

Verses and Versions

The Russian Originals

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Method of Transliteration

Nabokov explains his mature Method of Transliteration in *Eugene Onegin*, (Princeton: Bollingen Press, 1964), vol. 1, xix-xxv. © 2008 The Estate of Vladimir Nabokov.

Method of Transliteration Vladimir Nabokov

Except when otherwise stated, I have followed in all my transcriptions of Russian texts the new spelling adopted in Russia after the Revolution. The reform did not affect, or at least was not supposed to affect, anything in the pronunciation. Its main object was to get rid of certain superfluous ornamental letters. Thus (to mention a few of the changes), it retained only one of the vowels, identically pronounced but differently spelled, corresponding to the English e in "yes"; abolished the so-called "hard sign" that used to follow all nonpalatalized consonants at the end of words; and substituted for the nonaccented a in the ago of genitive endings (pronounced like the a the ava of Cavalleria) and o, which, being unaccented, is pronounced, or should be pronounced, exactly like the a it replaces. Below is a table of the transliterations used in the present work.

Russian character	Transliterated	Pronounced
А а	a	Like the Italian a. Resembles the a of "art" (never pronounced as in "man" or "male"). As in "Byron." Exceptions: medial b before a voiceless consonant and final b tending to p. Thus próbka, "cork," rhymes with knópka, "tack," and lob, "forehead," rhymes with pop, "priest" (but volshébnó, "magically," and velikolépnó, "splendidly," do not rhyme).
Б б	b	As in "Victoria." Exceptions: medial v before a voiceless consonant and final v tending to f. Thus bulávka, "pin," rhymes with "Kafka," and nrav, "temper," rhymes with telegráf (but svoenrávniy, "capricious," and telegráfniy, "telegraphic," do not rhyme.)
В в	v	As the hard g of "go" (never as in "gentle" and never mute before n). Exceptions: medial g before a voiceless consonant and, in a few words, final g tending to aspirated h as in myágkiy, and bog, "god." Otherwise, final g tends to k. Thus rog, "horn," rhymes with urók, "lesson." In terminations of adjectives and pronouns in the genitive singular, g is pronounced v. Thus nemógo, "of the mute," rhymes with slóvo, "word."
Г г	g	As in "Dante." Exceptions: medial d before a voiceless consonant and final d tending to t. Thus vódka rhymes with glótká, "throat," and sled, "trace," with let, "of years" (but ládno, "all right," does not rhyme with besplátno, "gratis").
Д д	d	As ye in "yellow."
Е е	e	As yo in "yonder" (never as in "yoke").
Ё ё	yo	As s in "measure" or z in "azure" (never as in "zeal") and as the French j in "Jacques" or the second g in "garage." Exceptions: medial zh before a voiceless consonant and final zh tending to sh. Thus lózhka, "spoon," rhymes with kóshka, "cat," and krazh, "of thefts," rhymes with karandásh, "pencil" (but lózhniy, "false," does not rhyme with roskóshniy, "luxurious").
Ж ж	zh	As in "zebra" (never as in "mezzo-soprano" or "azure"). Exceptions: medial z before a voiceless consonant and final z tending to s. Thus skázka, "fairy tale," rhymes with láska, "caress," and glaz, "eye," with nas, "us" (but rázniy, "different," does not rhyme with prekrásniy, "beautiful").
З з	z	

И и	i	As the first e in "scene" (never as i in "mine"), but as ĭ (see footnote 1) after the three letters zh, ts, and sh.
Й й	-y	A semivowel existing only in diphthongs: thus táyna, "mystery," in which ay is like an English long i or, more exactly, the French aille; ey, "to her," which sounds like the end of a long-drawn English "away!" in the mist and the distance; very close to the French eille; kiy, "billiard cue," in which iy is like the French ille in quille; boy, "battle" in which oy sounds like the oy in the English "boy" (in which, however, the o has greater duration and the y is not so strident); duy, "blow" (imperative), in which uy sounds like the French ouille as in andouille; and – iy, the ending of adjectives (masc. sing.), which sounds like the French œil.
К к	k	As in English, but never mute before n.
Л л	l	
М м	m	 As in English.
Н н	n	
О о	o	Like the Italian o; close to the first o in "cosmos" when accented and close to the second o when not (never as in "go"). In Moscow speech the unaccented o (as, for example, in Moskva) is pronounced in a manner about as "ah"-like as the accented o in New York English ("jahb," "stahp"). In ordinary good Russian the unaccented o (as, for example, in koróva, "cow") is pronounced like the final a, which sounds like the ultima of "Eva."
П п	p	As in English, but never mute before n or s.
Р р	r	A clean, clear vibration that is closer to the Italian than to the English (never amplifying the preceding vowel as it does sometimes in English). When burred (by old-fashioned Peterburgians), it is undistinguishable from a French r and then very annoying to the Moscow ear.
С с	s	Like the first c in "cicada" (never like the second).
Т т	t	As in "Tom" (but never as in "ritual" or "nation").
У у	u	As oo "boom." Similar to the French ou (never as the u of "buff" or of "flute").
Ф ф	f	As in English.
Х х	h or kh	Close to ch in the German ach or the Scottish "loch." There is no k sound about it, as the usual kh transliteration unfortunately suggests to the English eye. I have used kh only in one or two cases when s precedes it (for example skhodil, "descended"), to avoid confusion with sh. As ts in "tsetse" or the German z in Zermatt . It should be observed, however, that in many words such as otsyúda, "from here," in which ot is a prefix, kázhetsya, "it seems," in which sya is the suffix, and détskiy, "childish," in which ski is the suffix, the transcription ts corresponds to these two separate letters in Russian.
Ц ц	ts	
Ч ч	ch	As in English.
Ш ш	sh	As in English.
Щ щ	shch	A fusion of sibilants that can be imitated in English by such combinations as "fish chowder," "cash check," "hush child," "plush chair," and so forth.
Ы ы	ĭ	A medial or final nonpalatal vowel pronounced as a very blunt, short i by trying to say ee while keeping the tensed tongue back so as not to touch the inner side of the lower teeth, as it would do in a palatal vowel. The result is a kind of cross between a dull short i and a grunt. (The character chosen to represent this difficult letter should not be mistaken for the sharp French ĭ bearing the same diacritical sign, as in naif). (see footnote 2)
Э э	e	As in "Edinburgh." Apart from foreign words and geographical names, it is found only in étot, "this," and its derivations and in a few interjections such as e, ey, eh, and so forth.
Ю ю	yu	As u in "use" but of less duration.
Я я	ya	As in German ya.

Ь ь

A palatal sign modifying (softening) the preceding consonant, so that т' sounds somewhat like ts, д' like tz, and so on. A usual termination of infinitives (govorit', "to speak"; pet', "to sing"; pisat', "to write"). When placed after a medial letter it indicates not only palatalization but also a very slight pause. Thus the н'е of pen'e is like niè of the French dernière. Consequently И'я, "Elijah," sounds very like the French il y a pronounced rapidly.

Although rigid consistency would require that in transliteration all Russian names ending in **ий** should end in iy (such as surnames — e.g., Vyazemskiy — and first names — e.g., Grigoriy — as well as the names of avenues, lanes, and boulevards, all of which are masculine in Russian), I have had to make certain concessions to accepted spellings as given in works of reference.

All surnames lose the y after the i in transliteration (e.g., Vyazemski). All first names retain the y (e.g., Grigoriy), except in the case of one or two Russian names that have lost it in English usage (e.g., Dmitri instead of Dmitriy). The same goes for the names of boulevards, avenues, and lanes, except in the case of the Nevski, or Nevski Avenue (instead of Nevskiy). The word "street," ulitsa, is feminine in Russian, and the feminine ending of the adjective to it is completely transliterated in English (e.g., Morskaya Street). All names ending in **ой** (Shahovskoy, Bolshoy) retain the y in transliteration.

Except for the surnames of female performers, such as dancers, singers, actresses, and so on, which traditionally retain these feminine endings (Istomina, Pavlova), all feminine surnames, although ending in a in Russian, take a masculine ending in transliteration (Anna Sidorov, Anna Karenin, Princess Vyazemski).

I omit the soft sign in Russian names (Bolshoy instead of Bol'shoy, Olga instead of Ol'ga, Gogol instead of Gogol'), unless such names appear in lines of Russian or in other phrases that require exact transliteration in my Commentary.

Not a few Russians have German surnames, and there occur borderline cases in which a transliteration is preferred to the German original. But, generally speaking, I use the simple German spelling of such names whenever this does not clash with tradition (thus, Küchelbecker instead of Kyuhel'beker).

No accents are used in Russian, but I use them to indicate the correct stress whenever it might help the reader in scanning a verse.

In capitalizing the first word of each line when quoting verse, given that it is capitalized in the original, I have adhered to the following principles: it is capitalized in translations when the lines render exactly the form of the original, including rhymes and rhyme pattern; it is also capitalized in lines that are metrically faithful translations of blank verse or rhymeless dactylic hexameters.

1. *VN's note*: In Pushkin's time, and generally before the new orthography was introduced (in 1918), и, when preceding a vowel, was replaced by the identically pronounced i. There were also other differences: thus е was written as in a number of words (this letter, although pronounced exactly as e, I have transliterated by ye whenever the necessity to mention it arose, for the sake of differentiation), and words terminating in consonants had the useless "hard sign," ъ, affixed at the end. When medial, it acts as a medial б (see further) and is marked thus, '.

2. *Webmaster's note*: At this stage, as a result of difficulty with locating a ī with a stress mark attached to the character in this font, all words with the stress on a syllable containing ī are marked in boldface: **ī**.