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Russian Literature Not Lost in Translation

By John Freedman

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This week I am thinking about translation. More specifically I am thinking about those translators who were there for me — and several generations of people like me — when I became interested in Russian literature last century.

The topic arose in my mind because I learned a few days ago that Franklin D. Reeve had died at the age of 84. He died June 28, but the news didn't spread until an obituary appeared in the New York Times on July 7.

Reeve was kind of my "imaginary friend" in the early stages of my interest in Russian literature and drama. He was one of the few places you could go if you wanted to read Russian plays in English.

The mythically named Andrew MacAndrew was there with translations, particularly, of Nikolai Gogol. Louise and Aylmer Maude were the great translators of Leo Tolstoy's work.

The famed, and subsequently oft-maligned, Constance Garnett translated all of the great Russian works of the 19th century, it would seem. Ronald Hingley had your back if you were interested in Anton Chekhov.

Reeve stood out for me because he didn't only provide access to the great works, he also gave you a glimpse of what things were like if you stepped down from the home of the gods on Russian literature's Mount Olympus.

The first book of Russian plays I ever owned was a kind of workmanlike thing published in 1968, all green with white letters. As if the publisher was saying, "You really don't want to read this book, but we're putting it out for the record." Containing plays written from 1934 to 1967, it was boastfully called Contemporary Russian Drama.

In addition to Viktor Rozov's famous "Alive Forever" and Leonid Zorin's extremely popular "A Warsaw Melody," it contained plays by Vera Panova and Mikhail Pogodin that I don't think anyone has ever really cared about. Not in English, anyway. Sure there was filler. But in this book, for the first time ever, I had the feeling I was coming into contact with the actual process of a literary form developing more or less in a contemporary context.

I realize that sounds wildly overstated, but it is not a sign of my exaggeration, it is a sign of the dearth of translated material that existed at the time when I stood up and took notice of Russian literature. I mean, when I took an undergraduate course called "Contemporary Russian literature" at the University of California, Irvine, in around 1977, 80% of the syllabus consisted of works written before the 1940s. We began with Andrei Bely's great novel "Petersburg," written in 1916. That is how it was when I entered this territory.

All of the translations I used in those days have been superceded.

Only the lazy don't rail at Constance Garnett's Victorianized versions of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novels. And with good reason, I guess. But you'll never hear me say a bad word about her. I don't know what I would have done had she not been driven so by a tremendous work ethic and a love of her work.

The prodigious translation I first read of Bely's "Petersburg" has now been replaced by a newer and better one. The Maudes, like Garnett, tend to be downplayed now for sentimentalizing Tolstoy. I doubt that many these days have reason to go back to Reeve's translations, those very ones that once lit a fire in my imagination.

But this is the providence of the translator. I dabble a bit myself and I know that well. Translations are never primary sources. They are a reflection. You hope, if you're the one doing it, that it's a viable reflection, but you really can't go beyond that point.

I would hazard to guess that a translation capable of lasting for 20 years is a successful one. After that, bits of time-fixed cultural consciousness, various lexical quirks and the occasional inexplicable personal choice of word or phrasing begin to make any translation look outdated and out of whack for future generations. Then it's time for someone else to go back to the original and make sense of it again for new readers in the new language.

Reeve was an important figure in my intellectual life for giving me my first insights into these

and other thoughts.

I stated earlier that he was an "imaginary friend," and I mean that quite literally. I knew nothing about him, did not know where he lived or what he looked like. But he had done me a favor and I cherished him for that. When his son Christopher Reeve became famous playing Superman in the movies, I always thought how cool it was that a matinee idol had a translator of Russian literature for a dad. Of the two it was the dad I admired most.

After I learned of F.D. Reeve's death last week I posted a small remembrance on my Facebook page, noting that I never met him. Thirty minutes later I received a response indicating I had come much closer than I knew.

According to Jonathan Levi, who ran the Summerscape festival at Bard College in the early 2000s, Reeve attended one of the performances that my wife gave there of a show called "K.I. From 'Crime'" in 2003. I was at every one of those shows, which means I surely brushed shoulders with Reeve, not knowing it.

So close and yet so far. Just like translation itself.

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