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**Uilyam Shekspir. *Gamlet: V Poiskakh Podlinnika.*  
Perevod, podgotovka teksta originala, komentarii  
i vvodnaja statya I. V. Peshkova  
[*Hamlet: In the search of identity.*  
Translation, reconstruction of the original text,  
comments and introduction by I. V. Peshkov].  
Moscow: Labirint-MP, 2003**

Reviewed by Vladimir VAKHRUSHEV

The book is written in Russian and its main part is a new (twenty-fourth) Russian translation of the famous tragedy accompanied with Ilya Peshkov's explanations of his beliefs and his vituperative attacks upon "400 fallacies of his forerunners" in the field of translating Shakespearean text. Ilya Peshkov is a well-known Russian linguist and a scholar in cultural anthropology, and now he presents himself as a poet-translator and an expert on *Hamlet*.

In his introductory essay, the author asks ironically: "Was there *Hamlet* in reality?", as the problem of the "authentic" text has remained unsolved. And then he tries to give us his own "real" reconstruction of the text, bringing together many variants from two editions – the Second Quarto and the First Folio. So Peshkov presents the "real" *Hamlet*, although he knows quite well that his efforts to restore the "real, the actually Shakespearean text" can only be a little step in an infinite search for the "original" play.

The main purpose of his Russian version is clear: the translator wants to bring Shakespeare (the problem of *his* personal identity is omitted) as close as possible to *our* time in style, in the characters' mentality. Peshkov's aim is to disclose "philosophical" and cultural aspects of characters' thinking which were not understood by the Russian translators of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In his opinion, even such a famous translator as Boris Pasternak could not "adapt" his talent to Shakespearean style and wrote a purely "pasternakian" version of the play.

Ilya Peshkov's efforts are sometimes quite productive and fresh in their "modernity". Here is an example. When the Ghost says "Swear" from beneath, Hamlet responds ironically "Hic et ubique?" and adds: "then we'll shift our ground" (1.5). This line was traditionally rendered by Russian translators as "we shall move away" (*smenim mestó*). Peshkov gives his version which says: "we'll change our point of view" (*smenim tochku zrenija*). This is fully justified by the fact that Hamlet was a student and he knew, evidently, that "to shift the ground" in rhetoric is a metaphor which meant "to change one's view".

Besides, in this episode Hamlet wants to lessen the nervous stress by a joke, which is directed at all the participants in the scene – including the Ghost (“old mole”) and Hamlet himself. Although the gravity of the moment is not lost, it becomes only more poignant by a subtle touch of irony.

In several other cases Peshkov’s treatment of Shakespearean text is also expedient, and he has a full right to laugh at his colleagues – Russian translators of *Hamlet* – when they make purely comical blunders. Thus, Nina Korshunova took the word “incest” from the Ghost’s remark (“A couch of luxury and damned incest”) for “insect”. Correspondingly, she translated this line as “a couch for a splendid but damned insect”, but it is difficult for us to discern who, the Queen or Claudius is identified with this bloody little creature. Peshkov also corrects the traditional mistake of Russian translators who could not render properly the famous lines of the Prince: “The time is out of joint; O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!” – This splendid hyperbolic metaphor was traditionally substituted by such expressions as “The thread of time was torn...” The notion of Time as a mutilated giant, a Titan, was utterly lost. Peshkov sets this problem right in his version: “Here is a mutilation of Time” (zdes’ vyvikh vremeni) – a metaphor quite akin to the Shakespearean one.

However, Peshkov’s triumph over his rivals in translating *Hamlet* is marred by his own drawbacks, which are caused just by his sincere and justifiable trend of “modernizing” the great playwright. His achievements are obvious when he throws away shallow poetic embellishments which “decorated” former Russian versions of the tragedy and makes its style more simple, more energetic, more clear than before. But, to my mind, the newest translator sometimes does not take into consideration the subtle relationships between the semantics of Shakespearean vocabulary and its modern interpretation. The examples are numerous. Thus the execrable “incest” is rendered by Peshkov *literally* as “intsest” (ИНЦЕСТ), a term in modern Russian that has linguistic connotations which did not exist in Elizabethan England. Or, to take another example: Hamlet’s words to the Ghost “Thou com’st in such a questionable shape” in Peshkov’s version runs as “Your shape is problematic” (*tvoj vid problematichen*). It smells of modern vulgar colloquialism in Russian, and the poetry of Shakespearean “antiquated” style is lost.

There are passages in the play where Peshkov tries to “infuse” some philosophical ideas in the text and his good intentions go amiss. Let us consider the scene where Polonius is reading Hamlet’s letter to Ophelia aloud to Claudius and Gertrude (2.2). The newest interpretation of the Prince’s letter is that “the hero’s love is permeated with the idea of Cartesian universal doubt”, whereas all the Russian translators “turn Hamlet’s verses into teenager’s shallow song”. But the “philosophy” in Hamlet’s couplet is rather simple: “Doubt thou, the stars are fire; / Doubt that the sun doth move”, etc. Besides, Peshkov’s attention is diverted from the prosaic part of Hamlet’s letter where the Prince derides

and actually “deconstructs” his own “teenager’s” poetry by saying: “I am ill at these numbers, I have not art to reckon my groans”. In short, he has overgrown a grammar-school Petrarchism.

Peshkov proclaims himself to be a very strict observer of Shakespeare’s semantic and stylistic peculiarities, but sometimes he “inserts” his own subjective guesses which seem rather far-fetched. Thus, a well-known proverbial expression “Frailty, thy name is woman” is interpreted by him in a whimsically “gender-grammatical” sense. His Russian version literally states: “Unfaithfulness is a word of feminine gender” (*nevernos’ – zhenskogo to roda imya*), although Peshkov as a linguist knows perfectly well that English nouns have no marked generic distinctions! But he asserts boldly that Hamlet here speaks not as a common student, but as a skilled “philologist”, making “semantic and grammatical observations”.

The translator disagrees sometimes – luckily, rather rarely – not only with Hamlet, but with the playwright himself. So it is when the protagonist answers to his mother: “Tis not alone my inky cloak...” (1.2). In Russian this line appears as “I did not hide my face under a masque of sooty colour”. It is “poetical” and completely original, but is it a sign that Peshkov thinks himself to be a worthy co-author of the great British bard? Probably so. Or a line from the King’s monologue: “...but to persever/In obstinate condolement is a course/Of impious stubbornness: ‘tis unmanly grief...” (1.2). The Russian text reads thus: “To suffer without measure – this is stubbornness. Such a grief is cowardice (*trusost*)”. Where does this “cowardice” come from?

The last “revelations”, made by Peshkov, can be found in his interpretation of the proverbial monologue “To be, or not to be” (3.1). “That is the question” is a too primitive expression to the translator’s mind. He considers that the Bard meant not simply “question”, but “the *essence* of the question”. And so the Russian first line in the newest translation runs: “To be, or not to be – that is the essence of the question” (*voprosa sut’*). Poor Shakespeare must acknowledge his fault and follow obediently Ilya Peshkov who understands the essence of the monologue better. Other lines are also *bettered* by the bold translator and *co-author*. For instance, Shakespeare writes: “To sleep, perchance to dream...”; the translator changes it to “Dreams are possible within a sleep” (*vo sne vozmozhny sny*). Well, that is acceptable. Then “the oppressor’s wrong” is displaced and changed into “oppressor’s mistakes”! As if there are despots who are somehow devoid of “mistakes” and fallacies? And last, but not least – a brilliant tour-de-force – when “the pale cast of thought” becomes not a common metaphoric epithet (thought is pale, that is overshadowed by apprehension), but “a shadow of such reflections” (*ten’ podobnykh razmyshlenij*).

The detailed analysis of Peshkov’s version of *Hamlet* requires more space, moreover it is known that he is now working hard upon bettering his ambitious book. I daresay that it is a promising situation. The readers may hope that in a new variant Ilya Peshkov will bring them closer to the unfathomable world of the great tragedy.