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ROBERTA SALA
(UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TORINO)
ORCID: 0000-0001-9847-1123

THE RIGHT TO ERR. POETRY TRANSLATION IN THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN NINA ISKRENKO AND JOHN HIGH

ABSTRACT

The article examines the English version of some poems by the Russian writer Nina Iskrenko (1951–1995), included in the collection *The Right to Err* (Washington 1995) and translated by the American poet John High. Considering High's observations in the introduction of the work, I will analyze the translation process as an existential dialogue between two intersecting poetics, leading to the liberation of language from any ideological connotations.

KEYWORDS: Nina Iskrenko, John High, poetry translation, Soviet metanarrative, formal equivalence

ABSTRACT

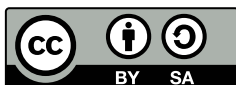
L'articolo esamina la resa in inglese di alcune poesie della scrittrice russa Nina Iskrenko (1951–1995), incluse nella raccolta *The Right to Err* (Washington, 1995) e tradotte dal poeta americano John High. Partendo dalle osservazioni di High nell'introduzione dell'opera, si metterà in evidenza come il processo traduttivo, inteso come una forma di dialogo tra due poetiche, conduca alla liberazione del linguaggio da connotazioni ideologiche.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Nina Iskrenko, John High, traduzione poetica, metanarrativa sovietica, equivalenza formale

INTRODUCTION

The Russian poet Nina Iskrenko (1951–1995) was a greatly influential figure within Moscow's unofficial culture¹ of the Seventies and Eighties. The author worked as a translator of scientific literature from English into Russian until 1989,

¹ After Stalin's death, a flourishing and diverse unofficial culture originated in Russia, allowing for the literary works forbidden by Soviet censorship to circulate illegally, mainly through samizdat



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when she decided to devote herself entirely to literature (High 1995: 105). She started to write her poems in the Seventies², and at the beginning of the Eighties she joined Kirill Koval'dži's poetry-writing seminar, whose participants in 1985 founded the artistic association Klub Poëzija in Moscow. Iskrenko gradually started to be considered the spiritual leader of the group, due mostly to her charismatic personality and creative energy, which emerged clearly during her unconventional poetry readings (Voznesenskij 1998: 11; Bunimovič 1998: 9). When she died in 1995, the Klub Poëzija ceased to exist, seeing in this tragic event the conclusion of their own poetic generation (High 2000: XXXIX). Indeed, Iskrenko's output was greatly representative of the evolution of the *vtoraja kul'tura* (second culture) during the Brežnev 'stagnation',³ due also to the fact that her oeuvre was deeply influenced by Moscow Conceptualism. In the Seventies she attended Il'ja Kabakov's attic-atelier in Moscow (Caramitti 2010), while from the mid-Eighties she cooperated with Dmitrij Prigov, who joined the Klub Poëzija as well. The importance of her artistic dialogue with the latter is connected to "the use of multiple personages and masks as a source of freedom" (Livšin 2010: 191), which contributed to shaping some major features of Iskrenko's works. A substantial part of her output is in fact based on the grotesque representation of the 'performance' of gender roles in Soviet Russia, aimed at raising the readers' awareness on the artificiality of all social stereotypes. The conceptualist character of her texts is also related to the presence of banal everyday words showing the emptiness of Soviet discourse. At the same time, her poetry was influenced by the metarealists⁴, whose "goal was [...] to complexify language, and through this complexification to reveal the multidimensionality of reality" (Wachtel 1995: 6). Quoting Michail Ėpštejn, "In Metarealism, the poetry of emphatic words, each word should mean more than what it once meant" (Ėpštejn 2000: 80). Finally, Iskrenko's works were in dialogue with the Russian avant-gardes of the beginning of last century, and mainly with the Oberiuty (Iskrenko 1995c: 97). Relying on these diverse literary influences, she developed a very personal poetics, primarily based on *polistilistika*⁵. This literary device implies the mingling of heterogeneous elements, styles, linguistic registers, contexts within the same text, in order to free literature from the univocal point of

editions. Between the end of the Fifties and perestroika, several heterogeneous literary and artistic manifestations originated within the space of the *vtoraja kul'tura* (second culture).

² Until 1987, when she published her first poem, *Fuga*, in the journal "Junost'", Iskrenko's works circulated only in the context of the unofficial culture.

³ John High defined "apolitical" (High 2000: XXX) the unofficial poetry of the Seventies and Eighties, since it was mostly based on formal experimentations aimed at showing the emptiness of Party discourse. Indeed, from the late Sixties it became clear that the Soviet metanarrative had failed (Popovič 2005: 628) and was maintained only through some empty rituals and the use of ideologized rhetoric (Esanu 2013: 67).

⁴ Some of the most important metarealist writers who joined the Klub Poëzija were: Ivan Ždanov, Vladimir Aristov, Aleksej Paršikov.

⁵ Iskrenko's poem *Gimn Polistilistike (Hymn to Polystylistics)*, first published in 1988, can be considered as the author's main declaration of poetics.

view established by ideology. Lastly, her works present elements of absurdism, grotesque realism and irony.

From 1987, due to the relaxation of censorship during perestroika, Iskrenko's output started to circulate outside the *vtoraja kul'tura* and, thanks to the American poet John High, some of her texts were even published posthumously in the United States. Besides including her works in the anthology of Russian unofficial poets *Crossing Centuries: The New Generation in Russian Poetry* (2000), in 1995 High translated (in collaboration with Patrick Henry and Katya Olmstad) and edited in Washington Iskrenko's collection *The Right to Err*. In this article the latter book will be analysed. Considering the close friendship and the artistic cooperation between the two authors, the translation process implemented by High will be examined, first of all, as a dialogue between poetics and poets. Besides, some of High's translation strategies will be investigated, taking into account his purpose to preserve the ethical and aesthetic aspects of Iskrenko's oeuvre, as well as her poems' internal rhythm, in the English texts.

VERSE TRANSLATION, OR THE INTERSECTION OF TWO POETICS

In his collection of essays *Con il testo a fronte*, Franco Buffoni presents his idea of poetry translation mostly relying on George Steiner's work *After Babel* (1975). According to the French author, translating literature is an “«existential experience»” (Buffoni 2016: 8) involving a translator driven by the need to reproduce within him/herself “«the creative act» which had given rise to the «original»”⁶ (*ibidem*). Considering this process in the perspective of “intertextuality”, each translation of a poem can be seen as a “verbal interaction with a foreign text, which is [absorbed], critically understood and actively transformed” (*ibidem*: 15) as a result of the flourishing exchange “between two poetics, the one of the translated author and the one of the translator” (*ibidem*: 17)⁷. The features of the verse resulting from this ‘dialogue’ partially depend on the momentary conditions related to its occurrence: “The same translator, even over a short space of time, translates in a different way. [...] The *poietic* encounter between source text and target text are like two arrows that intersect – and only in that exact moment do they intersect in that way”⁸ (Buffoni 2021). Furthermore, the dialogue with the original can be enriched by investigating the “avant-text” (Buffoni 2016: 13), namely the

⁶ The translations from Italian into English, unless otherwise specified, are by the author of this article.

⁷ In this connection, in an interview of 1979 with Eva Burch and David Chin, Josif Brodskij observed that each poet speaks his/her own ‘idiom’, regardless of the language he/she uses to express it (Brodskij 2015: 115).

⁸ Translated from Italian into English by Richard Dixon.

poem's drafts, marking the several phases of the creative process which have led to its final version.

As far as the collection *The Right to Err* is concerned, High's possibility to access the 'avant-text' of Iskrenko's works is represented by their intense conversations on her verse, as well as by their deep knowledge of each other's poetics. In the *Translator's Note* introducing the book, High explains that he first met Iskrenko in 1989, when the woman, together with some other members of the Klub Poëzija, visited San Francisco in order to give poetry readings in California. Their friendship and artistic collaboration began immediately, almost instinctively. At that time, Iskrenko was very popular among Moscow's *graždanye noči* (citizens of the night), being considered the "«soul of the Klub Poetry»" (High 1995: VII). Their consequent decision, in 1991, to translate each other's poems led to the publication not only of *The Right to Err*, but also of a collection of High's works rendered in Russian by Iskrenko⁹. From 1990 to 1995 the American writer stayed almost permanently in Moscow, where he experienced the unofficial culture's evolution (he was even made honorary member of the Klub Poëzija), as well as the fast, and sometimes violent, socio-cultural transformations occurring between perestroika and the USSR's collapse. In this connection, his translation of Iskrenko's poems can be defined as an 'existential experience' first of all since it originated within and from the context which inspired her output. High could witness her 'creative act' and even partially 'share' it during their poetic conversations and collaborations. As reported by the American writer, they often talked in Russian (especially at the beginning of their friendship)¹⁰, which allowed the translator to mentally penetrate the linguistic mechanisms from which her works emerged: "Nina and I have been able to sit down and discuss the poems, the translations, their various meanings and devices – our separate approaches to literature in general" (*ibidem*: VIII). High compares the translation process to a close relationship between two texts, going beyond the mere rendering from a language to another: "If successful, however, a relationship between the original and the translation is developed, a kind of marriage that by necessity creates even more echoes of the interaction between languages" (*ibidem*: VIII). These echoes, quoting Donatella Bisutti, are produced by the extreme intensity of the connection between the poet-translator and the translated-poet, which implies entering the creative mechanism of someone else's mind and thus "travel[ing] into the Other" (Bisutti 1989: 182). In the translator-translated relationship involving High and Iskrenko, the American poet was primarily driven by his declared purpose "to stay as close to the *intention* of the work [of Iskrenko] as possible" (High 1995a: VIII), as well as by his spontaneous attitude to respect the poems' internal rhythm. When a writer manages to enter the creative processes of another in fact some unconscious

⁹ The collection of poems *Vdol' po eë bedru*, containing the texts of John High translated by Nina Iskrenko, was published in Moscow in 1993 by the publisher Novaja Junost'.

¹⁰ From a conversation between the author of this article and John High, 25/04/2023.

mechanisms related to the text's musicality activate in his mind, which are similar to those inspiring the author and are instinctively reproduced in the translated text (Bisutti 1989: 179).

THE RIGHT TO ERR

In order to analyse High's translation strategies, it is first necessary to figure out the deep *intention* of Iskrenko's poetry. As observed by the American writer, his conversations with Iskrenko often revolved around going beyond ideology, to "see the world as it is"¹¹. Therefore, what he tried to preserve above all in his translations was "her spirit, that is to say the *performance* in her texts, but also the sense of freedom"¹². "Language itself is the final act" (High 1995a: IX), High concludes in his *Translator's Note*. This statement can be referred not only to the translation process, aimed at giving voice to Iskrenko's words in a foreign idiom, but also to the Russian writer's own poetics, based on the deep deconstruction of propaganda rhetoric and on the consequent renovation of language. Iskrenko's metalinguistic reflections led her to explore the essence of each single word, mostly through the aforementioned literary device of *polistilistika*. On this basis, the process of translation itself can be seen as a further way to free language from ideology, since it involves decontextualizing the Russian words by transposing them into another language. As observed by High, in translation "often a rupturing of the senses is involved, an overlapping of genres and folds of meaning, an abandonment of any master narrative that a language imposes through syntax or propaganda" (*ibidem*). It is precisely by striving to weaken, through his transposition in English, any ideological connotation of language that High could experience Iskrenko's own creative act.

This brings us to *The Right to Err*, which is the title of both Iskrenko's collection of poems and one of her essays included in it¹³. In the short paper, the Russian writer summarizes some major features of her poetics, reflecting on the value of mistake as a way to free each object from the boundaries of its linguistic definition:

[...] This dynamic of breakdown and self-correction explains the appearance in some of my texts of crossed-out words and phrases, rhythmical incongruities, the intrusion of the "filthy prose" into "unsullied poetry", and other *mistakes* that violate the harmonious serenity of exposition or, at the very least, its structural predictability. The right to err serves as a kind of grounding mechanism in that it underscores the distance between object and observer, and in particular between the dictionary definition of a word and the transfigured meaning that arises

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ The original version of the essay, written in 1991 and entitled *Pravo na ošibku*, was published in Iskrenko's collection of poems *Gosti* (Iskrenko 2001: 24–25).

in the embrace of context. To the list of effects enabled by such *mistakes* let's add a multiplicity of viewpoints, all bogged down in mutual discord and contradiction, and none mandated to assume a leading role (Iskrenko 1995b: 14).

By including several forms of 'mistakes' in her texts, represented by the intrusion of elements normally considered unusual in the domain of poetry, Iskrenko legitimizes the possibility to perceive reality from heterogeneous, non-ideologized perspectives. As suggested by the subtitle of her essay, '(or experiments in the demetaphorization of space)', the poetess' purpose is to show the profound emptiness of the Soviet master narrative, which was by then mostly perceived as merely metaphorical: "In Russia it is almost impossible to live. At bottom there has never been anything else and there still isn't anything, except metaphor" (Iskrenko 1995c: 87).

The performative character of Iskrenko's poems, where several masks, voices and social roles are mingled irreverently, reproduces precisely the nonsense of Soviet existence. As I will show in the following paragraphs, in order to reproduce this diversity in the English translation High tries to render, mostly through rhythmic equivalence and lexical precision, her intention to free the language of literature from its predetermined value.

WHAT GETS LOST. THE TRANSLATION OF RHYTHM

Reflecting upon the elements of Iskrenko's texts which have inevitably been lost in his translations, High states:

Sometimes rhyme and meter have been sacrificed in the English, sometimes whole fragments of a given poem have appeared untranslatable. In those cases, I have yielded. [...] Sacrifices are almost always involved. But the parts reflect the whole as they will in any given body; we have done our best to let them breathe their own life into the poems (High 1995a: VIII–IX).

According to the American writer, a certain number of sacrifices, concerning also the form¹⁴, are unavoidable, and they even contribute to conveying the 'spirit' of a poem. Therefore, loyalty to a text does not necessarily depend on the exact reproduction of the original's meter and rhyme scheme. His reflections on formal equivalence in the translation of poetry from Russian into English are part of a larger debate, which, mostly since the second half of last century, has also examined the possibility to use free verse for the translation of formal verse.

In her article *Whose Foreign is Foreign?*, Sibelan Forrester, besides stressing Russian and English poetry's common "history of syllabo-tonic verse (or [...])

¹⁴ In the conversation between John High and the author of this article, which occurred on April 25, 2023, the American poet stressed that rhymes were preserved when they sounded 'natural' also in the English text.

“accentual-syllabic verse)” (Forrester 2018: 186), underlines the presence of some differences between the two languages, which prove to be meaningful for everyone facing the issue of verse translation (*ibidem*: 185–186). To this end, she mentions Vladimir Nabokov’s essay *Problems of Translation: Onegin in English* (1955), where the writer observed that the Russian language includes a greater number of rhymes and polysyllabic words in comparison with English, and that Russian words, whose syllables are all pronounced, do not have a secondary stress. On these bases, in his English translation of Puškin’s ‘novel in verse’ (1964) the writer tends to favor content over full formal equivalence. Commenting on Nabokov’s reflections, Forrester adds that, as far as rhymes are concerned, in the English language they have a more ancient history than in Russian, and for this reason they are more likely to be perceived as cliché; moreover, longer words in English are usually “stylistically more elevated, and this can create an unwanted impact when they are used for their prosodic qualities alone” (Forrester 2018: 186) in the translated text.

The debate on formal equivalence in poetry translation, however, considers also the semantic and cultural value of prosody in the two languages. Indeed, across the Twentieth century free verse has become widespread in anglophone poetry, and nowadays it is the dominant option in élite or academic verse (Forrester 2018: 188). Contemporary poets writing in English tend to perceive meter as a sort of chain, limiting their creative freedom (Steele 1990). Rhythm, consequently, is most frequently scanned by alliterations and assonances, and the rhymes are preferably avoided in order not to make the lines predictable (Buffoni 2016: 221–222). On the contrary, Russian contemporary verse has preserved prosody as a mark of prestigious writing, even if free verse has recently become widespread. In Russia in fact meter and rhyme were dominant until the Eighties, and are still quite common in contemporary poetry (Niero 2019: 22). From the second half of last century to perestroika, literary experimentations implying the use of free verse were limited to the underground cultural context (Forrester 2018: 187), where, however, also formal verse continued to be used.

Analyzing several positions in the debate and considering the evolution of prosody in the two languages, Forrester concludes that neither full formal equivalence nor free verse can be considered ‘foreignizing’ options, the first not taking into account the departure from meter in English contemporary poetry, the latter not being entirely loyal to the original. Therefore, the author seems to suggest a translation strategy “that aim[s] for some amount of formal equivalence, though not for the most part absolute «congruence»” (Forrester 2018: 192). Going back to High’s considerations on meter and rhyme, his rendering of Iskrenko’s texts reflects exactly this idea. Furthermore, his choice to generally preserve the form, though occasionally sacrificing it, abandoning himself to ‘the right to err’, depends significantly on the semantic value of meter in the poetess’ oeuvre.

As mentioned in the introduction, the leader of Klub Poëzija’s output was meaningfully influenced by her artistic cooperation with Dmitrij Prigov. The main similarities between their poetics are: the chaotic mingling of several linguistic

registers, the ironic decontextualization of party language, aimed at showing its emptiness and violence, and the use of several masks, including that of the lyrical poet. In this connection, Alessandro Niero defines Prigov's poems as "«self-proclaimed traditional»" (Niero 2019: 282), since in them the metrical structures collide with an imperfect use of language and the ordinariness of the content. The aim of Prigov is to ridicule the authority of poetry and conventional language (*ibidem*). As far as Iskrenko is concerned, in her works she alternates metrical rigor and free verse. Like in Prigov's oeuvre, the function of the form is to provide an appearance of 'high' poetry only to desecrate it from within, through both the introduction of prosaic words and low linguistic registers, and the occasional disruption, across the text, of its metrical pattern.

Commenting upon Prigov's poems, Alessandro Niero¹⁵ claims that, in order to convey the author's "disguise as a poetaster" (*ibidem*: 284), the translator should reproduce the contrast between the form's rigor and the themes' ordinariness, simulating "an imperfect command" (*ibidem*) of the target language. Therefore, free verse should be avoided when the original poem is written in formal verse, even if in Italian contemporary poetry, like in the American one, meter and rhymes are not the most common option. Also for this reason, being perceived by the target language's audience as an estranging sign of loftiness, scanned rhythm contributes to conveying the parodic effect of the original text. Niero's translation strategy is mostly paralleled by High's choices concerning the rendering of the form in Iskrenko's texts. As stated above, when formal equivalence does not compromise meaning, the American writer avoids irregular metrical patterns; in some cases, however, he uses a different meter than that of the original. Besides, High conveys the rhythm of Iskrenko's poems also by preserving repetitions, alliterations, the almost complete lack of punctuation marks and the (often unconventional) visual structure of her texts. His formal choices are related to lexical accuracy as well: in order to render Iskrenko's intent to unveil the grotesque artificiality of Soviet language, the translator tries first of all to preserve the rough ordinariness of her verbal associations.

FOREIGNIZING AND DOMESTICATING ELEMENTS IN THE TRANSLATION OF ISKRENKO'S POEMS

To conclude my essay, I will examine some of High's translation choices in relation to his declared purpose of being loyal to Iskrenko's *intention*, conveying the poetess' irreverent approach to literature, as well as her revolutionary creative energy. For instance, in the text *Bit' ili ne bit'*, (Iskrenko 1995a: 49–51) the American writer

¹⁵ Alessandro Niero has translated from Russian into Italian a significant number of poems written by Prigov, which appeared in anthologies such as *Otto poeti russi* (2005) and *Trentatré testi* (2011).

seems to consider prosody as the ‘dominant’ of the lines, due to its considerable semantic value. Iskrenko’s poem ironically recalls Hamlet’s renowned soliloquy from the homonymous Shakespearean tragedy, its title being an imperfect quotation of the opening words ‘To be or not to be’ (*‘Byt’ ili ne byt’* in the Russian translation). The assonance between the verbs *byt’* and *bit’* (which occurs also in English, with the verbs ‘to be’ and ‘to beat’) generates a word game which wipes out the profound philosophical meaning of Hamlet’s words. The existential issues addressed by the Shakespearean hero are here related to a simple, prosaic object, namely an egg¹⁶. By ironically exploring its essence, the poet parodies the solemn attitude of traditional poetry, questioning, like Prigov, its effectiveness for the investigation of socio-political, philosophical and even sentimental matters (Niero 2019: 282)¹⁷.

Бить или не бить	To Beat or Not To Beat
Яйцо такое круглое снаружи Яйцо такое круглое внутри	An egg so round on the outside An egg so round on the inside
Яйцо такое земнее снаружи Яйцо такое летнее внутри	An egg so wintery outside An egg so summery inside
Яйцо такое первое снаружи а в нем такая курица внутри	An egg so primal on the outside And such a hen inside
И три его косые вертикали Как три подкладки в старом ридикюле Как три нимфетки у фонтана Сен-Микеле Как кегли нынче здесь а завтра снова здесь Дусь а Дусь Отцепись Сказано Не в свои сани не садись Из чужого яйца не выкатывайся [...] (Iskrenko 1995a: 49)	And three of its slanting verticals like three linings in an old handbag And like three nymphets at the fountain San Michele Like bowling pins here today and still here tomorrow Dusia, Hey Dusia Get lost I told you don’t try to wear somebody else’s shoes Don’t roll out from somebody else’s egg [...] (Iskrenko 1995a: 48)

The first three stanzas of the Russian poem are written in iambic pentameters, recalling the metrical pattern of Hamlet’s soliloquy in the tragedy by Shakespeare. Since the contrast between the use of meter and the nonsensical character of the

¹⁶ In Russian imagery, the ‘egg’ generates a series of associations: for instance, it is related to Orthodox Easter, and it recalls the Fabergé Eggs of late imperial Russia. Moreover, in 1925 Michail Bulgakov published the short story *Rokovye Jajca* (*The Fatal Eggs*), showing the dangers of the Soviet myth of technological and scientific progress.

¹⁷ In Russian culture, as explained by Niero, poetry has always been related to socio-political engagement (Niero 2019: 282).

content conveys the author's intention, High's translation is written in iambs as well. In the English version, however, the pentameters are replaced by tetrameters, apart from the sixth line, where the iambic feet are three. The alternate rhymes of the original, realized through the reiteration of the same words, become rhyming couplets in the English text. Moreover, the presence of the form *zemnee* (instead of *zimnee*, meaning 'wintry'), playfully shaped on the model of the adjective *letnee* ('summery') in the next line, is paralleled by High's choice of the unusual term 'wintery', due also to prosodic reasons. From the fourth stanza, a gradual break-up of the form occurs. The rigor of the first three stanzas in fact is not maintained in the following two, where some lines are much shorter than the others and seem to visually break up, while the iambic feet are sometimes replaced by trochees and irregular metrical patterns. In his translation of the fourth and the fifth stanzas, High as well is less concerned with formal uniformity, aiming to convey Iskrenko's intention to parody classical verse and deconstruct its authority. The American writer's loyalty to the rhythm of the Russian poem is given also by his choice to preserve the repetition of words and phrases, occurring especially in the opening stanzas, and to avoid punctuation marks, apart from a comma after the name "Dusia". Some few sacrifices concerning the musicality of the text, however, are present in the translation. For instance, the fluent rhythm created by the alliteration of the sibilant sounds at the end of the fourth stanza (*a zavtra/snova zdes'*) is not reproduced in the English version.

Lastly, the grotesque realism of the poetess' works is conveyed by High through accuracy in the rendering of the vocabulary. As we have seen, Iskrenko's irony is directed not only to language and the literary tradition, but also to everyday life in the USSR. Towards the end of the poem in fact, the egg is personified to represent the typical features of Soviet 'masculinity'.

<p>[...] Яйцо не раз товарищей спасало Яйцо мужало крепло и стреляло будило нас на утренней заре [...] (Iskrenko 1995a: 51)</p>	<p>[...] An egg that saved its comrades more than once An egg that matured became strong fired shots and woke us up at dawn [...] (Iskrenko 1995a: 50)</p>
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In these lines, Iskrenko introduces the ideologically connoted noun *tovariščej* in relation to the 'egg'. As stated by Niero in his comment on Prigov's poems, the use of words representing "ethical, political, cultural models which have become ingrained in everyday language [allows to] disclose their possible semantic emptiness and to denounce their either latent or manifest «aggressiveness»" (Niero 2019: 281). The same can be said considering Iskrenko's lexical choices; therefore, in his translation High opts for the politically connoted English equivalent 'comrade'.

Another literary device frequently found in Iskrenko's output, aimed at questioning further the prestige of literature and the effectiveness of language, is the presence of quotations from classical Russian works and references to renowned

Russian authors within prosaic contexts. In the former case, the criticalities faced by the translator concern mostly their identifiability for a foreign reader (Niero 2019: 292–293). For instance, seven out of the nine stanzas composing Iskrenko's poem *Seks-Pjatiminutka* (Iskrenko 1995a: 75–77) contain the repetition of the phrase 'melo melo', namely the opening words of Boris Pasternak's famous poem *Zimnjaja noč* (*Winter Night*, 1946)¹⁸. The text written by the leader of Klub Poëzija denounces both the model of masculinity and the myth of progress glorified by propaganda. Indeed, Iskrenko describes a mechanical sexual intercourse through metaphors and similes concerning the field of industry and technology¹⁹. The tone is ironic but also tragically grotesque, since it shows the moral corruption of human relationships in Soviet society. In this context, the inclusion of a quotation from Pasternak's work demystifies the lyrical value of the text and of poetry in general. *Zimnjaja noč* is in fact highly emblematic in Russian cultural imagery, symbolizing literature's ability to represent the intensity of love. Thanks also to some musical transpositions of the poem²⁰, its lines prove to be immediately recognizable for a Russian reader. In order to convey Iskrenko's irreverent attitude, in this case High chooses a domesticating strategy. Indeed, since an anglophone reader is likely not to be as familiar with the quote as the Russian audience, the American writer reports its translation in italics and cites the source in the footnote: "From Boris Pasternak's poem, «Winter Night,» in *Doctor Zhivago*" (Iskrenko 1995d: 74). High draws the English version of the phrase from Bernard Guilbert Guerney's translation of the text²¹; however, in order to mark Iskrenko's irreverent attitude, he replaces the conjunction 'and' with the symbol '&'²².

[...] Мело-мело весь уик-энд в Иране [...]	[...] <i>It snowed & snowed</i> The whole weekend in Iran [...]
Мело-мело весь месяц из тумана [...]	<i>It snowed & snowed</i> all month from the fog [...]
Мело-мело Мело [...] (Iskrenko 1995a: 75)	<i>It snowed & snowed</i> & snowed [...] (Iskrenko 1995a: 74)

¹⁸ Boris Pasternak wrote *Zimnjaja noč* in 1946, and included it in the seventeenth chapter of his novel *Doktor Živago*, entitled *The Poems of Jurij Živago*. The book was published for the first time in 1957, by the Italian publisher Feltrinelli, while the first version in English was edited in 1958 in London (Collins and Harvill Press; translation by Max Hayward and Manya Harari).

¹⁹ In this connection, it should be noticed that the translator reproduces the grotesque tone of the poem through extreme accuracy in rendering the technical vocabulary ironically used by the author.

²⁰ For instance, in 1966 Aleksandr Galič included some lines of *Zimnjaja Noč* in his *Pamjati Pasternaka*, while in 1978 Aleksandr Gradsckij set the whole poem to music.

²¹ Guerney's translation of *Zimnjaja noč* was published in the English edition of Pasternak's novel of 1958.

²² This device is used in all the translations of Iskrenko's poems included in *The Right to Err*.

Also in her poem *Gimn Polistilistike* (Iskrenko 1991: 28–30) Iskrenko shows a playful approach towards Russian literary models by juxtaposing the figure of Fëdor Dostoevskij to the image of a: “curious grandmother/running bare-legged” (Iskrenko 1995a: 34). At the same time, the renowned Russian author’s patronymic is spelt in its short version (*Michalyč* instead of *Michajlovič*). In his translation, however, High does not preserve this aspect, probably considering that an anglophone reader would not immediately recognize the short form. Iskrenko’s ludic intention is moved, also in this case, to the conjunction preceding the writer’s name, spelt as ‘&’.

<p>[...] Только любовь любопытная бабушка бегает в гольфах и Федор Михалыч Доста- тоевский [...] (Iskrenko 1991: 30)</p>	<p>[...] Only love like a curious grandmother running bare-legged & Fyodor Mikhailovič Dostoevskij [...] (Iskrenko 1995a: 34)</p>
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CONCLUSION

Considering the examples shown in the previous paragraph, as well as High’s reflections upon his approach to Iskrenko’s lines, it can be concluded that his translation strategies are mostly ‘foreignizing’, since he generally manages to convey the Russian poet’s authentic voice through the filter of his own ‘poetics’. Indeed, in order to be loyal to the leader of Klub Poëzija’s spirit, the writer deeply investigates and even tries to experience the internal rhythm of her poems, seen as the source itself of Iskrenko’s creative impulse. Some domesticating choices are also found in his translations, concerning both the content and the form, but only insofar as they prove to be necessary in order to move the reader toward the cultural reality described in the original texts. Besides, irregular metrical patterns and free verse are chosen only in those cases when the Russian lines are not written in meters.

Since it originates first of all from his dialogues with Iskrenko, High’s translation process represents a shared ‘negotiation’ of meaning, aimed at reproducing the Russian poet’s free attitude in the English language, and implying mistake as a further possibility of emancipation from master narratives. At the same time, semantic and formal equivalence are not conceived as restrictions by the American writer; on the contrary, due to the ethical and artistic closeness between the translated-poet and the poet-translator, he instinctively pursues them. The result is a deep ‘poietic’ dialogue, evolving into language liberation and carried out beyond the boundaries of languages. As stressed by High: “A guiding light

throughout the work, both on the page and on the stage, has been to stay clear of ideology. We have not attempted to erase the foreignness of the text, the boundaries between languages, or to avoid the inevitable transformation that evolves in the process of rendering a poem” (High 1995a: IX).

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