EFIM ETKIND

The Translator

Translated from Russian by Jane Bugaeva

When the applause had died down a woman's voice shouted, "Bravo! Author!" Laughter sounded from the other end of the theater. It wasn't difficult to understand why people were laughing: the production was a dress rehearsal of Byron's *Don Juan*. But others in the audience had understood the request and joined in, "Author! Author!" The director, Nikolay Akimov, walked out onstage with his actors, shook Varapaev's hand—he was playing the lead role—and proceeded to the edge of the stage. A woman wearing a long black dress that resembled a nun's habit rose from her seat in the front row. Akimov motioned for her and she joined him onstage. The woman had rounded shoulders and seemed hopelessly tired, she stood next to Akimov gazing self-consciously off to the side. The applause grew, a few of the audience began to stand, and then the entire parterre rose to a standing ovation. Suddenly, the room fell silent. The woman in black had teetered, she almost collapsed—if Akimov had not caught her, she would have fallen to the ground. She was carried offstage. A heart attack.

Could the audience have ever imagined the origins of this production? Was the call for the "author" simply a spontaneous cheer of appreciation, or did the woman who first voiced these meaningful words somehow know the story I am about to tell?

Tatiana Grigorievna Gnedich's great-great-great uncle translated the *Iliad* into Russian. In the early 1930s she was a graduate student at the University of Leningrad studying seventeenth-century English literature. Times were hard: Stalin's political purges were beginning. The university was ridding itself of "enemies"—today it was "formalists," tomorrow "vulgar sociologists," and always the nobility, bourgeois intellectuals, deviationalists, and supposed Trotskyists. Tatiana, however, remained completely buried in the works of Elizabethan poets, hardly noticing anything around her.

Nevertheless, she was brought back to reality when she was accused, at some meeting or other, of hiding her noble ancestry. It goes without saying

she was not present at this meeting, but when she learned of the accusation Tatiana was fiercely indignant. How could she have been hiding her origins? The Gnedichs, after all, were a part of the old nobility from before the time of Pushkin. So instead, she was thrown out of the university for "boasting about her noble ancestry." Life had become openly absurd. Its helpless victims had but one way to cope: they used this very absurdity to their advantage. It could be the end of someone, but if luck was on their side, it just might save them. Somehow Tatiana was able to prove that these two accusations canceled one another, and that she neither hid her noble ancestry nor boasted about it. She was reinstated. She taught, wrote poetry in the Acmeist manner, translated English poetry, and even began translating Russian poetry into English.

Tatiana and I lived in the same building, number 73–75 on Kamennoostrovsky Prospekt. Before the Bolshevik Revolution this giant building, whose granite façade towered over Kamenny Island, consisted of privately owned apartments. It was well known in St. Petersburg and continued its prominence when the city became Petrograd, and later, Leningrad. By the time we lived there it housed prominent cultural figures like the historian Nikolay Platonov, the literary theorist Vasily Desnitsky, and the poet and translator Mikhail Lozinsky. I was born in this building—at the time my father owned apartment number 2. Later, I found myself living there again by chance. My wife and I had just married and her stepfather temporarily offered us a room in a big communal apartment. Tatiana lived with her mother in a communal apartment off a different staircase—an apartment shared among many more families than ours. Their room was saturated with the smell of mothballs and, if memory serves, lavender. It was crammed with books, old photographs, and shabby furniture draped over with hand-knitted throws. I would go there to take English lessons with Tatiana. In exchange, we would read French poetry together, which, in all honesty, she understood perfectly fine without my help.

Then the war began. I graduated from university and my wife and I moved to the city of Kirov. Then it was the army—the Karelian Front. We knew that Tatiana and her mother had moved into a little wooden house on Kamenny Island right before the war. Later, we found out that her mother had died during the Siege of Leningrad and their house had burned down. According to Andrey Fedorov, a fellow translator from the university, Tatiana was deployed in 1942 to work as a translator at the political headquarters of the Leningrad military command. She only had

a passive knowledge of German so she was soon transferred to the intelligence unit of the Baltic Fleet. She sometimes sent us letters—often poems—and then she disappeared. She disappeared for a long time. There was no news of her at all. I tried to find out what had happened—but it was as if Tatiana Gnedich had disappeared into thin air.

After the war, my wife and I moved back into the same communal apartment, in building number 73–75. The former inhabitants were gone, most had died in the siege. There were just a few ladies from the old regime who had miraculously survived. Now and again they appeared in old-fashioned hats with veils. Once—I think it was in 1948—Mikhail Lozinsky from apartment 24 invited me over. Such invitations were rare—I hurried over. Lozinsky got me to sit beside him on a small sofa.

"I've just received something from the Big House," he said. He was referring, as we all did back then, to the large building that housed the NKVD headquarters and its inner political prison. He lowered his deep voice, "It's a manuscript by Tatiana Gnedich. Do you remember her?"

"From the Big House?" I repeated. "Why? What do they want from you?"

"It's a translation of Byron's *Don Juan*," he continued. "A complete translation. Do you understand? Complete. In octaves—in magnificent, classic octaves. All seventeen thousand lines. A huge volume of first-rate verse. And do you know why they've sent it? They want it reviewed. The Big House wants me to review Tatiana Gnedich's translation of Byron's *Don Juan*!"

What was all this? I was just as flabbergasted as Lozinsky, maybe even more. After all, we didn't even know that Gnedich had been arrested. And why? In those days no one asked "why," and if they did, it was with the ironic "The idiot's question—why?" And what had *Don Juan* got to do with all this? Tatiana's translation really was phenomenal. I understood this after Lozinsky, who was normally very reserved, read out a few octaves in a hushed voice, struggling to contain his awe. He compared them to two previous works: Alexander Pushkin's "The Little House in Kolomna" and Aleksey Tolstoy's "Councilor Popov's Dream."

"There are seventeen thousand lines of this caliber—that's more than two thousand octaves. . ." he kept repeating. "Such deftness, such elegance. . . the rhymes both bold and precise. . . such brilliant wit and refined eroticism. . . such quick, fluid language!" He wrote his review, but I never saw it; maybe one day it will be found in the KGB archives.

EIGHT YEARS LATER we were living in a different communal apartment, number 59 on Kirov Prospekt, not far from our previous place. One day, our doorbell rang. We opened the door to find Tatiana Gnedich, an apparition from the past. She was wearing a simple work coat and carrying a small bundle of possessions. She had just returned from an eight-year stint in a labor camp. On the train back to Leningrad she'd seen an article I'd written in the *Literary Gazette* titled "A Multifaceted Classic," introducing a new volume of Byron's poetry in translation by several different-minded poets. Tatiana remembered us, went to our old place on Kirovsky, found out our new address, and came over straightaway. She had nowhere to live, so she stayed in our room. There were already four of us there—five, if you count our housekeeper Galya, who stayed on a makeshift cot. I hung her coat in our shared entryway but the numerous other tenants began to complain: the stench was unbearable. The *fufaika*, as Tatiana called the coat, had absorbed every possible labor-camp odor from Leningrad all the way to Vorkuta. We had to throw it out. We didn't have a spare coat, and there were none in the stores, so we had to take turns leaving the house. Tatiana spent more and more time at a typewriter—retyping her *Don Juan*.

But how did she come to write it in the first place?

TATIANA WAS ARRESTED on December 27, 1944. She had denounced herself. Her story seems implausible (Tatiana liked to exaggerate), but very well may have happened amidst the psychosis of war. Supposedly, while waiting to be accepted into the Communist Party (membership was a requirement for intelligence workers), she approached the Party Committee and withdrew her candidacy, declaring that she had no moral right to Party membership after what she had done. She was arrested. The interrogating officers demanded a confession: what exactly had she done? They didn't believe her explanations (I wouldn't have either, if I hadn't known that she was something of a holy fool). She told them that at the request of Soviet radio—broadcasting to the allies before the opening of the Western Front—she had translated "Pulkovsky Meridian," a poem about the siege by Vera Inber, into English. Her consultant in intelligence—a British sailor—liked her translation and said, "You really ought to work for us! You could do a lot to strengthen the cultural ties between Russia and Britain." His words had made a strong impression on her and she began entertaining the idea of a trip to the United Kingdom. In her mind, this thought alone was treason, so she had withdrawn her

candidacy. And although she had made no other transgressions she was put on trial. She was sentenced to ten years in a corrective labor camp on the charge of "treason to the Soviet motherland" (filed under Article 19: intentions not realized).

After the trial she was held in an overcrowded cell in the Big House's inner prison, waiting to be transferred to a camp. One day, the man who had last interrogated her summoned her to his office.

"Why don't you use the library?" he asked. "We have many books, you know you are entitled to . . ."

"I'm busy," Tatiana answered, "I don't have the time."

"Busy?" he repeated, although he wasn't too surprised—he had understood by then that his ward was, to put it mildly, a little eccentric. "With what?"

"I'm translating." And then she added, "Byron's *Don Juan*." The interrogator turned out to be an educated man, he knew what kind of poem this was.

"So, you have the book?" he asked.

"I'm translating from memory," she answered. This surprised the interrogator even more.

"But how do you remember your final version?" he asked, showing an unexpected ability to hit the nail on the head.

"You're right," Tatiana said. "That's the hardest part. If I could just write down what I've already done . . . especially now that I'm approaching the end. My head is too full to remember anything new." The interrogator gave Tatiana a piece of paper before he left for the evening.

"Write down everything you've already done," he said. "I'll take a look at it tomorrow." Not daring to ask for more paper, she began to write. When the interrogator returned to his office the next morning Tatiana was still writing, sitting beside her was a furious guard. The interrogator looked at the paper—he couldn't read a thing: each letter was smaller than a pin head, each octave took up barely one square centimeter.

"Read it to me!" he ordered. It was the ninth canto, about Don Juan's trip to Russia. The interrogator listened to Tatiana for a long time. He laughed from time to time and couldn't believe his ears—or, for that matter, his eyes: he saw the heading "Statement of the Accused" and then a page covered on both sides by minuscule squares of verse that he couldn't have read even with a magnifying glass. He interrupted her reading, "Why, you deserve a Stalin Prize for this!" He knew no other measures of merit.

"I think one gift from Stalin is enough," Tatiana said sadly. It was rare that she allowed herself jokes of this kind.

The reading went on for quite some time. Tatiana had managed to fit at least one thousand lines on that page—one hundred and twenty octaves.

"Can I help you in any way?" asked the interrogator.

"Yes, certainly! More than anyone!" Tatiana needed: the original book (she requested a specific edition with notes that she trusted), a bilingual dictionary, paper, pencil, and of course, a cell to herself. A few days later the interrogator found a cell that was better lit than the others and provided her with a table and everything else that she had requested.

Tatiana Gnedich spent two years in that cell. She rarely went outside and didn't read a thing—she lived and breathed Byron's verse. She constantly repeated a poem by Pushkin to herself, one he had addressed to her distant forebear, Nikolay Gnedich:

> For a long time you spoke with Homer,
> all alone.
> For a long time we waited,
> oh so long.
> And then, enlightened, you returned
> from those high mysteries
> delivering your masterpiece.

He had spoken alone with Homer and she with Byron. Two years later, Tatiana, just like Nikolay, "returned from those high mysteries" and delivered her "masterpiece." Only, her "high mysteries" were a jail cell, furnished with a stinking slop bucket and a window muzzle that blocked the light of day. No one ever bothered her, except on occasion when she would pace about her cell searching for a rhyme: the prison guard would rip open the cell door and bark, "You're under orders to write, not walk around!"

Her conversations with Byron went on for two years. When she put the last period at the end of the seventeenth canto, she told the interrogator that her work was finished. He called her to his office, gathered the pile of papers, and informed her that she would not be transferred to the camp until the manuscript had been typed out. The prison typist labored over it for a long time. At last, the interrogator gave Tatiana three typed copies for her to read through and correct. He put the first in a safe and gave the second to her along with an official letter permitting her to keep the manuscript ("in the event of a search, do not read or take away from inmate"). He then asked who the third copy should be sent to for review. And Tatiana named Mikhail Lozinsky.

She was sent off to a labor camp where she served out the remaining eight years of her sentence. Her *Don Juan* manuscript never left her side, although the precious pages were often in danger.

"There you go, rustling your damn papers again! Can't you let us get some sleep?" her camp bunkmates would complain. She managed to hold on to the manuscript until the day she began retyping *Don Juan* in our room on Kirov Prospekt. During those eight years, she'd come up with a lot of improvements. And, after spending all that time in prison and in camps, the manuscript had the same foul stench as her *fufaika*.

In the fall of 1957 the Writers' Union put on a special evening in honor of Tatiana Gnedich. She read excerpts from *Don Juan*. Tatiana was especially proud of the generous praise she received from several translators whose opinions she valued, like Elga Linetskaya, Vladimir Shor, and Elizaveta Polonskaya. About two years later Khudozhestvennaya Literatura published *Don Juan* with a foreword by Nina Dyakonova, a respected expert in British literature, in a print run of one hundred thousand copies. One hundred thousand! Utterly unimaginable to the former inmate, who had spent two years in a solitary cell with only prison rats for company.

Tatiana had received a large advance for *Don Juan*—seventeen thousand rubles—and there was more to come from royalties. For the first time in many years she bought necessities for herself and presents for everyone else. She didn't have a single possession—not a fountain pen, not a watch, not even a pair of proper glasses.

The first few copies of her Don Juan were numbered. I received number two. Who got number one? No one. It was meant for the interrogator, but despite all her best efforts, Tatiana was unable to find the man who'd done so much for her. Evidently, he was much too intelligent and liberal. Judging by the fact that all traces of him had disappeared, the NKVD had done away with him.

Later, a new edition came out. Its dedication page, I am honored to say, featured a poem Tatiana had written to me—thanking me for helping her during those hard times.

> I want to end my simple verse
> with a wholehearted "thank you friend!"
> Because you wrote warm praise and words,
> because you never thought to condescend.
> And even evil grovelers could not curse

at you as someone who's irrelevant.
Because you are a winged muse, you soar above the rest
and having friends whose vision is so clear—now that's the best.
—October 22, 1964

The poem is an incredible honor but Tatiana bestowed upon me an even higher one. She gave me a priceless gift—that legendary piece of paper. The one with the heading "Statement of the Accused," where she had managed to fit one thousand lines of verse. This paper was the masterpiece Pushkin was referring to, when he spoke to his friend Nikolay Gnedich:

And then, enlightened, you returned
from those high mysteries
delivering your masterpiece.

The artist and director Nikolay Akimov read *Don Juan* on vacation. He fell in love with it and invited Gnedich over to suggest that they collaborate. Together they turned the poem into a theatrical production. Their friendship also produced another extraordinary work of art: Akimov's portrait of Tatiana Gnedich—one of the best in a series of portraits he had painted of his contemporaries. The production, directed by Akimov at his Comedy Theatre in Leningrad, was a huge success and ran for many years. The first performance, which I described earlier, ended in Tatiana's moment of triumph. By that time, over one hundred fifty thousand copies—two editions—of *Don Juan* had been printed. In his new edition of *High Art* Korney Chukovsky, an influential literary critic and essayist, referred to Tatiana's *Don Juan* as one of the greatest modern verse translations. My own book, *Poetry and Translation*, had also come out. In it I called Tatiana's translation a true chef d'oeuvre and gave a short account of its origin. But it was when the seven-hundred-person audience at the Comedy Theatre rose in a standing ovation, all unanimously applauding the author—that was the apotheosis of Tatiana's life.

After her release from camp, she lived for another twenty years. Everything seemed to have worked out. She even acquired a family: there was an old woman named Anastasia she'd known in the camp who moved in with her and played the role of a mother. There was also a man named Egory, a jack-of-all-trades—he was a sort of husband. A few years later she adopted Tolya, a boy who remained forever loyal to his adoptive mother. Thanks to her help, he was able to complete a university degree, specializing in Italian.

Everything *seemed* to have worked out—in reality, her "mother" turned out to be a grump, constantly sinking into black depressions, and her "husband" a chronic alcoholic with an unrestrained foul mouth. Tatiana attempted to civilize him; for example, she taught him to replace his favorite four-letter word with the name of an ancient Greek god.

"Guys, let's have a drink!" he would say to his wife's students, who had come over to work with her. "And if this one doesn't let us," he would point to Tatiana, "then to Phoebus Apollo with her!" Neither her "mother" nor her "husband" understood anything about literature; they didn't want to and they couldn't have understood anyway. There were times when Egory beat her. When I asked if she was afraid for her life, Tatiana replied sagely, "Who would kill the goose that lays the golden eggs?"

Tatiana spent her last decades just as she had always dreamed: she lived in her beloved Tsarskoe Selo at the edge of the park. She dedicated quite a few poems to it but, like the majority her work, these were never published.

> The park alive and well—a welcome sight!
> The outline of the Hermitage remains,
> the columns, too, are just as white,
> the beauty of its playful lines, the same. . .
> How swell, we sit together in this spot,
> beneath the linden's holy canopy.
> And from the chalice of inspired thought
> we drink the waters of the river Lethe.
> —August 20, 1955