



Potemkin Translators

"The Pevearsion of Russian Literature" by Gary Saul Morson

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ventional curatorial approach of hanging art chronologically, or by period or “school,” preferring to display his masterpieces on the basis of other similarities—in color, subject matter, technique, or artistic sensibility. A Picasso might hang next to an African mask, or a buxom Renoir nude next to similar works by Rubens or Titian. This is not just an idiosyncratic approach. “It is the way artists look at art,” Esplund writes. After a 1930 visit to the Barnes Foundation, the French artist Henri Matisse prophesied that the Barnes aesthetic would “destroy the artificial and disreputable presentation of the other collections.”

Matisse proved to be overly optimistic, perhaps because only a select few ever saw the collection. While the mercurial Barnes, who made his fortune in pharmaceuticals, was still alive, students had to demonstrate that they were “in earnest” to gain admission; after his death, it took a lawsuit brought by *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and its publisher, Walter Annenberg, to force the museum to open to the public in 1961. Since the 1990s, the trend has been to adopt the modus operandi of other museums—raising admission prices, opening a gift shop, and aggressively courting attendance and donations. None of these efforts has offset the dwindling endowment of the foundation, which has struggled to care properly for the masterpieces.

Financial distress left the foundation vulnerable to power brokers such as Pennsylvania

governor Edward G. Rendell, the Annenberg Foundation, and officials at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, who conditioned aid on the collection’s becoming a downtown Philadelphia tourist attraction. But in Esplund’s view, though the new museum “will supposedly replicate the scale, proportion, and configuration of the existing galleries, it will be through a Frankenstein’s monster-like revivification.” Gone will be “Barnes’s spectacular and well-thought-out views that lure and entice you from, for example, the forms in a particular Cézanne in one gallery to those in a particular Cézanne or Courbet or Renoir in the next.” The loss of the original Barnes, Esplund argues, is another step in the homogenization of museum collections, as larger institutions gobble up the smaller, unique places, often designed, like the Barnes, “to get us closer to the minds of art’s makers.”

ARTS & LETTERS

Potemkin Translators

THE SOURCE: “The Pevearsion of Russian Literature” by Gary Saul Morson, in *Commentary*, July–Aug. 2010.

LIKE DOSTOYEVSKY’S SAINTLY Prince Myshkin, literary translators Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky seemingly can do no wrong. Their recent translations of *Anna Karenina*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and

Dead Souls, among other Russian classics, have garnered praise from such diverse cultural arbiters as *The New Yorker* and Oprah Winfrey. But accolades do not sway Gary Saul Morson, a humanities professor at Northwestern University. In Morson’s eyes, P&V, as the two translators, who are married, are known among the literati, churn out “Potemkin translations—apparently definitive but actually flat and fake on close inspection.”

Morson holds that P&V’s weakness as translators owes a lot to their method. Volokhonsky,

A humanities professor believes the famous Russian translators known as P&V give short shrift to essential literary elements.

a St. Petersburg native, kicks off the process by translating the Russian text into highly literal English, which is then massaged into readability by Pevear, a literature professor from Massachusetts who has only a basic command of his wife’s native tongue. That approach gives short shrift to essential literary elements such as context, tone, humor, and timing, Morson says.

Take a passage from Nikolai Gogol’s *Dead Souls* (1842). In the 1942 English translation by Bernard Guilbert Guerney, the protagonist, a bureaucrat, settles

into “a very dark cubbyhole, whither he had already brought his overcoat, and together with it, a certain odor all his own, which had been imparted to the bag brought in next, containing sundry flunkeyish effects.” “Sundry flunkeyish effects” is true to the spirit of Gogol, Morson asserts, since “Gogol often chooses words less for their meaning than for their humorous sound and resonances.” Guernsey also stays true to Gogol by ending the passage with a funny image, as in the Russian.

P&V’s translation is quite different. In their version, the bureaucrat settles into “a very dark closet, where he had already managed to drag his overcoat and with it a certain smell of its own, which had been imparted to

the sack of various lackey toilettries brought in after it.” The use of “toilettries” in the P&V version is prompted by the Russian word *tualet* in the original, but Gogol’s intention, Morson says, was for *tualet* to be funny and jarring. This effect is achieved by Guernsey, but not in the P&V translation.

A handful of instances in which P&V emphasize semantic accuracy over tone and overall meaning round out Morson’s indictment of the lauded literary pair. For Morson, a great work of literature is an “experience, not just [a] sequence of signs on a page.” If translators are not able to convey that experience, they risk leading readers to think that the book’s greatness is the real sham.

ARTS & LETTERS

Forgotten Bauhaus

THE SOURCE: “The Powerhouse of the New” by Martin Filler, in *The New York Review of Books*, June 24, 2010.

SAY THE WORD *BAUHAUS* AND the thing that pops into just about everyone’s mind is Bauhaus architecture, codeword for boring, sleek, soulless, corporate design. This is all a terrible misunderstanding, declares architecture critic Martin Filler. The Bauhaus was not an architectural movement but a school for artists, architects, and designers whose uniqueness was found “not so much [in] its departure from prevailing aesthetic norms—specifically its rejection of historical styles—but rather

EXCERPT

Creation Mists

Just about any person fascinated by books has felt the seductive pull of the writer’s archive. Human beings love creation stories, and that’s what the researcher hopes to discover: to witness, in retrospect, the birth of a masterpiece. . . . [Sam] Tanenhaus writes excitedly [in The New York Times] of the trove of materials that went into the making of Rabbit at Rest: snapshots of storefronts in a Pennsylvania town, photocopies of pages from medical books on heart disease, a memo from a researcher on sales practices at Toyota dealers, a list of basketball moves. There’s even the wrapper from a Planters Peanut Bar, “as lovingly preserved as a pressed autumn leaf,” which Tanenhaus imagines [John] Updike using to come up with the novel’s vivid

description of Rabbit dumping the “sweet crumbs out of the wrapper into his palm and with his tongue lick[ing] them all up like an anteater”—one of those actions we’ve all done but would be at pains to describe.

But if these are the keys to a literary universe, where are the locks? None of us, presented with this miscellany of sources, could sit down and write the Rabbit novels. What they actually reveal is how mysterious the essential act of creation is. You might as well gather together Picasso’s paint jars, canvas, and easel and try to reconstruct Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, or imagine a ballet by looking at the music, costumes, shoes. What’s missing is the alchemy that takes an assortment of random objects and transforms them into a work of art. And that process leaves no trace.

—RUTH FRANKLIN, senior editor of
The New Republic (June 30, 2010)