



## **Bulgakov's Post Horses**

Mikhail Ivanov

Russian Life Editor Mikhail Ivanov visited Richard Pevear and his wife Larissa Volokhonsky, who translated *The Master and Margarita* in English in 1997. Together they discussed the subtleties of the translator's art and on the particular difficulty of translating Bulgakov.

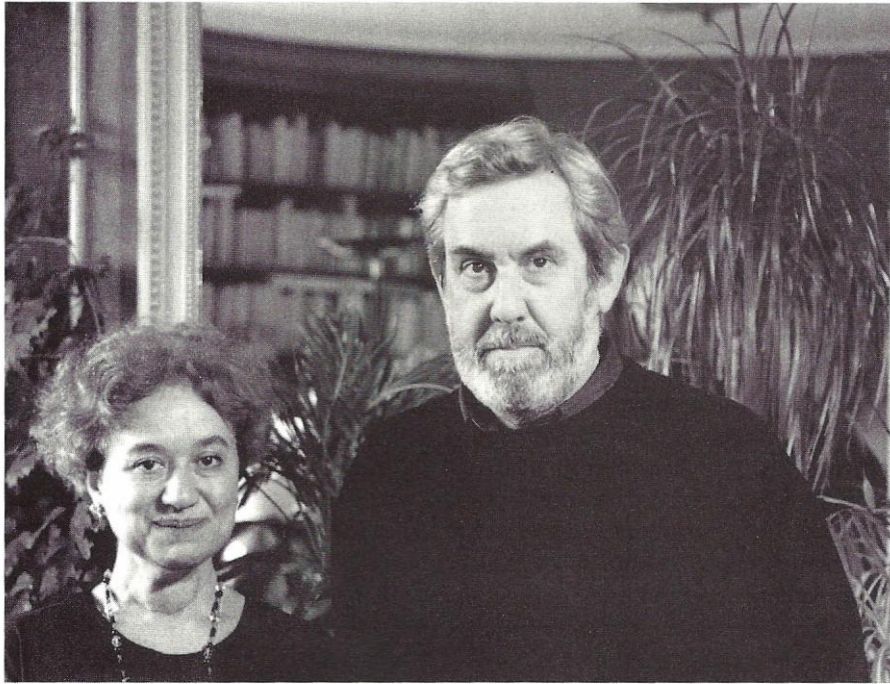
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From the archives of the website  
The Master and Margarita

<http://www.masterandmargarita.eu>

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## Bulgakov's Bulgakov's Post Horses

*Richard Pevear and his wife Larissa Volokhonsky are widely considered to be two of the world's top translators of Russian fiction into English. Together they have translated many of the giants of Russian literature: Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Nikolai Gogol and Mikhail Bulgakov. In 1991, their translation of Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* won the prestigious PEN/Book-of-the-Month Translation Award, and reviewers have repeatedly acclaimed the pair for their ability to faithfully render original Russian texts in modern English. Viking Penguin published their 1997 translation of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* in the Penguin Modern Classics series.*

*Russian Life Editor Mikhail Ivanov visited with the translators in April 2001, in their cosy Paris apartment in the 15th arrondissement. Together they discussed the subtleties of the translator's art and on the particular difficulty of translating Bulgakov.*

**RL:** How do you two work together in tandem? Is it possible to approach translation à la Ilf & Petrov?

**LV:** I do the interlinear translation very close to the text. I try to be very literal, sometimes even to the point of distorting the English sentences, so that Richard knows what is happening in the Russian text. I also sometimes indicate stylistic points - say, if an archaic word is used, or if there is some slang or a wrong word, especially in the dialogue. For example, in *The Master and Margarita*, the hero Behemoth says: "починяю примус" Not the correct "чиню примус", but rather "починяю". So this has to somehow be translated. I tell Richard that this is a lower class distortion of a correct expression. Sort of folksy.

**RL:** Yeah, a Russian dedushka living in the countryside would say that...

**LV:** Yes. And then we discuss what we can do about it.

**RL:** So what did you do about this "починяю примус"?

**RP:** I translated it as "reparating my primus:" "Reparating" is used by Americans very often, by uneducated people. They take "reparation" and then make a verb out of it. It is not correct at all. It is completely wrong, but it is a spoken way of doing it.

**LV:** The whole sentence is worth citing "Не шалю, никого не трогаю, починяю примус".

**RP:** I did: "Ain't misbehaving, ain't bothering anybody, just reparating my primus". Another translator writes: "I am doing no harm, I am not playing games, I am mending the kerosene burner". It is by Mikhail Glenny, one of the first two translators of *The Master and Margarita*, the other is by Mirra Ginsburg. Mirra writes: "I am doing no mischief I don't bother anyone, I am repairing the primus". "Repairing the primus" is simply normal English.

**RL:** In terms of style, "mischief" doesn't sound right stylistically, does it?

**RP:** Yes, it is a wrong word there.

**RL:** How do you regard "translation" in general? As an art, or as a craft - a "métier" to use a French word, since we are in Paris?

**RP:** I regard it as both. There should be a very strong underpinning of craft in it, but there is also... a poetic quality for translating texts, because you are dealing with it not the way a novelist deals with big materials... He has to compose the quality, he has to create characters, whereas the translator is concerned with the words with which it has already been done. It is much closer to mimicking the sounds of words... much closer to a kind of poetic writing than to novel writing. Novel writing is much more crude and bold and basic. I find there is a poetic side to translating prose. Translating poetry is another thing, because you generally lose all the poetry, which is very painful.

**RL:** Have you ever tried to translate poetry?

**RP:** Some. I translated [Samuel] Marshak, and then [Daniil] Kharms. I tried Pushkin once and failed - I gave it up. We tried Nikolai Zabolotsky and I couldn't. It's too good. The losses are too painful.

**RL:** You feel this is the only technique for translating, where one person does interlinear translation and the other adapts it? Or would it be better to just have one translator delivering the whole product, turnkey so to speak.

**RP:** Of course, there are both kinds. I think that in our system we have more control, because if I go too far from the meaning, Larissa catches it and she won't let me do it...

**LV:** Usually what happens is I see that something is wrong - it is either too far from the original or is stylistically incorrect. I don't know how to fix it, but I say, "This won't work". So we start discussing it, we go to the dictionaries, we pray to God, we root around in our memory, we discuss it over lunch or breakfast, and eventually we find something which is more precise.

**RL:** Did you ever face a situation when you could not find a translation variant you both could agree on?

**RP:** No, we have never had such a disagreement. We yield to each other one way or another.

**RL:** Any more colorful examples from Bulgakov?

**LV:** As many as you want. Take that phrase by Koroviev, "Поздравляю вас, гражданин, соврамши!"

**RP:** I translated: "Congrats, citizen, you done lied", which is very colloquial American. In fact it may be purely American, but a British publisher allowed us to do it.

**RL:** Will the British-English speaking reader understand the subtlety here?

**RP:** They will understand. "You done lied" is very low class, very crude.

**RL:** Any more?

**LV:** For instance, in the scene with Pontius Pilate, there is a swallow who comes flying in. It is very symbolic: the swallow comes in and flies out to freedom while Pontius Pilate makes his decision to crucify Yeshua. And Bulgakov does something very extraordinary. He uses the word "фыркнуть" to designate the sound produced by the swallow's wings as she very quickly flies " Крылья ласточки фыркнули над самой головой". "Фыркнуть" in Russian literally means "to grunt" (i.e. to produce a noise showing human discontent). But Bulgakov uses it in a purely onomatopoeic way - as a sound.

**RL:** And still there is something left from the meaning "grunt" no?

**RP:** Yes, And so it was so hard.

**RL:** And, at the end of the day?

**RP:** We said "the swallow's wings whiffled right over the Hegemon's head". Whiffle... is both a sound and a fluttering movement. And we keep the "f" which was in the Russian as well.

There is a **poetic** quality for translating texts... It is much closer to **mimicking** the **sounds** of words... much closer to a kind of poetic writing than to novel writing.

**RL:** And, by way of comparison, what did other translators do to it?

**RP:** There is another translator who says "the swallow's wings flicked over the Hegemon's head". Flicked is a physical movement without any sound and it doesn't have this double "fl" sound as in "whiffled". Another translator says "the swallow's wings fluttered"... there is nothing unusual in this version... By the way we were very savagely attacked for our translation in the *Times Literary Supplement* by a well-known Bulgakov scholar who held this translation ("fluttered") to be the best. She said this is the best, that if you really want to know what Bulgakov is like, read this one.

**RL:** Now you have to give me the name of that other translator.

**RP:** Mikhail Glenny.

**LV:** This was the first translation of *The Master and Margarita*.

**RL:** Did the reviewer attack you vehemently, or what?

**RP:** She said our translation was "disgraceful" and "amateurish"... It was very rude. And she did not give any examples. She quoted one passage. By the way, the passage she quoted...

**LV:** ...is the one we are most proud of.

**RP:** It is the beginning of the chapter "Pontius Pilate" And, as you know, the style in the Jerusalem sections of the novel changes radically.

**RL:** Oh, it is my favorite, whenever I reread the novel, I go to these sections first.

**RP:** I do too. It's my favorite. But it has its cadence... A completely different rhythm.

**LV:** It is not at all ordinary in Russian either, actually. This opening, all these epithets, these descriptions precede the name, and the name comes like a cadence at the very end. And in our translation we tried to convey the rhythm and to make one sentence out of it [like Bulgakov did], to preserve this flowing rhythm with the name at the end, because it's important. Besides, this passage is repeated within the novel several times... And we did our best and I think we've succeeded.

**RP:** And it's perfectly possible to do it in English. They call it an inverted sentence... but English style editors don't like inversions... It's beautiful, but they think it's old fashioned. They think you have to straighten it out.

**LV:** All of the best writers use inversions. And since we underwent this attack, I paid attention to it, and I found that all the best writers, including English writers, use inversions.

One of the **positive** effects of a translation on the language it is translated into is that it **stretches** the expressiveness of that language. To try to take Bulgakov and put him into English does something **good** to English. If it's done well.

**RP:** Nabokov uses inversions when he writes in English and also when he writes in Russian.

**LV:** Henry James uses inversions.

**RP:** So this savage review quoted this sentence to show that our translation was inept, inadequate, disgraceful... The one she likes reads: "Early in the morning on the fourteenth of the spring month of Nisan the Procurator of Judaea, Pontius Pilate, in a white cloak lined with blood-red, emerged with his shuffling cavalryman's walk into the arcade connecting the two wings of the palace of Herod the Great". All the information is there... Our translation is: "In a white cloak with blood-red lining, with the shuffling gait of a cavalryman, early in the morning of the fourteenth day of Nisan, there came out to the covered colonnade between the two wings of the palace of Herod the Great the procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate". This is how Bulgakov wrote. It begins with this stunning image "in white cloak with blood-red lining...". It's the first thing you see. And it's a very striking image.

**RL:** And who was that reviewer who gave you such a hard time?

**RP:** Julie Curtis is her name. And it's quite gratuitous. I don't know her and we have never met her.

**RL:** Have you responded to her?

**RP:** I wrote an answer. And it was published in the next issue... I simply pleaded for mercy. This is a 400-page book; she quoted one sentence. And she didn't even say what was wrong with it, she simply italicized it.

**LV:** She quoted several sentences, but she never said what was wrong with them. She actually used the method of the critic Latunsky from the novel *The Master and Margarita*. It's called "murder by citations". She just quoted and italicized the things she didn't like and never explained what was wrong.

**RP:** She never compared it to the original at all. She doesn't say what Bulgakov wrote, she just compared ours to the first translation.

**RL:** Maybe she was infatuated with the first translation?

**RP:** This is what I wrote in my answer. I said that translations have a strange kind of way of lodging themselves in our head. I assume that her whole career came from the fact that she one day picked up Glenny's translation and read it. And she became a Russian specialist and a specialist in Bulgakov and so she is in love with Bulgakov.

**RL:** What do you think of the famous quote about the *belles infidèles* (the "unfaithful beauties", as one linguist called translations, comparing them to women). In other words, you can be ugly yet faithful, or beautiful yet unfaithful.

**RP:** It depends on how far you push it. In principle, I don't agree with it. I think translations should first be faithful to the original, even to the point of distorting the destination language.

**LV:** Not "distorting" but rather let's say...

**RP:** "Stretching". One of the benefits of our translations, one of the positive effects of a translation on the language it is translated into is that it stretches the expressiveness of that language. To try to take Bulgakov and put him into English does something good to English. If it's done well.

**RL:** Does it stay in the language?

**RP:** It may. Writers have noticed some of the things we've done... But often they are *infidèles* because they are afraid to do in English what Dostoevsky or Bulgakov did in Russian. Look, in *The Master and Margarita* there is a chapter titled "Извлечение мастера" - when the master finally reappears. The verb is the same you use to describe extracting a tooth, or a square root in math. So how do you translate this? Simple: "The Extraction of the Master". It is perfectly right in English. There is no problem in using it. But no translator will do it. They are afraid to do it.

**RL:** Why?!

**RP:** I have no idea. Perhaps it sounds a little exaggerated to them. This one translation [Glenny] says "The Master is Released". Is this a *belle infidèle*? There is nothing *belle*. It is simply *infidèle*. It is simply wrong.

**RL:** I would assume whenever a translator can be loyal to the original, he should be.

**LV:** There is not even any difficulty in translating it as "Extraction of the Master". Not any art (in this case). You just translate what is written.

**RP:** This other translation, which is generally better [by Ginsburg] says: "Evocation of the Master". What has "evocation" got to do with it?! "Evocation" is like calling up a ghost.

**RL:** But does the word "extraction" have all these meanings? And here is more to it than just extraction of a square root or of the tooth, no?

**LV:** Yes, but the master is being "extracted" from an asylum...

**RP:** It is perfectly possible and right to use it in English. The translator has to have the courage to do it. Bulgakov had the courage to do it. For example, there is a chapter called "Ivan Splits in Two", because he is a schizophrenic... Glenny translates it as "The Two Ivans". "Ivan Splits in Two" must have seemed exaggerated to him. He didn't dare to say this in English.

**RL:** But it's perfectly fine to say it in English?

**RP:** If you trust Bulgakov. And it has to do with the whole tonality of his, of his voice. "Extraction of the Master" is exactly what he meant.

**RL:** Did you ever have to admit you cannot translate something?

**LV:** In Gogol's case. Not in Bulgakov.

**RP:** I can't remember any case with Bulgakov.

**RL:** One of my translation teachers was fond of saying: "Translation begins where the dictionary ends". Do you like it?

**RP:** (Laughter). It's good.

**LV:** A dictionary helps. It leads towards things, it sometimes gives you ideas.

**RP:** Actually, sometimes there is a great danger when translators start translating out of the dictionary - i.e. instead of giving a word they give you a definition. Like in Gogol, there was the Russian word "ушат" - two women were carrying an *ushat* [a tub]. But in an older translation, the translator said "the peasant woman came out of the barn carrying a round wooden receptacle for holding liquid" (Laughter).

**RL:** Sounds like it was taken from a book on chemistry.

**RP:** And if you look in a dictionary for what "ушат" means, it says "a round wooden receptacle for holding liquids" So the translator just put the whole definition into his translation, making the translation almost twice as long as the original.

**RL:** Back to Bulgakov. How different is he from other writers you have translated, like Gogol, or Tolstoy or especially Dostoevsky? To me, Bulgakov would seem easier to translate, it is such a classic style. OK, there is the inversion, but, for example, whenever he writes about Pontius Pilate, this sounds like classic prose, no?

**LV:** It may sometimes be deceptive, because the simplicity also has to be achieved, It's like Pushkin's prose. It seems so plain, there are no tricks, no local expressions, and yet it is hard to translate.

**RL:** It's hard to attain this transparency in Bulgakov's works as well?

**RP:** Yes. A friend of ours who is a Russian specialist said that Bulgakov's is the purest Russian prose since Pushkin. And pure writing-pure prose is very difficult to translate precisely because it is so simple.

A friend said that Bulgakov's is the purest Russian prose since Pushkin. And pure writing-pure prose-is very difficult to translate precisely because it is so simple.

**RL:** Are you planning to translate - or retranslate - something else from Bulgakov?

**RP:** We would very much like to do - and we probably will be commissioned to translate his *Theatrical Novel*. And the one we most want to do is *The White Guard*. A translation by Michael Glenny is the only one available.

**RL:** Is it full of similar incongruities?

**LV:** There are some mistakes in it. For example, Bulgakov describes a woman coming to the neighbour of the Turbins, and she is a very beautiful woman, while the neighbor has this boring, ugly wife he detests. So Bulgakov compares the pretty woman to a Siren - "сирена". Glenny translated this as "in a lilac dress", thinking that Bulgakov meant the "сиреневый" colour of her dress. But Bulgakov

in fact was making an allusion to the mythical Sirens, to underscore her being a temptress. It is a mistake. I think he was too hurried.

**RL:** Which of Bulgakov's works do you think will remain popular forever, "for all times and peoples" as we say; and which are too specialized? What about his plays for instance?

**LV:** Not in the West; they [the plays] are not known at all. Every once in a while they do a play by Bulgakov in France, but they are not known to the public at large.

**RP:** Some years ago they tried to perform *Days of the Turbins* in Greenwich Village in a good theater. It didn't last very long. I think that, of his works, certainly *The Master and Margarita*, and I hope *The White Guard* will remain popular. But even *Theatrical Novel* is perhaps slightly too specialized.

**RL:** Pushkin once called translators "post horses of enlightenment". How do you feel about it?

**RP:** What I love in this quotation is the combination of dignity and servility. And servitude. It sounds good: "Translators are post horses of enlightenment". But, after all, the real enlightenment is in the carriage, it is what you are pulling with you. And you are just the horse. This is the right way to think of a translator. Because, without the carriage which was Bulgakov, what would the horse do?