

Maria G. Rewakowicz, translator and with an introduction. Mountain and Flower: Selected Poems. By Mykola Vorobiov

Lada Kolomiyets

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Maria G. Rewakowicz, translator and with an introduction. *Mountain and Flower: Selected Poems*. By Mykola Vorobiov, Lost Horse Press, 2020. Lost Horse Press Contemporary Ukrainian Poetry Series 6, edited by Grace Mahoney. 125 pp. Illustrations. \$24.00, paper.

“God’s temple is everywhere!” (61; from the poem “you can do it or not—”). The bilingual poetry collection under review here, *Mountain and Flower: Selected Poems*, presents selected works by Mykola Vorobiov (1941-). Vorobiov was a cult Ukrainian nonconformist poet, one of the founders of the literary group known as the Kyiv school of poetry, and a leader in the Ukrainian cultural underground of the 1970s. His generation became known as the “ousted generation” (my trans.; see Andrusiak). The poets of this Kyiv school made their debut in literary magazines in the 1960s. They were officially silent for at least a decade, as they were unwilling to compromise on their freedom of expression. They have been republished only since the mid-1980s. Ukrainian literary critic Volodymyr Morenets’ argues that “M. Vorobiov’s feeling of light and of the essence of things allows him to reach unfathomable depths of *Naturphilosophie*—a level that the rest of the very rich twentieth-century European poetry simply does not know” (my trans.; Morenets’ 19). Another Ukrainian literary critic, Taras Pastukh, emphasizes the importance of epiphany in the poetry of Vorobiov. To him, Vorobiov is “a poet-painter who looks for new visual impressions in the landscape and captures them in words” (my trans.; Pastukh, *Kyivs’ka shkola* 594). In his book *Kyivs’ka shkola ta ii otochennia: Moderni styl’ovi techii ukrains’koi poezii 1960-90-kh rr.; Monohrafiia* (*The Kyiv School and Its Milieu: Modern Stylistic Trends of the Ukrainian Poetry of the 1960s-90s; A Monograph*), Pastukh frequently writes about Vorobiov’s “Zen world view,” remarking on its distinct Ukrainian nature and claiming (as in the article “Dzen ta Mykola Vorobiov” [“Zen and Mykola Vorobiov”]) that “[i]n general, Vorobiov was the first to bring Ukrainian poetry to such a fundamental ‘Zen’ level of the comprehension of the Universe and of the introspection of the lyrical self” (my trans.; Pastukh, *Kyivs’ka shkola* 336).

In contrast to the politically engaged poetry of the Soviet canon, in Vorobiov’s poetry, the voice of the lyrical self can only be heard in the privacy of one’s own inner sanctum. The tone of this voice—friendly, intimate, and naturally flowing—is rooted in free verse, with diverse in-line assonances and alliterations, as well as in fresh irregular end rhymes, generally spaced a few lines apart, that cement the poem’s phonetic integrity. The lyrical self speaks through Vorobiov’s poems in a frank and revealing tone, with a conversational and meditative inflection that draws on the author’s intuitive feeling of the ambient natural and man-made world as constituting a unity of animate and inanimate nature. This is a naturalistic world view characteristic

of the Ukrainian agricultural-horticultural lifestyle (existing since pre-Christian times; it has been represented through images and symbols of the yearly cycle of village life and of anthropomorphized nature, and it has been embodied by animated characters painted on art objects), which appeals on the genetic level not only to those Ukrainians who grew up in the countryside but also to Ukrainian townspeople and, in some ways (perhaps even more so), to those born in the cities.

The reflections of the observer-witness on the changing manifestations of the interactions between the natural world and the world of material and verbal culture are a source of unrealistic imagery and ambiguous symbolism in Vorobiov's poetry. For example, the following stanza in the collection's opening poem, "Pryhadai na dorohu meni" / "Remind Me for the Road," relates,

Наче князь
із дороги неждано дальньої,
входить дід
у заклечану хату.

Like a prince
from faraway,
an old man enters
a decorated hut. (22-23)

These lines encode an allusion to *Zeleni sviata* 'the Green Festival'—the proto-Slavic rite of tree worship, when the souls of the dead ("an old man," or grandfather) come ("from faraway," or from a journey to the afterlife) to a house decorated with green branches, and they hide in the greenery. In Christian times, this rite was transformed into ancestral Saturday, or "Green Saturday" (*klechal'na subota* 'decorated Saturday'), followed by the Feast of the Trinity, or "Green Sunday" (*klechal'na nedilia* 'decorated Sunday'). In the absence of such knowledge, the association between the entrance of the grandfather (ancestor) into a decorated house and the symbolism of ancestral Saturday is lost on the English reader. Another illustration of ethnocultural associations that underlie at-first-glance-hidden metaphors can be found in the poem "Navistyty matir" / "To Visit Mother":

Журавлиним горлом
диhaє відро.

The pail breathes through
a crane's throat. (32-33)

The meaning of these lines harks back to the ancient image of a water crane—a crane-like contraption with a lever mechanism that was used to draw water from a well.

As we can see from the above examples, Vorobiov's creation of new syncretic associations between various images of wildlife, flora, natural phenomena, and ethnocultural artifacts, with their multi-dimensional symbolism, could have been an insurmountable hurdle for the translator; the English-speaking reader could easily miss key metaphoric meanings. Maria Rewakowicz does not provide explanatory notes about many of the ethnospecific meanings and associations that are present in the metaphoric content of the original. However, she tries to make the elliptical and inverted constructions clearer and to universalize the metaphoric meanings in Vorobiov's poems, leaving the reader ample room to co-create poetic interpretations. Her texts are reader-friendly, clearly constructed, and transparent in the sense of semantic accuracy. In order to have them sound natural in English, she resorts, where necessary, to the transposition of semantic components, to syntactic rearrangement, and/or to the permutation of adjacent lines.

Contemporary translation norm has shown that the phenomenon of paronymic attraction, or the semantic convergence of words based on a similarity of sound, is generally impossible to reproduce authentically in translation and is therefore an inconvenient literary device (only selected assonances and alliterations are potentially transmissible through the echoing of similar sounds in translation). Although Rewakowicz does not reproduce in her translations the approximate rhyming technique occasionally used by Vorobiov in his early poetry, a sensitive reader can find numerous instances of a nuanced reverberation of sound. Here is just one example of the translator's attentiveness to sound echoes (from the poem "Klen zolotoiu pylkoiu rozpylianyi." / "A maple tree cut with a golden saw."; see underlined):

облущилось обличчя
боляче.

my suffering face
peels off (46-47)

Thus, Rewakowicz's translations in this collection attest to the fact of how well-chosen diction in a translated poem, that is, the selection and combination of words, can be an effective tool of compensation for the informed translator.

At the same time, the ambiguity of the metaphoric images in Vorobiov and their associated polyvalence is an interpretive challenge for any

translator, who must limit themselves to only one linguistic expression of a polysemous phrase. For example, the line-image “грають яблука на солов’ях,” or “other apples play with nightingales” (26-27; from the poem “Nastrii doshchovoho dnia” / “Rainy Day Mood”), can refer to an object of material culture—a children’s musical toy called a “nightingale,” which is a clay whistle with bright circles painted on its sides. Here is another example of ambiguity in Vorobiov’s original (from the poem “Vechir krapchastyi” / “Speckled evening”):

Під засушеною квіткою
хата сторінку чита.

Under the withered flowers
the hut reads a book. (40-41)

If this phrase is rearranged in directly reverse order, that is, “хата чита сторінку під засушеною квіткою,” then one sees an allusion to a flower dried between the pages of the book—a symbol of dear memories. The adjective “мотузяний” in the line “Мотузяний кіт крадеться,” or “A cat on a leash preys on,” in the poem “Klen zolotoiu pylkoiu rozpylianyi.” / “A maple tree cut with a golden saw.” (46-47) is also a representative example of the author’s use of elusive meanings and semantic ambiguity. The word can be interpreted in different ways—in particular, as “timid,” as in the idiom *motuziana dusha* ‘timid soul,’ or as “lithe” and wriggling like a twisting rope.

The language of the translations in this collection is precise and specific in every semantic detail. Let us consider a few examples of the translator’s designation of meaning, randomly taken from various poems throughout the book (corresponding lexical parts are underlined):

(1) from the poem “Tabuny rudykh konei” / “A herd of red horses”:

Тільки лоша одбилось,
ходить на світлих ногах.

A foal on its translucent limbs
steps away from the pack. (38-39)

(2) from the poem “i snyvsia vnochii” / “At night I dreamed about”:

не думаю щоб там
на небосхилі літ
я світло маяка
побачив

I doubt I’ve seen there
the blink of a lighthouse

on the horizon's
old age (54-55)

(3) from the poem "Melankholiia" / "Melancholy":

зелень вкривається снігом ...
greenery turns white ... (62-63)

(4) from the poem "prominnia z vikna" / "a ray coming through the window":

проміння з вікна
як непричесане волосся
переломилось на стілець—

a ray coming through the window
like uncombed hair
bent over the chair (82-83)

(5) from the poem "my postarili i vtomleni ..." / "we got old and tired ...":

метелики літають—
butterflies fluttering above— (88-89)

(6) and from the poem section "Lysty" / "Letters":

у вуста її
нерозспівані ...

into her mouth
short of songs ... (96-97; letter 5)

Rewakowicz's general translation strategy is to accurately reproduce the metaphoric content of the original, combining literalism with the necessary structural adjustments to create a cohesive and coherent text. Hermetic metaphors are translated for the most part verbatim. For instance, in the poem "Navistyty matir—" / "To visit mother—," we see

Морозу синя морква
стриба біля дверей.

the frost's blue carrots
hop by the door. (34-35)

A similar image is observed in the poem “Vechir krapchastyi” / “Speckled evening”:

Вечір крапчастий
в деревах моркву гризе.

Speckled evening
gnaws a carrot in the trees. (40-41)

Whenever possible, the translator resorts to moderate explication, helping the reader cognitively enter the unusual and impressive figurative world of Vorobiov’s poetry and facilitating many discoveries and insights there. The main ways of creating a coherent English text in translation are as follows (corresponding lexemes taken from the book are underlined, below):

(1) through contextual replacement with synonyms:

глиняник нявка, заївсь
коло синиць,
що цілують вікна.

a clay pot meowing, assailing
titmice
that kiss the windows. (30-31; “Vdoma” / “At Home”)

.....
і не гриміти грому
у хмарі золотим дзьобом ...

the thunder no longer frightens
with its golden beak in a cloud ... (108-09; letter 22)

.....
я міг перестрибнути річку
від весни розігнавшись ...

I could’ve jumped over the river
propelled by the spring ... (118-19; “Ia maliuvav usym” / “I painted with all”)

(2) through metonymic transfer, especially of grammatical tense or phase of action (the following example illustrates a transfer from the result of an action to its duration):

на узбережжі
не дочекаються нас ...

on the seacoast
keep on waiting for us ... (108-09; letter 23)

(3) through semantic development:

Гребеться тінь
у жовтому плачі.

A shadow roams around
shedding yellow tears. (46-47; "Klen zolotoiu pylkoiu rozpylianyi." /
 "A maple tree cut with a golden saw.")

(4) through clarification by adding a word or a phrase:

потім острів піску серед води . . .
 then you see an island of sand in the middle of water . . .
 (62-63; "Melankholiia" / "Melancholy")

(5) through concretization:

холод розсипле
 знаки кришталю

cold air scatters
 signs of crystal (110-11; letter 25)

(6) and through the use of common vocabulary:

у стріці місячної ночі
 серп блищатиме

a sickle shines
on the roof of a moonlit night (98-99; letter 9)

Overall, the texts by Rewakowicz in this collection of Vorobiov's poems with accompanying translations represent the work of a translator who is well informed about Ukrainian ethnocultural symbolism. Importantly, she exhibits a deep sensitivity in her treatment of the author's speaking voice, diction, and tone.

Lada Kolomiyets
Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv

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