

Tripping Measures

A SECOND BOOK OF RUSSIAN VERSE. Edited by C. M. Bowra. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1949. 154 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by BABETTE DEUTSCH

THE author of this review is unhappily familiar with the difficulties of translation, which become particularly acute when the verse to be rendered into English is written in a form as full of polysyllabic rhymes and tripping measures as the Russian. But sympathetic as she cannot help but be with Mr. Bowra and his fellow translators, she finds it equally difficult to accept the results of their labors. There are better versions extant of a number of the pieces that he includes, and the work of some of the most interesting poets represented, among them Blok, Mayakovsky, and Pasternak, is offered in versions that do nothing like justice to their performance. There is a scant handful of good pieces here, notably those by the hands of such accomplished writers of verse as Frances Cornford and the late Oliver Elton. Mr. Bowra, who is responsible for the larger number of the translations, makes skilful use of a Housman pattern in his version of Tyutchev's "Spring." This success stands out the more against his many failures. Sometimes the rhythm is ineptly handled, sometimes the rhymes obtrude disagreeably, more often the diction is awkward. A few instances should suffice to indicate the lapses of taste that abound. Thus, both meter and diction destroy the charm of the rendering of a simple "Song" by Koltzov:

One life in the world
I led with him alone,
Gave my soul to his soul,
Joined my life to his own.

One of Akhmatova's delicate lyrics is given a sword-thrust with the line: "From the earth and skies you would me sever." A poem of Blok's contains these remarkable lines:

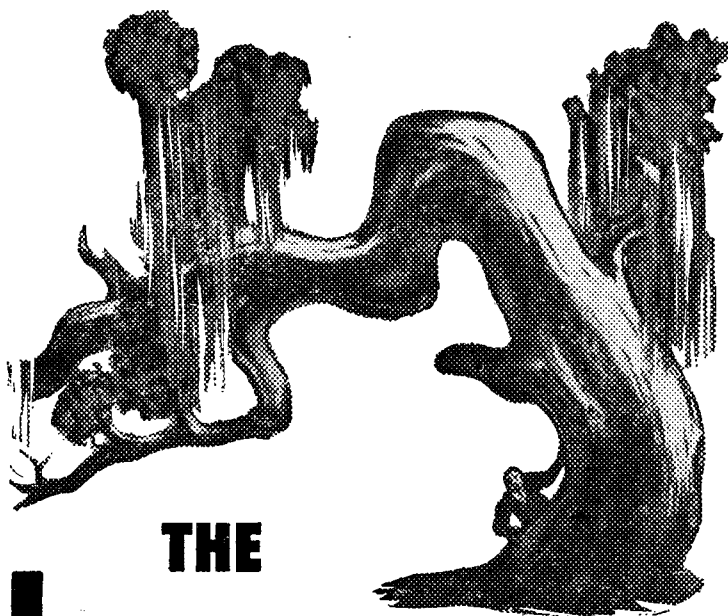
And it that was before so tender
Strange and another has become

Mr. Bowra is not the sole offender. There are other choice instances, one of the more notable being: "What to the maiden has happened?" But after all, he chose these pieces. One turns the pages asking: "But what to the poets has happened?"

Babette Deutsch is co-compiler with her husband, Avrahm Yarmolinsky, of "Modern Russian Poetry and Russian Poets."

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Seeing Things

OUT OF THE PAST

HIS name, printed on a closed door, caught my eye as I hurried down the corridor to the office of the faculty member who was to guide me to my morning lecture.

Let's say the black letters spelled "Ben Emery." They did not, but that is as near to what they did spell as I dare come. He would hate me if I used his real name. He was always the shyest, the most retiring of men.

I looked twice at those letters on the door. I looked at them with disbelief and excitement. It must be some other Ben Emery, thought I. It couldn't be mine. It couldn't be the one who taught me English in prep school. That was thirty years ago, and I had not heard of him or seen him since. Still it was worth taking the chance.

"Do you happen to know if the Ben Emery whose office is down the hall ever taught at a prep school in New Jersey?" I asked the man who was to guide me around this huge Midwestern campus.

"I don't think he did. At least I never heard of it."

This did not dash my hopes. It raised them. Such silence about himself sounded like the Ben Emery I remembered.

"Would you mind asking him?" I inquired. "Because, if he did teach there, I had the good luck to be one of his students."

Left alone, I was almost sorry I had made such a request. I very much wanted to see Ben Emery again. Over the years I had thought of him many times when trying to write or when enjoying this book or that. There were things I wanted to thank him for. But this business of stirring up memories, of confronting the past with the present or the present with the past, is perilous to say the least. Conrad in quest of his youth is Conrad in quest of what cannot be found, as Leonard Merrick and all the rest of us have discovered to our sorrow.

Two voices reached me from the hall. One of them, though very dry and firm, was nonetheless gentle. Unmistakably it was Ben Emery's. I had heard it too often in class, or when as housemaster he would assemble his dozen or so charges in his room at bedtime to read to us, not to recognize it at once. It had not changed a bit.

I wondered, of course, what he would look like. Thirty years for mortals are not merely three decades. They are the equivalent of several geological periods. Ben Emery had always seemed old to me. Not venerable, mind you. Not that at all. Just ageless old; just grown-up old; just old enough to be addressed unquestioningly as "sir" by those of us who were his pupils.

One trouble with seeing people you have not seen for a long time is that they also get to see you. Suddenly, instead of imagining what Ben Emery would look like, I began to wonder what I would look like to him. I had been eighteen when he last saw me. Or was it seventeen? My hair was then red. Not only red and airedale bushy but complete. My face . . . Before I could go further with this dismaying inventory of change and erosion, Ben Emery was in the room.

I would have known him anywhere. Why not? Although there was more of him, more to his face, more to his jowls, and more to his waistline than I remembered, he was the same tense little man he had been thirty years ago. His eyes were the same china-blue, capable of brightening or fading according to his interest. Though rounder, his face, with its small nose and firm but kind mouth, remained moonlit in its pallor. His suit was as rumpled as ever, his colored shirt as wrinkled, and his dark tie gathered into as clumsy a knot. His forehead, to be sure, was a little higher but his plentiful hair was still sandy. I noticed that at once, with envy.

"Sir," I surprised myself by saying, "Mr. Emery, sir," as I scrambled to my feet. "It's good to see you again. I couldn't believe that it would be . . ."

"So it's you," said he, shaking my hand and disguising by word and manner that he had to look hard to

rediscover in me the me he had known. "After all these years." What was passing through his mind, I do not know. He was considerate enough to mask the shock. I know what I was thinking. It was that those who do not teach fail to be protected against the years by that kind cottoning—is it contact with youth?—which can keep teachers young.

We plunged with some embarrassment into talk. Ten minutes is less than a thimble into which to try to pour the accumulation of thirty years. We had our stabs at "Do-you-remember?" We had our quick interchanges of "What-has-become-of-Peter?" and "Have-you-seen-Jim-or-Henry-lately?"

Pleasant as they were, these racing minutes were not easy. I found myself forgetting my age intermittently and, quite foolishly, feeling as if I were eighteen. That is the effect teachers have on us. Neither they nor we can at once outgrow that past relationship. I made my valiant, even my ostentatious, attempts to do so. Or rather my subconscious did. Once I startled myself by calling him "Ben." Right out. Just like that. Right to his face. He did not bat an eye.

The age business bothered me. If this moment I felt young again, at the next I felt old; infinitely older than Ben Emery. Not in years. Years had long since ceased to matter. In exposure; in the lack of that protection from life—indeed, of that insulation against it—which teachers enjoy and campuses create.

IN THE presence of a third person, it was hard to put into words the gratitude I felt. It would have been hard to thank Ben Emery had we been alone. I wanted to. I tried to—stammeringly. Yet each time I attempted to do so, he pinkened, just the way he used to pinken when he was about to send a boy out of the room, and changed the subject.

Among many things, quickly touched upon, he told me he had given up teaching composition and literature, and moved into some cactus-dry field of research where he was happy. Far from making me happy, this news saddened me. It saddened me no end. I would have as soon heard that Heifetz, because of crushing his hands in an accident, had been forced to give up the violin.

When, as adults, we think of the "great" teachers we have had, we are apt to think, if we are college graduates, of the flamboyant, the full-fledged, figures who dazzled and delighted us by speaking to us for the

