On Translating Krylov
Lydia Razran Stone

As a translator of poetry I always try to retain as much as possible of the form of the original, only committing small formal infidelities when I feel I absolutely have to in order to reflect meaning and create a well-formed work in English. When I accepted Russian Life Books’ commission to translate a fair number of Krylov fables (ultimately 62 + two more in this issue), I decided to adopt a somewhat relaxed version of this guideline. I would translate into iambics, Krylov’s only meter. However, since the fabulist varies line length, rhyme scheme and poem length at will, for any given poem, I would stay within the guidelines of the original works and not be too rigid about getting these aspects to exactly match an individual poem. This made my task a great deal easier and I felt I could claim that, though perhaps an individual translation did not sound exactly like the original Krylov poem, it did sound certainly like a Krylov poem.

Another issue was how much of the archaic language I should retain. The fact is that I learned Russian from teachers, including my own father and the nineteenth century literary masters, who spoke essentially nineteenth century Russian. So when it comes to understanding, I am at least as comfortable with something in Russian written in the second decade of the nineteenth century as I am with something written in that language in the second decade of the twenty-first. I set out to write in neutral understandable English, especially since we were hoping that our book would be read by and to children. When I read what I wrote, however, I saw that it was natural for me to include somewhat archaic terms, for example, “twas for naught,” not only for rhyme but to give a bit of the original atmosphere. I also, here and there, include a modern phrase, which I hope adds an additional flavor of humor.

My third concern particular to Krylov was to retain the pungency of the phrases that are still quoted (with a frequency analogous to English use of lines from Shakespeare) in Russian today. This was especially diverting when the quoted lines formed a rhymed couplet, for example, “Then Dragonfly felt hunger’s pang, And, no surprise, no longer sang,” and “Yes, I know their singing stinks, And yet not one among them drinks!”

Finally, as a twenty-first century liberal, I generally found Krylov’s Enlightenment views quite compatible, easing the translation process. However, it gradually dawned on me that in many of the fables, Krylov, like Aesop and La Fontaine before him, was imposing a false bestial analogy on the common theme of, let us call it “reaching above one’s prescribed station in life.” While a snake probably cannot shed its snakelike nature with its skin, nor a crow become a peacock, I would argue vehemently against the morality and truth of the human analog of these well-known fables. Nevertheless, I still accept any commission to translate more Krylov that comes my way.

Lydia Razran Stone translated over 62 of Krylov’s fables, which were combined with original illustrations by artist Katya Korobkina in the Russian Life Books title The Frogs Who Begged for a Tsar. The pair came back together for this article, on the occasion of Krylov’s 250th birthday, to issue two new translations and illustrations in the style of those in the popular book (published within the pages of this article).

Memoirs about Krylov include more than anecdotes: many express bafflement over his laziness and the value he placed on peace and quiet above all else, but also how enthusiastically he accepted invitations, went to the theater, his club, literary salons, or to visit friends. At social gatherings he usually looked sleepy, like an enormous “drowsy lion,” as Varvara Olenina, Alexei Olenin’s oldest daughter, wrote. But this appears to have been a way of protecting himself from the curiosity people felt toward him: “He was private, especially if he noticed that others were looking at him,” according to Olenina.

The poet Pyotr Vyazemsky, who was not fond of Krylov, preferring the sentimental poet Ivan Dmitriev, wrote:

Krylov was far from the carefree and ingenious La Fontaine he is reputed to be here, absentminded to the point of childishness. He was somewhat, if I may say, slovenly, but in all things and at all times he was what you might call crafty. And he made out marvelously because he was exceptionally smart. He was clever and calculating in how he handled his entire life and, ultimately, his talents.

What Krylov had to say about his contemporaries was always witty – sometimes blatantly caustic, sometimes hidden behind a jocular apologue (the old word for fables). An article by Vyazemsky describes the following incident:

Before it had become famous, Pushkin read his Godunov at Alexei Perovsky’s. Krylov was among the audience. After the reading concluded, I was standing next to Krylov when Pushkin walked up and, laughing good-naturedly, said “Admit it, Ivan Andreyevich. you didn’t like my tragedy, and in your opinion, it isn’t good.” “What do you mean, not good?” he replied. “I’ll tell you a little story: A preacher once delivered a sermon singing the praises of God’s world and saying that everything had been created in such a way that it would have been impossible to create anything better. After the sermon, a hunchback walked up to him with two round humps, one in front, one in the rear. ‘Aren’t you ashamed,’ he chided him, ‘to mock me and to contend in my presence that everything in God’s creation is good, everything is wonderful? Look at me.’ “What of it?” the preacher countered. ‘For a hunchback, you’re very good.” Pushkin burst out laughing and hugged Krylov.

Krylov’s contemporaries often wrote of his attitude toward royal personages. At times it was hard to separate the writer’s dutiful affection from irony, naïveté from cunning. In 1870, an illustrative anecdote was published
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