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(Review) Miedzy psem a wilkiem

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Między psem a wilkiem by Sasha Sokolov; Aleksander Bogusławski

Review by: Andrea Lanoux

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pursue a consistent search for the Christian message in Russian classics, as well as in contemporary literature.

The conflict between the generation of critics who had tried to express their honest opinion in terms acceptable to the Soviet regime and the young generation which knew no constraints, formal, moral, or ideological, is dealt with objectively. While conceding that the old generation still had the upper hand in 1993, Menzel points out that their behavior was inevitably rooted in a system they had tried to challenge before gaining freedom of direct expression.

In a chapter entitled "Two Exemplary Discussions," Menzel deals with a "reevaluation of the classic heritage." Andrei Siniavsky's notorious *Promenades with Pushkin*, hardly a typical case, serves as an example. The huge controversy which it generated is presented judiciously by Menzel. She believes that it was based on a misunderstanding of Siniavsky's intent by a readership not used to tongue-in-cheek talk.

The second "discussion" deals with "the other literature," that is, with critics who tried to draw the public's attention away from safe classics and to introduce new names, styles, and genres. Mikhail Epstein was the herald of new schools of poetry, such as Conceptualism, while Sergei Chuprinin made a point of suggesting the reading of "the other prose," works by unknown writers which were not message-oriented, but concentrated on esthetic devices and novel themes (sexuality, for instance), as well as new forms and styles.

A final chapter, "Conclusions: On the Functional Changes in Literary Criticism, 1986–1993," summarizes the observations made earlier. Again, the point is made that under the Soviets literary criticism was institutionalized and had a great deal of power. In the 1980s, it played a key role in the radical changes that affected the political, cultural, and even the social condition of the Russian intelligentsia. But when reduced to the role literary criticism plays in the West, the negative sides of these developments emerged, both for the Russian intelligentsia and for literary criticism. Commercialization deprived literature, and especially literary criticism, of state support, as it deprived literary critics of their authority and, for many, of their privileged livelihood. As in the West, literary criticism in Russia now tends to be identified with literary scholarship. Yet, non-academic criticism in Russia is more apt to pursue the irrational, the end of history, and other topics that appeal to readers, than is the case in the West.

Victor Terras, Brown University

Sasha Sokolov. *Między psem a wilkiem*. Trans. Aleksander Bogustawski. Afterword by Jan Gondowicz. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2001. 240 pp., 24.50 zł. (paper).

Aleksander Bogustawski's superb Polish translation of Sasha Sokolov's second novel, *Between Dog and Wolf* [*Mezhdū sobakoi i volkom*, 1980] is a monumental achievement, giving Polish readers access for the first time to this fascinating and difficult text. Written in both poetry and prose, employing an astonishingly eclectic lexicon of archaisms, anachronisms, dialectisms, neologisms, and slang expressions, and full of intertextual references, this novel would seem to defy translation. Other barriers include the novel's use of the *skaz* technique, its lack of a coherent plot (or its competing and contradictory plots), its multiple narrators, and its web of character doubles. Critics have compared this novel to the writings of such a diverse array of authors as Gogol, Melnikov-Pechersky, Bely, Klychkov, Platonov, Iif, Kharmis, Joyce and Faulkner. Yet Bogustawski meets the challenge with his beautifully nuanced translation, a project ten years in the making, which included consultations with the author and with the poet and translator Stanisław Barańczak, as well as countless hours of research. As translator of Sokolov's first novel, *A School for Fools* [*Shkola dlia durakov*, 1976; Polish translation, 1984], author of critical essays on Sokolov, and a painter who has interpreted Sokolov's

fictional worlds on canvas, Bogusławski has a deep and intimate knowledge of Sokolov's work, and he is the ideal person for the task.

Between Dog and Wolf begins as a mock epistolary novel—a letter of complaint from the one-legged, alcoholic knife-grinder, Ilia Zynzyrela, to the local police chief concerning the theft of his crutches, stolen by hunters to avenge Ilia's accidental thrashing of a hunting dog that he had mistaken for a wolf. This seemingly concrete plot thread, however, is not readily apparent; as Sokolov himself has said, only on the third reading does the plot become clear. Set in a rural backwater on the Ityl River (the old Tatar name for the Volga), the novel quickly melts into a meandering excursus on rural life, a mythologized place outside of time that acts as an escape from Soviet existence as well as from the exigencies of traditional narrative forms. This indeterminate quality of the novel is reflected in its title, a translation of the French idiom *entre chien et loup*, denoting the twilight hour when one cannot distinguish a dog from a wolf. Also a reference to a line from Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* («Люблю я дружеские враки / И дружеский бокал вина / Порою той, что названа / Пора меж волка и собаки», IV. 47), the title is a short-hand reference to the novel's plot (the fact that Ilia was so drunk that he could not tell a dog from a wolf). The novel operates primarily as a parody, which is felt in both the poetry and prose.

Native speakers of Polish consulted for this review agreed that Bogusławski's translation reads naturally and “doesn't feel like a translation.” Bogusławski achieves this effect in part by stylizing the Polish *gawęda*, a genre that loosely corresponds to the Russian *skaz* tradition (despite several important differences) and makes it possible to render Sokolov's eclectic style and baroque sentence structure. For example, the fourth sentence of the novel (in which the protagonist introduces himself) reads: “Я, хоть Вы меня, вероятно, и не признаете, гражданин, то же самое, пожилой и для данных мест сравнительно посторонний, но поскольку точу ножи-ножницы, и с панталыку меня вряд ли, пожалуй, сбить, пусть я с первого взгляда и совершенный культяп.” Bogusławski renders it as: “Choć mnie Pan zapewne nie znasz, też już dość sobie pożyłem i ze mnie w stronach poniższych obywatel względnie postronny, ale żem szliferz i ostrzę noże-nożyce, to z pantatyku nie tak mnie łatwo, powiedzmy sobie, zbić, nawet gdy na pierwszy rzut oka kulas ze mnie złamany” (9). Bogusławski's use of colloquial constructions (“Choć mnie Pan zapewne nie znasz”), archaisms (“żem”), and run-on clauses are characteristic of the genre. In this regard, Bogusławski's text is comparable to the 1994 English translation of Gombrowicz's *Trans-Atlantyk* by Carolyn French and Nina Karsov, which handles a parodied *gawęda* with similar finesse and grace.

In some cases the Polish text simplifies, clarifies, or explicates the Russian, which I consider to be a positive feature of this translation as well as a necessity. Translations are, after all, interpretations, and the translator must decide what each sentence means, no matter how ambiguous. Hence the Russian “Куковал где поселят и запросто” becomes “Żytem sobie jak kukułka, gdzie się dało i bez wymagań” (10). The lyrical quality of the prose (including occasional rhyme, word play, and puns) is generally retained in the Polish, if not always line by line. For example, the Russian sentence “Глазом мира был этот пруд с катушками, опалом шлифованным в оправе глин синих, купи ивы и тин длинных был он” becomes “Okieł świata był ten staw ze szpulami, był szlifowanym opalem w oprawie z kobaltowych glin, kęp iwy i gługich glonów.” Bogusławski retains only some of the rhyme here, but makes up for it a page later in an appropriate line: “utul do snu z biegiem, podsuń pod ciemność co miększy kamyczek” (22). Compare to the Russian: “уложи вдоль течения; камышек под затылок помягче сунь.”

Bogusławski's mastery is most evident in the poetry sections, which appear intermittently as notes (*zapiski*) in a bottle sent from a second narrator, Iakov, another drunkard but one who writes verse. A formal virtuoso, the poet writes in a variety of classical meters on the most prosaic of topics: storing one's hunting gear, watching the weather change, getting the mail. Bogusławski brilliantly renders the formal qualities and humor of the poems; here we find

many gems — poetic equivalents that convey the tone and overall sense of the original, if at times deviating from literal meanings. Especially noteworthy are poems 1–2, 5–6, 12, 15, 23, 26–28, and 31. The last lines of poem 32 (“Ekloga”) recall the opening lines of the novel and speak directly to the problem of language — the Russian language — the creative power of which the novel celebrates: “Но месяц был молод и ясен, / Как волка веселого клык / Привет вам, родные свояси, / Поклон тебе русский язык.” Bogustawski’s deft translation allows the reader to remain in the diegetic world of the Polish text, making it possible to read these lines as his own testimony to the flexibility of the Polish language: “Ale młody i jasny był miesiąc, / Jak kiel wilka wesotego blyskał. / Chwała wam, o rodzime pielesze, / Pokłon składam ci, mowo ojczysta” (205).

Andrea Lanoux, Connecticut College

Pavel Vilikovsky. *Ever Green Is . . . : Selected Prose*. Trans. Charles Sabatos. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002. Introduction. Translator’s notes. Bibliography. 195 pp., \$49.95 (cloth), \$15.95 (paper).

Finally — almost 10 years after the establishment of an independent Slovak Republic — appears a long-awaited and much-needed translation of contemporary Slovak fiction. No better representative could have been provided than the polyvalent writer Pavel Vilikovsky — Postmodern philosopher, political parodist, and pop-culture *maharishi*. Acclaimed as one of Eastern Europe’s best post-communist writers, Vilikovsky (b. 1941) won the Vilenca Award for Central European literature in 1997. He began writing in 1965, and surprisingly, published three of his major works in Slovakia in 1989, an unexpected turn of events, given the political tenor of his work and its proscribed themes, such as its unadulterated depiction of bisexuality. Under communism Vilikovsky also became Slovakia’s foremost translator of British and American literature, including works by Faulkner, Woolf and E. E. Cummings.

This collection offers three gems from Vilikovsky’s story-spangled oeuvre, brilliantly translated by Charles Sabatos, who perfectly performs Vilikovsky’s inimitable Postmodern style, which dazzles the reader with its delirious intertextuality, parodic pastiche and witty persiflage.

The riotous opening anecdote “Everything I Know About Central Europeanism” [1996] delivers a daunting dig at Kundera’s renowned essay “A Kidnapped West” [1984] and his notorious, noble notion of Central Europe as a collective “culture and destiny,” reconsidered in the light of present post-communism and Czech and Slovak nationalism. In this ludic tale of a fictional chance encounter with the Existentialist Camus on a train journey to a “Miss Democracy Beauty Pageant,” Vilikovsky lucidly exposes what it means to live in “our geographical latitude” (an unobjectionable code name for a certain social system, 8) and what the essential “remarkably Central European attitude” (9) quixotically really is. Given Vilikovsky’s colorful descriptions, detailed dialogue, and *bona fide* multicultural references (to Freud’s Moravian roots or Genet’s stay in Brno in 1937), the reader is seductively persuaded by the story, unsure whether Camus did in fact not pass through Olomouc on his way to Brno (as purported in his *Notebooks 1942–47*), while querying whether the narrative actually prefigures the Cold War or rather presages the 2004 European Union.

The title novella, *Ever Green Is . . .* [1989], displays Vilikovsky’s talent at its best. Again, teeming with intertextuality, this saucy, sardonic memoir of a collaborator reads like a juxtaposition of “The Post-Modern Adventures of a Slovak Švejk,” the confession of a guilt-free Jean-Baptiste from Camus’s *The Fall* and the sexual liberation of the Swiss-neutral, but sickly-alienated Hans Castorp from Mann’s *Magic Mountain*. Vilikovsky eloquently describes his native Slovakia, “a godforsaken country [. . .] right next to the heart of Europe, in the sub-