

explorations



Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

REVIEW

**Adrian Wanner. 2020. *The Bilingual Muse: Self-Translation among Russian Poets*.
Evanston: Northwestern University Press.**

DOI: 10.25167/EXP13.20.8.9

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Adrian Wanner's study of seven Russian poets—Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Brodsky, Andrey Gritsman, Katia Kapovich, Marina Tsvetaeva, Wassily Kandinsky, and Elizaveta Kul'man—who translated their own work into English, French, German, or Italian, is a welcome addition to the burgeoning field of translanguaging studies. While the concept and practice of writing in an acquired language are neither recent nor rare, it's only in the last decade or two that scholars of various stripes and persuasions have started studying it. Much of the hitherto neglect can be ascribed to the entrenched belief that literature of the highest order can only be composed in one's first language, and in that sense the example of Joseph Conrad or Samuel Beckett or Nancy Hurst will always be viewed as an incongruity. Among other culprits none stands out more than the monolingual foundation of almost any literary culture, with its rigid system of classifying authors and their works. Because translanguaging authors straddle multiple traditions, linguistic and cultural systems, etc., they cannot be easily pigeonholed, even in a country as multilingual and multiethnic as Russia, which often leads to their outright rejection.

Cutting to the chase, Wanner opens his Introduction by asking if self-translating or writing poetry in a foreign tongue can be done successfully. Given the numerous opinions he brings in—everything from Robert Frost's quip about poetry being what's lost in translation to Isaiah Berlin's no less shopworn view that one can write poetry only in the language of his childhood—this issue won't be put to rest any time soon. Not that it should. As Wanner demonstrates, the matter is hugely individualistic. For example, Elizaveta Kul'man (1808-1825), who at the time of her death "left behind an unpublished oeuvre in multiple languages of more than 100,000 verse lines" (19), seemed to acquire languages as a way of overcoming her underprivileged background. While the sheer number of poems composed in Russian, German and Italian by this awesome polyglot surely brings to mind much less talented graphomaniacs, her example opens up another can of worms: can poetry even be translated?

Self-translating poets would arguably answer the question with a resounding yes. Still, Wanner, who teaches Russian and Comparative Literature at Penn State, shows that some degree of equivocation is in order. When discussing Kandinsky's self-translations, for instance, he argues that while "the Russian poem looks like the work of a derivative

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symbolist, the German text, despite its awkwardness—or perhaps *because* of its awkwardness—shows genuine flashes of poetic inspiration” (56). By emphasizing in his multilingual practice inspiration and spiritual dimensions of composition, Kandinsky sidestepped issues pertaining to translating the formal elements of a poem. This is echoed somewhat in Nabokov’s literalist approach, but it clashes with Brodsky’s, who, famously, corrected the versions done by esteemed poets of the English language—Anthony Hecht and Derek Walcott, among others—thus showing his disapproval of what he called “smooth translations.” The case of Marina Tsvetaeva, whose self-translation of *Mólodets* into *Le Gars* is the focus of the excellent Chapter Three, adds yet another dimension to this discussion. While she believed, like Brodsky, that poetry in general is “a form of translation and thus by definition always translatable” (172), she also eschewed any ideas of poetry being “national” (110). However, while her self-translation of *Mólodets* is nothing short of amazing, her argument on behalf of poetry’s universality is harder to accept. In fact, given the homogenous nature of so much of today’s literature, one wishes for a return of poetry steeped in national or regional characteristics, which, needless to say, would make it harder to translate and consume.

Most importantly, Wanner applies his language skills, erudition, and, what’s equally significant, his love for poetry to investigate the parallel versions of self-translated poems. This is important, because style is often marginalized in favor of theme and biography in discussions of exophonic authors. At the same time, his curiosity about why poets translate themselves or write original works in an acquired language leads him to consider issues of identity and belonging, including among two contemporary Russian American poets, as well. Andrey Gritsman (b. 1947) and Katia Kapovich (b. 1960) differ greatly in how they approach self-translation. While Gritsman sees the Russian and English versions of his poems as “written in two languages on the same subject and in the same “emotional waves”” (155), thus stressing their parallelism, Kapovich’s self-translations “remain camouflaged as English originals” (169). Her decision to hide her poems’ origins, as it were, unlike Gritsman’s to publish his work in bilingual *en face* editions, has a lot to do with the unfortunate fact that translation of any kind, including self-translation, remains a no-go zone for many readers, critics, and publishers.

Not surprisingly, then, Wanner considers in his Conclusion the question of audience and the future of translingual literature. Citing, among others, the opening of Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay on the task of the translator—“no poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener” (173)—and Lawrence Venuti’s seminal points about “foreignizing” and “domesticating” translation, Wanner goes on to propose that self-translations “locate themselves in a transnational hybrid space” (173). Despite the fact that having multiple versions of the same text in different languages may, paradoxically, lead to a narrowing of the work’s readership, these poems should not be read as validations of each other but rather as “parallel poems with equal rights” (175).

This is less utopian than it sounds. Millions of people are affected by what Wanner calls “postmonolingual condition” (175). Will there be more writers *writing with an accent*? Yes. Will this lead to “the emergence of ever more deterritorialized communities” (176), where translingualism thrives and is cherished? That remains to be seen, but Wanner’s excellent study is better than most references and guides out there.

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