *giftlessly*—“trying giftlessly and inappropriately to clarify something”—presumably in keeping with

Pasternak's partiality to the term *dar*, "gift, talent."²⁰ It would be a disservice to both source and target cultures to identify the record of such discoveries with the "real," distinctive voices of the original authors.

I do not propose that all parties to Russian-English literary retranslation therefore abandon their lines of work and put down their pencils. I advocate only greater rigor and a reconsideration, by both translators and publishers, of the choice of source texts in favor of truly new titles. There is always plenty of old and contemporary literature worthy of international interest that has yet to be translated into English for the first time. The appearance of such anthologies of new Russian prose in English translation as *Rasskazy: New Fiction from a New Russia* (Tin House, 2009) and *Life Stories: Original Works by Russian Authors* (Russian Information Services, 2009) is an encouraging development. The fostering of economic and cultural demand for such works sufficient to make translating them a viable prospect depends on the overall quality of our anglophone literary culture, its depth and breadth, its global curiosity or indifference. The fate of that literary culture, in turn, forms no small part of what is at stake in current debates over the future of higher education in the humanities.

Editions of Lermontov's *Geroi nashego vremeni* reviewed in this article:

- Lermontov, M.Iu. *Geroi nashego vremeni*. (1840.) Russian Readers With Explanatory Notes. Moscow: Russian Language Publishers, 1977.
- Lermontov, Mikhail. *A Hero of Our Time*. (1958.) Trans. Vladimir Nabokov in collaboration with Dmitri Nabokov. Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1988.
- Lermontov, Mikhail. *A Hero of Our Time*. (1966; rev., 2001.) Trans. Paul Foote. Penguin Classics. New York and London: Penguin, 2001.
- Lermontov, Mikhail. *A Hero of Our Time*. (2004.) Trans. Marian Schwartz. The Modern Library Classics. New York: Modern Library/Random House, 2004.
- Lermontov, Mikhail. *A Hero of Our Time*. (2009.) Trans. Natasha Randall. Penguin Classics. New York and London: Penguin, 2009.

²⁰ *Doctor Zhivago*, trans. Pevear and Volokhonsky, [NY: Pantheon, 2010], 121, 351.