

## On Translating Tolstoy

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In chapter fourteen of the eighth and final part of *Anna Karenina*, some five thousand words before the end of the novel, Tolstoy produces one of his inimitable, participle-laden, congested sentences about the behaviour of bees in Levin's apiary:

In front of the entrances to the hives sparkling bees and drones danced before his eyes as they circled and bumped into each other on one spot, and amongst them, continually plying the same route to the blossoming lime trees in the wood and back towards the hives, flew worker bees with their spoils and in pursuit of their spoils.

Перед летками ульев рябили в глазах кружащиеся и толкущиеся на одном месте, играющие пчелы и трутни, и среди их, все в одном направлении, туда, в лес на цветущую липу, и назад, к ульям, пролетали рабочие пчелы с взяткой и за взяткой.

It is one of those sentences which exemplifies the challenges posed by Tolstoy's often tortuous but majestic prose in *Anna Karenina*—a novel he found hard to write due to profound spiritual crisis welling up inside him in the 1870s.

The above translation, which has thus far been revised at least a dozen times by the present author for a new edition of the novel commissioned by Oxford World's Classics, aims at precision by seeking to preserve Tolstoy's idiosyncratic sentence structure as far as possible, while simultaneously striving to transpose the original into an idiomatic English. Since Russian functions in a different way to English, its case endings offering authors enormous flexibility with regards to where they place parts of speech (as with Latin), this is not easy. In the second part of this particular sentence, for example (a literal translation of which reads “ . . . and amongst them, continually in one direction, there, into the wood to the blossoming lime trees, and back, towards the hives, flew worker bees with their spoils and for their spoils”), I chose to add a couple of extra

words in English in order to preserve Tolstoy's syntactic structure. And the English "spoils" was the closest I could come to reproducing Tolstoy's pleasantly onomatopoeic buzzing sound in "vzyatkoi", which he deliberately repeats. By way of comparison, we may consider the two most recent English translations. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Penguin, 2000) omit Tolstoy's repetition: "...and among them the worker bees flew, all in the same direction, out to the blossoming lindens in the forest and back to the hives with their booty," while Kyril Zinovieff and Jenny Hughes (Oneworld Classics, 2008) introduce a hyphen, as well as quite a lot of inversion: "... and between them flew worker bees, always along the same route—to the wood with its flowering limes to collect their booty, and back again, laden with it."

Bees are important in Tolstoy. They inspire one of the most important similes in *War and Peace*, and also feature several times in *Anna Karenina*, often at crucial moments. Translating the passage above brought back memories for me of wrestling with another sentence about bees. This one comes much earlier in the novel, in chapter twelve of Part Two, and presented difficulties of a different kind. In one of the most lyrical scenes in the novel, Levin, the rejected suitor, finds solace on his estate as spring suddenly begins to burst forth around him.

... The old grass and the emerging needles of young grass turned green, buds swelled on the guelder-rose, the currant bushes and on sticky, resinous birch trees, and bees on their first spring flight from their new home started buzzing about the gold-flecked willows. Invisible larks burst into song above the velvety green shoots and the ice-covered stubble, peewits sent up plaintive calls over wetlands and marshes sodden with murky, stagnant water, and up on high cranes and geese flew past with their spring cackle...

I spent a long time staring at the two adjectival participles in the clause describing bees, the one past passive, the other past active: "... и на обсыпанной золотым светом лозине загудела **выставленная облетающаяся** пчела" (i na obsypannoi zolotym svetom lozine zagudela **vystavlennaya obletavshayasya** pchela). Both words have recognizable roots, the first suggesting something that has been "put out" (the word *vystavka* in Russian means "exhibition" or "display"), and the second something which is "flying (a)round", but the lack of clarity about what they actually mean is reflected in the diversity of translations:

Constance Garnett (1901): "and an exploring bee was humming about the golden blossoms that studded the willow"

Louise and Aylmer Maude (1918): “and among golden catkins and on the willow branches the bees began to hum”

Rosemary Edmonds (Penguin, 1978): “the honey-bee hummed among the golden catkins of the willow”

Pevear and Volokhonsky: “and on the willow, all sprinkled with golden catkins, the flitting, newly hatched bee buzzed”

Zinovieff and Hughes: “an old bee, pushed out of its hive, buzzed in the gold-flecked willows”

Are we dealing here with an “exploring bee,” a “honey-bee,” a “newly hatched bee” or an “old bee pushed out of its hive”? And is the bee humming, buzzing, flitting and buzzing, or buzzing after being pushed out of its hive? Only the Maudes talk about bees in the plural, and register the prefix in the verb *zagudet* (“to start to hum or buzz”), but they make no attempt to translate *vystavlen-naya* and *obletavshayasya*.

Having written a biography a few years ago, I knew that Tolstoy had developed a typically obsessive but short-lived passion for beekeeping in the 1860s, and I had a hunch that *vystavlen-naya* and *obletavshayasya* belonged to the Russian apiarist’s lexicon. And so it turned out. The two words are linked to specific terms used to denote firstly the transfer of beehives from their winter to their summer resting place, and secondly the first spring flight bees make once their hives have been moved: hence the wording in the above-cited passage. Now the translator has a new challenge: to produce an English version which is as succinct as the Russian (impossible).

My lingering doubts about the oddity of only one bee contributing to Tolstoy’s triumphant evocation of Russian spring were erased when I was invited to take part in a Tolstoy conference organised by the University of Milan on the shores of Lake Garda in April 2010 and had the serendipitous good fortune during a break to mention my apiarial research to Prof. Thomas Newlin of Oberlin College, who just happened to be working on an article on “‘Swarm Life’ and the Biology of *War and Peace*” (*Slavic Review*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2012). Tom confirmed that the singular *pchela* for “bee” can be used to denote bees in the plural, which of course makes perfect sense.

When I subsequently wrote to thank the conference organisers for

inadvertently helping me to solve this particular translation puzzle, one of them was curious enough to go and consult the most recent Italian edition of *Anna Karenina* (la Repubblica, 2004). In Laura Salmon's translation ("un'ape abbandonata che girava lì attorno") we have "an abandoned bee which was roaming around there," which makes me wonder what the bees get up to in all the other translations of *Anna Karenina* around the world.