Approaches to Translation

Konstantin Bogatyrev, his Work and his Death
by Angela Livingstone

I write to lament the death of Kostya Bogatyrev, an excellent friend and a fine translator of poetry, who was murdered in Moscow this Summer. Kostya's was the face I always most needed to see when I went to that city. Though often anguished and restless, it often, too, showed a quick brightening-up of pleasure, as if he was always expecting and finding good things, good thoughts, good people. He had an impatience that was all his own. Scarcely had he opened the door of his flat before he would grasp and embrace the welcome visitor. A bottle of cognac would be poured out instantly for everyone present and emptied with unbelievable speed. There was never any marking time with small-talk before the shrugging, nervous, natural resumption of what seemed unceasing discussion of books, of writing and translating — his own and others' —, of life in Moscow, life in a police state, of poets and of other people — what they'd felt, thought and done.

An unusual face, both fleshy and thin, severe and gentle, and deeply lined, looking marked by the marks of more than one life; soft, but not like faces that are not firmly made — on the contrary, too much worked upon by too much

life and feeling: mobile, peaceless, rapidly expressive of tenderness, rapture, despair, unhappy scorn, an endless generosity. It was always good to be with him. Everything was personal; nothing invented for the occasion, nothing conventional or conformist. There was always warmth, intelligence, concern, and the certainty that these things mattered.

Kostya's hands shook when he gestured or poured out tea; his voice sometimes shook too; he seemed as if he were trembling inside himself. At the age of twenty-six he had been arrested, accused of "terroristic intentions", condemned to death, reprieved and sent off to twenty-five years in a prison camp, then released after five of them. He devoted himself to literature; became a friend of Boris Pasternak, knew Anna Akhmatova and others of that splendid older generation of poets, and came to be known himself as an excellent translator from German. He translated works by Hebbel, Chamisso, Th. Mann, Trakl, Brecht, Frisch, Celan, Dürrenmatt, Kästner and Rilke. He spoke with particular enthusiasm of his translations of the last two. When I saw him last year, on his fiftieth birthday, he was completing the work of putting all of Rilke's *Neue Gedichte* into Russian verse.

I want to say something about these translations, a few of which have already appeared in a small collection of translations from Rilke by various translators (Moscow 1974) and all of which are due to be published soon in Moscow. They represent something that is seldom found among English translations of foreign poetry. Most English poetry translations are either faithful to rhyme, metre and paraphraseable meaning while not succeeding in the least as poems, or else are themselves successful poems which reproduce virtually nothing of their originals' sound or shape. But these Russian renderings of Rilke preserve his metre, stanza-pattern and even — a considerable achievement — his rhyme schemes, losing remarkably little of the words and meanings, and yet at the same time are themselves good poems.

Wir kannten nicht sein unerhörtes Haupt,
darin die Augenäpfel reiften. Aber
sein Torso glüht noch wie ein Kandelaber
in dem sein Schauen, nur zurückgeschraubt,
sich hält und glänzt.

Nam golovy ne dovelos' uznat'
v kotoroi yabloki glaznye zreli
no tors, kak kandelyabr, gorit dosele
nakalom vzglyada, ubrannovo vspyat',
vovnutr'.

We did not know his unheard-of head
in which the eye-apples ripened. But
his torso burns still like a candelabra
in which his looking, only turned backward,
remains and gleams.

We did not happen to know the head
in which the eye-apples ripened
but the torso, like a candelabra, still burns
with the head of his looking, turned backward,
inward.

There are changes: 'unheard-of' is gone; there is somwhat more 'heat'; 'inward' is added. Bu these are justified by semantic and phonic requirements: Rilke's 'unerhört' (unheard-of) at least partly owes its presence to the echoing of its prominent 'h', long vowel and final 't' in 'Haupt' (head), and a subtly corresponding pattern of echoes is given in the Russian at the same place: the 'v', 'l' and careful arrangement of stressed and unstressed 'o' in 'golovy — dovelos' (head-happened). 'Candelabra' in German could mean at the beginning of the century a streetlamp which would still burn when the gas was turned down: as it did not have this meaning in Russian, the rather more difficult turning inward of the light of candles has to be visualised, and here not only is this feat assisted by the addition of 'nakal' (incandescent heat) but the alien word 'candelyabr' is briefly domesticated by its 'a' or 'ya' being echoed in thoroughly Slavonic words: 'nakal', 'vzglyad', 'vspyat'. 'Vovnutr' (inward) has two similar functions: for the understanding it adds a needed explanation, and, for the listening, its compound of consonants joins that of 'ubrannovo', 'vspyat' etc. to provide a characteristically Russian (consonantal) fullness of sound as counterpart to the typical German, or Rilkean, wealth of vowels in 'Augen', 'Schauen', 'geschraubt'. All this is done with an unostentatious power and poetic tact.

This poem, 'Archaic Torso of Apollo', with which the second part of Rilke's *Neue Gedichte* opens, says that the seeing power which belonged (or which the observer would have imagined in) to the eyeballs of a statue now surviving without its head is (one has now to imagine) spread through the rest of the body. The sculpted god is so alive that his sight is felt to be there in the curve of the breast, the turn of the loins, the way the whole torso seems to glisten and to burst out of its edges, forth from itself 'like a star'. The result is that every bit of it can 'see you'. The poem ends with a surprising, whether enlightening or bewildering, short sentence: 'Du musst dein Leben andern: You must alter your life.' At which one may ask: why? Because one has been seen by non-existent eyes, because one has looked at a great and living work of art and been looked back at by it? But still — why? Now the Russian version ends slightly differently. Having said, like the German, that if the god's seeing were not spread through the entire torso, the latter 'would not be shining through all its bends/like a star' ('i ne siyal skvoz' vse svoyi izlomy/zvezdoyu' - I quote this to show the sensitive and effective play of 's' and 'z') the poem in Russian goes on:

. . . vysvetiv tvoyi glubiny do dna. Ty zhit' obyazan po-inomu.	. . . lighting up your depths to the bottom. You've got to live differently.

Here is the same instructional last sentence. But preceding it, where in the German we read 'There's not a spot that doesn't see you', we read in the Russian 'lighting up your depths to the bottom'. Although in essence the same is being said, we are here made to reflect on what takes place in the observer rather than on what is done to him by the statue. So the reader is now prepared to hear 'You've got to live differently', which he can explain to himself by the offered consideration that someone who observes art is seen right into, brought wholly to light. To be thus seen and illumined is to feel oneself changed, and it follows that one must change one's way of life to suit.

As when a poem is set to music, so in a good translation, the multiplicity of possible meanings is often forfeited, certain ambiguities and connotational hesitancies foregone, while at each point *one* of those meanings, one type of possible connotation, is chosen and strengthened and made the translator's (or the composer's) own. The translating poet adds his own music, enriches with his own understanding, and thus makes up for those qualities of the other language which he is bound to see slipping through the however delicate net of his own. It is at interpretative points like this that we can catch sight most easily of the mind of Konstantin Bogatyrev finely at work. I have analysed this last line, summarised this poem, in order to point out that one thing he has immortalised of himself is his ability to perceive and communicate thoughts in that peculiarly Rilkean dimension. One of the things Russians have to thank him for is his making accessible to them insights and conceptions of an unusual fineness, not merely as passing intellectual notions but in lasting poems.

It is often said that the Russians love poetry in a more natural, unspoilt, wholehearted way than we do. Certainly when they read peoms aloud or, more likely, recite them from inexhaustible memory, there is generally an infectious enjoyment around, especially enjoyment of the poems' incantatory element, which I have not come across in English poetry readings. Rhythms, rhymes, line-endings — all the audible matter of the poem is respected and loved, the poem is practically sung, at the same time as it is being thought through. It is impossible here to give examples of the musicality in Konstantin Bogatyrev's translations. But I would point to the marvellously well imitated 'Roman Fountain', where an imagery and syntax which are almost the same as Rilke's create just as his do the lovely interrelation of the fountain's basins: the top one pouring down like speech to the middle one, which holds up to it sky and foliage while, level with its edges, it lets itself down in drops to the lowest pool, these 'transitions' ('going-overs', as double-meaninged in Russian as in German) 'animating it like a smile. And I would point to the translations of the poems about places ('The Square', 'In a Foreign Park', 'Quai du Rosaire . . .') which are very fine and contain lines which show that the translator has looked both at the world and at language with a Pasternakian luxury and rigour.

One poem that now, while we are still shocked by its translator's terrible death, acquires a new personality and force, is 'Der Gefangene'/'Uznik'/'The Prisoner'. In it Rilke says — to give again a crude paraphrase — suppose the world (sky, air and light) were turned to stone and you were still alive inside it, with your 'future' turning into festering wounds, and your past becoming an insane laughter; and suppose God became the prisoner-warder and stopped up the eyehole with his own dirty eye. Bogatyrev, instead of 'suppose all this were to happen', says (for reasons of his own or of his language) 'it will happen'. Sky and air and light are there *now*, but — imagine — it will all be stone . . . with you alive inside it, and a prison-warder for god —

i gryaznym glazom on zatknyot glazok	and with dirty eye he will stop up the eyehole

— here, once more, Russian consonantality comes aptly into its own.

Someone who saw Kostya in his coffin described his face as horribly tormented, as on some medieval 'memento mori'. It is hard not to imagine that he lay there consciously imprisoned in a world of stone, knowing all that had happened. His friends say that he had 'foreseen' it all and had prophesied that he 'would be the next'. Lena, his widow, wrote, in almost Rilkean words, that he died 'his own death'.

Kostya had made many friends and was much liked. He was known as someone who would always speak out, without fear, in defence of the truth and in defence of people who had been unjustly accused or, because they had written or spoken freely, deprived of their rights. He entertained visitors from abroad just as if there were nothing necessarily sinister about foreigners. He said what he thought; he did no intellectual violence to himself. Is it for this reason that physical violence was done to him? Many among his acquaintances think so, particularly as, they say, he had no personal enemies. Who would have wanted to wait on that dark landing outside his flat (several floors up in one of the huge, heavy, oldish apartment blocks on Krasnoarmeiskaya Street), to lunge out at him as he came home from his shopping, hit him with some large metal instrument, breaking his skull, and leave him lying in his blood for his aged mother to find? This is what happened at the end of April. For two months he survived, mainly unconscious, in hospital, where on June 18th after he had been moved out of the intensive care unit into the general ward, his condition grew worse, and he died.

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