

Review Article: Anthony Briggs' Translation of War and Peace

Hugh McLean

University Of California, Berkeley

Leo Tolstoy. *War and Peace*. A New Translation by Anthony Briggs, with an Afterword by Orlando Figes. N.p.: Viking, 2006. 1,412 pp. Cloth.

Yet another translation of *War and Peace*! By my count Anthony Briggs's English version is the seventh to appear since the pioneering effort by Clara Bell (1886, twenty years late!), who translated from a French rendition previously made by a "Russian lady." In an essay published earlier in these pages ("I Come as a Thief: Notes on the Retranslation of *War and Peace*," *Tolstoy Studies Journal* XIV (2002), 100-108), Briggs surveyed in some detail the products of his predecessors. Much of the same material is repeated in an article in the *New Statesman* (19 September 2005) and in yet another version appended to the translation (1404-07). Briggs describes his own work as an "arduous task," "the 600,000 word product of four years' work and 4,000 hours at the computer." We must commend and be grateful to Briggs for this immense investment of time and energy, especially since the result is so good and will undoubtedly enable many new readers to experience this great novel with a directness and immediacy perhaps less accessible in earlier versions. The translation is unquestionably a major achievement, and no carping remarks in this review are intended to detract from this recognition.

We turn first, however, to Briggs's comparative self-assessment. Ostensibly making no claim to be rescuing Anglophone readers from the gaffes and gaucheries of his predecessors, Briggs writes of the latter with manifest respect; but it turns out that each of his kudos carries a little sting in its tail. Constance Garnett, called "the admirable early doyen [shouldn't it be doyenne?]" of Russian literature in English transla-

tion," "produced a sensitive version in 1904; she had a delicate feel for language, *though* [my italics] there are some errors." The version by Louise and Aylmer Maude is "a classic"; "the errors that it contains are so few as to be negligible" [*but* there are some]. A more stinging dart is slung at the Maudes as part of a broader sexist sally. All the major *War and Peace* translations of the last century have been made by *women*: Constance Garnett, Rosemary Edmonds (1957, updated 1978), Ann Dunnigan (1968), and even the Maudes because "Louise contributed more than Aylmer" to their version (no evidence is cited for the latter statement). It seems that these refined, cultivated, upper-class women just couldn't render the coarse language of "soldiers, peasants, and all the lower orders." Of course, Tolstoy himself was hindered by Victorian taboos from reproducing much of this pungent *matershchina* in all its macho glory. Indeed, such language did not make its way onto English printed pages until much later (one remembers the barely tolerated "fuggin" of Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* as late as 1947), and onto Russian pages until the collapse of the USSR. We will examine some examples of Briggs's testosterone-rich efforts below.

Briggs makes a reasonably good case that new translations are needed every generation or so, on the grounds that new readers need "phrasing more closely attuned to their way of speaking," though following that reasoning it seems that we must pity poor new *Russian* readers, who must still experience the novel via Tolstoy's ever more antiquated prose. Without, mercifully, naming the names of their sources, Briggs gives some very funny examples of "infelicities" presumably perpetrated by these refined ladies: "Natasha went

about the house flushing," "He exposed himself on the parade ground," and "He ejaculated with a grimace."

Citing John Rutherford on *Don Quixote*, Briggs divides translators into "cavaliers," who take liberties, and "puritans," who strive for maximum accuracy at the expense of "naturalness." Briggs thinks his predecessors have erred on the side of Puritanism; he therefore tried to move somewhat in the other direction.

In addition to his arguments about translating, Briggs in his Afterword also provides some general evaluative comments about the novel as a whole and its place in Tolstoy's career. These are generally helpful enough for a first reader, but one is disturbed by some factual errors. "But at the age of eighty-two Tolstoy, estranged from all his family except for one daughter, Alexandra, fled with her, for a monastery" (1402). In fact, Tolstoy was by no means estranged from all his family except Alexandra. He did not flee with her; she was left behind and only joined him later. Briggs's "for a monastery" is ambiguous. To see her, Tolstoy did go to a convent where his sister Mar'ia was living, but he did not stay there and certainly had no intention of becoming a monk. Of Countess Sofia Andreevna, Briggs writes, "A woman of striking intelligence, she had a good education at home and at university" (1404). Of course, no women were admitted to Russian universities until much later, and since she married at eighteen, Sofia Andreevna would hardly have had time to attend one anyway. In the list of characters (1392), Anatole Kuragin is identified as the "elder son" of Prince Vasily and Hippolyte as the "younger" one, whereas the opposite is the case. Such carelessness does not bode well for the accuracy of the "cavalier" translation itself.

A brief second afterword, by Orlando Figes, is appended to the Briggs translation and given equal billing with Briggs on the title page and dust cover. A historian, Figes does not seize the opportunity to comment on Tolstoy's treatment of history nor on his musings about the philosophy of history. Figes only stands in awe before the majesty of the great work and tells us that it embodies the very essence of all it means to be a Russian and is a "triumphant affirmation of human life in all its richness and complexity." Do readers really need to be told that after 1,400 pages?

For his Russian text, from several that have some claim to be considered "canonical," Briggs has chosen

the one developed in the 1960s by a team from the Tolstoy Museum in Moscow led by the redoubtable Evelina Zaidenshnur. Their aim was to create a maximally "pure Tolstoyan" text, purging it of all additions, corrections, and emendations inserted by others, in particular by Tolstoy's friend and occasional literary agent, Nikolai Strakhov. It could be argued that since Strakhov acted at Tolstoy's behest, if not with his specific authorization for each correction, and received his thanks, his corrections should therefore stand. However, Strakhov was a right-wing Slavophile philosopher and journalist, decidedly in bad odor in Soviet times. How could such a man be allowed to contaminate the great national masterpiece? Wisely or not, Briggs elected to use the Zaidenshnur text, but without its French, translating all the latter into English on the grounds that "few readers today have a sound knowledge of French." In Briggs's source, the Zaidenshnur edition (the twenty-volume *Собрание сочинений* of 1961-65), the French is left intact, and translations are provided in footnotes, but Briggs thinks such footnotes would "load down" the book.

In assessing the translation let us start there. This seems to me a bad decision, though others, including the Maudes, have done the same. Even for readers who know little or no French, there is some deprivation in losing the effect of seeing the elegant French habitually spoken by Russian aristocrats in the early nineteenth century. Take the very first sentence in the novel: "Eh bien, mon prince, Gênes et Lucques ne sont plus que des apanages, des поместья, de la famille Buonaparte." The insertion of the single Russian word, поместья (estates), with all its connotations for Russian estate-owning aristocrats, is of course lost in Briggs's rendition: "Well, Prince, Genoa and Lucca are now nothing more than estates taken over by the Buonaparte family," essentially correct, though one might argue that "taken over" is an unwarranted insertion. Later in the same paragraph Anna Pavlovna again inserts a Russian phrase, "мой верный раб," once said by Prince Vasily, no doubt playfully, to describe his relationship to her; again this effect is lost in Briggs's homogenizing translation, "faithful slave" (he leaves out the *мой*).

A similar case occurs in One: II.10, where the cynical snob and diplomat Bilibin occasionally mixes Russian with his usual French. Austria, he explains, is offended because its provinces have been devastated:

“on dit que le *pravoslavnoe* est terrible pour le pillage.” The use of the religious term to refer to the Russian peasant troops has a mocking, condescending flavor, that of an effete aristocrat holding a perfumed handkerchief to his nose when talking to *le pravoslavnoe*. Briggs makes a valiant attempt to reproduce the effect: “They say the Holy Russian army is good at looting.” But of course the Russian army was never called “holy” by anyone.

Let us examine the actual passage where Briggs believes he has outdone his female predecessors in rendering the vigorous language of peasant soldiers. It occurs in Three: II.31, in the thick of the battle of Borodino. Tolstoy conveys the artificial gaiety of the soldiers, who shield themselves with humor from the horror and fear around and in them:

Ай, нашему барину чуть шляпку не сбила,—показывая зубы, смеялся на Пьера краснорожий шутник. [...]

— Эх, нескладная,—укоризненно прибавил он на ядро, попавшее в колесо и ногу человека.

That word *нескладная*, applied to a shell, has proved a stumbling block for previous translators, and Briggs triumphantly cites the absurdities they have come up with: “Hey, awkward hussy” (Garnett), “awkward baggage” (Maudes), and several others. Briggs is also certainly right to observe that “no soldier” in the heat of battle ever uttered anything like these bookish concoctions. (One even wonders whether contemporary young English-speakers, perhaps especially Americans, have ever heard the word “baggage” used as a derogatory term for women.) Here is Briggs’s version:

“Phew, almost had our gent’s hat off!” said the red-faced joker with a laugh, showing his toothy grin. [...] “Ooh! Nasty bitch that one!” he added, cursing a cannonball as it smashed into a wheel and took a man’s leg off. (882)

“Nasty bitch” is certainly a great improvement over “awkward baggage,” and the rest of the passage is vividly rendered, though I have my doubts about “gent’s” (which reminds me too much of signs on toilet doors in cheap bars) and see no justification for moving back from two sentences later the information that the victim’s leg was torn off; at this point Tolstoy says only

that he was struck in the leg. Of course, these are minor, minor matters, and from Briggs’s version the Anglophone reader can certainly get a powerful impression of the confusion and horror—and the excitement—of Borodino, as perceived through the defamiliarized eyes of Pierre, who does not belong there at all and whose presence is itself an absurdity.

A reviewer can only analyze a very few, perhaps unrepresentative, samples from such a huge work as this, but I must include peace as well as war. Let us jump to the Epilogue, the scene at the Bezukhov household where the fictional part of the novel ends. I take a single paragraph from I: 14. All the main surviving characters are there, the Bezukhoffs and the Rostovs, along with now fifteen-year-old Nikolenka Bolkonsky and Denisov as a guest. Pierre has just returned from his conspiratorial meetings in Petersburg and is relating all the latest news. Tolstoy characteristically takes Nikolenka’s as the naïve consciousness through which we perceive the scene, infused with his especial adoration of Pierre, his late father’s closest friend:

Мари, как он похож становится,—прибавил он, обращаясь к графине Марье.

— На отца?—сказал мальчик, багрово вспыхнув и снизу вверх глядя на Пьера восхищенными, блестящими глазами. Пьер кивнул ему головой и продолжал прерванный детьми рассказ. Графиня Марья работала на руках по канве; Наташа, не спуская глаз, смотрела на мужа, Николай и Денисов вставали, спрашивали трубки, курили, брали чай у Сони, сидевшей уныло и упорно за самоваром, и расспрашивали Пьера. Кудрявый болезненный мальчик, с своими блестящими глазами, сидел никем не замечаемый в уголку, и, только поворачивая кудрявую голову на тонкой шее, выходившей из отложных воротничков, в ту сторону, где был Пьер, он изредка вздрагивал и что-то шептал сам с собою, видимо испытывая какое-то новое и сильное чувство.

Here is Briggs:

“Marie, he’s getting more and more like him, isn’t he?” he added, turning to Countess Marya.

"Like my father?" said the boy, blushing to the roots of his hair and gazing up at Pierre with blissful, glittering eyes. Pierre nodded, and went on with the conversation that had been interrupted by the children. Countess Marya had some canvas embroidery to work on, Natasha sat there with her eyes fixed on her husband, and Nikolay and Denisov put question after question to Pierre while getting to their feet, asking for a pipe, having a smoke and accepting cups of tea from a gloomy Sonya, doggedly manning the samovar. The delicate curly-headed boy sat unnoticed in a corner, his eyes gleaming and his curly head on its slender neck protruding from a turned-down collar never moved except to follow Pierre round the room. Now and then he shivered, and mumbled something under his breath, evidently thrilled by some powerful new sensation. (1303)

The translation seems to me notably successful. Briggs manages to make his English convey the transition from the perfective verbs *сказал... кивнул*, indicating single narrative events, and the imperfective ones, used for description of continuing or repeated actions. The cavalier transposition of *рассрашивали* might not seem necessary to a puritan, but I see no harm in it. Briggs has simplified the complex syntax of the last Russian sentence, with its succession of gerunds and active participles, breaking it into two. I also see no harm in this. No doubt Briggs regards this as one of those "sentences of excessive length" of which Tolstoy was frequently guilty and which a cavalier translator is apparently free to correct. Of course no doubt a puritan would argue that this is not translating, but rewriting, and I see no way of resolving this fundamental opposition.

Here, for comparison, is the Maudes' version:

"How like he is growing, Mary!" he added, addressing Countess Mary.

"Like my father?" asked the boy, flushing crimson and looking up at Pierre with bright, ecstatic eyes.

Pierre nodded, and went on with what he had been saying when the children had interrupted. Countess Mary sat down doing woolwork; Natasha did not take her eyes off her husband. Nicholas and Denisov rose, asked for their pipes, smoked, went

to fetch more tea from Sonya—who sat weary but resolute at the samovar—and questioned Pierre. The curly-headed, delicate boy sat with shining eyes unnoticed in a corner, starting every now and then and muttering something to himself, and evidently experiencing a new and powerful emotion as he turned his curly head, with his thin neck exposed by his turned-down collar, toward the place where Pierre sat.

The Maudes simply equate the perfective and imperfective verbs, making no difference between the repeated actions of Rostov, Denisov, and later Nikolenka and the single ones of Nikolenka, earlier, and Pierre. Briggs undoubtedly scores decisively on this point. The Maudes manage, somewhat laboriously, to preserve as single Tolstoy's last sentence, and personally I prefer it that way (but then I suppose I lean toward puritanism).

One more comparison, the famous passage where Kutuzov, lying in bed at night, gets the happy news that Napoleon has left Moscow and is retreating westward (Four: II.17):

Болховитинов рассказал все и замолчал, ожидая приказания. Толь начал было говорить что-то, но Кутузов перебил его. Он хотел сказать что-то, но вдруг лицо его сщурилось, сморщилось; он, махнув рукой на Толя, повернулся в противную сторону, к красному углу избы, черневшему от образов.

— Господи, Создатель мой! Внял ты молитве нашей...—дрожащим голосом сказал он, сложив руки.—Спасена Россия. Благодарю тебя, Господи!—И он заплакал.

Briggs's version:

Bolkhovitinov told him everything and then stopped, waiting for orders. Toll was on the point of saying something, but Kutuzov checked him. He tried to say something himself, but suddenly his face wrinkled and crumpled. Waving at Toll, he turned away to the far corner of the hut, which was blackened with candle-smoke around the holy icons. "Lord, my Creator! Thou hast heard our prayer..." he said in a trembling voice with his hands clasped together. "Russia is saved. I thank Thee, O Lord." And he burst into tears. (1141)

The Maudes' version:

Bolkhovítinov told him everything and was then silent, awaiting instructions. Toll was beginning to say something, but Kutúzov checked him. He tried to say something, but his face suddenly puckered and wrinkled; he waved his arm at Toll and turned to the opposite side of the room, to the corner darkened by the icons that hung there.

"O Lord, my Creator, Thou hast heard our prayer..." said he in a tremulous voice with folded hands. "Russia is saved. I thank Thee, O Lord!" and he wept.

Briggs's version wins this round, in my opinion. The reason for the blackened walls above the icons is unclear from the Maudes' version, which implies that the icons somehow did it themselves. The Maudes were also wrong to run the last two sentences together, losing the Biblical effect of "И он заплакал." But I must say that I think "And he wept" is better, more Biblical, than "And he burst into tears."

I thought of comparing a characteristic passage of philosophical discourse, for instance from the second part of the epilogue, but I did not find enough significant differences to make such a comparison worthwhile. Both seemed perfectly adequate to me.

Both Briggs and the Maudes supply explanatory notes to illuminate readers concerning matters that Russians of Tolstoy's time knew from experience. The Maudes' notes have the marked advantage of appearing at the bottom of the page, whereas Briggs's are tucked inconveniently away at the back of the book. This is of course not Briggs's fault, but his publishers'. For some reason endnotes are more popular with publishers, but surely not with readers, than footnotes. Another responsibility of the publishers (and the economics of book-publishing and book-binding) is the fact that unlike the Zaidenshnur Russian edition, in four comfortable volumes, and some earlier English editions, the Briggs translation is packed into one heavy and unwieldy tome, tiring to hold and very unsuitable for reading in bed.

Both Briggs and the Maudes provide a chronology or summary so that readers can review both public and

private events in the order they occur. Briggs's version has the advantage of preserving Tolstoy's divisions: "volume" (*том*), "part" (*часть*), and unnamed sections marked by Roman numerals (changed to Arabic by Briggs and called "chapters"). The Maudes devised a numbering system all their own, ignoring Tolstoy's "volumes" altogether and dividing the text into fifteen "books" plus two "epilogues." The Maudes also do not follow Tolstoy's division into numbered sections or "chapters," making arbitrary divisions of their own.

I also much prefer Briggs's use of Russian first names. I have never believed there were persons named Nicholas Rostov or Andrew Bolkonsky, as they appear in the Maudes' version. Perhaps one should be grateful that they did not transform Ilya Rostov into Elijah, and allowed Natasha to remain Natasha, not turning her into "Natty." The Maudes do have the virtue of marking the stress on all proper names left in Russian. Briggs lets readers stress as they like (they will invariably be wrong, but does it matter?). Briggs uses the standard British system of transliteration, which works well enough for all the names except Nikolay, which seems to me too likely to rhyme with "hay."

What about an overall grade? The dust jacket of Briggs's translation quotes such eminences as John Bayley and the late, lamented Robert Maguire rating Briggs's *War and Peace* above all others. It is undoubtedly a very good translation. Briggs knows Russian extremely well, and he has a good ear for both literary and colloquial English. Through his translation English-speaking readers will experience *War and Peace* with much enjoyment, reasonably close to what Russian readers gain from the original. But is it unquestionably *the best*? I am afraid I cannot quite concur in this unqualified judgment. When compared with the Maudes, as I have done so cursorily here, it seems to me better in some respects, not so good in others. No doubt the quest for the perfect translation will continue; the immortality of this novel seems assured.

Notes

1. I wish to thank Robert Hughes, Brian Horowitz, and especially Donna Orwin for advice concerning this review (whose opinions they do not necessarily share).