НОВОЕ О ПАСТЕРНАКАХ

Материалы Пастернаковской конференции 2015 года в Стенфорде
Под редакцией Лазаря Фреймана

Л.О. Пастернак. «Поздравление» (1915)

Москва
«Азбуковник»
2017
Translation, Imitation, Adaptation, or Mutilation?
Robert Lowell's Versions of Boris Pasternak's Poetry

Michael Wachtel
Princeton

"He <Lowell, MJP> spoke of his admiration of Doctor Zhivago. For him and his wife, the critic Elizabeth Hardwick, and their circle of friends, including the long-divorced Mary McCarthy and Edmund Wilson, Doctor Zhivago served as a yardstick in matters of literary appreciation."

Like many writers and readers in the West, Robert Lowell discovered Boris Pasternak after the highly-publicized publication of Doctor Zhivago. By the time the English translation of Zhivago appeared, translations into other European languages had made the novel an international sensation. Keenly interested in current events both literary and political, Lowell was quick to obtain a copy. On 16 September 1958 — less than two weeks after the novel was released in English — Lowell was writing to his cousin Harriet Winslow: "The last pages of Pasternak’s Zhivago are still reeling through my mind. It covers most of our century with a tragic heavy hero who loathes the stereotyped and has a Graham Greene-like williness and worlds besides. For a moment the stone facades of the new Russia blow away like gauze, much of our own too." Two days later he wrote to Elizabeth Bishop, who was living in Brazil and therefore received books (and literary news) with some delay: "You must read the Pasternak Dr. Zhivago, badly translated but dwarfing all other post-war novels except Mann. Everyone says it’s great but too lyrical to be a novel. I feel shaken and haunted by the main character."

1 Olga Andreieva Carlisle. Far from Russia (New York: St. Martin's, 2000), p. 145. I have corrected an obvious error; Carlisle writes "Edward" rather than "Emund."


4 Thomas Travisano, with Saskia Hamilton (eds). Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell (New York: FSG, 2008), p. 267. Hereafter abbreviated in the text as W.A. Because of the political situation, the English translation of Zhivago was produced at breakneck speed. Its inadequacy was a subject of constant discussion, both in the press broadly (see, for example, Edmund Wilson's review in The New Yorker of 15 November 1958 and Maya Harari's deferential response to it, "On Translating 'Zhivago'" in Encounter of May 1959, 51 — 53), and even within the publishing house that produced it. The Hoover archive (Box 174) has an internal memo of 22 December 1958 to Kurt Wolff (the publisher of Pantheon Books) in which the subject of a retamina-
tion of Zhivago is seriously discussed.

5 For details on the readings in these courses, see L, 333 and W.A 279.

Such freedoms mark the entire book, _Imitations_, in which the Pasternak translations serve as the endpoint. On 28 October 1960, Lowell had written to T.S. Eliot:

“I also have another book that Faber might be interested in. It’s to be called _Imitations_ and will be about 50 free translations I’ve been working on for the last three years. 11 or 12 Montale, 4 Rilke, 15 Baudelaire (the hardest and done in rhyme and meter), 3 Leopardi, 3 Heine, 5 or six Pasternak and so forth. The poems are all done, but I need three or four months for polishing and intend to have a manuscript for Farrar and Straus by April, and they will publish in the fall. Some of these translations are almost original poems and I think some of my best work” (L. 370).

Though the book begins with Homer and Sappho, the lion’s share of poetry comes from the nineteenth century, in particular the French Symbolists.8 Of twentieth-century poets, only Pasternak and Montale figure prominently; each is allotted approximately twenty pages. Moreover, Pasternak is one of only two Russians included. (Annemys, the other, is represented by a single poem.)9

Lowell himself was uncertain of the appropriate term for his renderings of foreign poems. We have already seen him call them “free translations” and “adaptations” (“after” certain poets). Allen Tate had suggested that he call the book “Versions: A Book of Free Translations,”10 and Lowell did indeed use the word “versions” in the above-mentioned publication in _Harper’s_. In the typescript submitted to Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, the working title is: “IMITATIONS, A Book of Versions and Free Translations.”11 However, strictly speaking, the final poem is a version of Rilke’s “Taube, die draussen blieb,” translated extremely freely. (The source is incorrectly listed as Rilke’s “Die Tauben,” which is another poem entirely. See Jn, 149.) As Lowell wrote to Hannah Arendt on 9 January 1961: “I want to put it out of chronological order and away from my other Rilke pieces and let it end my book, for it’s really my own credit” (L. 376). That brief poem is preceded by sixteen pages of Pasternak translations.

8 In terms of the history of composition, Homer and Sappho were late additions. Initially, the book began with the medieval German poet ‘Deirdre Alexander.’ See the mimograph version of the book sent by Lowell to Stanley Kunitz. Archive of Princeton University, Stanley Kunitz papers, Box 122, Folder 9. This reduction of the book is undated, but must have been prepared in December of 1960, judging from Lowell’s letters to Elizabeth Bishop (US 348 — 49). Lowell sent additional copies to Hannah Arendt (who thanks him for it in a letter of 5 February 1961); Allen Tate (who comments on it in a letter of 26 February 1961) and Adrienne Rich (who, in a letter of 28 February 1961, writes, “I’ve been too long in acknowledging the mimograph of _Imitations_.”) All of these letters are unpublished and found in the Lowell collection at the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

9 I measure the contributions in terms of number of pages rather than number of poems, because Lowell sometimes combines excerpts from several Pasternak poems into one of his own “imitations.”

10 A version of Sergei Eizen’s “Soviet Russia” (“Russovietzaska”), found on the back of a draft of Lowell’s introduction to _Imitations_, suggests that he had considered including this poem as well (Houghton Library, Harvard University). To my knowledge the Eizen translation was never published.


NYPL, Berg Collection, 80b. The typescript is unsigned, but was probably submitted in spring of 1961. In the earlier mimograph version (in the Stanley Kunitz papers at Princeton University), the book is called “Imitations: A Book of Free Translations.” The choice of “versions” as against “imitations” clearly caused Lowell (and his editor Robert Giroux) some vexation. Years later, when Lowell published his _The Dolphin_, which included material from his former wife’s letters, Lowell wrote to Giroux about the bruhaha these passages had caused: “Of course from one angle: publishing ‘versions’ of her letters, I can’t clear myself. (I hope no reviewer will call them ‘imitations’.)” NYPL, Berg Collection, letter of Lowell to Robert Giroux of 18 July 1973.

12 Lowell admired Pound’s _notorious_ _Propers (_L. 222_) and clearly saw similarities between his own translations and those of _Pound_ (L. 404_).

13 Cited in D.S. Cate-Ross, _The Two Voices of Translation_, in _Thomas Pynchon_ (ed.), _Robert Lowell: A Collection of Critical Essays_ (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 154. In his preface to Ovid’s _Epistulae_, Dryden had advocated “paraphrase” as a middle ground between the extremes of _metaphrase_ (literal translation) and _imitation_. I am grateful to Katarzyna Szymanska for the precise _Dryden_ reference (not given by Cate-Ross). In a letter to Stephen Spender of 14 November 1961 Lowell gives another model for his approach to translation: “My method is nothing new; the example I had in mind when I was working _on_ Kimbaud was Sir Thomas Wyatt’s versions of Petrarch” (L. 392).

14 The editors of Robert Lowell, _Collected Poems_ (New York: FSG, 2003), p. 1067 point out that this line is borrowed from Dryden’s “Dedication” to his translation of the _Aeneid_: “I have endeavour’d to make _Vigil_ speak such English, as he wou’d himself have spoken, if he had been born in _England_, and in this present _Age_.” Subsequent references to this book will be abbreviated as _CP_.

T.S. Eliot emphatically rejected both these terms in a letter to Lowell of 1 June 1961 (close to the book’s publication date): “I think that the right title for this is _Imitations_ and I don’t agree with Allen’s <Tate> if he thinks that _Versions_ would be better. I think also that a subtitle is a mistake: your translations are indeed imitations, and if you use the word translation in the subtitle it will attract all those meticulous little critics who delight in finding what seem to them mis-translations <sic>. You will remember all the fuss about Ezra Pound’s _Propers_.12 Keep the word translation out of it.”14 Eliot and Lowell were undoubtedly alluding to Dryden, who had used the word “imitation” to describe a type of translation in which the writer “assumes the liberty, not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion; and taking only some general hints from the original, to run division on the groundwork, as he pleases.”15

Lowell recognized that he would be taken to task for his numerous liberties, and he attempted to prepare his readers (or, in his words, “tried to answer a certain kind of critic”) (L. 392) by including a lengthy “Introduction” that discussed his aims. Essentially, Lowell explained that poetry rarely works in translation, so that his primary goal was not so much to render foreign works into English as “to write alive English and to do what my authors might have done if they were writing their poems now and in America” [Im, xi].16 He criticized translators who try to maintain the metrics of the originals: “They seem to live in a world untouched by contemporary poetry. Their difficulties are bold and honest, but they are taxidermists, not poets, and their poems are likely to be stuffed birds.” However, he likewise attacked free verse renderings as “a sprawl of language, neither faithful nor distinguished.” Lowell’s solution was “poetic translation — I would call it an imitation — <that> must be expert and inspired, and his book _The Dolphin_, which included material from his former wife’s letters, Lowell wrote to Giroux about the bruhaha these passages had caused: “Of course from one angle: publishing ‘versions’ of her letters, I can’t clear myself. (I hope no reviewer will call them ‘imitations’.)” NYPL, Berg Collection, letter of Lowell to Robert Giroux of 18 July 1973.

12 Lowell admired Pound’s _notorious_ _Propers_ (L. 222) and clearly saw similarities between his own translations and those of _Pound_ (L. 404).

13 Cited in D.S. Cate-Ross, _The Two Voices of Translation_, in _Thomas Pynchon_ (ed.), _Robert Lowell: A Collection of Critical Essays_ (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 154. In his preface to Ovid’s _Epistulae_, Dryden had advocated “paraphrase” as a middle ground between the extremes of _metaphrase_ (literal translation) and _imitation_. I am grateful to Katarzyna Szymanska for the precise _Dryden_ reference (not given by Cate-Ross). In a letter to Stephen Spender of 14 November 1961 Lowell gives another model for his approach to translation: “My method is nothing new; the example I had in mind when I was working _on_ Kimbaud was Sir Thomas Wyatt’s versions of Petrarch” (L. 392).

14 The editors of Robert Lowell, _Collected Poems_ (New York: FSG, 2003), p. 1067 point out that this line is borrowed from Dryden’s “Dedication” to his translation of the _Aeneid_: “I have endeavour’d to make _Vigil_ speak such English, as he wou’d himself have spoken, if he had been born in _England_, and in this present _Age_.” Subsequent references to this book will be abbreviated as _CP_.

594

595
needs at least as much technique, luck and rightness of hand as an original poem.” To achieve this end required altering the originals: “I have dropped lines, moved lines, moved stanzas, changed images and altered meter and intent ...” (Im, xi–xii).

As Lowell himself later lamented, his warnings to readers were generally ignored. In a letter of 7 November 1961, he wrote to his friend the critic A. Alvarez: “Time Magazine in a longish panning review says half my poems bear the smudge of translation and the other half seem to have been written by some talented foreigner. Dudley Fitts in the New York Times says they should be read in a salt mine, with a grain of salt, and three hysterical Frenchmen writing to Encounter say my Rimbaud is an insane slaughter and hopeless trash. On the other hand, every decent judge from Edmund Wilson down likes them or some of them” (L. 390; for more on the “hysterical foaming” of the Frenchmen, see L. 392).

Edmund Wilson, a friend of Lowell’s, had written in The New Yorker: “It <imitations> has, in general, it seems to me, been stupidly received. It is absurd to complain, for example, that he has not followed Baudelaire literally when he has made a point of explaining in his foreword that he has taken every possible liberty – has changed the order of stanzas, invented stanzas of his own, and contributed his own new images. He has also in many cases transmuted the whole tone and color of the poem which he has taken as a point of departure.” In that same piece, Wilson defends Lowell’s approach: “I have always said that the best translations <...> are those that depart most widely from the originals – that is, if the translator is himself a good poet <...> Lowell, who has used material from a variety of other writers, all the way from Homer to Pasternak, has produced a volume of verse which consists of variations on themes provided by those other poets and which is really an original sequence by Robert Lowell of Boston.”

II

“In the modern languages this study is dilatory: the student never learns to speak the language, he reads, if at all, its classics without taste.”

Robert Lowell on his education at St. Mark’s School (cited in Hamilton, 22)

Wilson’s seemingly innocuous phrases (“used material from a variety of other writers” and “the poem which he has taken as a point of departure”) demand close scrutiny. One central issue that has rarely been raised – and never been resolved – in the secondary literature is that of Lowell’s linguistic preparation for the task of translating. Wilson, who had an impressive knowledge of foreign languages (even including some Russian), apparently assumed that Lowell was in most cases competent to work from the originals. T.S. Eliot, upon learning of Lowell’s translation project, drew similar conclusions. On 4 November 1960 he wrote in his capacity as literary advisor to the Faber and Faber publishing house: “What you say about your volume of translations staggcrs me with your evident command of languages. I think there is no doubt of our wanting to publish this book” (Houghton Library, Harvard University). And in the above-quoted letter of 1 June 1961 (about the book’s title) Eliot presumes that Lowell had derived his versions of Pasternak “from a French or German translation.” Lowell made no effort to correct such false assumptions. In one of the most memorable “Acknowledgments” pages ever penned, he wrote: “I have been so free with my texts that it is perhaps an impertinence for me to thank those people, more expert in languages than I, for their scattered help. Corrections in my Italian were made by Alfredo Rizzardi and Renato Poggioli; in my French by Jackson Mathews, T.S. Eliot and Elizabeth Bishop; in my German by Hannah Arendt. Russian texts were given me by Mrs. Roman Jakobson, Mrs. Olga Carlisle and Nicolas Nabokov (Im, xiv).” This would lead most readers to conclude that, with the exception of the poems written in Russian, Lowell was taking his cue from the originals, especially since he then adds that “swarms of published translations were useful and irritating to me (Im, xiv).”

Numerous memoirists attest to Lowell’s extraordinary command of the English verse tradition and his boundless curiosity about European poetry. His mentor John Crowe Ransom recalled, “When Lowell came to Kenyon ...” he could distinguish a dozen lesser poets of the eighteenth-century school of Pope, and easily one from another, as I could not.” The eminent translator Robert Fitzgerald noted: “Always a prodigious reader, in these years <the late 1950s, MB> he began taking in armloads of the western world’s best poetry and possessing it by translating it – Juvenal, Racine, Villon, Baudelaire, Leopardi, Montale.”

John McCormick, who taught at the Salzburg Seminars with Lowell in the summer of 1952 and published a brief piece about it a year later, wrote: “Lowell himself is a good passive linguist, and a bad but brave active

17 In the course of this paper I will speak in some depth about the ways Olga Carlisle and Nicolas Nabokov influenced Lowell’s work. However, I have found no material that illuminates the role played by “Mrs. Roman Jakobson.” The woman in question was Svata Vlkavnik Jakobson (1908–2000), a Czech folklorist who had translated Pasternak’s memoir “Safe Conduct” into Czech in 1953 (with an afterword by her husband). A letter to Lowell from his wife Elizabeth Hardwick of 30 March <1957> suggests that they were on friendly terms with Svata, though not with her husband: “Then the Swatcha party. Roman is an awful man – very disagreeable, very arrogant and heavy. We ended up with a sort of boring argument about Nabokov in which the other Russian ‘told lies about Gogol’ but that’s a wonderful Gogolian bit of nonsense. That should read, ‘said Nabokov told lies about Gogol.’” Houghton Library, Harvard University.


one. Each morning we were reading Fausset with a tutor for an hour after breakfast; in Holland he had struggled with Dutch poetry, and his Italian was improving.”

Close inspection of the available evidence suggests that most accounts (usually written by friends and admirers) exaggerate Lowell’s ability to engage with what he euphemistically called “our imperfectly mastered foreign languages” (L. 359). Despite studies at some of America’s finest educational institutions and extensive travel in continental Europe, Lowell had a poor grasp of foreign languages. At the prestigious St. Mark’s school he had studied languages, but—as he ruefully noted later—he had not learned them well (Hamilton, 22). Though he spent two years at Harvard and then transferred to Kenyon College (where he graduated as valedictorian, with highest honors in classics), he apparently never learned to read original texts without a trot.

In a letter to Elizabeth Bishop of 20 November 1947, he boasts of his “grand plans of reading Sophocles with an English trot (WF 14, 16).” According to Stanley Kunitz in a piece published in 1964, “~Lowell~ makes a point of returning regularly to the classics ‘with the aid of some sort of trot.’” There is every reason to assume that this same approach guided Lowell while he was at work on the *Imitations*. For example, he had the following to say about classicist Richmond Lattimore, whose literal translations of Homer were then widely read: “I admire Lattimore’s translations a lot—they are just the opposite of what I am trying to do.” When I did a passage from the *Iliad* in my book *Imitations*, I used his translation and the Greek very carefully and tried to make mine—not a critique of his, I tried to do something very different in blank verse.”

Shortly after the publication of *Imitations*, in a letter to Stephen Spender of 14 November 1961, Lowell explicitly praised trotts at the expense of “poetic” translation: “Exact prose translations are very useful. There should be accurate scholarly editions of the great modern European poets with literal translations and footnotes. Such editions would replace the innumerable slap-dash free renderings which are neither informative nor good poetry on their own” (L. 392). In an interview of 1968 (seven years after the publication of *Imitations*), he said much the same thing: “There could be a law, though I don’t really believe in it, that almost nobody would be allowed to do a verse translation of poetry. He’d have to do an accurate prose trot. And these trotts are usually better poetry than the professor’s or even the minor poet’s poetic transla-

In his “Introduction” to *Imitations*, however, Lowell is far less direct in his evaluation of trotts, offering only a backhanded compliment: “Most poetic translations come to grief and are less enjoyable than modest photographic prose translations, such as George Kay has offered in his *Penguin Book of Italian Verse*” (Im, xi). From this statement, it would be hard to know that Lowell greatly admired these “modest photographic prose translations” and that he had studied them closely. Certainly his discovery of Montale’s poetry would never have occurred had Kay not included a generous selection of that poet’s work in his book. Kay’s anthology was part of a series of European poetry published by *Penguin Books*, the purpose of which was “to make a fair selection of the world’s finest poetry available to readers who could not, but for the translations at the foot of each page, approach it without dictionaries and a slow plodding from line to line...”. These anthologies are not intended only for those with a command of languages. They should appeal also to the adventurous who, for sheer love of poetry, will attack a poem in a tongue almost unknown to them, guided only by their previous reading and some Latin or French.”

The reader here envisioned, surprisingly similar to Lowell, was presumably the typical Anglophone of the day, whose knowledge of foreign languages was limited to a smattering of French and Latin.

Lowell’s letters attest to his immersion not only in the *Penguin Book of Italian Verse*, but also in the *Penguin Book of German Verse* and the *Penguin Book(s)* of French Verse (L. 316). Reflecting the status of French culture in the Anglophone world of that time,

25. *L*. 316. In 1964, Kay published a book of “poetic translations” of Montale, which Lowell found far worse. “I checked the phraseing when he says ‘Kay’ turned his Penguin prose into verse and two thirds of the time they were worse. I still think his versions are very well done but I wish he had printed them as prose.” Carne-Ross, in Meyers, 136.


27. In a letter to Theodore Roethke of 19 April 1958, Lowell writes: “There’s a good Penguin anthology of the later 19th Century French with English prose translations at the foot of the page” (L. 321). This volume could explain the preponderance of Rimbaud and Baudelaire in *Imitations*, though Lowell clearly used other sources for them as well. (For example, it is striking that Lowell dedicates his translation of Baudelaire’s “To the Reader” to Stanley Kunitz, Kunitz had published his own translation of that poem in 1958 in *Angel Flores*: *Anthology of French Poetry from Nerval to Valery* in English Translation with French Originals (17), and several striking repetitions suggest that Lowell had consulted Kunitz’s version.) It is also revealing that the only two Hugo poems included by Lowell are found in this *Penguin Book of French Verse*. (While both appear in truncated form, the typescript of *Imitations* [Berg Collection, NYPL] indicates that in the case of “At Gautier’s Grave,” Lowell translated the entire poem—the first half in rhyme—only to reject that entire first half at a late stage.) In a similar way, the three Leopardi poems in *Imitations* are all found in the *Penguin Book of Italian Verse*, and the many Villon texts that Lowell includes in *Imitations* (Lowell called these lengthy extracts “probably my best translations” (WF 340)) can all be traced to the first volume of the *Penguin Book of French Verse*. While scholars have occasionally noticed Lowell’s dependence on the Penguin Italian and German volumes, no one seems to have imagined that Lowell had also relied on the Penguin French texts. Hence one critic registered his surprise that Lowell rends the section of Villon’s “Testament” with the famous refrain “But where are the snows of last year?” as a separate poem. Philip Hobsbaum, *A Reader’s Guide to Robert Lowell* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 109. But this was no idiosyncratic choice on Lowell’s part. The Penguin anthology presents it this way, and Lowell was simply following his source. Carne-Ross (in Parkinson, 159), unaware of the role that the Penguin book played, goes on at length about Lowell’s reading of Villon, noting that he “works quite close to the French.”
the Penguin Book of French Verse consisted of four volumes arranged chronologically, whereas all the other European traditions were kept to a volume apiece. Unfortunately for Lowell, the Penguin Book of Russian Verse appeared in print only after he had published his Imitations.28 Lowell’s interest in the Penguin series (and other bilingual editions) has occasionally been noted, but its extent has not been thoroughly investigated nor its significance sufficiently appreciated.29 This has misled critics and scholars, who have repeatedly compared Lowell’s versions to the originals, which he in most cases could barely understand and which he rarely approached without the mediation of a prior translation.

To trace the full influence of trots on Lowell’s translations would go beyond the scope of the present paper.30 However, we can get a sense of the complexity and significance of the problem by examining the German poems that appeared in Imitations. Looking at Lowell’s selections, the uninformed reader could easily assume his expert command of the German poetic tradition: he includes one medieval poet (Der wilde Alexander), one obscure Swiss-German poet (Johann Peter Helbel), as well as two classic poets: Heinrich Heine and Rainer Maria Rilke. These eclectic choices are easily explained upon consulting Leonard Forster’s 1957 Penguin Book of German Verse, a book that Lowell called “very useful for me” (J. 298) in a letter of 24 October 1957 to Randall.

28 Olga Carlsfie (Far from Russia, 145), writing decades later and relying on her memory, anecdotally dates Lowell’s familiarity with this book to the time of his work on Imitations. However, her conclusion is understandable. Lowell clearly did consult the Penguin Book of Russian Verse when it came out, as is evident in the tenth poem of “Long Summer” (CP 497), which owns its first line to Mandsztam’s famous poem about reading Homer (Penguin Book of Russian Verse 352 – 353). See Belinda Cooke, “Robert Lowell’s ‘Notebook’ and the ‘Ghost’ of Mandesztam” (New Comparisons: A Journal of Comparative and General Literary Studies, vol. 19 [Spring 1995], pp. 19 – 45) who deftly demonstrates, by going through the unpublished drafts of the collection Notebook, how Lowell “gradually writes Mandesztam out and himself in” (13). She also notes how other Mandestam poems left their mark in Lowell’s original poetry (6).

29 The only person who seems to have understood the depth of this indebtedness is Belinda Cooke. “One of Lowell’s common means of access to foreign language poetry was by way of the series of anthologies published by Penguin Books, Harmondsworth. This includes volumes such as The Penguin Book of Italian Verse, edited with translations by George Kay (1958), Elizabeth Hardwick, for example, confirmed that he used them frequently. Lowell’s Notebook stanza Volgares (p. 210) is a translation of Beccario’s poem, Volgares las esauris gaudiumine, with lines drawn from the translation in The Penguin Book of Spanish Verse. The selection of Villon poems in Volume one of The Penguin Book of French Verse is almost identical to that of Lowell’s selection in Imitations.” Belinda Brandle <Cooke>, “In Pursuit of the Word: Robert Lowell’s Interest in the Work of Osip Mandesztam,” unpublished doctoral thesis (Goldsmith’s College, University of London, 1993), 90. I am grateful to Cooke for drawing my attention to this issue in conversation many years ago and for sending me a copy of her thesis.

30 As will become clear, a true understanding of Lowell’s creative process in Imitations can only begin after his sources in previous translations have been established. Given that translations into English were limited at this point, the task is not as daunting as it may seem. I point out several sources in passing that I have not made the systematic effort that Lowell would need to. For example, despite my emphasis on his German translations, I did not attempt to find the sources for his Rilke versions. Lowell did not like Forster’s selection in the Penguin Book of German Verse (“the man isn’t too good on Rilke” [J. 298]) and obviously looked elsewhere.

31 Leonard Forster (ed.), The Penguin Book of German Verse (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957). A reference in a letter of Elisabeth Bishop to Lowell of 15 August 1957 (WB 219) indicates that Lowell was so enthusiastic about this book that he had sent her a copy. In a letter to her of 11 September 1957 (WB 231), Lowell discusses his favorite poets from that book (Morgenstern, Heine, Hebel, Carossa, Hölderlin, Goethe). Cf. the above-mentioned letter to Jarrell, where he makes similar comments and concludes that the German tradition is “almost as good a poetry as English” (WB 299).

32 In fact, Lowell states this directly in a letter to Elisabeth Bishop of 15 March 1958: “We done another family poem, a translation of Der Wilde Alexander’s poem in the Penguin German anthology, and several Montale pieces from the Penguin Italian <...>” (WB 253). The echoes between Forster’s translation of this particular poem and Lowell’s “imitation” have been noted by Hobbsmeier, pp. 89 – 99, and Yesser; the latter adds that Lowell “seems <1 M> to have consulted” the Penguin Book of German Verse. Stephen Yenser. Circle in Circle: The Poetry of Robert Lowell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 172.

33 J. 298. Lowell’s linguistic and geographical confusion can be traced to Forster’s brief biographical note, which states that Hebel wrote “in the Alemmanic dialect of the Upper Rhine” (xvi). The “upper Rhine” is not in the north, but rather the area between Germany and Switzerland. The fact that Hebel is identified in that same paragraph as a “native of Basel” should have tipped Lowell off that the poem is not written in a north German dialect. (Moreover, the city of Basel figures prominently in Hebel’s poem “Sie Träumt.”)
the far better-known early ones (which are well-represented in the Penguin Book of German Verse). These late poems, written when the poet was bedridden, are disturbing in their bleakness. Lowell, who knew what it meant to be ill, seems to have found an alter ego in the late Heine. In *Imitations*, he creates a cycle out of three poems, giving it the title “Heine Dying in Paris.” In terms of the structure of the entire book, the static misery of the Heine poems could be said to represent the antipode to the largely life-affirming Pasternak selections at the end.34

Judging from a comment of C.K. Williams, the Heine translations are legendary for their freedoms: “Occasionally, when Lowell went almost completely ‘free,’ as in ‘Heine Dying in Paris,’ he came up with poems all but unrelated to the original, but which are still splendid.”35 Lowell himself had made a similar comment when sending these poems to Elizabeth Bishop in a letter of 28 April 1960: “I enclose a translation of Heine, almost an original poem from three of his. How marvelous to have had a life that could be so written about even in terrible pain” (#41 324). It is worth looking closely at these poems to determine the extent of his vaunted “freedoms.” The first two of the three poems in Lowell’s “cycle” are anthologized in the Penguin Book of German Verse.

The first, entitled “Morphine,” reads as follows (in the German and then the trot [332]):

Grog ist die Ahlichkeit der beiden schonen
Junglingsgestalten, ob der eine gleich
Viel blasser als der andre, auch viel sturzer,
Fast mocht ich sagen viel vornehmer aussieht
Als jener andre, welcher mich vertraulich
In seine Arme schlief – wie lieblich sanft
War dann sein Lacheln und sein Blick wie selig!
Dann mochte es wohl geschehn, dass seines Haupests
Mohlbloomenkranz auch meine Stirn beruhrite
Und seltsam duftend allen Schmerz verscheuchete
Aus meiner Seele – doch solche Linderung,
Sie dauert kuerze Zeit, genesen ginhlich
Kann ich nur dann, wenn seines Fuchels senkt
Der andre Bruder, der so erst und bleich.
–
Gut ist der Schlaf, der Tod ist besser – freilich
Das beste wric, nie geboren sein.

[Trot: Morphine: Great is the resemblance between the two beautiful youths, though one looks much paler than the other, more austere too, I might almost say more distinguished than that other one who used to take me confidintly into his arms—how soft and loving his

34 In discussing *Imitations* as a whole, Yenner (169) notes “a progressive structure, in which a spiritual descent turns into an ascent and an affirmrative conclusion grows out of a nihilistic beginning.”


36 Lowell likewise invents rhyme into the seventh poem of Anna Akhmatova’s poetic cycle “Requiem,” something that the scholar Gleb Struve found sufficiently surprising that he wrote “rhymless in the original!” in his personal copy (Hoover Archive, Stanford University, Gleb Struve papers, Box 71, Folder 15). However, in the case of Akhmatova, Lowell was surely unaware of the formal liberties he was taking. (Most of that cycle does rhyme, just not that particular poem.) Struve’s marginalia include numerous question marks and exclamation points next to the most outrageous departures from the original. I am grateful to Edward Wyslewslad for bringing this document to my attention.

Lowell’s version (38) is entitled “Death and Morphine”:

Yes, in the end they are much of a pair,
My twin gladiator beauties—thinner than a hair,
Their bronze bell-heads hum with the void; one’s more austere,
However, and much whiter: none dares cry down his character.
How confidingly the corrupt twin rocked me in his arms;
His poppy garland, nearing, hushed death’s alarms
At sword-point for a moment.
Soon a pinpoint of infinite regression! And now that incident
Is closed. There’s no way out,
Unless the other turn about
And, pale, distinguished, perfect, drop his torch.
He and I stand alerted for life’s Doric, drilred, withdrawing march:
Sleep is lovely, death is better still.
Not to have been born is of course the miracle.

On first glance, it is hard to dispute Williams’ judgment that Lowell “went almost completely ‘free.’” Nonetheless, it should be noted that a significant number of words and phrases come directly from the trot (“more austere,” “confidintly... in[to] his arms,” “poppies,” “the other,” “pale,” “torch” and of course the closing lines: “sleep is good <lovely>, death is better,” “not <never> to have been born”). None of Lowell’s changes can be explained by examining the German original, and there is little reason to think that it influenced his work. Close inspection reveals that most of the extraneous words and images occur as a result of Lowell’s decision to create a rhymed translation. This is particularly surprising because this formal constraint is absent in the original.36 Heine’s poems usually rhyme, but this is a blank verse meditation, a form that would surely have been familiar to Lowell from the English tradition. (In his other Heine versions, Lowell does not rhyme, though the originals do.) If Lowell’s pair rhymes have any source in Heine, it seems to be not this poem, but the following one in the cycle.
That second poem represents an entirely different approach to poetic translation. Here we find Lowell's characteristic disregard for the formal qualities of the original, but an unusual fidelity to the text. The poem and trot (as they appear in the in the Penguin Book of German Verse [334] are as follows:

Der Scheidende

Erstoben ist in meiner Brust
Jedwede weltlich eile Lust,
Schier ist mir auch ersterben drin
Der Hall des Schleichen, sogar der Sinn
Für eigne wie für fremde Not —
Und in mir lebt nur noch der Tod!

Der Vorhang fällt, das Stück ist aus,
Und gähnend wandelt jetzt nach Haus
Mein liebes deutsches Publikum,
Die guten Leuten sind nicht dumm,
Das speist jetzt ganz vergnügt zu Nacht,
Und trinkt sein Schöppchen, singt und lacht —
Er hatte recht, der edle Heros,
Der weitland sprach im Buch Homeros':
Der kleinste lebendige Philister
Zu Stükkert am Neckar, viel glücklicher ist er
Als ich, der Pelide, der tote Held.
Der Schattenforscher in der Unterwelt.

[Trot: On Departing: "Every vein desire has died in my breast, even hatred of evil things, even the feeling of my own and other people's distress, and the only thing that still lives in me is death. // The curtain falls, the play is over, and my dear German audience walks home, yawning. They are no fools, these good people, they're having their suppers quite happily and drinking their pins and singing and laughing. The noble hero who said long ago in Homer's book that the meapest Philistine alive in Stuttgart on the Neckar is much happier than I, the son of Peleus, the dead champion, the prince of shades in the underworld."]

In a letter to Elizabeth Bishop of 11 September 1957, Lowell lauds this poem in particular (W4 231): "Have you read Heine's 'Morphe,' and 'Der Scheidende' (the ending very Jewish and German with its bluster, comicality, clicking sounds, confusion of pronouns is about the wittiest poem I know of?'". This comment indicates that Lowell was indeed looking at the original, though he appears not to have understood it, since there is no "confusion of pronouns" for someone who reads German easily (and no obvious "comicality"). In any case, his "translation" of "Der Scheidende" (probably done soon after that letter was written) reveals without a doubt that he was working much more intensively with Forster's translation than with Heine's original (Im. 39):

Every idle desire has died in my breast;
even hatred of evil things, even my feeling
for my own and other men's distress.
What lives in me is death.

The curtain falls, the play is done;
my dear German public is goosestepping home, yawning.
They are no fools, these good people:
they are supping their dinners quite happily,
bear-hugging beer-mugs — singing and laughing.

That fellow in Homer's book was quite right:
he said: the mearest little Philistine living
in Stükkert-am-Neckar is luckier
than I, the golden-haired Achilles, the dead lion,
glorious shadow-king of the underworld.

One cannot but be astounded at the extent to which Lowell has simply taken the prose translation and rearranged it into lines of verse. The relatively few departures from the trot (e.g., "goosestepping home," "bear-hugging beer-mugs," "that fellow") are clearly Lowell's additions rather than anything be gleaned from the German original. 37 The only detail that indicates that Lowell had so much as glanced at the original is his retention of the colloquial "Stükkert-am-Neckar" rather than Forster's more recognizable "Stuttgart on the Neckar." (This may perhaps be an attempt to retain the "clicking sounds" that he had so admired in the original German: "kleinste ... Stükkert am Neckar ... glücklicher").

What then should be our judgment on Lowell's attitude toward the original poems he was translating? Was he using them as a point of departure (the first Heine poem) or closely following earlier translations (the second Heine poem)? The third and final Heine translation demonstrates still another approach. This poem is not found in the Penguin Book of German Verse, and it appears to be a rare instance where Lowell worked directly from the original. The primary reason for this assumption is that the mistakes he makes are so egregious that they could not have occurred to him had he started from a trot.

Heine's poem, a sonnet, reads as follows:

Mein Tag war heiter, glücklich meine Nacht.
Mir jauchzte stets mein Volk, wenn ich die Leiter
Der Dichtkunst schlug. Mein Lied war Lust und Feuer,
Hat manche schöne GLUTEN angefacht.

37 Hobein (103) notes some of these insertions, but mysteriously avoids commenting on the borderline plagiarism that characterizes this "imitation."
On first glance, Lowell’s text seems to be simply a free variation on Heine’s poem. Closer inspection, however, reveals that most of Lowell’s freedoms are simply misunderstandings of the German. Take, for example, the first line: “Mein Tag war heiter, / glücklich meine Nacht,” which Lowell renders as “My zenith was luckily happier than my night.” To come up with this “translation,” one has to misread the adjective “heiter” as a comparative (presumably because of the “-er” ending), ignore the punctuation, read an adjective as an adverb (“glücklich” as “glücklicherweise”) and not recognize the rhetorical construction (a chiasmus, with the second word elided). Only a reader who lacks the most rudimentary grammatical foundation could come up with such a variant, but Lowell appears to be precisely such a reader. In that same stanza, he understands German “Lust” (“pleasure”) in a broad, but not erotic sense as English “lust,” a mistake that first-year students of German quickly learn to avoid. (With characteristic poetic license, he does not hesitate to transform “lust” into “sex,” just as he had turned “happy day” into “zenith.”)38 Things only get worse after this. Lowell does not recognize the standard idiom “die Leier schlagen” (“to play the lyre”) and instead takes the verb “schlagen” in its literal sense as “to beat.” Hence he concludes that the poet, rather than playing his instrument to the delight of the people (“das Volk”), “smiles the Chosen People.” Lowell thus connects this to the Jews. (Heine was, of course, Jewish by birth, but in the original “das Volk” refers unambiguously to the German public.) Lowell develops this military imagery (nonexistent in the original) through yet another misunderstanding, this time an inability to determine which verb a participle is derived from. The word “angefacht” comes from the infinitive “anfachen” (“to stoke” [a fire]), but Lowell assumes that it is connected to “fechten” (“to fence”), hence the images of swords and scabbards. Hobsbaum, the only scholar I am aware of who discusses this poem, does not recognize that it is a mistranslation and merely calls it “a new poem.” Pointing to the final lines he notes that “there is nothing in the original about Aristophanes” (103). In this he is correct, yet it is curiously the one point where Lowell really does draw on Heine.39 In the closing passage of his prose piece Geständnisse (Confessions), Heine deplors his miserable condition, depicting himself (“the German Aristophanes”) as a plaything of God (“the great Aristophanes”): “the great Author of the universe, the Aristophanes of Heaven, wished to show the petty, earthly, so-called German Aristophanes that his mightiest sarcasms are but feeble banter compared with His.”40 This passage, one of the most powerful in all of Heine’s

38 In a much later reduction of the poem, published in History, Lowell wrote “day” rather than “zenith” and even corrected “sex” into “joy.” However, the other misunderstandings and mistranslations remain. See CP 481.

39 The Aristophanes references were added at a late stage in the translation. In the mimeograph version that Lowell sent to Stanley Kunitz (Princeton University archive), the relevant lines read: “Mortal, I witness earth’s homicidal coming / and lose my sugared leasethold on my life.” (The surrounding lines are the same as in the published version.)

40 The Prose Writings of Heinrich Heine. Edited, with an introduction, by Havelock Ellis (London: Walter Scott, 1887), p. 325. On the following page, Heine returns to the comparison, referring to God as “the great Aristophanes of Heaven.”
prose, was accessible to Lowell in English.24 In other words, in this instance, Lowell was indeed true to Heine, just not true to the specific poem he was “imitating.” This conflation of two sources within a single poem is worth noting, as it occurs in a more radical form in Lowell’s renderings of Pasternak.

Lowell’s Heine “cycle” reflects a range of attitudes towards the original texts, but it allows us to establish two things about his Imitations, neither of which has been sufficiently recognized in the scholarly literature. The first is that in certain cases Lowell—though famed for taking liberties with the originals—borrowed extensively from trouts.25 The second is that Lowell was a poor linguist whose ability to read foreign poetry in the original was extremely limited.25

The foreign language that Lowell knew best was French. In the poem “Levi-Strauss in London,” Lowell wrote: “Since France gave the English their tongue, most civilized / Englishmen can mooch along in French...” (CP 388). Lowell seems to have been like

41 Lowell was well aware of which Heine prose works were available in translation (L. 312).

42 The second Heine poem appears to be the most egrotique instance, but additional examples of verbalm Яperation from the texts can be found in Lowell’s Montale translations and the equivalent passages in George Kay’s Penguin Book of Italian Verse, especially the conclusion of “Dora Maruken” (Im 109, Penguin 392), the opening of “Historian Spring” (Im 113, Penguin 397) and “The Folli 5” (Im 126, Penguin 605). In view of this obvious dependence, one reads with astonishment Ben Belitt’s close comparison of Lowell’s English to Montale’s Italian in the poem “Dora Maruken”: “Every sequence of Montale’s thinking has been retained intact, every image has been confronted, for the most part, in its own context; every effort has been directed with scrupulous and laborious integrity on unfolding the progressions of the poem...” Belitt does regret that the prosody sounds “as though Lowell were still mired in the prose of The Penguin Book of Italian Verse” - a statement that requires no subjective! Ben Belitt. The Forsaken Feature: Toward a Poetics of Uncertainty: New and Selected Essays Fordham UP, 1995, pp. 135 – 36.

43 Lowell displayed a remarkable confidence in regard to his German language competency. In a letter to Randall Jarrell of 1 April 1958, he wrote: “I’d like very much to see your Rilke. While I was in the hospital and nothing original came, I tried a few translations, mostly from an Italian poet of Eliot’s generation, named Montale. From there is seemed easy to do a few Italian scenes from the Neve Grafico. Something evanescence when they lost the gentle, grouping weight of the German, the more direct German language, and its greater possibilities for word-displacement and placement “[320]. Such deep feeling for German (and for Rilke) does not prevent Lowell from making simple lexical errors like confusing “allegrenzontale” (“most protected” or “most cared for”) with “afferichemente” (“most beautiful”) in his “free” rendition of Rilke’s “Thue, die draussen bleib” (Im. 149). In a letter of 1952 from Holland (during his two-year stay in Europe), he wrote that he was reading books “in Dutch, French, English and German.” Paul Mariani. Last Partion: A Life of Robert Lowell (New York: Norton, 1994), p. 309. In Salzburg that year he organized readings in French, German, and Italian, “which meant my studying the stuff pretty intensely myself,” as he wrote in a letter in Mariain 213. In a brief essay on his own poem “Skunk Houe,” Lowell explaining that he was influenced by poems of Hölderlin and DuSable-Hillshade, both of whom he cites in the original (with typos that no one knows German would make). Not surprisingly, both of those poems can be found in The Penguin Book of German Verse, where Lowell had surely read them in English translation. However, he did not understand foreign languages.

44 “I was at Expo and there was a poetry conference which like all such things was very tedious, but the best part, for me, was talking with the poets from France. We had to talk French and listen to French and this is very painful to me, but after a while with a little wine it got rather pleasant...” - from an interview of 1968 (Carne-Ross, in Meyers, 134 – 155). On Lowell’s limited knowledge of Italian, see Esther Brooks “Remembering Cal” (in Meyers, 292 – 283) and his comment (cited in Mariain 201) “I have a theory that I can learn Italian simply by tossing about bizarre words and phrases.”

45 Carne-Ross, in Meyers, 132.

46 In this instance, Lowell appears not only to have missed the French, but also to have misunderstood the English translation. There’s a good reason to believe that he was using C.F. MacIntyre’s bilingual anthology French Symbolist Poetry (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1958), p. 103, where the line in question is translated: “Amor! It’s...” This is one of four Valéry poems that MacIntyre includes in his book. In “Lowell’s Imitations,” Additional support for the claim that Lowell used this anthology is that all three Rimbaud poems included by MacIntyre appear in Imitations.

47 For example, Bishop was capable of reading Doctor Zavago in French, something Lowell could not possibly have done. (Wd 274)
I know you have called them ‘free translations,’ and you can change the line-order, interpolate, call Zeus Jehovah, maybe, point up, put in those ‘plebeianisms,’ etc. — for obvious reasons of effect. But I don’t think you should say the opposite of what the poet says, (as you do a few times) — or make changes that sound like mistakes in translation. These poems are well known and I’d hate to see you attacked for carelessness, ignorance, etc.” (Wis 803–804). She then goes painstakingly through a number of poems, giving word-by-word translations and pointing out the inaccuracies in Lowell’s versions. The fact that Lowell changed his translations in accordance with these corrections before publishing them (and that he thanked Bishop in his acknowledgments and retained the dedication to her) makes us realize here we are dealing with not poetic license, but with fundamental linguistic mistakes.46

III

“but if I blunder, it doesn’t matter — I must persist in my errors”

Boris Pasternak, “To Anna Akhmatova” in Robert Lowell, Imitations, 133

Having established this broader context, we can now return our attention to Lowell’s renderings of Pasternak. What should be emphasized is that Lowell’s approach to Pasternak differed from his approach to French, German and Italian poetry only in degree.48 With the Western European languages, he could not understand the texts without a trott, but he was capable of looking at the original and making observations on its qualities and even understanding individual words and phrases. In the case of Russian, he could not even sound out the words and was thus forced to base his work entirely on prior translations or on the advice of acquaintances who knew Russian. Throughout Imitations, Lowell’s standard practice is to append to each poem the name of the poet and then the title of the poem (usually in the original) that he is translating. In the case of the Russian poems, he simply names the author. Part of the reason for

46 The editors helpfully cite from the version Bishop was reading (subsequently changed by Lowell) so one can see precisely how he initially misunderstood the lines [354].

49 Here I must disagree with Simon Karlinsky, who (like most contemporary readers) vastly overestimated Lowell’s ability to read foreign languages and thus viewed his renderings of Russian poetry as something profoundly different: “Robert Lowell’s verbal magic in English is potent. There are people able to read Mandelstam in the original who met in admiration before Lowell’s distorted adaptations and never mind what Mandelstam actually wrote.” There is nothing wrong with the extreme freedom of Lowell’s treatment. That kind of freedom worked wonders in his translations of Baudelaire and Montale. It was pushed to extremes in his magnificent adaptation of Racine’s Phèdre. In all those cases there was no doubt that Lowell had a full grasp of the text he was translating or adapting. With Mandelstam, Pasternak, and, now, Anna Akhmatova, it is equally evident that, all too often, Lowell does not understand the tone, the structure and, sometimes, the elementary meaning of the poem.” Simon Karlinsky, “Hosting Russian Poetry,” The Nation, 7 July 1969, p. 30.

48 Stanley Kunitz concludes his interview (in Meyers, 89): “At the door, where he offers a warm valiantly handshake, Lowell stands for a moment surveying the pantheon of his friends and heroes whose photographs adorn the staircase wall. These cherished countenances, who are very much apart of the Lowell life and household, include — in so far as one remembers — T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, Boris Pasternak, John Crowe Ransom, Edmund Wilson, the Allen Tate, T.A. Richards, William Empson, Randall Jarrell, Flannery O’Connor, and Elizabeth Bishop.” It should be noted that Pasternak is the only poet named who did not write in English.


50 As it happens, an interview with Lowell appeared in the following issue of The Paris Review, so the journal was certainly on his mind at the time.

51 Carlisle remembers their first meeting as taking place on a “midwinter day” (Far from Russia 148), but this is a remembrance slip, for she also notes that Lowell was hospitalized a few days later (Far from Russia 146), and the hospitalization occurred on 3 March (Hamilton 284–285). The date of their meeting must have been in mid to late February. This can be established based on Carlisle’s recollection that Lowell had invited her to see Racine’s “Andromaque” as presented by the Comédie Française
“imitations” from Pasternak (On, xiv), and she was instrumental in his subsequent translations of Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam (the latter initially published in Silvers’ *The New York Review of Books* [23 December 1965] under both their names, the former first appearing in *The Atlantic* [October 1964] with her introduction). She even induced him to correspond with Mandelstam’s widow in Russia.54 When Lowell was flown to Hollywood to participate in a CBS “television essay” on Pasternak broadcast on 18 June 1961, Carlisle was also on the set.55 At least one memoirist recalled “Olga Carlisle explaining some nuances of Pasternak’s to Cat.”56 Lowell appreciated Carlisle’s help, though he seems to have tired of her enthusiasm: “Olga is nice, but as <Robert> Silvers says, her one subject is Russia. I am not sure that she even hears or understands the English language on any other subject” (*I* 381).57

In her letter of 1 March 1961 (Wd 355), Bishop asks Lowell: “will you please tell me what is a good Pasternak to get for some idea of the poems?” In the extant letters, Lowell never responded to this query, but it is in most cases not difficult to establish which versions he consulted. After all, there were few Pasternak translations in print at this time, and Pasternak’s sudden fame led to the republication of everything that previously existed. Lowell had only discovered Pasternak in 1958, and he seems to have gathered all editions that were available: Boris Pasternak, *Safe Conduct and Other Writings* (which included lyric poetry previously translated by Maurice Bowra and Babette Deutsch, New Directions, New York, 1958), *The Poetry of Boris Pasternak 1917–1939* (selected, edited, and translated by George Reavey, G.P. Putnam, New York, 1959), Boris Pasternak, *Selected Poems* (Ernest Benn Limited, London, 1958) [a reprint of a 1946 edition], with translations by J.M. Cohen, *Poems by Boris Pasternak* (Peter Russell, Sussex, 1958 and 1959, translations by Lydia <Pasternak> Slater), and of course *Doctor Zhivago* (Pantheon, New York, 1958, in which the poetry was translated by Bernard Guibert Guerney). He also seems to have obtained C.M. Bowra’s *A Second Book of Russian Verse* (Macmillan & Co, London, 1948), which contains a Pasternak translation omitted from the New Directions volume, but included in *Imitations*.


55 See *I* 380 and the commentary on 748 – 749.


57 Among the Lowell papers at Houghton Library (Harvard University, number 2781) is the draft of what was apparently his blur for her book. Forces in the Snow (1962): “Olga Carlisle’s Russian interviews are interesting for their subjects and still more remarkable for the love and richness of their language. They are not photographs or tape recordings but portraits cunningly designed. Each line has its own touch and meaning.”

58 *Harper’s Magazine*, September 1961. According to marginalia by William Meredith on a draft of “Hamlet in Russia” (discussed at the end of this essay), Lowell submitted the Pasternak material to *Harper’s* on 16 March 1961.

59 Bowra’s translation is titled “Spasskoye.” The first draft of Lowell’s translation (found in the Houghton Library, Harvard University) is likewise called “Spasskoye,” and it is remarkably close to Bowra’s version. Since Bowra’s translations were republished several times, it is impossible to say which edition Lowell consulted. However, it is unnecessary to do so, as the texts did not differ in the republi- cations. I am citing page numbers from *A Second Book of Russian Verse*, translated into English by various hands and edited by C.M. Bowra (London: Macmillan & Co, 1948). All Pasternak translations in this book were done by Bowra himself. Lydia Slater (Pasternak) [1959: 15] and possibly Bernard Guibert Guerney [532].

60 Though I do not discuss this translation in detail, it is worth noting that the interlinear dictated by Nikolai Nabokov has been preserved (see facsimile pages in the addendum) and that it seems to have
“The Landlord” [Сверсла] – see the “Addendum” to this essay
“Hamlet in Russia” [комбинирование Сюжета веста, Сестра моя – жизнь, Гамлет] –
George Reavey [108], J.M. Cohen [5], Lydia Slater (Pasternak) [1959: 16], possible minor influence of Bernard Guilbert Gueney [523]

Space considerations prevent me from examining all of these poems in detail, but a few examples should suffice to make clear the range of Lowell’s approach(es) to Pasternak’s poetry. The first Pasternak poems that Lowell published (and most likely the first that he translated) appeared in Encounter in August 1959. Since Lowell knew no Russian whatsoever, it stands to reason that he felt most comfortable working with poems that had been translated more than once. Both of these poems existed in versions by J.M. Cohen and Maurice Bowra. Cohen explained his approach in an “Introduction” to the volume: “Aiming at literal translation, I have tried to reproduce the poet’s images with his own clarity, but made no attempt to follow the metres of the Russian, few of which suit our language, or to reproduce the poet’s rhyme schemes, which are based on the strong accent peculiar to Russian. I have tried to select English metres of equivalent length and pace, and have, in a few of the poems, used half rhymes where their introduction did no violence to the sense” (1). This philosophy of translation is noteworthy in that Cohen later became the general editor for the Penguin books of European verse, so central to Lowell’s undertaking.

Interestingly, Lowell tended to prefer the translations of Maurice Bowra to those of Cohen. Bowra produced his Pasternak translations two years after Cohen, and he clearly consulted Cohen, sometimes repeating entire lines. (It would perhaps have been appropriate for Bowra to acknowledge the extent of his own borrowings, but that issue is not central to the concerns of this paper.) An erudite classicist who learned Russian later in life, Bowra held the prestigious Oxford Professorship of Poetry from 1946 to 1951. He was the author of several highly regarded studies of European poetry. His Russian was limited to a reading knowledge, but, judging from his 1944 review of an anthology of Soviet poetry – he was remarkably well-informed.62 He clearly had sufficient fluency to recognize quality, because as early as 1946, he put forward Boris Pasternak’s name as a candidate for the Nobel Prize, the first person ever to do so.63 In his translations, Bowra tried to remain true to the semantics of the original while still retaining some of its formal qualities.

In the case of “Sparrow Hills,” Pasternak’s poem is in trochaic hexameter with alternating rhymes, and Bowra’s translation preserves the trochaic hexameter, though he rhymes only the even-numbered lines. It is not necessary to cite Pasternak’s original, since it was inaccessible to Lowell. It should, however, be noted that the poem is from Pasternak’s early book My Sister Life (1917), a work that challenges even native speakers in terms of its complex syntax and unexpected imagery. The original poem contains characteristically obscure passages, some of which Bowra simplifies, and some of which he complicates. The result is such that Lowell (and any reader) would be perplexed at times.

Bowra’s translation first appeared in 1948, but was republished several times:

Kisses on the breast, like water from a pitcher!
Not always, not ceaselessly spurs the summer’s well.
Nor shall we raise up the hardy-gardy’s clamour
Each night from the dust with feet that stamp and trail.

I have heard of age – those hideous forebodings!
When no wave will lift its hands up to the stars.
If they speak, you doubt it. No face in the meadows,
No heart in the pools, no god in the fires.

Rouse your soul to frenzy. Let today come foaming.
It’s the world’s midday. Have you no eyes for it?
Look bow in the heights thoughts seethe into white bubbles
Of fir-cones, woodpeckers, clouds, pine-needles, heat.

Here the rails are ended of the city tram-cars.
Further, pines must do. Further, trams cannot pass.
Further, it is Sunday. Plucking down the branches,
Skipping through the clearings, slipping on the grass.

Sifting midday light and Whitsunday and walking
Woods would have us think the world is always so;
They’re so planned with thickets, so inspired with spaces,
Fallen from the clouds on us, like chintz below.

J.M. Cohen’s rendering of the poem, published under the title “Vorobyev Hills” (“Vorobei” means “sparrow” in Russian), reads as follows:

Kisses upon your breast, like water from a jug,
But not forever flows, not ceaselessly, summer’s spring.
Nor shall we every night raise from the dusty floor
The hardy-gardy’s roar and stamp and drag our feet.
I’ve heard about old age. Such terrible forebodings! Then not a breaker throws its hands up to the stars. They speak – you don’t believe. There’s no face in the fields, There’s no heart in the ponds and no god in the wood.

Set your spirit rocking. Splash right through today. It is the world’s midday. Where are your eyes? You see How thoughts up in the hills are gathered in white bubbles Of woodpeckers and clouds, heat, fir-cones and pine-needles.

Here the town tram stops; the rails are laid no further. Beyond, the pines will serve. Beyond they cannot run. Beyond there’s only Sunday. Plucking down the branches, Running about the glades and slipping through the grass.

Sifting the midday light and the Whit-Sunday crowds, The copse invites belief the world is always so, Conceived so by the thickets, suggested to the clearings, Split on us from the clouds, as on a chintz design.

In the 1961 Harper’s publication of Pasternak and in Imitations, Lowell boasts of having consulted native speakers: “Friends have rendered the Russian for me word by word and then checked my final results.” We will examine this claim closely in the “Addendum” to this essay, but for now it is sufficient to point out that it postdates the first publication of “Sparrow Hills,” which occurred in 1959. Textual analysis supports the supposition that at the time of this initial publication Lowell’s only sources were the published versions of Bowra and – secondarily – Cohen. There is not a single instance where Lowell comes closer to Pasternak’s text than Bowra or Cohen do. Moreover, at times Lowell follows Bowra verbatim, even when the latter had moved away from Pasternak’s original. For example, in the line “[Of] fir-cones, woodpeckers, clouds, pine-needles, heat,” both Bowra and Lowell list the items in the same order, though in Pasternak’s poem those items appear in a different order and differently grouped (literally from the Russian: “Of woodpeckers, clouds and fir-cones, heat and pine-needles”). Bowra’s departures are easily explained. He had altered the sequence of nouns to create a rhyme and removed the repeated “and” for the sake of rhythm. Lowell, who made no effort to retain formal features, would have had no reason to follow Bowra had he known what the original actually said. (In fact, this is the sole rhyme in Lowell’s poem, and it appears only because he borrowed both lines from Pasternak.)

Bowra. He conceivably did not even notice that “for it” and “heat” were being used as a rhyme pair.

To simplify comparison, we will cite Lowell’s version, noting in bold the words he took from Bowra and in italics the words that come from Cohen. When Bowra borrowed certain passages from Cohen and Lowell repeated them, the words will be in bold and italics.

**Like water pouring from a pitcher**, my mouth on your nipples. Not always. The summer well runs dry. Not for long the dust of our stamping feet, encore on encore from the saxes in the casino’s midnight gazebo.

I’ve heard of age – its obese warbling! When no wave will clap hands to the stars. If they speak, you doubt it. No face in the meadows, no heart in the pools, no god among the pines.

Lash your soul to hysterics. Let today froth from your mouth. It’s the world’s toontide. Have you no eyes for it? Look, conception bubbles from the bleached fallsows; fir-cones, woodpeckers, clouds, pine-needles, heat.

**Here the city’s trolley tracks give out.** Further, you must put up with peeled pine. The trolley poles are detached. Further, it’s Sunday. Boughs screwed loose for the picnic bonfire. Playing tag in your bra.

The world is always like this,” say the woods, as they mix the midday glare, WhitSunday, and walking. All’s planned with checkerberry couches, inspired with clearings. The piebald clouds spill down on us like a country woman’s housedress.

In short, Lowell’s method was to take the previously existing translations and amend them in ways that seemed aesthetically appropriate to him. As he put it in the journal publication that immediately preceded Imitations: “My purpose in these very free versions of Pasternak’s poems has been to make good English poems, to capture something of the greatness that flashes through the various literal translations that have been published.” Nonetheless, most of Lowell’s lines hew closely to the previous translations. In the exceptional passages, the most obvious change is in his depiction of eroticism. Love is Pasternak’s dominant theme, and it lends coherence to the entire book My Sister Life.

I don’t understand. People have sometimes read me Russian and so forth. But the worst Russian poet would sound like the best, I couldn’t talk.” (Caen-Biron, in Meyers, 132.)

---

Footnotes:
64 Cohen was closer to the original, but Lowell – without the input of a Russian speaker – would have had no way of knowing this.
65 Lowell had no interest in the formal features of the Russian poems he translated. When asked if he had someone read him the poems in the original, Lowell replied: “No, it just bores me to hear a language
Almost every individual poem reflects the speaker's state of mind, ranging—depending on the circumstances at any given moment—from despondent to euphoric (as in “Sparrow Hills”). It is this love—which spreads from the speaker to the beloved to the entire natural world—that this poem celebrates. However, Pasternak's depiction of physical love is expressed through striking images, nowhere as directly as in Lowell's transpositions.

On 15 October 1959, shortly after Lowell's version was published in Encounter, he received a letter from Stephen Spender, his close friend and one of the editors of that journal. Lydia Slater [Pasternak], who lived in Oxford, had written to him “very annoyed because you had brought the word ‘nipples’ into a poem related, however remotely, to her brother” (L. 744). Slater's annoyance can be easily understood. First of all, there is no mention of nipples in Pasternak's original, and it strikes a reader who knows Russian as gratuitous, much like the line about “playing tag in your bra” later in the poem. In that latter case, the only thing that Lowell retained from Bovra was the participial form (cf. “plucking... skipping... slipping”). But her annoyance had a more profound motivation. Less than a year before, when she had submitted her own translations of her brother's poetry for publication in Encounter, Spender had rejected them. This had led to a nasty exchange of letters, where Spender wrote (among other things): "It may interest you to know that I looked at your translations without realizing at first who they were by <...> My immediate reaction was to think that these were rather interesting poems by an illiterate" (19 June 1958). After that rejection, Slater had published her versions of her brother's verse elsewhere, as a booklet in 1958 and again in 1959, where she included a two-page "translator's note," setting out her modest aims: "The essential qualities of a musical composition are rhythm and melody.


67 Another example of this foregrounding the sexual can be found in Lowell's version of Pasternak's "Wild Vine" (Line 142). In this case, he had added to two published sources an interlinear version provided to him by Nikolay Nabokov. In Nabokov's rendition the fourth line reads: "And I entwine my arms around you like branches." Perhaps inspired by the "br" sound in the final word of the phrase, Lowell transformed this line into: "my fingers twist like the wild vine around your breasts." (Guevrey had rendered this as "My arms are tightly encircled about you," while Slater [Pasternak] had written: "I am clasping your arms in my own."). Once again, the original is highly erotic, but it is conveyed indirectly. On Lowell's tendency to make sexual tensions explicit that are only implicit in the original, see Christopher Rickes, "Racine's Phèdre: Lowell's Phèdra," in Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics, Third Series, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Spring, 1991), pp. 44–59.

68 Markov (Slavic Review, Vol. 29, No. 1, March, 1970, pp. 156 – 160) quotes this line as an example of "distortion," of Lowell's "inventing things that his Russian colleague "Pasternak, MP" could not see in his wildest dreams" [158]. Actually, this addition is tame compared to a version of the line that is found in a draft to this poem (preserved in the Houghton Library, Harvard University): "Further on, it's Sunday. Screwing loose hints for Sunday's teetotum./Arms spread-eagling with wine bottles for a panromantic rape of the Sabines in a clearing!"

69 This letter is found in the Pasternak collection at the Hoover Archive. The correspondence between Spender and Slater is being prepared for publication by Laura Fleshman, who kindly shared it with me.

70 Most unfortunately, the CBS archives have lost this show, so the only record of it is a brief review in the New York Times from 19 June 1963. This comment of Lowell's is preserved in that review.
when Lowell republished "Sparrow Hills" in *Imitations*, he changed only one line from his earlier version. This was presumably an attempt to recreate that "surg- ing flow." Bowra had written "Rouse your soul to frenzy." In an early draft of the translation (Houghton Library, Harvard University), Lowell had followed Bowra, writing: "Whip up your soul to frenzies." He had then changed this to the version published in *Encounter*: "Lash your soul to hysteric's." Only in the typescript of *Imitations* (NYPL; Berg Collection) did he emend it to read: "Split your soul like wood." Pasternak's image is indeed strange, and it is not surprising that Lowell struggled with it. In his case, his change was apparently not a poetic freedom, but rather an attempt to get closer to Pasternak's sense. We must surmise the influence of a "native" informant who nonetheless misunderstood Pasternak's Russian. It is easy to reconstitute the source of the error. The Russian verb "raskolykyat'" (which comes from the infinitive "raskolykyhat'" - "to shake up" or, metaphorically, "to excite") has been confused with the verb "raskolot'" ("to split, to chop" [wood]). Lowell was trying to get *closer* to the original, but his informant inadvertently sent him further away.71

When he decided to create a version of Pasternak's "In the Woods," Lowell once again had translations of Bowra and Cohen at his disposal. It is instructive to begin

In the Woods

A lilac heat was heavy on the meadow;
high in the wood, a cathedral's sharp, nicked grins.
No skeleton obstructed the bodies -
all was theirs, obsequious wax in their fingers.
Such, the dreams - you do not sleep,
you only dream you thirst for sleep,
that some one else elsewhere thirsts for sleep -
two black suns singe his eyelashes.

Sunbeams flow, ebb to the flow of iridescent beetles.
The dragonfly's mica whirs on his cheeks.
The wood fills with meticulous scintillations -
a dial under the clockmaker's tweezers.

It seemed he slept to the tick of figures;
in the gross amber ether,
they set up nicely tested clocks,
shifted, regulated them to a soprano hair for the heat.

They shifted them here and there, and snipped at the wheels.
Day declined on the blue clock-face;
they scattered shadows, drilled a void -
the darkness was a mast derricked upright.

It seems an antique happiness is fitting beyond them;
It seems sleep smothers the woods;
it no elegants on the clock's ticking
sleep, it seems, is all this couple is up to.

The primary source of this Pasternak imitation is once again Bowra. In order to make clear the extent of Lowell's borrowings, I cite Bowra's version, putting in bold the words that Lowell retains:

A lilac heat was heavy on the meadow,
High in the wood cathedral's darkness swelled.
What in the world was left still for their kisses?
It was all theirs, soft wax fingers held.

Such is the dream - you do not sleep, but only
Dream that you thirst for sleep, that someone lies
Asleep, and through his dream beneath his eyelids
Two black suns sear the lashes of his eyes.

Rays flowed, and with ebbing flowed the beetles;
Upon his cheeks the dragon-flies' gloss stirs.
The wood was full of careful scintillations
As under pincers at the clockmaker's.

It seemed he slumbered to the tick of figures;
While in harsh amber high above they set
Their nicely tested clocks up in the ether,
And regulate and move them to the heat.

They shift them round about, and shake the needles,
Scatter shadow, and swing, and bore a place
For darkness like a mast erected upward
In day's decline upon its blue clock-face.

It seems that ancient happiness flits over;
It seems sleep's setting holds the woodland close.
Those who are happy do not watch clocks ticking,
But sleep, it seems, is all this couple does.

Browa himself had obviously consulted the previous translation, done by J.M. Cohen, and likewise available to Lowell. It will be noted that in several instances where Lowell departs from Browa, he simply turns to Cohen. Cohen's version is below, again with bold used to point out Lowell's verbatim borrowings. (I have not put in bold the passages that occur in both Browa and Cohen, because the preponderance of borrowings shows unmistakably that Lowell took them from Browa.)

In the Wood

The field was clouded with like heat.
Through the wood rolled the darkness of cathedrals.
What in the world remained for them to kiss?
It was all theirs, like soft wax in their fingers.

This is the dream,—you do not sleep, but dream
you thirst for sleep, that there's a fellow dozing
and through his dream from underneath his eyelids
a pair of black suns break and burn his lashes.

Their beams flowed by. And iridescent beetles;
The glass of dragon flies roamed over cheeks.
These two Pasternak poems indicate that, with the exception of a few lines, Lowell followed his sources closely. This was not always the case. In a cycle of poems that he created under the title "The Seasons," Lowell borrowed from numerous Pasternak poems, often combining and developing them in unexpected – not to say bizarre – directions. Numerous drafts of the final poem in this cycle have been preserved among the Lowell papers in the Houghton Library of Harvard University. This three-stanza poem takes each of its stanzas from a different Pasternak original. The first stanza is the most revealing, and we will therefore limit our discussion to that. The drafts are undated, but their order can easily be determined based on textual emendations. They were obviously composed in 1958 (or early 1959), because they are typed on the flip sides of his versions of "Sparrow Hills" and "In the Woods."\(^{74}\)

The poem in question, brief and celebrated, comes from Pasternak's book *Themes and Variations*. Once again, it is unnecessary to cite the original, since Lowell could not read it. However, it should be noted that Pasternak relies heavily on paronomasias, which is fundamentally untranslatable. To give but one example: Pasternak contrasts seawater to the Sahara not only because of the opposition of wet vs. dry, but also because in Russian the word "Sahara" looks identical to the word for "sugar" (in the genitive case, albeit with a different stress) – hence the Russian language itself provides the additional opposition of salty vs. sweet. Pasternak revels in such wordplay, which creates a subliminal poetic logic.

In Bowra's rendition, the poem reads as follows:

Stars raced headlong. Seaward headlands lathed.
Salt spray blinded. Eyes dried up their tears.
Darkness filled the bedrooms. Thoughts raced headlong.
The Sahara Sphinx turned patient ears.

Candles guttered. Blood, it seemed, was frozen
In the huge Colossus. Lips at play

...
Swelled to the blue simmer of the desert.
Night paralyzed <estyle>the hour of ebb</style>

In Lowell's fourth version, only one line (the fourth) can be directly traced to the Bowna translation:

No recess then for the stars flogged headlong down the sky's hippocrane, Headlands grinding the infinite, serried ice-does to laughter,
The pinecones of intuition popping in my bedroom's sallow depression –
The Sphinx turned its patient ear to the Sahara.

Smog bubbled in the overtime light-bulbs. Our lips stuck, puffed to the blue simmer of the desert.
Night clotted the opened, ebbing vein of the saber-rattling Colossus,
His magnificent, philandering phallus.

Lowell added a few hand-written corrections to this (typewritten) text that take it still further from Bowna's translation. Next to "bubbled" he wrote "boiled (hummmed)." And he emended the final line to read: "Don Giovanni's saber-rattling phallus."

By the time it appeared in Imitations, only five lines (combined into a single stanza) remained:

Pinecones pop in the military gloom of our bedroom.
A gray smog boils in the overtime lightbulb.
The blue window simmers
Over the snow desert.
Our lips puff and stick.

Considerable effort is required to find any connection between this stanza and the Bowna translation. Only three words remain — "blue," "desert," and "lips" — and they are in completely unrecognizable semantic contexts. Without knowledge of the drafts, it would be impossible for a Pasternak specialist to determine which poem Lowell was "imitating."

The fortuitous survival of these four drafts allows us to see clearly that, in this case, Lowell was using the Pasternak poem as a springboard for his own imagination. There was no attempt to stay close to the original; indeed, each subsequent version departs radically from the previous one, and there is never a point where Lowell tries to find his way back to the "original" Bowna text. It would be futile to compare the final version to Pasternak's original — they are simply unrelated works.

The Pasternak versions we have looked at thus far were among the first that Lowell undertook. As in the Heine translations, Lowell uses a variety of approaches to the material at his disposal. In each of these Pasternak poems, whether relatively faithful or utterly free, Lowell was deriving his inspiration from published translations. In later renderings, however, the situation was different. Lowell used texts that friends prepared for him as well as published translations. One might expect that this would have led to more careful and accurate renderings, yet these later translations display a surprisingly cavalier attitude to the source text. "Hamlet in Russia, A Soliloquy," which closes the Pasternak section of Imitations, provides a striking example of Lowell's creative reception. Though not identified as such, this work is a compilation of three Pasternak poems. The first part intersperses two early Pasternak lyrics (from the collection My Sister Life), while the second part consists of a full translation of "Hamlet" from Doctor Zhivago, a poem written two and a half decades later. Given that the late Pasternak differs from the early Pasternak not only stylistically, but also in terms of world-view, Lowell's idea of combining two distinct phases of Pasternak's work is startling. When Olga Carlisle republished "Hamlet in Russia" in her anthology, she included a note of explanation: "Robert Lowell points out that the new English 'Hamlet' tells us of the Russian poet's life in a way that he himself might not have perceived it. It opens with a pastoral version of youth, a boating scene which could have been depicted by an Impressionist. The poem ends tragically with the poet's crucifixion by the mob. In the adapter's interpretation, the clapping of the river ripples and that of the audience which greets the poet about to enact his own tragic ending merge with each other, providing a transition for poems belonging to very different periods and moods."

The published version (first printed in Harper's Magazine of September 1961 [46], then in Imitations [147 – 148] and finally in Carlisle's anthology [92 – 93]) reads as follows:

**Hamlet in Russia, A Soliloquy**

"My heart throbbed like a boat on the water."
My ears rested. The willows swayed through the summer,
licking my shoulders, elbows, and rowlocks –
wait – this might happen,
when the music brought me the beat,
and the ash-gray water files dragged, and a couple of daisies blew,
and a hint of blue dotted a point off shore –
lips to lips, stars to stars!

My sister, life!
the world has too many people for us,

---


76 There are a few minor discrepancies between these publications, e.g., "door-frame" becomes "door frame," but no changes of significance.
the sycophant, the spineless—
politely, like snakes in the grass, they sting.

My sister!
embrace the sky and Hercules,
who holds the world up forever
at ease, perhaps, and sleeps at night
thrilled by the nightingales crying...
The boat stops throbbing on the water...
The clapping stops. I walk into the lights,
as Hamlet, lounge like a student against the door-frame,
and try to catch the far-off dissonance of life—
all that has happened, and must!

From the dark, my audience leans its one hammering brow against me—
ten thousand opera glasses, each set on the tripod!
Abba, Father, all things are possible with thee—
take away this cup!

I love the mulishness of Providence,
I can content to play the one part I was born for...—
quite another play is running now...—
take me off the hooks tonight!

The sequence of scenes was well thought out;
the last bow is in the cards, or the stars—
but I am alone, there is none...
All’s drowned in the sperm and spittle of the Pharisee—
To live a life is not to cross a field."

The texts that Lowell was using are easily identified. One is the famous “With Oars at Rest,” of which only one published translation existed, that of George Reavey (108).

In the drowsy breast the rocking boat is knocking;
Willows stoop down, my shoulders willows kissing,
My elbows and rowlocks their leaves caressing,
O wait and you also may have this blessing.

That’s why this solace in song we find flowing,
For we know that’s the ash grey lilac blowing.
The Berg Collection of The New York Public Library contains numerous items relating directly to Lowell's work on Pasternak. Lowell had entrusted most of these materials to William Meredith, a fellow poet and friend. Meredith not only preserved these texts, but even annotated them, adding marginalia that allow us to date these materials precisely, often to the day. All of them pertain in one way or another to the final section of Doctor Zhivago, which consists exclusively of poems supposedly written by the eponymous hero. Though we have already established that Lowell had read the novel when it first came out in English in 1958, he only decided to translate some of these poems in 1961.81

Among the Meredith materials is a nine-page typed text with the words “Strictly Confidential” in capital letters on the first page. That text recounts in detail the circumstances of Pasternak’s relationship to his last great love, Olga Ivinskaya, and his (futile) attempts to keep her—and her daughter Irina—from harm’s way. On the top of the first page is a handwritten note of Meredith: “Nicholas <sic> Nabokov gave this to Lowell in Feb 61 – Cal was speaking of Olga Ivinskaya a great deal just before and during his illness in March.” The illness that Meredith alludes to was one of the mental breakdowns that Lowell suffered periodically. He spent almost the entire month of March 1961 in the Neurological Institute at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in Manhattan. Relatively speaking, this breakdown was mild; Lowell spent much of the time working on his translations.82 It is at this point not possible to establish the authorship of the “Strictly Confidential” text; it was clearly written by a Westerner who knew Pasternak personally and was intimately acquainted with Soviet cultural affairs. Nabokov himself could not have been the author; his first trip back to the Soviet Union took place in 1967. He had probably received this text through the highly political Encounter network. The last event mentioned in the “Strictly Confidential” memo comes in a P.S.: “On December 7, 1960, at a secret trial, Mrs. Ivinskaya was sentenced to eight years internment, and Irina to three years.” We may infer that the text was completed shortly after that date.

In the first months of 1961, an international campaign began to free Ivinskaya and her daughter. As Olga Carlisle recalls: “In 1961 American intellectuals were outraged

79 Yensen (171), unaware that Lowell has changed Pasternak’s line, nonetheless sees this retrospектив glance as crucial to the structure of IVimtationa as a whole.
80 In 1961, the two were particularly close, since they had received grants from the Ford Foundation to spend a year at the Metropolitan Opera and the City Opera, in the hope that they would bring literary sophistication to libretto writing. The project led nowhere as far as musical collaborations were concerned, but Lowell and Meredith spent many hours listening to rehearsals and attending performances. Their fellowship had begun in September of 1960; these documents all date from March, 1961. See Hamilton, 280 – 383; Martini, 282, 290 – 292. For more on their collaboration, see Meredith’s letter to Lowell of 28 March 1960 (Houghton Library, Harvard University). In IVimations (1961), Lowell dedicated his
by the arrest of Pasternak's lover, Olga Ivinskaya. Shortly after the poet's death she had been seized by the Secret Police for receiving Western currency from the Italian publisher of Doctor Zhivago. Petitions on her behalf circulated in New York. Robert Lowell, like many others including myself, was persuaded that Olga Ivinskaya's release could be secured through a show of public indignation, a campaign of protest by influential Westerners.83 Active in this campaign were Lowell's friends connected with Encounter magazine, including the poet Stephen Spender and the musician Nicholas Slavkoff. However, I discovered that Lowell involved himself in a very personal way with the Russian poet's legacy. He identified with Pasternak to an unusual degree; he was possessed by an obsessive, chivalrous concern for Ivinskaya's fate. It was moving and somewhat disconcerting until one realized that Lowell, like Pasternak, had extramarital affairs, and took especially to heart the fate of a woman persecuted because of an illicit liaison (Carlyle, Far from Russia 143, 144). As we shall see, all of these factors came together in Lowell's final homage to Pasternak.

The Meredith papers in the New York Public Library contain a version of "Hamlet in Russia" that differs considerably from the published versions.84 It reads as follows (with the major changes in boldface to simplify comparison):

83 Ivinskaya's arrest was announced in the New York Times on 19 January 1961, where she was described euphemistically as "the late Boris Pasternak's closest literary collaborator and intimate friend."

84 Meredith's margins are instructive, if at times mysterious. At the top of the page, he dates the poem 5 March 1961, next to the words "a few weeks after his death," in the parenthesis introduction, a reading for Meredith, Kermit and conceivably a few others. Below the text Meredith writes: "Red words the words "from me" are crossed out and the margins comment added: "These 2 words struck out by the translation within two days of his being in the psychiatric ward. Given his condition those days, it is probable that he had started this work earlier (We recall that Meredith had noted elsewhere that "Cal explicitly names her), Lowell made some changes over the next few days and eventually sent the published version to Harper's on March 16.

---

Translation, Imitation, Adaptation, or Mutilation?

Hamlet in Russia

(An imaginary soliloquy spoken by the ghost of Pasternak a few weeks after his death. He addresses Olga Ivinskaya, who was the model for Lara in Dr. Zhivago, and is now in prison in Siberia.)

"My heart throbbed like a boat on the water,
My ears rested. The willows swayed through the summer,
licking my shoulders, elbows, and rowlocks—wait!—this might happen,
when the music brought me the beat,
and the ash-gray water-lilies dragged, and a couple of daisies blew,
and a hint of blue dotted a point off shore—
lips to lips, star to star!

Olga Ivinskaya—my sister! Life!
the world has too many people,
the sackcloth, the spineless
Politely, like snakes in the grass, they sting.

Olga—my sister!
You say, "Embrace the Gods,
who hold the world forever
and a day, perhaps, and sleep at night
thrilled by the nightingales crying..."

The heart of heaven ceases to throb...

The clapping stops. I walk out on the boards,
lean like a Sorbonne student against a door-frame,
and try to catch the far-off resonance of life—
all that has happened, that must!

From the dark, my audience loans its sole hammering brow against me—
ten thousand opera glasses, each set on the tripod!
Abba, Father, all things are possible with thee—
take away this cup from me!
I love the mildness of Providence,
I am content with the one part I was born for...
quite another play is running now...
Take me off the hooks this night!

My sequence of scenarios was well thought out;
My last bow is in the cards, or the stars –
But I am alone, but I am alone, and there are none to help...
All's drowned in the sperm and spirit of the Pharsee –

To live a life is not to cross a field."

The heart of heaven ceased to throb...

Several things stand out in this version, the most striking being the apostrophe to Olga Ivinskaya. (Never one to worry about morphological niceties, Lowell shortens her surname by a syllable.) While it might be logical to include her in the context of Zhivago (as Lowell’s parenthetical introduction indicates, Ivinskaya was widely regarded as the prototype for the character of Lara), to identify her as the addressee of My Sister Life is anachronistic. Ivinskaya was five years old at the time Pasternak wrote these poems, and the two only became acquainted many decades later. But this draft version makes clear that the entire poem is not to be understood sequentially (chronologically), but rather retrospectively (as the deceased poet revisiting his life and work). One detail is in this regard especially revealing. Even in the published version the presence of a “student” in the “Hamlet” poem is mysterious, as there is no corresponding image in the original: “The clapping stops. I walk into the lights, / As Hamlet, lounge like a student against the door-frame.” In the unpublished version the explicit reference to Hamlet is omitted, and the student is more precisely described: “The clapping stops. I walk out on the boards, lean like a Sorbonne student against a door-frame.” The referent here can only be explained by a passage in the “Strictly Confidential” memo, which discusses the fate of Ivinskaya’s daughter Irina: “Boris Pasternak had long thought of Irina as his own daughter. He truly loved her as a father and gave her all the books and presents he received from abroad. In January 1960, Irina became engaged to a young French student in Moscow – Georges Nivet.” While the document does not identify Nivet’s home institution as the Sorbonne, Lowell had surely learned this from Nicolas Nabokov. The Lowell papers at Houghton Library (Harvard University) contain a letter (in very simple French) from Nivet to Lowell dated 1 March 1961. Lowell’s breakdown occurred on 3 March, which means that he would presumably have received the letter in the hospital.

TRANSLATION, Imitation, Adaptation, or Mutelation?

Cher Messire,
M. Nabakov m’a demandé de vous faire cadeau personnellement de ces photos. Elles me sont très chères, mais je vous les envoie avec plaisir. Je sais que vous êtes un si admirable traducteur de Boris Léonidovitch.
Ne montrez à personne ces photos. Je vous prie de croire à ma très profonde considération

Georges Nivet

One may infer that Nabokov and Lowell had spoken about Nivat. The photographs, which Nivet requested not be shown to anyone, have unfortunately been lost, but they presumably were of Pasternak, Ivinskaya, and perhaps her daughter. How Nivat – later to become a distinguished scholar and translator of Russian literature – found his way into the text of Pasternak’s “Hamlet” poem is difficult to explain by any ordinary logic. It would appear that Lowell gathered together in this “posthumous soliloquy” whatever stray facts about Pasternak’s life had come to his attention.

This version of the poem, punctuated by a refrain that shifts from present to past tense (“The heart of heaven ceases [ceased] to throb…”) gives a tragic finality to Pasternak’s dashed hopes. The published version, which omits the specific references to Pasternak’s biography as well as the final line, is likewise dark, but ends with Pasternak’s own proverbial utterance, which Lowell appears to have accepted as a personal credo. More than a decade later, in a letter of 3 May 1973 to Elizabeth Bishop, Lowell noted: “I translated a proverb line of Pasternak – it seems to me it took weeks, and yet only varies slightly from what other ‘translators’ did <…>: ‘To live a life is not to cross a field.’ This is poignant, but this is what is comforting. We cannot cross the field, only walk it… finishing or not finishing this or that along the way” (WLT 746).

There is an irony here that is representative of Lowell’s entire translation project. It is true that Lowell’s rendition of this line closely resembles that of Pasternak’s sister, who had translated it as “Life is not a walk across a field (16)” (and appended a footnote “This is a Russian proverb”), yet it differs just enough to allow Lowell to misconstrue its meaning. According to the interpretation that he spells out in the letter to Bishop, life is an unsuccessful attempt to cross a field (i.e., to live life = not to be able to cross a field). In actuality, the proverb means that crossing a field is easy, but living a life is hard. As so often, Lowell has not deliberately altered the meaning of the original; he has simply misunderstood it. In this case, since Lowell’s own rendering is ambiguous, a reader coming from the Russian would not notice his misunderstanding. Ultimately, what matters is less Lowell’s ability to comprehend a Russian proverb than his eagerness to identify with Pasternak, to internalize what he imagined was Pasternak’s essence. “I hope I have caught something of the triumph and blaze of his tone,” as he wrote in his Harper’s publication of “Seven Poems by Boris Pasternak” (44). In Pasternak’s life and work, Lowell obviously saw a Russian version of himself.
By writing "Hamlet in Russia," Lowell placed himself as the terminus of a series of identifications that moved from Hamlet to Christ to Zhitagovo to Pasternak. It was for good reason that Andrei Voznesensky, on his trip to America a month after Lowell's death, brought a few sprigs from the rowanberry tree above Pasternak's grave to place on Lowell's own.

ADDENDUM: Boris Pasternak's "The Wedding" and Robert Lowell's "The Landlord"

Robert Lowell was notorious for obsessively editing his work. According to Stanley Kunitz, "Lowell doesn't so much write his poems as rewrite them... he is never done with a poem." To produce a various edition of his poetry would therefore be a daunting task. This addendum, a close analysis of a single "imitation," is intended to give some sense of what such an edition would require. In addition to tracing the changes from draft to draft, we will attempt to explain them insofar as they offer insights into Lowell's working method.

The recent Collected Poems edition, the most thorough to date, is understandably reticent about giving variants. In terms of Lowell's work on Pasternak, the poems appear in their final published form, in Olga Carlisle's 1968 anthology Poets on Street Corners, accompanied by notes in the relatively few places where they differ from the versions in Interactions. Variants from publications prior to Interactions go unmentioned. (In fact, the very existence of such earlier publications goes unmentioned.) In keeping with the goals of that edition, there is no consideration of unpublished drafts.

The Berg Collection of the New York Public Library contains unusually rich material for a study of Lowell's approach to translation, including the typescript of the manuscript of Interactions and the galley proofs. These are both edited by Lowell, the former heavily and the latter lightly. For our purposes, however, the most valuable materials concern Lowell's work on Pasternak's poem "The Wedding." In this exceptional case, the library holds not only multiple drafts, but also the English interlinear that served as his point of departure. For permission to cite these texts (and to print the relevant facsimiles), grateful acknowledgement is made to the New York Public Library (in particular curators Isaac Gewirtz and Joshua McKean of the Berg Collection), Jonathan Galassi (for the estate of Robert Lowell), Dominique Nabokov (for the estate of Nicolas Nabokov), and Richard Hareis (for the estate of William Meredith).

The work on Pasternak's "The Wedding" can be dated to March of 1961, when Lowell spent most of the month locked in the neurological wing of the Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital in Manhattan, convalescing from a nervous breakdown. (Two of the drafts are typed on the flip side of hospital stationery.) In a letter of 17 March to Adrienne Rich and Philip Booth, William Meredith reported on Lowell's condition, noting that he "writes and revises translations furiously and with a kind of crooked brilliance" (cited in Hamilton, 285). These drafts of Lowell's work on "The Landlord" survived
because Lowell gave them to Meredith, who was visiting him frequently. Meredith’s meticulous marginalia on these papers allow us to see precisely what Lowell was doing and when he was doing it. A letter from Meredith to Lowell of 9 March 1961 gives some context:

Dear Cal,

I don’t think I’ll be able to get in for visiting hours tonight because of seeing Kay Morrison and having to go to dinner downtown. But I sent some cigarettes (Carr’s) (only one carton, assorted, because I’m out of cash today) and some typed-up poems. There is no copy, but only the fair copy of “The Landlord”: “Wild Vines,” “Hamlet in Russia” and “The Voyage” I made three copies of each. Where I have been in doubt, or made changes from what you have said or what you think you mean, I have made marks in red pencil in the margin of the originals, and I return the originals to you all except “The Landlord” which you said I should keep.

If you make revisions, I suggest you make them in ink on the first copies, so that when they are given to a professional typist they will present no further problems. <...>

In short, Meredith was running errands for Lowell and helping to type his translations. In most cases he gave Lowell three copies (an “original” and two carbons), presumably because of Lowell’s tendency to rework his own translations. The fact that he gave Lowell only one copy of “The Landlord” on March 9 suggests that he deemed the poem complete at that point. The day before he had put the following marginalia on one copy of “The Landlord”: “R.L. gave me the 3 typical versions on March 7th saying I had once asked to see some of his works & that he wanted me to have these and the literal translation – longhand, on lined yellow paper and including “Wild Vines” which becomes “Wild Vines” in his translation – taken down freely from Nicholas Nabokov. Typed March 8. …” Since the typed versions of “Hamlet in Russia” (likewise in the Berg Collection) are dated March 5, we may presume that Lowell moved directly to “The Landlord” from there.

The various versions of the text allow us to examine Lowell’s engagement with his source and his departures from it.

STEP 1 – From the Original to the Interlinear

In the paper proper, I have demonstrated how Lowell generally used previously existing translations – rather than the originals – as the basis for his Initiations. The striking resemblances between many of Lowell’s versions and those of his predecessors make clear his indebtedness to them. Nonetheless, when working with most languages, Lowell was capable of consulting the originals, and at times he clearly did so. With the Russian poems, he could not access the originals. To compensate, he emphasized repeatedly, he was not only used prior published translations, but also texts that had been prepared for him by speakers of Russian. This was not true when he began this work in 1958 (or early 1959), but it apparently was the case by the time he made such claims in 1961.4

As is clear from Meredith’s above-cited letter, the very first stage of the translation process (the production of the interlinear) involved Lowell, even though he did not know a word of Russian. In the case of at least two poems, Nicolas Nabokov produced the text, which Lowell wrote down for subsequent use. Nabokov would appear to have been a superb choice to mediate between Pasternak’s Russian and Lowell’s English. Not only was he a native speaker of Russian with fluent English, but he was also a great admirer of Pasternak. In 1954, when the poems of Zhivago first appeared in the Soviet Union under the title “Verses from a Novel,” he had written to Isaiah Berlin suggesting that they send this poetry to his cousin Vladimir and Edmund Wilson for translation.5 In August of 1957, as soon as he learned that Pasternak’s novel would not be published in the USSR, Nabokov committed resources from the Congress for Cultural Freedom to fund its Russian publication abroad.6 In 1959, as the head of a committee organizing an international conference in Venice to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Tostoi’s death, Nabokov was scheming to invite Pasternak, a plan that could not be realized because of the poet’s ill health and eventual death in 1960.7 Most relevant for his work with Lowell: the appearance of Doctor Zhivago had inspired Nabokov to set to music four of the poems from the novel’s final section: “Hamlet,” “Parting,” “Hopkins [Wild Vine]” and “The Wedding.”8

Since Lowell translated only three poems from Zhivago, and since all three of them are likewise in Nabokov’s cycle, it seems likely that Nabokov encouraged him to choose precisely these poems. Two of Nabokov’s interlinear have survived, and chances are...
good that he also did the third ("Hamlet"). Nabokov’s song settings had been written in 1960 and were first been performed in December of that year (by Hermann Prey). So one might fairly assume that Nabokov had given considerable thought to these texts and that they were fresh in mind when he helped Lowell with the translations.

However, the production of the interleavings was clearly flawed. Nabokov did not write them out, but dictated them, and numerous details suggest that he did so quickly. First of all, Lowell’s handwriting shows signs of extreme haste. He was never a good speller, but in this case there are a number of missing final letters that presumably are omitted simply because he was rushing to get to the next word. Punctuation is sparse, with periods often missing even at the end of stanzas. Not surprisingly, Lowell’s penmanship is even sloppier than usual. Finally, the translation is not always grammatical; it would seem that there was no time to go back to make certain that verbs were in the correct tense or that sentences were complete. (Admittedly, it is likewise possible that the incorrect tenses reflect errors that Russians make when speaking English.) What is obvious yet deserves emphasis is that oral translation of poetry is fraught with danger. Poets in general (and Pasternak in particular) play off multiple meanings of words, and such details require not just translation, but explanation. Subtleties are necessarily lost in spontaneous transmission.

It is the second interleaving ("The Landlord") that will be the subject of our analysis, precisely because so many versions of this poem have survived. In this case, the interleaving is untitled, which is in itself odd, again suggesting a hurried and unfocused approach to the task. The Russian original has a title that is easily and unambiguously translatable — "Бракосочетание" ("The Wedding"). In Nabokov’s song cycle, which was published trilingually (Russian, French, German), it was translated into French as "Noces" and German as "Hochzeit." Unsurprisingly, Guernsey translated it as "Wedding" in the English translation of Doctor Zhivago (534), a version that Lowell appears not to have looked at closely (despite owning and reading the novel). Curiously, when "The Landlord" was republished in Olga Carlisle’s anthology, "The Wedding"

10 Cf. an early letter from Lowell to Elizabeth Bishop on the subject of spelling and handwriting (WP 57): "A delicate matter – the pot calling the kettle black – it’s been said to me by all my friends repeatedly, and I know I’m myself beyond self-help, and at least you can spell; but I sometimes have to use the lines you copied out from Chaucer and Eberhart as key to illegible words – at times in vain."
11 As chance would have it, a facsimile of the handwritten letter cited in the previous footnote is reproduced on the final page of the hardcover edition of the Lowell-Bishop correspondence (it is omitted in the paperback edition). That letter is far more legible than the interleavings dictated by Nabokov. (Other archival letters at the NYPL and the Houghton Library corroborate that Lowell’s penmanship was ordinarly far clearer than in the surviving interleavings.)
12 The French version is credited to Michel Ancery and the German to Rolf-Dietrich Krall, but Nabokov was apparently involved in both translations. Giroud, 317.
13 Notwithstanding his excellent linguistic skills, the usually admirable Guernsey provided imprecise and unpersuasive translations of the Zhivago poems.

Step 1: Interlinear versions of two Pasternak poems on yellow lined paper, dictated by Nikolai Nabokov, written down by Robert Lowell (Berg Collection, New York Public Library)
having crossed the slope of the courthouse
the sunburned off to the flintlocks he
wore's hands, both the Italian shapers.

Making the huckaback, westward-stripped down,
trimming out the golds, the business of the cuffless down,
but the way round in the middle of sleep,
now point to briers and watching out and sleep
nowhere. The connection began to sleep.

The woodsmoke grew by a green and on his fenstant
piled the drifts slowing of the smile of the north.
The jingle of the barn's male chiminey.
and again quite quite again.
the rain of the open abatement. I saw
Stormy through the sawdust and the bareness.

Through the sawdust, the rain-stilling, the moment
one white of a smoke from the second
headlight cut in the street,

Now today's

The sleazy husband is to write a poem
in the sleazy spazzy homely tiredness to harbor
with the dealership's bile of the forest.
The Landlord

By Robert Hugh Benson

Having crossed the edge of the courtyard, the Landlord went off to the East, into the Bride's house—

with the aforesaid Italian singer, behind the slide's weather-stripped door, between one and seven.

The matches of the bride's quieted down, but the sun rose blood-red in the middle of the bed—

he wanted to sleep and sleep and sleep.

The accordion began to play—

the accordion-player lay asleep on his instrument—

he wanted to sleep and sleep and sleep.

The soapstone's silver flashed in his pocket. Again and again again again—

the song of the accordion—

in the street—

a beautiful bird...

He dropped into the hole at the sun.

The sleepy courtyard began to wake up—

in the sleepy courtyard everything...—

the sun rose blood-red in the middle of the bed—

he wanted to sleep and sleep and sleep.

As the accordion-player lay asleep on his instrument—

he wanted to sleep and sleep and sleep.

The accordion began to play—

the accordion-player lay asleep on his instrument—

he wanted to sleep and sleep and sleep.

The Landlord

By Robert Hugh Benson

Having crossed the edge of the courtyard, the Landlord went off to the East, into the Bride's house—

with the aforesaid Italian singer, behind the slide's weather-stripped door, between one and seven.

The matches of the bride's quieted down, but the sun rose blood-red in the middle of the bed—

he wanted to sleep and sleep and sleep.

The accordion began to play—

the accordion-player lay asleep on his instrument—

he wanted to sleep and sleep and sleep.

The soapstone's silver flashed in his pocket. Again and again again again—

the song of the accordion—

in the street—

a beautiful bird...

He dropped into the hole at the sun.

The sleepy courtyard began to wake up—

in the sleepy courtyard everything...—

the sun rose blood-red in the middle of the bed—

he wanted to sleep and sleep and sleep.

As the accordion-player lay asleep on his instrument—

he wanted to sleep and sleep and sleep.

The accordion began to play—

the accordion-player lay asleep on his instrument—

he wanted to sleep and sleep and sleep.
The Landlord

Having crossed the curb in the courtyard,
the Landlord journeyed to the feast,
into the Bride's house—

with him departed the Italian singer,
behind the Bride's weatherstripped doors,
between one and seven,

the snatches of talk had quieted down,
but the sun rose blood red in the middle of the bed—
he wished to sleep and sleep and sleep.

The accordion began to weep,
the accordion-player lay spread out on the instrument—
hearing the palms clapping, seeing the shine of the serfs.

The feast's whole flourish jingled like silver in his hand,
again again again again,
the song of the broken accordion.

Rushing through the bed and the sleeper,
the noise, whistling and the cheering,
swam a white peacock.

The Landlord

Having crossed the curb in the courtyard,
the Landlord journeyed to the feast,
into the Bride's house—

with him departed the Italian singer,
behind the Bride's weatherstripped doors,
between one and seven,

the snatches of talk had quieted down,
but the sun rose blood red in the middle of the bed—
he wished to sleep and sleep and sleep.

The accordion began to weep,
the accordion-player lay spread out on his instrument—
hearing the palms clapping, the shuffle of the shining serfs.

The feast's whole flourish jingled like silver in his hand,
again again again again,
the song of the broken accordion.

Rushing through the bed and the sleeper,
the noise, whistling and the cheering,
swam a white peacock.

Step 5: Fourth imitation. Typed fair copy. According to the marginalia of William Meredith, this version was sent to Harper's Magazine.
(Iberg Collection, New York Public Library)

Step 6: Publication. The poem as it appears in Robert Lowell, Imitations
(Reproduced by permission of Jonathan Galassi.)
He moved his hips,
and strutted out in the street,
this beautiful bird . . .

He shook his head, he ruffled his breast-feathers;
suddenly the noise of the game
is the stamping of a whole procession.

He drops into the hole of the sun.

The sleepy courtyard grows businesslike,
mules stand up by the stone well,
teamsters shout down the laughter of the feast.

A band of pigeons
blues from the sky’s blue bowl,
as if it were following the wedding party,
as if life were only an instant, of course,
the dissolution of ourselves into others,
like a wedding party approaching the window.

Pasternak.
The subject of these verses is a rustic wedding celebration, and Pasternak brings out its traditional folk character. He repeatedly mentions an accordion and various genres of folk music (the “round dance” and the “chastushka,” an untranslatable genre that Nabokov called a “factory song”). A “chastushka” is a simple poem in trochees, with the second and fourth lines rhyming. Pasternak’s poem rhymes throughout (alternating masculine and feminine), but the meter—alternating trochaic tetrameter and trimeter—serves to set off the second and fourth lines and thus recalls the “chastushka.” Such niceties were of course lost on Lowell, who had no interest in the formal qualities of the original. More to the point is that while Pasternak’s early poems challenge even a native speaker to make sense of the syntax and imagery, this poem is (at least on the surface) straightforward. It would be an immense challenge to do a spontaneous translation of the early poetry, but in the case of this poem, it would certainly be possible (though not desirable). And this is presumably what happened. In several places Nabokov offered versions that he surely would not have, had he given the matter closer attention and more thought. In some instances, he apparently gave alternate possibilities, which Lowell wrote above his first version or in parentheses, without giving priority to either. In the transcription below, all such variants will be put in parentheses. (As was his custom, Lowell wrote in all capital letters. Like the editors of his letters, I have changed this to make it look somewhat less odd, but the reader is encouraged to compare the version below to the facsimile.)

Having crossed the edge of the courtyard
The guest went off to the feast into the
Bride’s house with the Italian singer.

Behind the weatherstripped doors of the landlord
Between one & seven the bits of talk
Have quieted down

---

15 In his setting of this text, Nabokov added the parenthetical Russian subtitle “chastushka,” which was translated into German as “Tschastushka” and into French as “Couplets populaires.” Nabokov 1961, 23.
the countryside. (In fact, even the notion of "courtyard," present in the first stanza, is misleading insofar as it has upper-class connotations. The word in question could mean that, but it also could connote any sort of rural dwelling and the land in front of it.)

STEP 2 - FIRST IMITATION

This text, dated 6 March 61, begins with a typed version that is very close to the interlinear. Lowell heavily edited the typewritten text, crossing out words and writing his changes in the margin. In the transcriptions below, in keeping with the conventions of this volume, the crossed out words appear in square brackets, and the additions are not marked as such. To get a better sense of Lowell's idiosyncratic method, the reader is encouraged to examine the facsimiles.

In Lowell's typed transcription and in all subsequent versions, almost every stanza consists of three lines, whereas Pasternak's original is in quadrains. The reason for this formal decision was probably subconscious. Lowell was surely unaware of the form of the original, and in his transcription of the interlinear, almost all the stanzas happen to fall into three-line groupings (see the facsimile).

THE LANDLORD

Having crossed the edge of the courtyard
the [guest] landlord went off to the feast
into the bride's house
with him went the Italian singer.

Behind the [landlord's] bride's weatherstripped doors,
between one and seven,
the snatches of talk [have] had quieted down-

But the sun rose blood red in the middle of sleep the bed—
you wanted to sleep and sleep and sleep again.
The accordion began to weep.

The accordion-player lay spread out on his instrument
hears the palms clapping
sees the shine of the serif
the [jingling] jingle of the feast's whole flow of Irish.

And again again again again
the [moan] song of the wrung accordion
rushed through the [bed and the sleepers] flow of Irish of the feast
Through the noise, the whistling, the [tumult] cheering
one white as a peacock
swam out. [and] She moved her hips.

She strutted out in the street,
this beautiful bird,
shaking her [head she danced in a reel]. It shook its head, it shook its breast-feathers.

Suddenly from the noise of this game
[and the] Came the stamping of the whole procession,
he dropped into the [abyss] hole of the sun.

The sleepy household begins to wake up;
in the sleepy courtyard businesslike sounds
start to interfere—with the laughter,
and the babble of the feast.

In this version, the landlord takes center stage. He is the title character, setting off for the feast in the first stanza. In Pasternak’s original it is not he, but the guests who set off for the feast. The interlinear had rendered “guests” as “guest,” either because Lowell misunderstood what Nabokov was saying or because he simply was hurry- ing and forgot to place the “s” at the end of the word. The weatherstripped doors no longer belong to the “landlord,” but to the bride. In Lowell’s new rendering, the ac- cordion player, rather than “spreading out” his hands on his instrument, lies spread out on top of his instrument. This is probably not poetic license, but merely a misunderstanding of the interlinear. The Russian is hard to translate, as the verb that Pas- ternak uses (“rasypat’”) means “to strew” or “to scatter.” Nabokov’s rendering was not wrong, but it was odd enough to confuse a reader unfamiliar with the original. The layout on the page and the absence of punctuation in Lowell’s interlinear adds to the ambiguity:

And the harmonica [accordion] player spread out on his
Instrument the clapping of the palms &
The jingling trinkets [shining of the medals] & the whole
Noise & flourish of the feast.

In reviewing the text in his hospital room, Lowell probably assumed that the verb “spread out” was intransitive, especially since “spread out the clapping” is not idiomatic English. (The Russian is likewise not idiomatic, but Pasternak frequently plays with Russian syntax. In the original, there is no question that the verb is being used transitively.) Lowell therefore inserts new transitive verbs to “make sense” of the pas sage: the accordion player “hears the palms clapping” [sees the shine of the serfs.” What Nabokov had rendered as either “jingling trinkets” or “shining of the medals” should probably have been translated as “glitter of necklaces.” Lowell’s insertion of serfs is not suggested by anything in the interlinear, but he presumably spelled out what he correctly sensed was a metonymy (i.e., someone must have been wearing the “medals”). He likewise retains the “jingling,” though that word is Nabokov’s addition, based on an internal rhyme in the Russian. (The words for clapping [plešk] and glitter [blešk] rhyme in Russian, creating a “jingling” effect.)

Finally, Lowell encounters a problem with gender that he would resolve in various ways whenever he returned to the poem. In Russian, gender is marked grammatically and thus much more central to the language than in English. Pasternak’s poem describes a woman dancer as a “peachen.” Colloquially, the Russian “pava” (“peachen”) is used to describe a woman “with a proud bearing and smooth gait,” so the image is not as strange in Russian as in English. Nabokov did not help by first rendering this as “peacock” and only later (assuming I deciphered the transcript correctly) as “peachen.” Lowell introduces the bird as “a white peacock.” (Peacocks are ordinarily not white, of course, whereas peahens are brown with a white belly.) He then switches to the pronoun “she” (following the interlinear), but then, presumably puzzled by the gender, changes to “it.” Finally, the “[abyss] hole in the sun” causes considerable confusion. Once again, the interlinear did not make matters any easier.

In the Russian original, the imagery is straightforward: the various sounds of the festivities suddenly disappear, as if into an abyss. In Nabokov’s translation (or Lowell’s transcription of it), “be” disappears into this abyss. The antecedent for “be” is unclear, and Lowell—without a Russian speaker at his side—will repeatedly struggle to sort this out.

STEP 3 – SECOND IMITATION

THE LANDLORD

For Sandra Hochman

Boris Pasternak

Having crossed the [edge of the] cobblestone courtyard
the Landlord went [off] to the feast
[into the Bride’s house] into the house of the Bride

19 See Roman Jakobson, "Linguistic Aspects of Translation," in Language in Literature (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987), p. 432: "In order to translate accurately the English sentence I hired a worker, a Russian needs supplementary information, whether this action was completed or not and whether the worker was a man or a woman, because he must make his choice between a verb of completive or non-completive aspect – manjal or manimal – and between a masculine and feminine noun – robotnik or robotnica. If I ask the utterer of the English sentence whether the worker was male or female, my question may be judged irrelevant or indiscreet, whereas in the Russian version of this sentence an answer to this question is obligatory."
with him went [the] an Italian singer, 
behind the Bride’s [weatherstripped] fresh and sanded doors,

[The] Their snatches of [talk] gossip had quieted down,
but the sun rose blood red in the middle of the bed,
[she] you wanted to sleep and sleep and sleep.
The accordion began to weep;
the accordion-player lay spread out on his instrument—[;]
[hears] hearing the palms clapping, [sees] seeing the shine of the serfs.
The feast’s whole flo-werish jingled like silver in his pocket
again again again again [;],
The song of the [wring] bruised accordion,
[Rushing] Rustling through the bed and the sleeper,
[through] the noise, the whistling and the cheering,
swam a white peacock.

She [moved] twirled her hips,
and strutted out in the street—
this beautiful bird…

[It shook its] She wagged her head. [It shook its tail-feathers] She ruffled her breast-
feathers—

[is] was the stamping of the whole bridal procession.

He drops into the hole of the sun! 
The sleepy courtyard begins to wake up—
in the sleepy courtyard businesslike grows— sounds
begin [to interfere<—> with] to swallow the laughter,
the [bubble] babbling of the feast.

This version is not dated, but it was almost certainly composed one day after the
previous one, on March 7 (since the subsequent version is dated March 8). Several
things are striking about this draft. Perhaps the most obvious is the dedication. Sand-
dra Hochman (born 1936) was at the time a young poet whom Lowell (born 1917)
had recently taken up with. With characteristic impulsivity, he had hatched a plan to
leave his wife and start afresh with Hochman. This new relationship began shortly
before the breakdown that sent Lowell to the Neurological Institute and continued for

STEP 4 – THIRD ImitATION

On 8 March, Meredith produced a fair copy. The only change (in Meredith’s
handwriting on the typed manuscript) replaces the phrase “interfere with” with
“swallow.” Next to this is an explanatory note by Meredith: “This change made 8
March by R.L. when Stanley Kunitz said there were 4 dead words in a row in the
next to last line.” (The four words were presumably “to interfere with the.”) Since
this change had already appeared in the previous version, we may infer either that
Lowell produced two separate versions on a single day or, more probable, that

20 For the most detailed account of Lowell’s courtship of Hochman, see Jeffrey Meyers. Robert
Meredith meant to write that the change had been made on 7 March. One other bit of marginalia deserves mention. Meredith writes: “The dedication I put on this copy and RL’s carbon only.” In short, the dedication was not intended for publication, but exclusively for “personal” use.

THE LANDLORD (for Sandra Hochman)
Boris Pasternak
Having crossed the edge of the courtyard
the Landlord went off to the feast,
into the Bride’s house —

with him went the Italian singer,
behind the Bride’s weatherstripped doors,
between one and seven,

The snatches of talk had quieted down,
but the sun rose blood red in the middle of the bed —
he wanted to sleep and sleep and sleep.

The accordion began to weep,
the accordion-player lay spread out on his instrument —
hearing the palms clapping, seeing the shine of the serfs.

The feast’s whole flourish jingled like silver in his pocket,
again again again again,
The song of the broken accordion.

Rustling through the bed and the sleeper,
the noise, whistling and the cheering,
swarm a white peacock.

She moved her hips,
and strutted out in the street —
this beautiful bird…

She shook her head, she ruffled her breast-feathers,
suddenly the noise of the game
is the stomping of the whole procession.

He drops into the hole of the sun.

The sleepy courtyard begins to wake up,
in the sleepy courtyard grows businesslike —
sounds begin to [interfere with] swallow the laughter,

the babble of the feast.

Curiously, much of this version returns to “step 2,” rejecting the changes made in “step 3.” Once again we find “the edge of the courtyard,” “the Italian singer” (with definite article), “weatherstripped doors.” The accordion is now neither “wrung” nor “bruised,” but “broken.” The gender issues pertaining to the peacock remain unresolved: the peacock is referred to as “she” repeatedly, but then “he drops into the hole in the sun.”

STEP 5 – FOURTH IMITATION

The final version in the Berg Collection has Meredith’s marginalia: “revision sent to Harpers, typed 16 March 61 – WM.” This version is quite close to Step 4; to allow the differences to stand out, I put them in bold below. (They are not in bold in the original.)

The Landlord

Having crossed the curb of the courtyard
the Landlord journeyed to the feast,
into the Bride’s house —

with him departed the Italian singer,
behind the Bride’s weatherstripped doors,
between one and seven,

the snatches of talk had quieted down,
but the sun rose blood red in the middle of the bed —
he wished to sleep and sleep and sleep.

The accordion began to weep,
the accordion-player lay spread out on the instrument —
hearing the palms clapping, seeing the shine of the serfs.
The feast’s whole flourish jingled like silver in his hand, again again again again, The song of the broken accordion.

Rustling through the bed and the sleeper, the noise, whistling and the cheering, swam a white peacock.

She moved her hips, and strutted out in the street – this beautiful bird... She shook her head, she ruffled her breast-feathers: suddenly the din and the game are the stamping of a whole procession.

He drops into the hole of the sun.

The sleepy courtyard grows businesslike, The creature's of the courtyard begin to wake up – sounds begin to swallow the laughter the babble of the feast.

STEP 6 – Publication

The final text, as published in Harper's and then in Imitations, contains several surprises.

The Landlord

Having crossed the curb in the courtyard the Landlord journeyed to the feast, into the Bride’s house –

with him departed the Italian singer, behind the Bride’s weatherstripped doors, between one and seven,

The snatches of talk had quieted down, but the sun rose blood red in the middle of the bed – he wanted to sleep and sleep and sleep.

The accordion began to weep, the accordion-player lay spread out on his instrument – hearing the palms clapping, the shuffle of the shining serfs.

The feast’s whole flourish jingled like silver in his hand, again again again again, The song of the broken accordion.

Rustling through the bed and the sleeper, the noise, whistling and the cheering, swam a white peacock.

He moved his hips, and strutted out in the street – this beautiful bird... He shook his head, he ruffled his breast-feathers: suddenly the noise of the game is the stamping of a whole procession.

He drops into the hole of the sun.

The sleepy courtyard grows businesslike, mules stand up by the stone well, teamsters shout down the laughter of the feast.

A band of pigeons blasts from the sky’s blue bowl, as if it were following the wedding party, as if life were only an instant, of course, the dissolution of ourselves into others, like a wedding party approaching the window.

To begin with, this version actually reaches the end of Pasternak’s poem, albeit with some extraneous material along the way. It is of course bizarre that Lowell had earlier spent so much time on the poem yet neglected the final stanzas, which supply the key both to the poem (and, according to V.V. Ivanov to Pasternak’s
world-view) as well as to Lowell’s overall project in *Imitations* (cf. Yenzer 195). It must remain a matter of speculation whether Lowell had lost the final sheet of the interlinear (and belatedly discovered it), whether another Russian speaker supplied the missing lines, or whether Lowell simply based his conclusion on Guerney’s published translation (to which it is surprisingly close in places). What is certain is that some of the imagery — e.g., the mules at the stone well and the teamsters (presumably mule-drivers, not truck drivers!) could only come from Lowell’s imagination, as no direct translation would account for their presence. That said: Step 5 had already introduced the line about the “creature <s>-<s> of the courtyard,” which this may develop. Guerney might also have given the impetus. He renders the problematic word “dvor” (“courtyard”) as “barnyard” (a conceivable translation), which might have encouraged Lowell to develop the line in the direction he did. (In the final version of the poem, published in Carlisle’s anthology [111], the mules are inexplicably transformed into horses.)

But the most instructive change is that Lowell has resolved the gender problem by retaining the peacock and making all pronouns masculine. Within the context of Lowell’s text this is consistent and convincing. However, the Russian unambiguously identifies the bird as female and, indeed, as the vehicle for a simile for which the tenor is a woman. Was Lowell willfully ignoring the original or had he simply forgotten the context and the fact that this “peacock” was actually a woman dancing? One factor points to the latter explanation: when Lowell republished the poem in Carlisle’s anthology, he changed “peacock” to “peahen” and all of the corresponding pronouns to “she” and “her.” It seems probable that Carlisle had noticed his mistake and urged him to correct it.

This microscopic analysis of drafts supports and extends what was argued in the main text. While Lowell himself boasted of the liberties he took in his translations, he sometimes took those liberties unwittingly. Whether because of his own linguistic shortcomings or because of the limitations (and circumstances) of his informants, he worked with imperfect renderings of the originals. In the case of Pasternak’s “The Wedding,” numerous factors conspired against him. The trot he used was flawed by lexical misunderstandings and ambiguities, and these problems were compounded because the interlinear was produced quickly and written down sloppily. Whenever Lowell encountered difficulties in the trot, he relied on his poetic intuition to resolve them. After producing the interlinear, his informant ceased to have any influence whatsoever. When Lowell began work on “The Wedding” in earnest, his informant was not present and — given the furious pace of the revisions — further consultation was not a possibility. The interlinear served primarily as a point of departure, used for the very first draft and not thereafter. Each subsequent version moves further and further away from it, yet — ironically — still retains the errors of that initial version. Indeed, whatever mistakes, oversights, or ambiguities were in the trot became magnified when Lowell attempted to make the poem “ring right for me.”

---


22 "Flocks of pigeons taking off! In fast flight from dovecotes <…> For life, too, is only an instant, / Only the dissolving of ourselves / In the selves of all others / As if bestowing a gift / Only wedding nooses / Soaring in a window <…> (p. 535). If Lowell really was looking at Guerney, one wonders why he did not switch the poem’s title to “The Wedding.” In terms of the overall structure of *Imitations*, Pasternak’s pigeons make a convenient transition to Lowell’s free rendering of Rilke’s “Tauben, die draussen blieb” (“Pigeons”), the final poem in the book.

23 Cf. the final paragraph of the introduction to *Imitations* (xiii): “All my originals are important poems. Nothing like them exists in English, for the excellence of a poem depends on the unique opportunities of the native language. I have been almost as free as the authors themselves in finding ways to make them ring right for me.”