

Finding the Just Name: On Translating Ismailov

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One of the most difficult works I have translated from Russian is Hamid Ismailov's *The Railway*. This novel has a huge geographical sweep, taking in not only most of Soviet Central Asia, but also Iran, Afghanistan and parts of European Russia and western Europe. It incorporates a great deal of twentieth-century political and cultural history. It comprises many separate stories, often linked together only tangentially. It is full of unfamiliar real-life detail—Soviet, Muslim, and (most bewilderingly of all) Muslim-with-a-Soviet-veneer-to-make-it-acceptable-to-the-authorities. And there are at least 137 different characters.

How could I make all this not only comprehensible to people from another world but also interesting and enjoyable for them? One approach would be to simplify. The publishers of the French translation omitted about half the chapters, leaving out everything that did not relate to the story of the novel's central family. I have no doubt that this stripped-down version has its merits, but this is not the way I wanted to go myself. *The Railway* is exuberant and Rabelaisian, full of slogans, spells and curses; Hamid (the author and I are close friends, so I shall refer to him by his first name) is deeply aware of the power of fantasy, of the way words beget words and stories beget stories, of the power of language to create reality. I did not want to sacrifice this exuberance.

I knew that *The Railway* would need an introduction, endnotes and an alphabetical list of characters, but I slowly realized that there was something more important than this: I also had to find names for the characters that would stay in a reader's mind and make it easy for him or her to place them. Otherwise, no notes or lists would be enough to enable people to orient themselves in this strange, teeming world.

In the original, each character has both a name and a nickname, linked by a hyphen. In answer to one of the many hundreds of questions I asked him while translating his novel, Hamid wrote, "Nearly everyone in Uzbekistan had a nickname. These were based on all kinds of things: an aspect of someone's character or appearance, something to do with their profession or maybe just a particular incident in their life . . . Often people were stamped with these nicknames in

childhood, and they carried more weight in their lives than their real names.”

Hamid had originally meant to write *The Railway* in Uzbek. After completing a first draft, he changed his mind. Wanting the novel to reflect the multinational, Soviet culture in which he grew up, Hamid decided to rewrite it in Russian—the common language of the Soviet Union as a whole. But he left the characters’ nicknames as they were; he did not translate them. Most are in Uzbek and so, to the average Russian reader, they are simply interesting patterns of sound. English readers, however, would be facing a greater cultural divide, and I felt that they needed more help.

And so—after I had got Hamid to explain their meaning and derivation—my wife and I set about recreating these nicknames in English. This was not easy; finding a name with the right sounds and the right rhythm was as difficult as coming up with a good rhyme when one is translating verse. And like a good poem, a nickname has to be memorable; otherwise, needless to say, it would never have caught on. With only one or two exceptions, we left the first, given name as it was in the original; it was only the nickname itself that we recreated.

In most cases, we knew when we had got a name right. It was like trying a key in a lock: either it turns or it doesn’t turn. Some of these names took us a few seconds, some a few months, but we were pleased with Abubakir-Snufftaker (Abubakir-Nasvoy, the school caretaker), Bakay-Croc (Bakay-Timsokh, the double amputee and leader of a rights-for-the-disabled movement—*timsokh* is the Uzbek for ‘crocodile’), Bolta-Lightning (Montyor-Bolta, the town electrician), Ortik-Picture-Reels (Ortik-Arshan-Malalan, the cinema manager),¹ Tolik-Nosetalk (Kolyok-Gundos, the alcoholic manual labourer), Osman-Anon (Osman-Besfamil’ny, the shadowy KGB officer who is issued every month with a new passport in a different name, although, in reality, *everyone* is well aware who he is), Rizo-Zero (Rizo-Shtangentsirkul, the engineer, student of shadows and supposed instigator of a terrible eclipse) or Vera-Virgo (Verka-Davalka the town prostitute) . . .

These nicknames recur many times, and any sense of strain would have been disastrous. What made success possible was that we had a certain freedom. The nicknames of Hamid’s characters, like real-life nicknames, are constructed according to a variety of principles. We were obliged to follow these general

¹ In reality, of course, there nearly always *are* further improvements that could be made. Olive Classe, after checking through this essay before publication, pointed out that we could have nicknamed the cinema manager “Ortik-Picareels”—or even, slightly changing his first name, “Orpik-Shopic”!

principles, but we were not obliged to copy what Hamid had done in each particular instance.

Some of the names, in both languages, are largely a matter of rhythm and alliteration: e.g., Ruzi-Crazy, a name we translated absolutely literally and which happens to alliterate better in English than in the original. Others, like Yusuf-Cobbler—both in the original and in English—do no more than provide straightforward information; still others, like Osman-Anon, provide information and disinformation at the same time. Our “Vera-Virgo,” however, reverses the meaning of the original. In the Russian text, this prostitute is called “Verkadavalka,” which sounds affectionate. Both name and nickname end with a diminutive, and the Russian *davalka* means—literally—“a woman who gives.” Our first attempts at English equivalents—Vera-Tarty, Vera-Prosty—sounded too harsh. Eventually, Hamid came up with Vera-Virgin, which I liked; a few days later, I realized that Vera-Virgo would be better still. It is more archetypal and the irony is less explicit. Like many of our nicknames, “Vera-Virgo” is *not* a literal translation of the original; it is what Hamid, my wife and I imagine this woman might have been called in the unlikely event that her friends and neighbors were in the habit of speaking about her in English.

The world of *The Railway* is multilingual. Most nicknames in the original text were in Uzbek, but some were in Russian, Tajik or various combinations of these languages; this made it seem appropriate to translate them into a mixture of languages. One important figure, an inadvertent revolutionary, is called Oktam-Humble-Rusky. He is “humble” because he is genuinely unassuming; he is “Rusky” not because he is in any way genuinely Russian but because he happens to have ended up in a dominant position in the hierarchy imposed by the Russians. He is, therefore, both humble and dominant, both Russian and non-Russian.

Sometimes unexpectedly serious issues came into focus around these nicknames. The character known as Mullah-Ulmas-Greeneyes, for example, is not a mullah; nor is he even in the least religious. “Mullah” is simply a nickname, one that came into being because it is, almost, an anagram of his given name, “Ulmas.” One of my pre-publication readers suggested I omit this “Mullah”; he thought that English readers, not being accustomed to Muslims using religious terms so frivolously, would find it confusing. For a moment I was close to making this change. Then it dawned on me that this “Mullah” was more significant than I had realized. The Muslim world has never been monolithic; Central Asia has nearly always been religiously liberal—with Sufis having the upper hand over dogmatists—and during the Soviet period secularism made considerable inroads. This nickname was an important clue to the nature of the world Hamid

was evoking. And our current concerns over the spread of Wahhabi fundamentalism made it all the more important to point out that there are other, wiser and more tolerant, kinds of Islam.

A little story Hamid has told elsewhere—though it is in keeping with the spirit of *The Railway*—illustrates both the origin and the power of such nicknames: “I remember how once, when I was about twelve, a group of us were sitting in a carriage behind the locomotive and my classmate Fedka, who was by far the wittiest of us, shouted out: ‘Fireman, throw in some curved logs, we’re coming to a bend in the line . . .’ Ever afterwards he was known as Fedka-Fireman. Years later I learned that he ended up working in a fire brigade, as if trying to combat this spell that had been cast on him.”

If my wife and I were to be faithful to a novel as witty, generous and multi-layered as *The Railway*, it was, above all, this ability to negotiate bends, to depart from linear thinking and recognize unexpected parallels that we needed to develop in ourselves. Our own “Rizo-Zero” may seem a long way from Hamid’s “Rizo-Shtangentsirkul,” but this re-creation works; *the words fulfil what is required of them by the novel as a whole*. Not only is “zero” a near anagram of “Rizo,” but it also alludes to Rizo’s obsession with mathematics and to his fellow-townpeople’s belief that he nearly destroyed their town by calling down a total lunar eclipse on it. As for the original *Shtangentsirkul*, the word means a pair of dividers; it is a Russian borrowing from the German *Stangenzirkel*. For several weeks we had tried to make Rizo a nickname out of a pair of dividers, or maybe a compass. It was a liberation to recognize that these dividers were getting us nowhere. Once we threw them out, we were able to find a solution truer to the spirit of the original.

Hamid Ismailov’s *The Railway* is published by Vintage Classics.