

Distress from Cleverness. By ALEXANDER S. GRIBOYEDOV. Trans. by BEATRICE YUSEM. New York: Effect. 1993. 223 pp.

Few works of classical Russian literature are so difficult to translate as Griboedov's comedy, at least half the lines of which have become proverbs, as Pushkin prophesied they would. Nevertheless, the translation history of *Gore ot uma* into English is more than 150 years old. If early renderings into prose are discounted, the first genuine translation (one which retains its value to the present day) is the version by Sir Bernard Pares that appeared seventy years ago (*The Mischief of Being Clever*, by Alexander Griboedov, trans. by Sir Bernard Pares, with an introduction by Prince D. Mirsky (London: School of Slavonic Studies, University of London, 1925). The translations by F. D. Reeve and Joshua Cooper, which appeared several decades later, are inferior to that of Pares. The beginning of the 1990s saw a revival of interest in Griboedov in the English-speaking world. In 1992 two new translations of *Gore ot uma* appeared almost simultaneously, one in Great Britain and the other in the United States. Intended as 'acting versions', they were by Anthony Burgess and Alan Shaw respectively. Finally, shortly before the bicentenary of Griboedov's birth, Beatrice Yusem's translation was published in a bilingual edition of the play. This is a serious work which deserves special attention.

Yusem's translation differs from those that appeared a year earlier chiefly because it is a *translation* and not an adaptation. The translator has made a consistent and successful attempt to be lexically and semantically faithful. This judgement may be applied both to the text as a whole and to individual extracts. For example, in the monologue at the beginning of the second act Famusov utters the very significant phrase: 'Chto za tuzy v Moskve zhivut i umiraiut'. The word *tuzy* is translated by Yusem as 'bigwigs', preserving not only the sense but also the style of the original. This choice is more accurate than Cooper's 'grand men' and avoids the modernization of Reeve's 'big shots'.

In general Yusem avoids literalism. This aspect of her work is particularly noteworthy in the translation of phraseological expressions, the more so since, as is well known, Griboedov employed a very wide range of means of expression from the rich arsenal of Russian phraseology. The translator must cope with particular difficulties in attempting to render idiomatic Russian. Take, for example, the ending of one of Famusov's monologues: 'Vy, nyneshnie-nutka.' It is scarcely possible to find in English colloquial speech a direct equivalent to the Russian *nutka*, and Yusem skillfully avoids the problem by using everyday vocabulary and thereby remaining within the limits of the codified literary language: 'You, young ones, where are you?' (pp. 60–61). It must, however, be pointed out that in a few isolated examples the translator's avoidance of literalism takes her rather far from the original, stylistically if not semantically. Take, for example, an extract from Famusov's tirade in the first act. 'Moi drug, nel'zia li dlia progulok . . .' becomes 'My friend *if you have no objection* . . .' (pp. 22–23). In seeking semantic equivalence the translator has here clearly neglected stylistic adequacy.

We are reminded of the fact that occasionally literalism can be useful by the rendering of the title: *Distress from Cleverness* (a collocation that has not, incidentally, been used in any of the preceding versions: *The Misfortune of Being Clever*; *The Mischief of Being Clever*; *The Woes of Wit*; *The Trouble with Reason*; *Chatsky*, and others). Anthony Burgess's version, which bears the hero's name, Chatsky, as its title, has the subtitle *The Importance of Being Stupid*, which brings to mind associations with Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Formally effective though it is, Burgess's subtitle clearly shifts the semantic accent and creates an antithesis between the title and the subtitle. Yusem's approach is more cautious, and her translation of the title presents no problems.

In rendering proper names and purely Russian realia, Yusem sticks more closely than her predecessors to the original and does not adapt the names of people or objects to their English equivalents. The departures from this principle are rare; thus 'bufetchik Petrusha' becomes 'Petrushka'. One can understand the translator's motives here: 'Petrusha' is a name which sounds alien to a non-Russian, whereas many will be familiar with the name 'Petrushka' from Stravinsky's ballet.

It is exceptionally difficult to translate those lines from Griboedov's comedy that have become firmly fixed as proverbs. It is evident that to attempt to find equivalent English proverbs is a pointless task. To Yusem's credit, she copes successfully with many difficulties of this type. Her rendering of Repetilov's 'Shumim, bratsy, shumim' as 'What noise we raise, what noise' (pp. 190-91) appears simple enough, but such aphoristic simplicity is achieved only through hard work and talent. Equally simple and semantically accurate is her version of Chatskii's difficult phrase: 'Kogda v delakh — ia ot veselii priachus': 'When I'm at work I do not seek for pleasure . . .' (pp. 122-23). The first half of this phrase coincides with the version by Pares, but in the second half Yusem is more accurate.

Gore ot uma is a verse comedy, written in iambic lines of varying length, which is unusual for the western reader. The principle of equilinearity has been observed by several translators of the play, including Yusem. But in observing another important principle, that of equi-rhythmicity, her translation is distinguished from the others. Here is an example of the observation of equi-rhythmicity in an iambic tetrameter:

V moi leta ne dolzhno smet'
Svoe suzhdenie imet'
I daren't at my age be known
To have opinions of my own.
(pp. 124-25)

The translation of Griboedov's Alexandrines is more difficult. Here Yusem demonstrates a wide range of translation and versification possibilities, rendering all the parameters of the Alexandrine line while retaining the meaning.

Unlike some of her predecessors, Yusem is scrupulously faithful to the rhyme scheme of Griboedov's verse, including those instances where, in the words of Grigorii Vinokur, rhyme is 'a means of linking speeches'. In a few lines in the monologues and tirades the rhyme scheme in the translation does not fully correspond to that in the original, but such cases are rare, as are rhymes of the type 'and a *fop*/grown *up*' (p. 53) based on American speech norms. For the most part the translator has succeeded in her task of rendering the rhymed verse.

The assimilation into other cultures of such significant works of Russian literature as *Gore ot uma* is a process that is slow and difficult, but exceptionally important. Beatrice Yusem's translation is of interest to others besides students and scholars of Russian literature. It is a new and significant advance that will make Griboedov's masterpiece accessible to a wider circle of readers in the English-speaking world.