

NINE

Translations Past and Present

Every age deserves the translations it tolerates or admires. —Ivan Kashkin

1 *The Song of Igor's Campaign* has been translated into Russian forty-four or forty-five times, each time in a different way. And each of these forty-four or forty-five translations has reflected both the personality of the translator with all his individual qualities and the age in which the translation was done, because each translator introduces into his version precisely those elements which constitute the aesthetics operative in his time.

Every translation is therefore a new distortion of the original conditioned by the taste of the social stratum to which the translator addresses himself. That is, in other words, every age prescribes its own recipes for departures from the original, and translators follow this recipe to the letter because they realize it is precisely the departures their contemporaries will consider the translation's chief merits.

The age of pseudo-Classicism dictated to its poets translations of "Yaroslavna's Lament" in majestic couplets: "To the mighty river a turtledove I shall wing, / My beaver sleeve in the soft Kaiala to wring."¹ As a result *The Song of Igor's Campaign* was

given in opulent alexandrine lines obviously intended to be declaimed on the stage. This is the same line in which the "thundering" tragedies of Ozerov, Knyazhnin, and Sumarokov were written. Yaroslavna came to resemble Queen Osnela, who declaimed the same sort of lines in Sumarokov's tragedy *Kborev*. The Romantic period demanded that its translators turn "Yaroslavna's Lament" into a love song. The result was a sensual love song with harpsichord accompaniment. V. Zagorsky's 1825 translation was even titled just to suit: "Yaroslavna: A Love Song." It was written in iambic tetrameter quatrains with alternating rhyme scheme and filled with phrases such as "O, where art thou, my beloved friend? / Where is thy Yaroslavna's bright-shining light?" In that day of the Romantic cult of ancient Slavdom and rapturous restorations of works of folklore, N. Grammatin's 1823 translation of "Yaroslavna's Lament" was written in long trochaic lines and endowed with an archaic style typified by the usual old forms—*grad* for *gorod*, 'city,' *glas* for *golos*, 'voice,' and so on. During the period of enthusiasm for Homer (right after the appearance of Gnedich's translation of *The Iliad*), M. De La-Pyu obliged Yaroslavna to do her lamenting in hexameters (1839).

In the period following the collapse of the high poetic culture which distinguished the first third of the nineteenth century, "Yaroslavna's Lament" sounded forth in a still different way in the 1854 translation by M. Gerbel—in a resilient and ringing but empty line devoid of lyricism, with plain trochaic tetrameter lines and alternating rhymes, with predictably common metaphors.² As always happens with the verses of epigones, the mechanical rhythms were not even slightly related to the theme—they came out like a dance instead of a lament. In the same period of epigones, about eight years before at the very height of dilettantism, another "Lament" appeared in the translation of D. Minayev (the elder) which was similarly resilient yet empty, and was sweetened besides with concoctions in a sentimental style. Yaroslavna was made to "bow her little head" on her "snow-white bosom," and she even had to sing rhymes like *polechu—omochu—zalechu*. *Chu—chu—chu*—these three rollicking,

dancing sounds are not even faintly expressive of sorrows and sobs.³ And since a moribund exoticism peculiar to the ornamental style was flourishing at that time in fashionable journal verses (for example, in *Library for Reading*), this too could not but be reflected in the "Yaroslavna's Lament" of the day: "Wind, wind, why dost thou howl, / Why plowest thou thy broad road / With widespread wing?" Flowery concoctions such as "the slave of Avarian hosts" seem especially intolerable disfigurements here because this is one of the simplest, most sincere sections of the lament, hardly in need of ornamentation. In the Modernist period "Yaroslavna's Lament" sounded forth in G. Volsky's 1908 version with cheap pseudo-Decadent rhythms. The dreamlike somnolence into which the translator steeped the lamenting Yaroslavna is blatantly typical of Decadent poetics.

An end was put to such distortions only in our age, when the art of translation was closely linked to science. "When we examine the translations and adaptations of the Soviet period," says a modern scholar,

we note a generally higher level of artistic culture in comparison with prerevolutionary translations. Almost every translation represents serious work in an artistic, and often even in a scientific regard; they do not bear the imprint of provincialism and hack work which characterizes many prerevolutionary translations, especially those of the years just prior to the revolution (1908–16). There was a significant growth of interest on the part of the broad masses of our people in *The Song of Igor's Campaign*. Theory and culture of translation reached a high level in our country. To these favorable conditions must be added the appreciably more profound study to which *The Song of Igor's Campaign* has been subjected by modern science. All of this has helped Soviet translators perfect their translations.⁴

In the thirties "Yaroslavna's Lament" was translated by Georgy Shtorm. His translation is not a rehash, not a paraphrase, not a variation on a theme, but an interlinear model maximally approximate to the original. The translator's personality does not thrust itself upon the attention, as was the case with the transla-

tions just cited. Georgy Shtorm treated the text with the objectivity of a scientist—his translation is a contribution to both belles-lettres and science. It is in the style of the translator's art established in the thirties and forties. Concurrently with Georgy Shtorm, *Song* was translated by Sergey Shervinsky, who was guided by the same aspiration toward scientific precision, but nevertheless produced a quite different translation, one sharply distinct from Georgy Shtorm's: more feminine, more lyrical, and, I would say, more musical.⁵ Where Shtorm offers a drily rationalistic, effaced phrase such as, "The banners flutter," Shervinsky preserves the priceless metaphor of the original, "The banners speak forth." Shtorm's translation is more solidly based on principles, more firm, more confident, but also more prosaic and coarse. What is important, however, is that both translators tried equally hard to avoid introducing subjective moments into their translations. Neither translator employs concoctions, of course, neither attempts in any way to "improve" the original, to "beautify" or "adorn" it as was typically done by the translators of previous times. And yet their translations are as different as their personalities.

The same scientific-artistic principles can be found in the translation of *The Song of Igor's Campaign* done by Ivan Novikov.⁶ This translation is also perfectly typical of the period just past: no embellishments or concoctions, a perfect combination of poetry with strictly scientific analysis of the text! The translator's chief aim was to re-create the ancient *Song* by means of a maximum approximation to the original—its rhythms, styles, vocabulary, poetic images. Next to this modern translation the majority of translations done in the nineteenth century seem like dilettante work, capricious paraphrases of the great literary monument. Ivan Novikov does not "adorn" it with loud, impertinent rhymes, as was done by Gerbel, Minayev, and Mey. He attempts to restore the stylistics of the original, to renew the movement of the line inherent to the original. And although his commentaries testify that his translation is based on extensive research on the text, this work not only did not destroy the poetic charm of *Song*,

but on the contrary, allowed it to manifest itself in all its fullness: "It is not spears that sing on the river, — / It is the voice of Yaroslavna I hear. . . ." The translation not only preserves the requisite negative simile of the first line, but conveys each word and image of the original with great precision, carefully preserving its linear and syntactic structure.

Of course, even here the translation only seems to be objective. (Is it not poetic caprice, for example, that some lines are amphibrachic, others anapestic, and still others a mixture of oral narrative rhythms?) And yet it is impossible not to admit that objectively calculated departures from the original are far fewer than in any other translation of *The Song of Igor's Campaign*. Of all forty-five translations done of *Song* in the century and a half since the text was first published, Ivan Novikov's translation corresponds most closely to the literal meaning of the original and serves as an excellent interlinear model for anyone wishing to study the work.

Novikov's method of interpreting the text cannot be considered the only one, of course. There is a great temptation for Soviet poets to adapt *Song* to the modern period, to phrase it in the "nowadays" style. This temptation overcame Mark Tarlovsky, and he created an extremely curious work of poetry which only with reservations can be called a translation. More than anything else, this is an adaptation of *Song* into the complex, multistyled language developed in modern poetry. The headings of the individual sections of the translation are deliberately vulgar—the headings of adventure films and novels: "Head on into the Eclipse," "Head on into Fate," "Trapped," "Lessons of the Past," "Svyatoslav's Dream," "The Dream Is Fulfilled," "No Warriors, Alone in the Field," "Glory to the Donets," "Gzak's Nemesis," and even "United Front." This translation of "Yaroslavna's Lament" is in quatrains with mixed iambic-anapestic lines which are most definitely modern, as is the vocabulary.⁷

But of course, Tarlovsky's translation is not typical of the translation trends of the modern period. It stands detached, like a rarity which no one will ever imitate. The great majority of practicing translators of the thirties and forties set quite different

tasks for themselves: objectivity, precision, an absence of concoctions and capricious embellishments, equirhythms, equilinearity, and so forth. These principles seemed completely inviolable when in 1946 there suddenly appeared the miraculous, authentically poetic translation of Nikolay Zabolotsky.⁸ This translation does not satisfy the demands whose observation would seem to guarantee maximum precision in a translation, but it is actually more precise than the most precise of interlinear translations because it conveys the most important thing: the poetic uniqueness of the original, its fascination, its charm. Never before in a single translation have the uncoordinated images of *The Song of Igor's Campaign* been brought together with such powerful lyrical feeling. The line is strongly forged throughout. The brave prince's warriors fight from morning to night and through the night to morning again in a bold trochaic line, with swift, bold images, one following the other in quick succession: "mountains of bloody corpses," "sabers striking helmets." "In terms of a scientific understanding of the composition of *Song*," says V. Stelletsky,

its exposition is divided into three parts and a prelude. Zabolotsky has divined the mosaic character of the composition of *Song*, and the entire exposition, with the exception of the prelude, is subdivided into forty-five structurally different complex or combined stanzas. . . . With great tact and taste Zabolotsky introduces into his exposition separate stanzas written in trochaic trimeter with dactylic endings and in trochaic tetrameter. . . . It can thus be said with great pleasure that Zabolotsky has found a new way to the free poetic recreation of *The Song of Igor's Campaign*.⁹

Nikolay Zabolotsky's "Yaroslavna's Lament" is composed of trochaic pentameter lines, the majority of lines following the same strict pattern: -- ' - ' - -- ' -. All the advantages of the authentic Soviet method are clearly evident here—the joining together of scientific knowledge with poetic feeling. Zabolotsky has called his translation an adaptation, but his adaptation conveys the original more accurately than many other translations, because it conveys its lyricism, its dynamism.