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Lydia, My Love

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LYDIA, MY LOVE



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about
the
author



Jane Costlow in Pavlovsk

In the years since I translated Lydia Zinovieva-Annibal's *Tragic Menagerie* my family has developed a kind of joke about the title, which my daughter at some point started calling the *Terrible Menagerie*. It wasn't because she didn't like the book — she liked it a lot. Leah went from being five to eight in the years I worked on Lydia's stories; and then she was a teenager, ricocheting back and forth between rebellious silence and good-humored delight in the world. The young women students who have read *Tragic Menagerie* in my classes have always loved it, finding in Vera an awkward and embarrassing but also compelling version of their adolescent yearnings. And as I've read the book with them, I've come to understand my own affection for it, my own attraction to its strange author. For surely she was *strange*: an uneasy mix of overly-dramatic dress-up — the hennaed hair, the kohl-rimmed eyes and scarlet chiton — trying on life personas borrowed from the world of decadence and her husband's Dionysian intellectual passions. It's a life story I could relate to — not because I kohled my eyes but because I was always so good at pleasing father figures: I had come to love the phrases in *Centaur Princess* about

leaving fathers' homes behind. Vera's rebellious infractions were bad behavior I'd never been able to pull off, but secretly dreamed of. What's tragic? What's terrible? When my daughter teased me with her own new title, I remembered that the book was written by a mother for her daughter — that the book was after all an odd and wonderful gift from one woman to another. Find the eros of your life and hold on to it with passion and persistence. Leave your father's house if you must. Break the rules. Dive into the sea, and swim.

When I was working on the translation, I felt an acute, almost physical closeness to her, a relationship to this woman that was quite unlike whatever it was I'd felt in writing essays about Turgenev or Evgeniia Tur. With Tur or Turgenev — gender made no difference — the distance of analytic mind would pull me back from my attachments. Reading those narratives involved a displacement from my own world not so much into the author's Umwelt as into that of his or her characters. Immersed in *Nest of Gentry* in my overstuffed chair in New Haven I was transported to the window-frame-space where Lavretsky sat on a summer's day, as intently focused in reading that page as he was, watching the grass grow and the clouds pass overhead. In some fascinating and not quite comprehensible way, his estate became a place I had been, even before I got off the train that morning in 1985, in Orel. But with translation the transmigration of souls worked differently. To say that I was at Lydia Dmitrievna's elbow would be not quite right: I granted her forearm, with its odd unsteady ardor, the liberty of becoming my own. I felt inside my own skin the impulsive, excessive motor of her adjectives, that surging voice that shifted tense and tenor — abrupt, hypnotic, alluring. It was a voice that lived in the muscles and not only in the throat.

When I visited the Ivanov archive in Rome, her husband's son Dmitrii said he'd always found her handwriting difficult to read, as though she'd written in a railway car, or after taking morphine. As I think of it now, it's a comparison that makes Lydia a daughter of Anna Karenina on her reckless, suicidal drive through a city she loathes. What I felt in Zinovieva-Annibal's forearm wasn't loathing, though, but something lavish, erotic, determined. Determined to find an audience; determined to hold you in her ecstatic aura; determined to escape her husband's thrall by becoming a girl again. I fell for her, and maybe there was in the whole production — the seemingly endless massaging of syntax, lexicon, timbre — an eroticism of mystical, bodily presence, exactly the kind of merging of female flesh and soul that the decadents she hung out with flaunted and failed at. Translator as homoerotic amanuensis, ninety years later. I knew her in a way her decadent co-conspirators and mythologizing husband didn't... We were children together, sharing those hidden transgressions, the trespasses of girls who kiss in lush meadows, who play dangerous games — including the one that's most dangerous of all, the game of feeling too intensely in a world we're quite sure will betray us.

The game I played with Lydia was finally, though, a game with words: we never really touched. And despite those moments of surrendering to the sensuality of her syntax, I also pulled out, crept off to the library, into the bowels of the pre-internet reference room, into guidebooks on mushrooms and carriage design and Imperial tax law. And I pulled out in other ways — for in any case, isn't the erotics of a connection like this really just a version of my odd susceptibility to another person's voice, part of what had made me vulnerable to shilling for male authority figures? There's something both intoxicating and disturbing about the ability to mime another's voice — a mimicry at the heart of being human and learning to speak. Even when we're not separated by a century and an ocean, I hear myself starting to imitate the cadences of people I'm talking with, not so much what they say as how they say it. Children in the womb apparently can hear the music of voices speaking — the rise and fall of sounds in the world outside, the tone and timbre of human language. That was the rise and fall that so captivated me with Russian: when I first went to Leningrad in the early 80's there were lots of things I couldn't understand, but I loved listening, particularly to women as they talked. The Mikhailovsky garden, late afternoon, women with shopping bags sitting beside me on a bench. Listen to the roller coaster cadences, realize that your Russian teacher isn't lying when she tells you to intensify the leaps and falls of pitch. Even before your handwriting starts to change under the pressure of Cyrillic letters, you learn to ask questions and make statements in a different way. You begin to wonder just what your own voice sounds like, inflected as it is with this new form of music.

Translating Lydia — loving her syntax and its wild, inappropriate excess — meant adopting her voice, learning from that voice one way of speaking in Russian. But there comes with that apprenticeship a kind of anxiety as well, since working with Lydia — especially working with Lydia — means acknowledging the imperative desire to speak in your own voice, and not anyone else's. And here you are giving the pencil in your hand (the keyboard at your fingertips) over to another, allowing her voice, vision and word choice to supplant your own. Even if we think of translation as taking two to tango, it's the original writer who leads. For me, though, this apprenticeship to Lydia was about many things: a way to learn Russian, a way to live inside stories I loved, stories I both understood and didn't understand, a way to shift away from the intensely analytical writing we learn to produce in graduate school. Translating Lydia was, for me, a way of breaking with the fathers, all those kind, wonderful men who lived in the upper stories of Yale's Hall of Graduate Studies. I loved language, I loved literature, I loved Lydia, but I wanted — I needed — to rediscover a kind of *play* — and for all of that I owe her a great debt of gratitude.

In saying this I'm suggesting that translation is more personal, more transformational, but also more risky than the academic writing I learned to do so well in graduate school. Part of what I loved about the process of translating was asking my Russian friends in Orel for advice: for them Lydia was an unknown, and my friend Marina in particular found her absolutely outrageous and absolutely delightful. Asking Marina about sticky passages or the parts of a whip (I still have her drawing with its explanation of the handle and the lash — or whatever it is you call them in English) made the work collaborative in a way none of my other work had ever been. And working on the translation, I came to feel, drew on my knowledge of English at least as much as my knowledge of Russian: it challenged my ability to render tense, the compressions and inversions of an inflected language in one bound to word order. Translating from Russian into English pushed me to see just what liberties you could take with English, how far you could go into the wilds or the water before the meaning itself broke down. I loved the sense of process, experiment, engagement, and creativity. I loved the way it didn't have to be linear, that you could work back and forth through passages; I loved the way the words — whether Russian or English — would settle into my inner ear and test my sense of pacing and measure. It was, perhaps, the closest I'd ever come to creating myself. And I felt in some way that Lydia was giving me her blessing, that the overly intense eyes in the portrait in Dmitrii Ivanov's living room were watching me, and wishing me well.

Since that translation I haven't done much — occasional poems and stories for class, an excerpt from "Mother and Music" that a colleague wanted for an anthology of essays on the history of the piano. Translating Tsvetaeva made me realize why she mentions the *Tragic Menagerie* as a favorite book on her childhood shelf. But the experience with Lydia spoiled me, because I felt such intense and physical connection to her, a standard perhaps too high in looking for other things to translate. The desire to inhabit another person's voice comes along as a kind of wanderlust.... *But then I'm left with the question: who to go with?* I want to translate someone whose voice I love and whose words I honor — someone I can bear to spend months or years with. Vladimir Korolenko's journey into the trans-Volga woods is beckoning me now, but I may have to canoe the Kerzhenets myself before I finally say yes. Translation means embarking into darkness — a darkness I associate, in my own northern landscape, with woods: there's the endless complexity and unpredictability of everything around you, the pools of light when you see a way through. Only an intensely tuned perceptual vulnerability lets you make your way out in one piece. You have to feel your way as you go.

When I worked on my introduction to *Menagerie*, I read Lydia's letters to Liubov' Mendeleeva. It turns out the two of them loved to go barefoot in the woods at Lydia's house near the Baltic. They left the poets in the family — the Famous Men who got to make pronouncements about Feminine Soul — behind. They wandered off barefoot into the woods — woods where you could trespass at will. It makes me think it's time to take my shoes off, and follow them.

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