THE RUSSIAN RECEPTION OF NORMAN MAILER

VICTOR PEPPARD

NORMAN MAILER'S CONNECTIONS WITH RUSSIAN LITERATURE, especially with Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, are both numerous and significant, and they go back to the very beginnings of his career as a writer. I have written about this issue in some detail in *The Mailer Review* (2009). Referring to himself in the third person, Mailer writes in his introduction to the fiftieth anniversary edition of *The Naked and the Dead* that "he had the good luck to be influenced profoundly by Tolstoy" and that "he read from Anna Karenina most mornings before he commenced his own work" on his own novel (xii). Given the subject matter of *The Naked and the Dead*, one might ask why Mailer chose to read *Anna Karenina* and not *War and Peace*, especially since in places Mailer moves between the characters' experience of World War II and their previous lives as civilians, as for example with Gallagher and Hearn. Indeed, Alexander Muliarchik's 1973 review of The *Naked and the Dead* is titled "America between War and Peace." Perhaps Mailer was reluctant in 1998 to invite comparisons between what was after all his first published novel with Tolstoy's masterpiece. In any event, Mailer writes that what he learned from the Russian author is that "compassion is of value and enriches our life only when compassion is severe" (xii). Moreover, Mailer believes that this compassion is what gave *The Naked and the Dead* "whatever enduring virtue it may possess" (xii). Mailer's interest in things Russian was still in full cry at the time of his death; and we know from the "Russian" chapter of *The Castle in the Forest* that he was preparing to write about Rasputin, whose complex, contradictory character exemplified for Mailer a diabolic force capable of working both good and evil. There is therefore a question that begs to be

THE MAILER REVIEW, VOL. 7, NO. 1, FALL 2013. Copyright © 2013. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

answered, and that is, what has been the response to Mailer and his work in Russia?

To set the context of the Russians' reception of Mailer properly, I would first like briefly to sketch the tale of two Katherines. Ekaterina II, better known outside of Russia as Katherine the Great, embodied two apparently contradictory tendencies: cultural assimilation and cultural importation. That is, as a woman of German origin, she worked extremely hard to master the language and culture of Russia, of which she became tsarina, and also brought with her a love of the culture of Western Europe, notably in making French the language of the Russian court. She gave over the task of importing the literary culture of Western Europe to her sometime ally, Ekaterina Dashkova-Vorontsova, who became the founding head of the Russian Academy of Sciences and led a project of translating the major works of English, French, and German literature into Russian. I maintain that the availability of this literature in translation gave the small, almost exclusively aristocratic Russian reading public and the writers that sprang from it an essential building block for their own national literature that, together with the seminal works of writers such as Nikolai Gogol and Alexander Pushkin, created the foundation to become one of the world's great literatures. (These writers themselves typically knew at a minimum French and often other European languages, especially English and/or German.) In this way, Katherine II and Katherine Dashkova-Vorontsova helped stimulate the Russians' love of foreign literature that has carried from the second half of the eighteenth century to the first part of the twenty-first century. What is more, the current Russian literary scene includes a large number of excellent translators who are busy translating the works of the major writers of world literature.

Russians are voracious readers, and anyone who has traveled there can testify that as soon as the tour bus stops, the driver will whip out the novel he is reading (I cannot say she here, since there are virtually no women drivers). And, when you ride in the metro, you will see that a large number of passengers take out the novel they are reading the minute they find a place, either sitting or standing. The ongoing Russian passion for reading is also on display in major book stores, such as *Dom knigi* (The House of Books) and *Biblios* in Moscow, where you are struck by how attractive modern Russian books are by comparison with their drab predecessors from the Soviet era and the high quality of the paper they are printed on. And, they are available

in everything from paper backs to leather-bound editions. When Norman Mailer visited Russia in the 1980s and 1990s, he almost certainly noticed that the Russians are voracious readers of fiction.

As for his own work, where does Mailer stand with the reading public and the critics? One individual proclaimed that Mailer was the American Tolstoy; this man, Oleg Nikishin, was the spy the Americans never caught. Here is how Lawrence Schiller relays Nikishin's reaction to Schiller's collaborating with Mailer on a project: "Mailer!" Nikishin exclaims. "He is even in our KGB encyclopedia! This is a man who writes what he believes!" (*Your Free Press*, 3 July 2010). Nikishin's exclamatory triplet reveals one of the things that is central to the appeal Mailer has for Russian readers, who in the 1980s, the time of Schiller's meeting with Nikishin, were especially attracted to authors who actually believed what they were writing. They still are.

As of this writing, the following works by Mailer have been translated into Russian: *The Naked and the Dead* [*Nagie i mertye*], *The Deer Park* [*Oleinii zapovednik*], *An American Dream* [*Amerikanskaia mechta*], *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man* [*Pikasso, portret khudozhnika v iunosti*], *Tough Guys Don't Dance* [*Krutye parni ne tantsuiut*], an article on Apollo II in *America's Star Wars* [*Zvezdnoe voinstvo Ameriki*], *The Gospel According to the Son* [*Evangelie ot Syna Bozhiia*], *Harlot's Ghost* [*Prizrak prostitutki*], *Ancient Evenings* [*Vechera v drevnosti*], and *The Castle in the Forest* (*Lesnoi zamok*). It is likely that other translations are in the works, but these are the ones I know to have been completed. Perhaps I should mention here that Russian translators are paid by the word so that the great length of many of Mailer's books is not a hindrance, but may rather be an inducement for them to take them on as projects.

Mailer was highly visible on the Russian literary scene in the last years of the twentieth century and the first year of this century. *Inostrannaia literatura* (Foreign Literature), the leading Russian journal in this area, published chapters of Aleksandr Bogdanovsky's translation of *Portrait of Picasso* in 1997, nos. 3 and 4 and in 1998, no. 8. In 1999 Bogdanovsky was nominated for *IL*'s best journal publication in 1998 for his translation of *Portrait of Picasso* and his translation of Jose Saramago's *Amada*. A chapter of Olga Varshaver's translation of *The Gospel According to the Son* was excerpted in *IL* in 1998, no. 5, together with her translation of John Updike's review of Mailer's

novel (more on that soon). Finally, selected chapters of Babkov's translation of *Tough Guys Don't Dance* were published in *Il* in nos. 3 and 4 of 2001.

I have not examined all of these translations in detail, but from what I have seen they are quite serviceable and, in at least one case, truly superb. There are a couple of exceptions, however, the first of which is the translation of *The Naked and the Dead*. With respect to Mailer's first novel, Vladimir Babkov writes that "*The Naked and the Dead* is simply excellent literature. It had bad luck here—it was translated in Soviet times by a whole team of authors and turned out badly."

The second is Viktor Toporov's translation of *The Castle in the Forest*, about which Viktoria Shokhina has written an extensive and perceptive review. Toporov calls the novel *Lesnoi zamok* in Russian, which on reverse translation back into English would be "The Forest Castle." Shokhina notes that she would prefer the title in Russian to read *Zamok v lesu*, which happens to be a literal version of Mailer's title. She also raises more serious complaints; Toporov mistranslates a number of passages, including some that are in German, which Mailer worked hard to master so that he could use the language purposefully in his novel. She also finds that Toporov "vulgarizes and coarsens" the novel's discourse and thereby lowers Mailer's lexical register. For example, Shokhina believes that in the original, when the narrator D.T./Dieter is describing an act of homosexual sex and also the conception of Hitler, he remains within the bounds of what is appropriate. As Shokhina puts it, "It is as if V. Toporov does not feel that the cosmopolitan [word] fucking [in the Roman alphabet] is completely different from the Russian '*eb..ia*'." What Shokhina means is that the Russian "*ebnia*"—with apologies to any Russian readers—is much stronger than its literal English equivalent, which, as is well known, has lost its historic edge and now gets into all kinds of places it feared to go in yesteryear. Mailer's use of the words "fug" and "fugging" in *The Naked and the Dead* is a good reminder that in the middle of the last century it was not yet considered appropriate to print what his characters—they were after all soldiers at war—actually said.

Shokhina considers Toporov's greatest mistake to be his failure to include Mailer's bibliography in the Russian translation of *The Castle in the Forest*. This glaring omission is important for several reasons. The addition of a bibliography is seldom found in novelistic practice, and thus Mailer could only have meant it to be an important part of the book. The sources cited there also provide a telling view on those works the author considered

as important points of historical and literary reference for the novel. I count no fewer than fifteen citations that are directly related to Russia, thirteen of them are historical and two are literary: *Anna Karenina* and *The Death of Ivan Ilytch.* There are as well five works about Rasputin, in addition to several others in which he figures. Mailer also makes extensive use of the correspondence between Tsar Nicholas II and Alexandra. I completely agree with Shokhina that Russian readers who read *Castle* in translation should definitely have the bibliography available to them, for they would certainly find it both interesting and revelatory.

There are some glitches in other works as well. For example, in the translation of *An American Dream* by A. K. Slavanskaya and Toporov, they give an explanatory note about Phi Beta Kappa that describes it as a "Privileged Student Society." I suppose that in a certain limited sense this is correct, but it obviously misses the point that PBK is a society into which one is accepted on the basis of outstanding academic achievement. Soviet citizens had extremely limited contact with America, but there were certainly sources available to the translators that would have clarified what PBK really is. I have to tread carefully here, because as someone who has been engaged in various kinds of translation for most of my career I know how easy it is to make mistakes. One of the most difficult things for a translator is dealing with whole institutions that exist in one society but not in the other.

Among more recent translations of Mailer, I have to make special note of the Russian title of *Harlot's Ghost* that on reverse translation back into English comes out as "A Prostitute's Ghost," or "The Ghost of a Prostitute." This looks at first glance like a major gaffe, but I do not believe it is. I do not think so because the novel's translator, Tatiana Kudriavtseva, is a talented professional with a host of major works to her name who would have been unlikely to make such a mistake. The book's cover, which features a picture of a woman dressed in red hanging over a city street—ostensibly the ghost of a prostitute—suggests that the mistranslation of the title is a deliberate but singularly incongruous attempt to suggest the novel is of prurient interest, that it will describe the life after death of a prostitute in a red dress who flies around the streets of, let's say Washington DC, enticing the city's politicians and bureaucrats to come fly with her, somewhat in the manner of Margarita, the heroine of Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita.* Ah, but you will say I'm the one who has gotten carried away here, but I do not think so. The real point is that the deliberate mistranslation of *Harlot's Ghost* as "A

Prostitute's Ghost" looks as though it is calculated to capitalize on the Russian reading public's fascination with the fantastic—and of course with sex.

There is one translation into Russian of Mailer that is worthy of special note for its high quality, and that is *The Gospel According to the Son* by Olga Varshaver. In *Gospel*, Varshaver has reproduced the direct, straight-forward style of Mailer's version of the story in her Russian text most effectively. What is more, she has also deftly given it the flavor of biblical style that is found in Mailer's work in the speech of the narrator-protagonist, Yeshua.

As we have seen in the case of Babkov, Mailer's Russian translators have not limited themselves only to translating him and have written frank, sometimes incisive analyses of his works. As just mentioned, Babkov calls *The Naked and the Dead* "excellent literature." He considers that Mailer "is a very good writer" and "speaking of the value of his books as literature, they are high quality, interesting texts, but they lack depth." Babkov goes on to say about *Tough Guys*, which he translated, that "it is well written, but there are no especially profound ideas in it. Can we say that it is a phenomenon specifically of American culture? Yes, definitely, it's very American. With respect to universality, I'm not sure" (13 Nov. 2007).

I have to say here that although Babkov seems to have read a fair bit of Mailer's work he does not really get it. If he has read such novels as *An American Dream*, *Harlot's Ghost* or *The Castle in the Forest*, among several others, he ought to have an entirely different conception of Mailer. He gives every appearance of being trapped in a stereotype of American culture that does not allow him to perceive the depth of Mailer's fiction.

Olga Varshaver, although she finds many of Mailer's works "completely alien" to her, considers herself lucky that she was given the job of translating *The Gospel According to the Son*. She writes, "Mailer wrote from a clean sheet, as though before him there were not all these translations of the gospel stories. That is what captivated me. Such spontaneity wins you over. Mailer penetrated the text of the Gospel, lived it anew, like life . . . *The Gospel According to the Son* is interesting for any reader, it is not tied to any kind of realia." Olga Varshaver's translation of *Gospel* and her translation of Updike's review of Mailer's short novel both appeared in volume 5 of *Inostrannaia literatura* [Foreign Literature] in 1998. This issue contains eight translations of biblical stories, including Jose Saramago's *The Gospel according to Jesus*, Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Return of Lazarus*, and Jorje Luis Borjes' *Christ on*

the Cross, among others. It is obvious that Mailer is here in the company of some of the real luminaries of world literature.

I cannot resist saying a word here about Updike's review essay. Updike calls Mailer's version of the crucifixion "kitsch" and he cites Jim Kreis' depiction in *Quarantine* of the famous forty days in the desert as a better description of the ancient world and its violence and perversions than Mailer's description of the same in Gospel. It seems to me that Updike is assigning Mailer a task that is not the main purpose of *Gospel*. Taking nothing away from Kreis, I think it is reasonable to conclude that Mailer's goal in his short novel was not to reveal all of the sins of the ancient world, but rather to portray Yeshua's experiences and perceptions of his life. Having said that, as I have written elsewhere, I find Mailer's pithy treatment of Pilate's corrupt dealings with the Sanhedrin to be an excellent, persuasive depiction of what went on in the ancient world (196-97).

Of all the works by Mailer the Russians have not translated yet, I am most surprised by the omission of *Oswald's Tale*, because so much of it is devoted to Oswald's activities in Moscow and Minsk, Belarus. I suspect it is only a matter of time before this book appears in Russian translation.

Since the late 1980s, and even more so after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the whole enterprise of literary criticism has undergone a tremendously refreshing change in Russia with the disappearance of long standing imperatives critics had to deal with in their work. Whatever their real critical orientation or purpose, Soviet scholars and critics of literature had to pay obeisance to Marxism-Leninism so that their work would be approved by what Soviet citizens called "higher offices" (*vyshie instantsii*). This was an obligatory ritual that no one could avoid, including such leading cultural and literary scholars as Mikhail Bakhtin and Yury Lotman. It required that the critic would have to claim, often in a transparent act of verbal gymnastics, that his or her methodology was indeed grounded in M&Lism and/or that it was based on "historical materialism." Another benefit of the post-Soviet scholarly dispensation was that scholars no longer feel required to write about so-called Socialist Realism in the works of non-Russian literatures and other such tortured topics. Nor do they have to concentrate their efforts on writers from outside of the Soviet Union, who by the standards of Soviet officialdom were deemed to be "progressive." Norman Mailer, by the way, fell into that category because of his willingness to criticize and challenge various aspects of the American polity and society: in other words, the

capitalist system. I have to say here that the one thing that has been lost in the post-Soviet era is the piquancy of reading articles that were subversive of official literary catechisms a particularly clever critic would sometimes smuggle into their work. Instead, they now spend a great deal of space and energy making up for all those lost decades in which they gave short shrift to such Russian émigré writers of the last century as Vladimir Nabokov and Joseph Brodsky. Now there is virtually no aspect of either Nabokov's or Brodsky's lives and works that is not subject to extensive and often adoring investigation.

With the exception of a few voices, the impression I have of Mailer's Russian reception is that it is overwhelmingly positive, including popular opinion as reflected and reported in the press. For example, the online Russian language magazine *booknik*, a journal devoted to Jewish culture in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere, published an extensive obituary of Mailer with the title "A good writer has died—Norman Mailer." This obituary begins with the assertion that Mailer's considerable contributions to American culture took place "in the process of overcoming the image of a 'nice Jewish boy'." The contributions cited by *booknik* include the fact that he was the "founder of "new journalism," the inspiration of "the new leftists," and the creator of "a new version of the Gospel." According to the unnamed author of the obituary, "Sensationalism, non-conformism, cultivation of psychopathy and open hooliganism" are the personality traits that the obituaries of Mailer enumerated after his death. In order to discover whether the Russian reading public saw Mailer as so "scandalous and revolutionary" *booknik* solicited the comments of Vladimir Babkov and Olga Varshaver referred to above, as well as Updike's somewhat ironic reaction to *Gospel* and a *USA Today* conversation with Mailer about his novel *The Castle in the Forest.* In this conversation Mailer is quoted as saying that Rasputin was a character "you couldn't invent." *Booknik* concludes that "it is equally true that you couldn't invent Mailer."

Mailer was recognized by Soviet scholars as an important American writer at least by the early 1960s. Writing about the 1963 October edition of *Inostrannaia literatura* [Foreign Literautre] (this was the 100th issue of the journal), Aleksei Mikheev observes that Mailer was then characterized together with Richard Wright, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and William Styron as a exponent of "American Existentialism" and as a writer

who protested against "capitalist reality" (5 1997). This meant in the Soviet critical parlance of the time that he was considered to be a "progressive" writer. In addition to *Inostrannaia literatura*, articles about him appeared in other important literary journals, such as *Voprosy literatury* [Issues in Literature] and *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* [The New Literary Revue] and in chapters of scholarly books, sometimes as the main subject and sometimes as part of a wider analysis of American literature on the whole. Nevertheless, despite the fact that Alexander Muliarchik had written a lengthy analysis of Mailer's novels in 1978 in a leading journal, *Voprosy literatury* [Issues in Literature], according to Lidia Shliamovich in her dissertation of 1985, no monographs had to that point been devoted to Mailer and his work by Soviet critics, and the criticism of him was confined to newspaper and journal articles. Shliamovich's dissertation, *The Creative Evolution of Norman Mailer* (*Tvorcheskaia evoliutsiia Normana Meilera*) is, as far as I know, the first attempt by a Russian scholar to give a comprehensive treatment of Mailer. Since then a great deal has been written about Mailer by such leading Russian scholars of American culture and literature as Muliarchik, Osovsky, Tlostanova, Zverev, and others. Mailer also attracts the attention of Russian scholars at conferences.

Shliamovich writes that Muliarchik's idea that "'the Mailer phenomenon' in literature, journalism (we will add in life), as it were, crystalizes within itself very important features of contemporary America, but he does not analyze in sufficient detail Mailer's philosophical and aesthetic views." In her own opinion, Schliamovich sees Mailer as "an artist whose work is characterized by certain contradictions. It is formed, by his own admission, primarily under the influence of Steinbeck, Dos Passos, Farrel, and also by Wolf, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner."

Shliamovich finds "interesting and subtle remarks and observations" in American criticism of Mailer, but considers that American critics are "governed by Freudian psychoanalysis, existentialism, or a method of analytical reading" and that their works are too subjective and inward looking. Shliamovich asserts that her own work, written in 1985, just before the advent of perestroika and glasnost, is grounded in a Marxist-Leninist approach, which presumably stressed a more objective method of literary criticism. It is hard to see, however, any specifically Marxist-Leninist features of her work and I thus regard Shliamovich's declaration of fealty to L&M as something she needed to aver in order to insure the acceptance of her work.

Shliamovich divides Mailer's work into three periods: 1948-1957, 1955-1967, and 1968-1978. She describes the divide in American critics between those who saw Mailer's creative talent in a state of decline and others who saw him in a state of transformation. As with some others, Shliamovich considers *The Naked and the Dead* to be Mailer's greatest novel.

The consensus among Russian critics and scholars is that, as Tlostanova puts it in her work on multiculturalism and literature at the end of the 20th century in the United States, Mailer is a "living classic," together with Bellow, Vidal, Chivers, Salinger, Garner, Welty, and others. Ekaterina Chernetsova agrees, when she writes that "Norman Mailer (Norman Kingsley Mailer, 1923–2007) rightfully belongs to the number of first-rate American writers of the 20th century." Chernetsova's treatment of Mailer is perhaps the most penetrating of all those by Russian scholars, and is certainly the definitive analysis of his novels from the 1980s to the 2000s. Fully free from the dead hand of official Soviet theory and practice of literary criticism, she is able to delve into the poetics of Mailer's works, which she terms syncretic, the mythopoetic space of his novels of the 1990s and 2000s, and Mailer's artistic treatment of the cold war in his novels of the early 1990s. Chernetsova also analyses how Mailer transforms literary tradition in *The Castle in the Forest.*

Chernetsova buttresses her own work with reference to Osovsky, who writes that Mailer "turned out to be the last of the 'great white novelists,' whose work in large part determined the character of the development of American prose in the second half of the last century and even in the beginning of the new millenium." Chernetsova believes, correctly, that at the time of his death Mailer "had enough potential as a writer and plans to last a century." No doubt under the influence of Bakhtin, I am prejudiced in favor of scholarly examinations of an author's poetics and so I find Chernetsova's treatment of Mailer to be one the most innovative and ambitious of the Russian scholars.

I would like to begin my conclusion by noting the impressive breadth and depth of the work of Russian critics of American literature, indeed of world literature in general. Russian scholars who write about Mailer are typically well read in both the American and Russian criticism of him and his works and have consulted the major sources of it. (My excuse for not listing all of the Americans is that virtually all of them are cited (and many are published) in this issue of *The Mailer Review.*) Since the demise of the Soviet Union, Russian scholars and critics have continued to expand their critical horizons

in their treatment of Mailer and are investigating virtually all writers of note from a large range of critical perspectives. This is in fact true of Russian scholars' treatment of world literature in general, and in this way they, together with Russian translators, are fulfilling the dreams and intentions of Katherine II and Katherine Dashkova-Vorontsova. Today, especially, they do not hesitate to explore new avenues of investigation that transcend the topoi and stereotypes of Soviet-style literary criticism. Russian scholars, much like their Western counterparts, increasingly analyze literature in its cultural, or "culturological" context. Feminist perspectives and post-colonial and decolonial studies are more and more frequent. Bakhtin, who has long been the basis for scholarly treatments of the carnival and his notion of "the word" (*slovo*), both inside and outside of Russia, remains an important inspiration for scholars, such as Osovsky. Russian scholars are also engaged in the study of different types of discourse. Moreover, some of their works are available in English translation, as for example several books by Tlostanova on gender and border studies. I cannot help but notice, though, that as far as I can tell Russian criticism of Mailer has not dealt extensively with the numerous connections between his work and that of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in any systematic fashion. Perhaps these are by now simply taken for granted, considered to be all too obvious for further elaboration and investigation. Regardless, interest in Mailer and his works in Russia shows no signs of subsiding, and I believe that much more will continue to be written about him.

NOTE

I gave a paper at the 2011 Mailer Society Conference with this same title. The quotations here of Russian scholars and critics are my own translations. Transliteration from Russian into English is a funny business, and so there are some inconsistencies here. That is because I have left items from Russian sources in the form they were originally written (they may not be consistent among themselves). Otherwise, I use the Library of Congress system. In the case of Russian names, I have tried to use the most familiar and recognizable English versions of them. Lastly, Russian dissertation abstracts (*avtoreferaty*) are generally more extensive and detailed than American ones and include a list of works cited.

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