Verses and Versions: Three Centuries of Russian Poetry, selected and translated by Vladimir Nabokov, edited by Brian Boyd and Stanislav Shvabrin. Harcourt, Orlando — Austin — New York — San Diego — London, 2008; ISBN 978-0-15-101264-0, xxxv+442 pp. Notes. Indices. No price available.

In this handsome and beautifully referenced book, Brian Boyd and Stanislav Shvabrin have brought together Nabokov's translations of short Russian poems into English, completing a project which Nabokov had planned. The book includes translations previously published in the 1940s in the anthologies *Three Russian Poets* and *Pushkin, Lermontov, Tyutchev*. It also incorporates translations made during Nabokov's laborious work on *Eugene Onegin*, and unpublished texts from the Nabokov archives in New York and Montreux. As Boyd explains in the preface, the rather fragmentary nature of the book is due, in part, to the fact that it is a posthumous compilation: the selection of poems is "more accidental than it would have been" had

Nabokov overseen it.¹ *Verses and Versions* is as much a sourcebook on Nabokov as it is on Russian poetry, and no less interesting for that.

The poets whose work is most generously represented here are the three nineteenth century poets in Nabokov's anthology: Pushkin, Lermontov and Tyutchev. Also included are some of their more prominent forbearers, contemporaries and successors, such as Lomonosov, Karamzin and Zhukovsky, Fet and Nekrasov, as well as the work of some less well known poets, such as Aleksey Koltsov. The choice of twentieth century poets is highly selective: Blok, Khodasevich, Mandelshtam and, surprisingly, Okudzhava. (As is often the case with Nabokov, what he leaves out is as interesting as what he includes). Each translation is printed next to the original version of the poem, and the editors have provided a website giving transliterated versions for those who do not read Russian.

In addition to the translations, the book includes short biographical and critical articles on each poet, penned by Nabokov, as well as a number of his comments on the activity of literary translation. In these notes, Nabokov is revealed in a number of different guises. He is, by turns, a fascinating, poetic and opinionated literary critic—writing of Lermontov's talent for creating “a fluid and iridescent medium wherein reality discloses the dreams of which it consists”;² a ferocious baiter of those who substitute travesty for translation—such as Lowell, who receives a battering for his misleading adaption of a Mandelshtam poem; and a learned and generous guide to the work of those he regarded as truly great, such as Pushkin and Khodasevich. He even appears in the unfamiliar role of devoted father, in a set of notes for an album of songs recorded by his son Dmitri in the 1970s. Here, Nabokov's usual uncompromising tone is noticeably softened.

The book opens with some notes on translating poetry, in which the author's strong opinions are at their most evident. (Not for nothing did one writer brand him “Nazistic Nabokov,” “the verbal sadist”).³ Nabokov was fond of drawing up lists of unreasonable rules regarding the “perfect translator” (including one that the translator “should be of the same sex as his author”),⁴ and of delivering highly subjective statements as if they were undisputed facts (for instance: “the Russian sense of blueness belongs to a different series than the Russian ‘remember’ does”).⁵ His comments are couched in

¹ Boyd and Shvabrin, ed., *Verses and Versions*, xxiv.

² *Ibid.*, 274.

³ *Ibid.*, xxvi.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

an oppressive rhetoric reminiscent of that of the fire-and-brimstone preacher or the hanging judge, bristling with words like “ignorance,” “sin,” “evil,” “frailty,” “hell,” “turpitude,” and “crime.”

Nabokov’s translations, however, speak far more eloquently and humbly than his diatribes. They bear witness not only to his phenomenal talent but also to the difficulty of the tasks he set himself in trying to render the most melodious of Russian lyrics into English. In the earlier translations, there are concessions to what Nabokov called the “into” language⁶ that must have cost him dearly—such as the word “frail” included in his translation of Lermontov’s “The Sail” for the sake of the rhyme. In some cases, there are various versions of a single poem which chart Nabokov’s growing disillusionment with free, rhyming translation. Eventually, around 1950, literal translation takes over entirely. Nabokov described his “stratagem” in his famous poem on translating *Onegin*, also included in *Verses and Versions*:

I traveled down your secret stem;
and reached the root, and fed upon it;
Then, in a language newly learned
I grew another stalk and turned
Your stanza patterned on a sonnet
Into my honest roadside prose
All thorn, but cousin to your rose.⁷

The more prosaic thorns in the collection, like Pushkin’s “Demon,” produced in this later period, function as elegant cribs to be read side by side with the Russian (or the transliteration). But more interesting by far is the material relating to the period when Nabokov was still producing literary roses. In his translations of such poets as Karamzin and Zhukovskii, Nabokov reveals a rare ability to capture an archaic poetic diction. The translations of Tyutchev, dating from the 1940s, are particularly beautiful. Nabokov’s version of “Nightfall” retains the melodic qualities and rhyme of the original without sacrificing imagery and sense. A delightful example of the way Nabokov recasts Russian into English is the line “A liquid shiver, swift and sweet” for “*I sladkii trepet, kak struia*.” In “Reconciliation,” there are more conspicuous departures from the original, which are justified by the result.

⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁷ Ibid., 16.

*A uzh davno zvuchnee I polnei
Pernatykh pesn' po roshche razdalasia,
I raduga kontsom dugi svoei
V zelenye vershiny uperlasia!*

Nabokov's version:

— while thrush and oriole make haste to mend
their broken melodies throughout the grove
upon the crests of which was propped the end
of a virescent rainbow edged with mauve.⁸

The translation is lovely and largely faithful to the essence of the Russian original, but it reveals touches of Nabokov's style: the unusual, slightly prosaic "propped" and the rainbow embroidered (for the sake of scanning) with the rare and melodious "virescent." Although Nabokov declared that the translator must "possess the gift of mimicry and...impersonate (his author) with the utmost degree of verisimilitude,"⁹ his own voice can, on occasion, be heard ringing through in his English versions (in Lermontov's "Angel" "*skuchnye pesni*" is rendered "dull little ditties" — a characteristically Nabokovian turn of phrase).

The best translations in the collection are of blank verse, which provide just the right scope for Nabokov to show his virtuosity. On reading Khodasevich's wonderful "The Monkey," side by side with Nabokov's English version, the translator's extravagant claims for its author do not seem far-fetched. Best of all, though, are the translations of Pushkin's *Little Tragedies*. Just about any line of these can be selected at random to illustrate how Nabokov finds inventive ways of retaining the rhythm and the melodic qualities of the Russian. In "The Covetous Knight," for instance, "*bleshchushchie grudy*"—"glittering heaps" (the coffer filled with gold) is rendered as "brimming glory"; and "*tiazhelykh dum*" ("heavy thoughts") as "inner gloom." "Mozart and Salieri" is the crowning glory of the book, as near perfect as a translation can be, and poignant, as Nabokov echoes in Salieri's words:

I cut up music like a corpse; I tested
The laws of harmony by mathematics.
Then only, rich in learning, dared I yield
To blandishments of sweet creative fancy;

⁸ Ibid., 241.

⁹ Ibid., 9.

and in Mozart's exclamation: "If all could feel like you the force of harmony!"¹⁰

This wonderful book will bring us closer to feeling, as Nabokov did, the force of harmony in some of the best poetry ever written in Russian.

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¹⁰ Ibid., 173.