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A Brief Note on the Translation of the Opening Lines of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*

"Happy families are all alike. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* (1877) begins with the most famous opening line in Russian literature. That sentence also happens to be fairly easy to translate into English. There are a few small variations possible, but the sense of the author's contrast is immediately apparent in the original and in most English versions.

But what is perhaps the second most famous opening of a Russian novel poses enormous challenges to the translator. I have in mind the first three sentences of Fyodor Dostoevsky's short novel *Notes from Underground* (1864), a rambling monologue by an embittered, isolated, anonymous narrator. In English transliteration, this work begins as follows:

*"Ja chelovék bol'nói. Ja zloi chelovék. Neprivlekátel'nyi ia chelovék."*¹

A "literal" English rendition, preserving the precise word order of the original, is as follows: I [am a] man sick. I [am a] spiteful man. Unattractive [am] I [a] man.

Translating these three sentences into "literary" as opposed to "literal" English isn't easy. Here is a sample of ten of the most popular versions published to date:

¹ F.M. Dostoevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh*. Leningrad: Nauka, 1973, 99.

1. "I am ill; I am full of spleen and repellent" (C. J. Hogarth, 1913).
2. "I am a sick man.... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man"
(Constance Garnett, 1918).
3. "I am a sick man.... I am a spiteful man. I am an unpleasant man"
(Ralph Matlaw, 1960)
4. "I'm a sick man... a mean man. There's nothing attractive about me"
(Andrew MacAndrew, 1961).
5. "I am a sick man.... I am a nasty man. A truly unattractive man"
(Serge Shishkoff, 1969).
6. "I am a sick man.... I am an angry man. I am an unattractive man"
(Jessie Coulson, 1972).
7. "I am a sick man.... I am a spiteful man. An unattractive man"
(Mirra Ginsburg, 1974).
8. "I am a sick man.... I am a spiteful man. No, I am not a pleasant man
at all" (David Magarshack, 1979).
9. "I am sick man... I'm a spiteful man. I'm an unattractive man (Jane
Kentish, 1991).
10. "I am a sick man.... I am a wicked man. An unattractive man" (R.
Pevear and L. Volokhonsky, 1993).

To look closely at the Russian: the original consists of three simple, complete sentences, each containing three words, two of them repeated in each: *ia* -- the first person nominative singular of the personal pronoun ["I"], is the grammatical subject; and *chelovék* -- a common noun in the nominative singular ["person," or, given the narrator's gender, "man"], is the predicate nominative. The translation of these two words poses little problem. Since spoken Russian has no verb "to be" in the present tense and lacks articles (both definite or indefinite), I have inserted both verbs and articles in brackets above to conform to the rules of English grammar.

It is easy to reproduce the repetition, so the translator's difficulties lie elsewhere: first, to convey the essential meaning of these three carefully chosen adjectives; and second, to replicate the dramatic foregrounding of the adjective as it advances in the word order of each consecutive sentence from final to medial to initial position.

The first adjective, *bol'noi*, means "sick" or "ill" (in the physical sense). The long-form here follows the noun and is used with predicative meaning, denotes characteristics "inherent in or completely identified with the noun."² Thus the word connotes "sickly" or "chronically ill," conveying the sense of a long-term condition, rather than a temporary problem. Thus the hero's first utterance characterizes his physical health: he claims that he thinks his liver is diseased. But before long we come to realize that the underground man's illness is not merely physical, but also psychological. When the hero says he is a "sick" man, it is clear that the word applies much more to his mind than to his body.

The second adjective, *zloi*, poses even more difficulties. The word is usually translated as "mean," "nasty," "malicious," or "spiteful." That's correct, but it omits an equally important secondary meaning: *zloi* also means "evil" or "wicked," as opposed to "good" (*dobryi*). That second sense is essential in order to understand the hero's emotional crisis in Part Two; when the prostitute Lisa finally realizes how miserably unhappy the narrator is, instead of replying to him with more words, she offers him the greatest gift she or any woman can offer, namely, unconditional love. At that moment the underground man is severely conflicted: part of him wants to respond, but he cannot or will not. In a burst of honesty combined with deep self-pity, he pleads: "They won't let me be... I can't be... good (*dobryi*)." In other words, from the second sentence of this work until this late epiphanic moment; the narrator has been his "evil" self and will continue to be so because he knows he can never escape his own nature.

The much-praised duo of Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky have chosen to render this adjective as "wicked." In fact, they justify their choice in a Foreword to their edition of *Notes from Underground* (1993). The long list of other translations included above renders the epithet *zloi* in its meaning of "nasty, malicious, spiteful, angry, and full of spleen." There is simply no English word that conveys both meanings of the Russian original. The moral dimension of the word is crucial, but in this text it functions only at a secondary level and should certainly not be

² Terence Wade, *A Comprehensive Russian Grammar*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, 164.

brought to the fore until the moment of the hero's crisis in Part Two. To introduce it in the translation's second sentence is both premature and misleading; furthermore, it undercuts the impact of its antonym, when the word *dobryi* finally emerges from the hero's mouth. In a recent article entitled "The Pevearsion of Russian Literature", Gary Saul Morson expounds at length and with considerable wit on the meaning of Pevear and Volokhonsky's unfortunate rendering:

But that is just what P&V do [i.e., miss the concept of spite]. Instead of "spite" they give us "wickedness." Now the Russian word *zloi* can indeed mean "wicked". But no one with the faintest idea of what the novella is about, with any knowledge of criticism from Dostoevsky's day to ours, or with any grasp of Dostoevskian psychology, would imagine that the book's point is that people are capable of wickedness.³

In addition, I would add that the word "wicked," no doubt to the consternation of theologians, has recently entered colloquial English as a term of approval (e.g., "wicked good.")

Dostoevsky's third epithet, *neprivlekatel'nyi*, is a compound formed of the following elements: the negative prefix *ne* = not + the prefix *pri* = near or at + the verb *vlech'* = to pull or drag + a noun suffix of agent *tel'* + the adjectival ending *-nyi*. The result is a literary word meaning "unattractive", "unpleasant", or by extension, "repellent" or "repulsive." Dostoevsky uses the adjective in its first or "positive" degree, that is, neither comparative nor superlative. Yet some translators have insisted on strengthening this attribute by qualifying it with an adverb such as "truly" or "most."

With extraordinary prescience these three sentences announce the author's fundamental themes for his entire work. The personal pronoun *ia* [I] indicates that man's individuality lies at the center of the author's attention. The Underground Man contends with powerful forces threatening to obliterate his individuality, originality, and uniqueness. The common noun *chelovek* [person] demonstrates that the central problem concerns not just that one individual, but all people, humanity in general. Finally, the three adjectives begin the process of characterizing the hero in the most profound and precise terms: his illness (physical and psychological); his personality ("mean, nasty, spiteful," as well as its ethical or moral dimension, "evil, wicked" as detailed above); and his impact on

³Gary Saul Morson, "The Pevearsion of Russian Literature," *Commentary*, July/ August 2010, 93.

other people (“unattractive, unpleasant, repulsive”). Psychology, ethics or morality, and aesthetics – all captured in three words.⁴

As indicated above, not only are these three adjectives challenging to translate, but the word order of the original is virtually impossible to reproduce in English. To illustrate I include a diagram of the structure in Russian: let’s represent *ia* as “1”, the noun *chelovek* as “2”, and the adjective as “3”. Thus the structure of Dostoevsky’s first three sentences is:

1 2 3a

1 3b 2

3c 1 2

This unusual word order has one primary purpose: to foreground the adjective, to advance it from the final to medial, and then to initial position. In each of these three sentences the reader is compelled to focus more and more on the highlighted characteristic of the narrator:

a) “sickly” > b) “spiteful/evil” > c) “unattractive/repulsive”

Given that the two other words (personal pronoun and common noun) in each sentence are repeated, we acquire new information both from the adjective and from its position in the sentence. The speaker strives to provide the reader with as full a description of himself as possible and each epithet is essential to portraying him, although no one word is more important than any other.

As demonstrated above in the list of published versions, it has proven impossible to replicate both the author’s insistent repetition and his unusual word order in English. Previous attempts to reproduce something of the force of Dostoevsky’s opening lines have not succeeded.

In my own version, the Norton Critical Edition published in 1989 (with a second revised edition in 2001), I settled for the early rendition by the indefatigable and inimitable Constance Garnett. Hers struck me at the time as the simplest: it captured the repetition and rendered the meaning of the three adjectives satisfactorily, even though it failed to reproduce the powerful effect of the Russian word order.

Recently, however, I had an opportunity to share this challenge with a group of advanced undergraduate students of Japanese in a colleague’s

⁴ The aesthetic dimension is most fully discussed in Part I; section vi, where the phrase “beautiful and sublime” [*prekrasnoe i vysokoe*] is frequently repeated.

senior seminar at Middlebury. I used Dostoevsky's three simple sentences as a reminder that no translation can ever really "replace" the original. The best we translators can do (and, unfortunately, we can't always do it), is to provide a close "equivalent".⁵ For the authentic experience I always advise and urge my students to learn the language. One student raised his hand immediately and offered a suggestion. He knew not a word of Russian; he had taken my course on Dostoevsky (in translation) several years ago, and there he had proved to be one the most motivated and perceptive students. His elegant solution abandoned the repetition of pronoun and noun, and instead aimed to replicate the foregrounding of the adjective in English. He also chose a stronger synonym for the third epithet. His version is as follows: I'm a sick man. A spiteful man. Repulsive.

His name is Jesse Bennett; he hails from Kailua Kona, Hawaii and he graduated from Middlebury College in 2011.

This experience demonstrates, yet again, the collaborative nature of translation. It is certainly not a new idea and has been discussed at length in numerous books and articles. I first encountered it in a little-known piece by the late Donald Frame, a scholar of French Renaissance literature, and a Fellow at the National Humanities Center. In a paper published in their *Newsletter* in 1982-83, he wrote:

I strongly favor regarding translation, like scholarship, as a cumulative undertaking, and therefore borrowing – or stealing – whenever you see that your own best solution to a problem is clearly inferior to someone else's.

"Borrowing" (or stealing) is one thing, plagiarism, is certainly another. Lauren Leighton has written a thoughtful essay on the problem entitled "Translation and Plagiarism: Pushkin and D.M. Thomas." In spite of the risks, he argues that it would be foolish to redo a line that is already "perfect" and that "translators should consult and take existing work into account".⁶ Thus, he says, a translator can and should "borrow" or "steal" – to incorporate a phrase from a predecessor's work without risking an accusation of plagiarism.

⁵ See Robert Fitzgerald's "Postscript to a Translation of *The Odyssey*," in *The Craft and Context of Translation*, edited by William Arrowsmith and Roger Shattuck. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1964, 303-51.

⁶ *SEEJ*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (1994), 69-83.

So, until anyone comes up with a better idea, I will incorporate Jesse Bennett's solution into my translation of *Notes from Underground*. My opinion is that his version can serve as an inspiration, and as dramatic testimony to what a fresh pair of eyes and a lively intelligence can do: "out of the mouths of babes."

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