

Dragged Along by a Statue:  
Translating Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman*

Walk along the hard, straight embankments of the Neva — or take a Google Earth trip down to the centre of St. Petersburg — and you'll come to a large lump of granite, atop which a determined and martial-looking figure is pulling up a fierce, eye-bulging horse, and pointing out across the wide river in the direction of the West. Falconet's statue of Peter the Great has become the Little Mermaid of St. Petersburg, only the Little Mermaid isn't a symbol of geopolitical manoeuvring, emerging naval power and enforced socioeconomic change in a huge but predominantly agrarian territory. Peter's founding of St. Petersburg in the early 18th century derived from a need to keep the regional rivals, the Swedes, at arm's length, and construct a prestige project for his imperial ambitions.

The source material of Pushkin's tale of how a young clerk loses his prospective fiancé in a brief but deadly flood includes newspaper reports of a flood that had taken place in St. Petersburg in 1824. Somewhere in the background is also Virgil's *Aeneid*. Though the narrative is retrospective, its quasi-supernatural aspect — does the Horseman "really" come to life and pursue Yevgeny, or does it all take place in the latter's traumatized mind? — seems not dissimilar in technique to that of a science fiction story set just a few years from now where most things are the same, but one thing is different.

The poem is also a virtuoso performance of form and tone, moving from ode to narrative, to chatty interior monologue, to jibes at contemporary poets, and enactments in verse of psychological distress and trauma. It's a love poem for a city — this is the bit the censors didn't mind — and a not-too-subtly concealed elegy for those who died in its construction — an aspect the censors certainly did mind: the poem did not appear in anything like its full form until after Pushkin's death by duelling in 1837, and even then with certain omissions. Critics have disagreed about the nature of Pushkin's attitude to Peter the Great: did he imply that Peter was to be admired? Hated? Distrusted? Accepted? At the very least, the poem problematizes the relationship of the state and the individual. It might, in Poundian terms, be accorded the status of an Image with a capital "I".

If the translation is a success it won't need an apology, but I'll offer one here for any dissatisfied customers. Pushkin is an all-rounder, so I tried to make my compromises everywhere a little bit, rather than prioritize one particular aspect and make a huge compromise elsewhere. The rhythm of *The Bronze Horseman* can be analyzed in metrical terms as iambic tetrameter, but Russian is a strongly stressed language, and the distribution of natural as opposed to metrical stresses in a tetrameter is frequently such as to give, to my ear anyway, the feel of a three-beat line. It was the three natural stresses, rather than the four metrical stresses that I was more concerned to preserve, at least as a rough base, though the reader will quickly see and hear that even here I've been very flexible. The imagery of the poem is sharp and concise, and I was loath to add or delete words and images for the sake of line length. This, perhaps, is where I have indeed been guilty of favouritism towards one particular element.

Eliot's 'ghost of a metre' (behind good free verse) has a parallel in rhyme I think, and my translation aims to give the feel of a rhyming poem without making the compromises in diction and meaning that tend to accompany attempts to do Pushkin in full-chime rhyme in English (Edwin Morgan's 'Autumn' is one highly successful exception to this tendency).

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