



KHAYYAM, OMAR IX. RUSSIAN TRANSLATIONS OF THE

There are a great number of Russian translations of the *Rubaiyat* (*Robā'iyāt*) of Omar Khayyam ('Omar Kayyām). By the early 21st century, more than seventy were made. They vary a great deal in both form and content, depending on the choice of the Persian *robā'is* selected for translation and the degree of liberty that the translators had allowed themselves in departing from the original. As a result, we are offered a range of strikingly diverse collections of poems under the title of *Rubaiyat*, conveying conflicting interpretations of Khayyam's poetry and worldview.

In contrast to such great Persian poets as Hafez, Sa'di, and Ferdowsi (q.v.), who had all been already introduced to Russian readers, there is no evidence of any interest in Khayyam in Russia before the last decades of the 19th century, when the *Rubaiyat* had already achieved widespread popularity in Europe, largely due to Edward FitzGerald's (q.v.) famous translation.

The very first rendition of Khayyam's quatrains into Russian was not, however, derived from FitzGerald's translation, but translated directly from Persian by the poet and traveler Evgeniĭ Belozerskiĭ (1853-1898). He had studied Persian at the Lazarev Institute of Oriental Languages in Moscow and is known to have made prose translations of 153 *robā'is* circa 1886 (Abdullaeva, Chalisova, and Melville, p. 163). Since these never appeared in print, the publication of 16 *robā'is* in verse translation by the poet Vasilii



Velichko (1860-1903) in *Vestnik Evropy* (Velichko, 1891) marks the starting point of Khayyam's multi-stage reception in Russia.

The small number of translations that appeared up to 1916 drew their inspiration, at least partially, from the article by Vasilii Zhukovskii (q.v) on the wandering quatrains (Zhukovskii, 1897). They were composed by different authors but shared a common and lively disregard for the specific formal features and conventions of the original verses in Persian. They appeared sporadically as contributions to journals (Porfirov, 1894; Umanets, 1901; Lebedinskiĭ, 1901; Bal'mont, 1910; Umov, 1911), as well as in poetry collections and anthologies (Velichko, 1894; Velichko, 1903; Danilevskii-Aleksandrov, 1910; Mazurkevich, 1913; Umov, 1916). Almost all were free paraphrases, with a general tendency to elaboration and embellishment of the original: in Velichko's translation, fifty-two poems in all, only five quatrains could be found, the rest of the so-called "quatrains" contain more lines and vary between five and sixteen lines (Vorozheĭkina and Shakhverdov, 1986, pp. 43-47). The only exception here is Konstantin Bal'mont (1867-1942), one of the major poets of the Silver Age of Russian poetry (circa 1890-1920). He kept to the form of the quatrain in all his eleven poems and was the first Russian translator to follow the formal structure of the *robā'i*.

The only edition of the *Rubaiyat* as a single volume at this stage appeared as a literary enigma without any reference to Khayyam. In 1901, a poet and music critic Konstantin Mazurin (1866-1927) published his *Stanzas of Niruzam (Strofy Niruzama)*; where "Niruzam" is an anadrome for the poet's name) under the pseudonym K. Gerra (Mazurin, 1901). In the introduction, the author claimed that the source of his translation was an old manuscript of an anonymous 10th-century Persian poet from Khorasan. That Oriental stylization, supposedly penned by Mazurin himself, turned out to be a free paraphrase of Khayyam; 110 *robā'is* were rendered, emulated, or used in part in 168 stanzas of "Niruzam" (Vorozheĭkina and Shakhverdov, 1982, pp. 45-46).

In subsequent decades (1920s and 30s), new verse translations appeared, some based on FitzGerald's English version, others directly from Persian. In 1922, Osip Rumer (1883-1954), a polyglot linguist and a versatile poet-translator, published in Moscow a complete translation of FitzGerald's third edition of *Rubaiyyat* (Rumer, 1922), which had been published in 1872 (101 poems). The trend to follow FitzGerald's translation continued with *Omar Khaiyam: Chetverostishiya* (Omar Khayyam: Quatrains), published in Paris in 1928. Its author was Ivan Tkhorzhevskii (1878-1951), a statesman, poet, and translator



of modern French poetry who had emigrated to France after the Russian Revolution of October 1917 (Tkhorzhevskii, 1928).

Tkhorzhevskii's Khayyam collection (194 poems) included selected translations from FitzGerald's oeuvre and improvisations on its main themes, together with alternative renditions from Louis Jean Baptiste Nicolas' French versions, and poems authored by the translator himself. Tkhorzhevskii did not know Persian but benefitted from the helpful guidance of Professor Vladimir Minorsky (q.v.) in order to enter the spirit of the original. He took great liberties with the imagery but followed closely the formal conventions of the *robā'i* genre. He applied the form of the quatrain, already familiar to Russian readers in the 19th century thanks to the rich tradition of epigrams in verse, but changed the conventional rhyme schemes (*abab*, *abba*) to the specific *robā'i* rhyming pattern (*aaba*) and observed a compact rhythmic pattern of iambic pentameter throughout his poems. His masterful imitations shaped the first recognizable image of a sententious, ingenious, and impious Khayyam for Russian readers, although Tkhorzhevskii's popularity came much later, when his translations finally found their way to Soviet Russia (Rumer, N[ekora], and Tkhorzhevskii, 1954; Rumer and Tkhorzhevskii, 1955). The future success of his imitations of Khayyam was predicted by Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977; Nabokov, 1928). At the time, the young Nabokov criticized Tkhorzhevskii for the "muddle of sources," but concluded his review of the book with praise for the translator's "good poetry," adding: "I suspect the kind Omar Khayyam, though he possibly did not write it at all, nevertheless would have been flattered and would have rejoiced" (Nabokov, 2008, p. 659).

In the 1930s, Khayyam enjoyed scholarly attention in the Soviet Union, prompting new translations based on the original texts. Leonid Nekora (1886-1935) presented 144 poems (from the famous Bodleian Library manuscript of 1460) in an accurate and highly proficient verse translation, in the volume *Vostok II: Literatura Irana X-XV vv.* (The East II: Literature of Iran, X-XV cc.), dedicated to the Third International Congress of Persian Art and Archaeology (Nekora, 1935). Sergeĭ Kashevarov published his collection of 122 quatrains (Kashevarov, 1935), based on the texts of Khayyam in the editions by Nicolas (1867) and Arthur Christensen (q.v.; 1927); however, his rhymed but pedestrian literal renderings are only of historical interest now. Some of Nekora's texts, along with several poems offered by Vladimir Tardov (1879-1938) and Konstantin I. Chaĭkin (1889-1938), were included in a separate Khayyam edition (1935) in which the majority of the translations (43) were by



Osip Rumer. For this volume, Rumer translated directly from the original, having by then learnt Persian, prompted and inspired by his previous work, his translation of FitzGerald's *Rubaiyat*.

In 1938, Rumer published Khayyam's *Chetverostishiya* (Quatrains; Rumer, 1938), his own translation of 300 *robā'is*, apparently chosen from Nicolas' edition, since some of the inaccuracies of that translation are found in it as well (Vorozheikina and Shakhverdov, 1986, p. 51). Having followed Tkhorzhevskii's metrical scheme, he rendered all the quatrains in iambic pentameter with *aaba* or *aaaa* rhymes and also managed to combine fidelity to the original with a display of aptly chosen Russian poetic idiom, thereby introducing the authentic motifs and images of Khayyam to Russian poetry lovers. Rumer's collection rightfully counts as the crowning achievement of the first half-century of Khayyam translation into Russian.

Soon after the end of the Second World War, a large-scale project of literary translation aimed at promoting mutual exchange between Soviet peoples started to gain momentum. A strong stimulus to translate Persian poetry came from its official ideological status as the "cultural heritage of the Tajik people." Thus the existing translations of Khayyam were republished, and some new versions by Il'ia Sel'vinskiĭ (1899-1968) and Anatoliĭ Starostin (1919-1980), both active translators of the "USSR peoples' literature" from several languages, appeared in numerous editions of Tajik poetry (see Sel'vinskiĭ, 1949; Rumer and Sel'vinskiĭ, 1951; and Rumer, Thorzhhevskii, and Starostin, 1957).

An influential attempt to understand Khayyam was made in 1959 by the renowned Soviet Iranologists M.-N. Osmanov (1924-2015) and R. M. Aliev (1929-94). They presented an accurate prose translation of 293 poems from the Cambridge University Library manuscript supposedly written in 1207 CE (Aliev, Osmanov, and Bertel's, 1959). The manuscript itself later turned out to be a modern forgery, although the poems it contained were mostly "authentic," i.e. culled from already existing collections. Osmanov and Aliev's mode of understanding of the poems and their choice of words in their translation had a noticeable impact on numerous poets with little or no knowledge of Persian, who were nevertheless eager to compose their own translations of Khayyam (Pen'kovskii, 1959; Spendiarova, 1971; Semenov, 1972; Strizhkov, 1980; Sedykh, 1983; Severtsev, 1984). Their output varies in terms of literary merit and aesthetic value, but they all appear closer to Russian hedonistic poetry than to the original Khayyam.



The most solid contribution was made by Vladimir Derzhavin (1908-75), a prolific poet-translator who was renowned, inter alia, for his translations of Persian classical literature. He published two collections of quatrains. The first collection (Derzhavin, 1965, with the language of the original noted as “Tajik-Farsi”) included 488 poems, of which 292 were from Osmanov and Aliev’s publication, while 196 were from Govinda Tīrtha’s 1941 edition, with 14 *robā’īs* translated twice as separate poems (Vorozheikina and Shakhverdov, 1986, p. 52). For his second collection, Derzhavin selected only 218 quatrains, and he revised and improved some of his translations (Derzhavin 1972, language of the original noted as “Farsi”). The poet applied various meters with a preference for long ones, and his work fails to evoke the laconic brilliance of the original. Unlike other poets-translators, Derzhavin followed the cribs meticulously in an attempt to preserve the “exoticism” of the translated texts. The strategy, given that he lacked a working knowledge of Persian poetic conventions, made his Khayyam sound verbose and at times even stiff and awkward. Derzhavin’s translations have, nevertheless, been well received by readers and critics and frequently reprinted.

It is, however, German Plisetskiĭ (1931-92) who should be mainly credited for promoting the Omar Khayyam cult in Russia. Plisetskiĭ used cribs made by learned Iranologists (M. N. Osmanov, Michael Zand) and worked in cooperation with his editor Natalia Kondyрева, also a well-known translator from Persian. The result was 450 poems (Plisetskiĭ, 1972), around 300 from Aliev and Osmanov’s edition (1959), the rest chosen from the editions by Moḥammad ‘Ali Foruġi (q.v.; 1943) and Govinda Tīrtha (1941). Plisetskiĭ’s translation reproduces the formal features of the original: the poet used anapestic tetrameter, rhythmically close to *robā’ī* meters, and observed regular rhymes and *radīfs*. As to the imagery, Plisetskiĭ relied at times not on the literal meaning, but rather on his own imaginative interpretation. Nevertheless, he succeeded in reproducing the seemingly unattainable simplicity of the Khayyamian *robā’ī* in a light, limpid, easy-to-remember Russian verse. Plisetskiĭ’s Omar Khayyam turned into a cult poet, first for intellectuals, and then for readers in general.

In spite of the fame and popularity of the Plisetskiĭ’s version, the eminent scholar Iosif Braginskiĭ (1905-89), who edited the volume of Iranian-Tajik poetry in the celebrated “Library of World Literature” series, chose to represent Khayyam by different translations (Braginskiĭ, 1974, pp. 101-24). The editor selected 137 of what he considered to be “authentic” texts and chose



their “most reliable translations, which at the same time represented the joint experience of the Soviet school of translation” (Ibid, p. 585). Only six quatrains translated by G. Plisetskii were included in the volume, the rest consisted mainly of translations by L.V. [Nekora], O. Rumer, and V. Derzhavin, with a small addition of contributions by I. Tkhorzhevskii, S. Lipkin, I. Sel’vinskii, and L. Pen’kovskii.

In 1983, a learned Iranologist and brilliant translator of the *Šāh-nāma*, Tsetsiliya Banu (1911-98), married to the famous poet Abu’l-Qāsem Lāhuti, published her selection of 38 *robā’is* (Banu, 1983). This fine and elegantly simple and fluent translation manages to adhere closely to the original in form and meaning. Unfortunately, the selection was relatively small and since the book was printed in Tajikistan, it was not widely distributed and did not attract the attention it deserved (for a much fuller collection of 104 *robā’is*, published later, see Banu, 1991).

The enormous popularity of the *Rubaiyat* in Russia and the rest of the former Soviet Union has instigated an interest in its reception. A representative collection of translations made since the beginning of the 20th century was published by Zinaida Vorozheĭkina and A. Sh. Shakhverdov (1986); it is prefaced with an instructive survey of the methods and achievements of the translators as well as a useful index of first lines of the poems in the original source in Tajik (Cyrillic) characters. The book sets a precedent for later editors; in response to the high level of public interest, all the old and hitherto forgotten renderings have been since recollected and anthologized in numerous editions (Reĭsner, 1999; Safi, 2001; Malkovich, 2004; Butromeev et al., 2005; Sinel’nikov, 2008). A major publication in comparative translations (Malkovich, 2012) includes translations of Khayyam published in Russia by sixty-eight poets from 1891 to 2012. Every *robā’i* is provided with a literal prose translation, followed by all the existing poetic versions (more than twenty in some cases).

The more recent Khayyam translations in the post-Soviet period tend to be inadequate both in terms of their fidelity to the original and as specimens of good poetry in general. One can detect supposedly “fresh” interpretations of the *Rubaiyat* that are actually based on earlier versions. Irina Evsa (2003) once again versified the literal translation made by Osmanov and Aliev in 1959. This book, along with Evsa’s awkward translations of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Goethe’s *Faust*, brought her a “worst translation” prize from the Moscow *Knizhnoe obozrenie* (Book review) newspaper in 2013



(http://www.biblio-globus.ru/inter_analytics.aspx?id=2046). Pavel Bunin, a famous painter and book illustrator, included his versified renderings of Khayyamic poems along with brilliant graphic illustrations in an erotic style in a book (Bunin, 2006) that also contained the “originals,” i.e. German translations made by Friedrich Rosen (1856-1935) in 1909.

Igor Golubev, who held a doctorate in technical sciences and who had learned Persian on his own, made a solid attempt to reinvent Khayyam’s image and message. He versified 1,300 of what he considered to be authentic poems, working with the Persian text of the Govinda Tīrtha edition (1941) as well as using some manuscripts (Golubev, 2000). In the lengthy introduction to his translations, Golubev sets out his criteria in detail (based mostly on stylistic and subjective grounds) for distinguishing authentic verses by Khayyam from those falsely attributed to him. Golubev also claims to present his own decipherment of Khayyam’s esoteric philosophic message. That collection has since become extremely popular and has gone through many editions with different publishers in both luxury and less expensive editions.

Presently, Khayyam enjoys the status of a uniquely readable and marketable poet in Russia: Every six months or so at least one or two new editions appear, in modest or fancy design. However, they happen to be mostly reprints of already issued popular translations, such as Plisetskiĭ’s Khayyam, the Butromeevs’ collection of old renderings, or the new versions by I. Golubev. Numerous websites (<http://haiam.ru/index.html>; <http://хайям.рф/>; http://hayam.spinners.ru/view_all.php, and others) publish old and modern translations; and one can Google “*Kak skazal Omar Khaiyam*” (“as Omar Khayyam has put it”) to find out that the Persian poet has become the pre-eminent authority on wisdom in Russian internet blogs and forums.

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