Nikolai Gogol

THE ODYSSEY IN ZHUKOYSKY'S TRANSLATION

A letter to N. M. Yazykov

N. M. Yazykov (1803-46) was one of the most important poets of the time and is still widely anthologized. His gift ran more to verbal pyrotechnics, however, than to content. Gogol thought very highly of his skill with language. He wrote to him often.

THE PUBLICATION OF *THE ODYSSEY* will mark the beginning of a new era. *The Odyssey* is without doubt the most perfect work of all the centuries. Its breadth is enormous; *The Iliad* is an episode next to it. *The Odyssey* takes in the entire ancient world, both public and domestic life, all the vocations of the people of that time, their trades, their knowledge, their beliefs ... in short, it is difficult to say what *The Odyssey* does not take in or what is left out of it. For many centuries it served as an inexhaustible well for ancient, and afterwards for all, poets. Subjects for innumerable tragedies and comedies have been drawn from it. All that was spread throughout the world, became a common heritage, and *The Odyssey* itself was forgotten.

The fate of *The Odyssey* was strange: in Europe they did not value it; the fault is partly the lack of a translation that would artistically reproduce the splendor of the ancient work, and partly the lack of a language rich enough and full enough to reflect its innumerable elusive beauties as they are in Homer and in Hellenic literature in general; it is, finally, partly the lack of a people sufficiently gifted with a pure virginal taste, which is necessary for Homer to be appreciated.

Now this translation of the foremost poetic creation has been done in the fullest and richest of all European languages.

It is as though the whole literary life of Zhukovsky was a preparation for this task. He had to work out his lines with the help of works and translations of poets of all nations and languages; in order to make himself capable of rendering the eternal lines of Homer, he listened to all lyres, so that he might become sufficiently sensitive to the nuances of Hellenic sound; it was not only necessary for him to fall in love with Homer, but also to conceive a passionate desire to compel every one of his compatriots to fall in love with Homer, for the aesthetic profit of the soul of each one of them; it was necessary for the translator to undergo many experiences which would lead his soul to that harmony and calm indispensable for the reproduction of a work planned with such harmony and calm; finally, it was necessary for him to become a more profound Christian, in order to acquire that enlightened, profound attitude towards life which none but a

Christian (who automatically comprehends the meaning of life) may have. Such are the conditions which had to be fulfilled so that the translation of *The Odyssey* might not appear as a servile reproduction and so that the living word might be heard in it and all Russia might accept Homer as its own!

Thus a kind of miracle resulted. This is not a translation, but rather a re-creation, a restoration, a resurrection of Horner. The translation somehow introduces us into the life of antiquity better than the original. The translator imperceptibly became the interpreter of Homer, became a kind of optic nerve, a clarifying lens for the reader through which all Homer's numberless treasures are displayed with more definite-ness and distinctness.

In my opinion, all conditions, as though by chance, are now present to make the appearance of *The Odyssey* almost indispensable to our time; in literature, as elsewhere, there is a chill. As we are weary of enchantment, so are we weary of disenchantment. Even the convulsive, sick productions of this century, with their mixture of undigested ideas introduced by political and other ferments, have begun to decline considerably: only belated readers accustomed to line up behind the leaders of the press still read a little here and there, without realizing, in their simple-mindedness, that the sawhorses leading them have long been uncertain, not knowing themselves where to lead their lost flock. In short, it is now vital for a work harmonious in all its parts to appear, one which represents life with astonishing distinctness and at the same time conveys a calm and almost child-like simplicity.

Among us, *The Odyssey* produces an influence both generally on all and separately on each. Greek polytheism will not tempt our people. Our people is sensible: without racking its brain it will comprehend what the intellectuals do not understand. Here it will see the proof of how difficult it is for a man without prophets and without a revelation from on high to come to know God in his true aspect, and in what absurd aspects His image has been presented by the division of His unity and unified powers into numerous forms and powers. He will not even laugh at the pagans of that time, knowing that they were in no way at fault: the prophets did not speak to them, Christ was not born then, there were no Apostles. No, our people will rather scratch the backs of their necks, sensing that even he who knows God in his true aspect, who has his written law in his hands, who even has commentators on the law in the spiritual Fathers, prays more slothfully and accomplishes his task less well than a pagan of antiquity. The people will realize why the supreme power aided a pagan because of his good life and zealous prayer, although in his ignorance he appealed to Him in the form of Poseidon, Chronos, Hephaistos, Helios, Aphrodite, and others of that kind who fill the imagination. In short, he will drop the polytheism and will extract from *The Odyssey* what he ought to extract from it, what is palpable in it for everyone, what constitutes the spirit of its content and why *The Odyssey* itself was written, that is, to teach that everywhere, in every vocation, much trouble comes to man and he must struggle against it—and it is for this that life has been

given to man; that in any case he should not lose heart, as Ulysses did not lose heart when in all his difficult and grave moments he called out in his heart, without doubting that by this interior call within himself he was creating an interior prayer to God, which in moments of distress every man accomplishes, even he who has no understanding of God. That is the general, the spirit of its content by which the impression of *The Odyssey* is produced on everyone, even before some are carried away by its poetic qualities, the fidelity of its pictures, and the vigor of its descriptions; even before others are struck by the exposure of the treasures of antiquity in a detail which neither sculpture, nor painting, nor, in general, any of the ancient monuments has retained; even before a third group stands dumbfounded at the extraordinary knowledge of all the coils of the human soul, all of which were recorded by the all-seeing blind man; even before a fourth group is struck by the profundity of the views on government, by the knowledge of the difficult science of ruling people and wielding power over them which the divine old man possessed, the legislator of his and future generations; in short, before anyone is seduced by any passage of *The Odyssey* whatsoever about his trade, his occupations, his inclinations, and his personal peculiarities. And all because the spirit of the content is tangibly perceived, it is its inner essence, which no other work has displayed so powerfully through externals, penetrating everything and dominating everything, especially when we consider how vivid each episode is, how each might have eclipsed the principle.

Why is it felt so powerfully? Because it resided in the depths of the old poet's soul. You see how at every step he wished to clothe what he wanted to affirm for all time among men in all the bewitching beauty of poetry, how he tried to strengthen whatever may be commendable in popular customs, to remind man that there is something better and holier in him, which he is always liable to forget, to leave to every person an example of his profession in each of his characters, and to leave to all in general an example in his tireless Ulysses of the profession of man in general.

The stern respect for customs, the reverential esteem for power and superiors, notwithstanding the organized limits of power, the virginal modesty of his young people, the benevolence and good humor of the old people, the cordial hospitality, the respect, almost reverence, for man, in so far as he shows forth the image of God, the belief that not one happy thought can be conceived in his brain without the supreme will of a Being infinitely higher than us, and that he can do nothing by his own means—in short, everything, every least detail in *The Odyssey* speaks of the inmost desire of the poet of poets to leave to the men of antiquity a living and complete book infused by law at a time when there was still neither law nor founders of order, when there were still no civil and written enactments determining the relations between people, when the people had not yet seen much and did not even have a presentiment, when only this divine old man saw everything, heard, imagined, had a presentiment—a blind man, deprived of the sight normal to all people and armed with that inner eye that

other people do not possess!

And how skillfully was all this labor, so long considered, hidden under the most naive fiction. It is like a grandfather who, having brought all his kin together in one family and having seated himself among his grandchildren, is ready to behave like a child with them; he tells his good-natured tales and is careful only to bore no one, not to intimidate by an unbecoming length of instructions but to disseminate and spread them through the tale so that they may all collect them as though playing with them (although they are not given to man for him to play with), and so that everyone may imperceptibly absorb what he knew and saw better than anyone of his age and time. Anything spontaneously expressed may be admired, if an attentive examination later discloses a marvelous structure both in its entirety and in each separate song. How stupid are those German savants who imagine that Homer is a myth and all his creation popular songs and rhapsodies!

But let us examine the influence that *The Odyssey* can produce *on each of us separately*. First, it will work upon our writing brothers, on our authors. It will restore many to the light, leading them like an artistic pilot through the bustle and the shadows piled up by unsettled, unorganized writers. It will remind all of us anew with what ingenuous simplicity we must imitate nature, how to render each of our thoughts with an almost tactile plainness, with what balanced tranquility our speech should be expressed. It will make all our writers feel anew that old truth, which we should always remember and which we always forget, namely, never to take up the pen until everything is established in our brains in such clarity and order that even a child's powers would understand everything and keep it in memory. Still more than on the writers themselves, *The Odyssey* will work on those preparing themselves to be writers in secondary schools and universities, who see their future career dimly and vaguely. From the beginning, it can lead them in the right road while saving them useless vacillations in the face of the tortuous ins and outs which their predecessors ran into.

In the second place, *The Odyssey* will work on taste and on the development of the aesthetic sensibility. It will rejuvenate criticism. Criticism is worn out; it is entangled in the analysis of mysterious literary works of the latest fashion; it is woefully beside the point and, deviating from questions of literature, it rushes into nonsense. On the ground of *The Odyssey* much really sensible criticism could appear, the more so as there is scarcely one work in the world which could be looked at from so many sides as The Odyssey. I am certain that the talk, analyses, judgments, annotations, and thoughts excited by it will resound in our press for many years. Readers will lose nothing from this: the criticisms will not be worthless. They will reread much, look at it anew, experience and rethink; besides, a hollow, superficial man will not be able to say anything about *The Odyssey*.

In the third place, *The Odyssey*, in the Russian dress with which Zhukovsky has clothed it, can operate meaningfully for the purification of the language.

Never yet in any one of our writers—not only in Zhukovsky in everything that he has written up to now, but even in Pushkin and Krylov, who are incomparably more exact than he in terms and expressions—has the use of the Russian language attained such fullness. There are all the resources and locutions in all their variations. Infinitely immense periods, which in any one else would be sluggish and obscure, and concise, short periods which in another would be stale and abrupt, which would make the speech bitter, are in him so well united with one another; all the passages and transitions are accomplished with such harmony, everything is so well merged into a unity where the cumbersomeness vanishes into thin air, that it would seem that all the style and quality of speech flows on of itself; there is no trace of contrivance, as there is none of the translator himself. In its place, we have before our eyes, in all his majesty, the old man Homer, and one hears those stately eternal speeches which are not on the lips of any other man but whose fate it is to be heard eternally throughout the world. It is here that we writers see with what wise attention one must make use of words and expressions, how each simple word may be restored to its lofty dignity when we know how to put it in its proper place, and how much it means for a work meant for general use, a work of genius, this highest work of all, to have a proper outward form: the least little mote is noticed and springs to our eyes. Zhukovsky justly compares these motes to trash dragged into a splendidly appointed room where everything shines like a polished mirror, from ceiling to floor; what the visitor first sees is this trash, for the same reason that he would not have noticed it at all in a disordered, dirty room.

Fourthly, *The Odyssey* will work upon all curious dispositions, as well of those occupied with scholarship as of those who have not been instructed in learning, by disseminating a living knowledge of the ancient world. You will not read in any history what you will find in it: all the past breathes from it; antique man is there as though living before your eyes, as though you had met him and spoken with him. You see him in all his actions, at every hour of the day: as he reverently prepares a sacrifice, as he chats decorously with his guest at table, as he dresses, as he strolls in a public square, as he listens to an old man, as he instructs a young one; his house, his chariot, his bedroom, the least bit of furniture in his house, from his movable tables to the bands and bolts on his doors—everything is before your eyes, with more freshness than in the excavations at Pompeii.

Finally, I even think that the appearance of *The Odyssey* will make an impression on our contemporary society. Precisely at the present time, when, by a mysterious decree of Providence, everywhere is heard an unhealthy murmur of dissatisfaction, the voice of human displeasure with everything that exists in the world: against the order of things, against the time, against oneself. When one finally begins to become suspicious of the perfection to which the latest constitution and public education have led us; when one perceives in everyone a kind of uncontrollable thirst to be something other than what he is, perhaps even

proceeding from a fine source—to be better; when through the absurd clamor and the thoughtless propagation of new but dimly perceived ideas one perceives a kind of general attempt to be closer to a mean, to find the real law of our actions, as well those of the mass as of persons taken separately—in short, it is precisely at this time that *The Odyssey* strikes with the majesty of the patriarchal, ancient mode of life, with the simplicity of uncomplicated social lines, with the freshness of life, with the clarity of man's childhood. In The Odyssey, our nineteenth century will hear a strong reproach, and the reproaches will go on the more it is scrutinized and carefully read.

It is possible, for example, that the reproach which expands in your soul will be stronger when you discern how ancient man, with his poor means, with all the imperfections of his religion, which even permit him to cheat, to avenge, to resort to perfidy for the extermination of his enemy, with his recalcitrance, cruelty, absence of obedient character, with his worthless laws, nevertheless knew, by the simple fulfillment of old customs and rites which were not senselessly established by the ancient sages and were preserved to be transmitted from father to son as something holy—by the simple fulfillment of these usages and customs he succeeded in acquiring a harmony and even beauty of conduct, so well that in him everyone becomes majestic from head to foot, from speech to least gesture, even to his well-made clothes, and it seems that you really perceive in him a man of God-like descent. And we, with our enormous means and instruments for perfecting ourselves, with all our centuries of experience, with our supple imitative nature, with our religion, given to us precisely to make us saints and inhabitants of Heaven—with all our instruments, we have come to such a sloppiness and disorder, both externally and internally, that we have succeeded in making ourselves into scraps, into petty creatures, from head to very clothes, and in addition to all that, we so loathe one another that no one respects anyone, not even excepting those who speak of the respect due to all.

In short, *The Odyssey* will operate on those who suffer and are ill because of their so-called European "perfection." It will remind them of the beauty of their youth now, alas! lost, but which humanity must recover as its legitimate legacy. Many will meditate over many things in it. And, among others, many things about the patriarchal era, with which Russian nature has so much affinity, will invisibly be spread abroad over the face of the Russian land. By the fragrant lips of poetry there will be wafted into the soul something that implies neither law nor power!

Reference: *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends by Nikolai Gogol*, translated by Jesse Zeldin, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, 1969, p. 32-41.