



To cite this article:

Windle, Kevin. "An Unrepentant KGB Informer: An Introspective Poem by Sergei Khmel'nitsky" *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation* 19, (December 2023): 94-96.

aalitra.org.au

Australian Association for Literary Translation

An Unrepentant KGB Informer: An Introspective Poem by Sergei Khmel'nitsky

KEVIN WINDLE
Australian National University

Poetry and the USSR's security services may seem unlikely bedfellows, except in a purely adversarial sense. It is well known, after all, that many poets and writers suffered during the long years of Stalin's repressions. Yet the concepts were not necessarily mutually exclusive. Those who served the KGB and its predecessors (OGPU, NKVD, MVD) included some extremely cultivated representatives of the intelligentsia, whether as full-time operatives or part-time agents. The poem offered here is the work of a member of the latter category – a zealous and industrious informer with highly developed aesthetic sensibilities and a rare poetic talent.

Sergei Khmel'nitsky (1925-2003), an architect, connoisseur of art and literature and specialist in Central Asian architecture, wrote striking poetry from earliest youth but published little until after his emigration to West Berlin in 1980. This poem appeared with eight others in an article written in response to an unfavourable literary portrait by Andrei Siniavsky in his autobiographical novel *Goodnight!* (Terts; Khmel'nitsky 182). It was, Khmel'nitsky asserted, “flagrant ... unprovoked slander”, a grossly exaggerated picture of “evil incarnate”, a farrago of “nightmarish lies” by one who had no claim to any moral superiority (Khmel'nitsky). Other accounts, however, especially that of another one-time friend, Vladimir Kabo, fully accord with that in *Goodnight!* (Kabo 116-141).

“Greetings, dear unrepentant...” presents a revealing insight into the mind of what Olga Matich has termed an “evil genius, reifying the demonic artistry of High Stalinism” (Matich 56), as depicted by Siniavsky. Written on the poet's twentieth birthday, according to Kabo it constitutes “a coded address to himself, a self-portrait and a program for living” (Kabo 128). A few years later, in 1949, Khmel'nitsky would manufacture “evidence” of an anti-Soviet conspiracy by two students, his good friends Kabo and Iurii Bregel, and see them receive ten-year sentences in the GULAG. In 1964, having returned to Moscow, Kabo and Bregel contrived to expose their accuser, who then found himself ostracized by the intellectual society which had always been his natural home (see Kabo 114-141; Windle, “The Belly of the Whale” 6-7). In another poem, as elsewhere in his response, the poet expressed a measure of regret, without apology, for the harm done (“I saw that wrong can't be set right”), while maintaining the focus on his own uncomfortable social situation (Khmel'nitsky 187; Windle, “Tantamount to Death” 157; Windle, “The Belly of the Whale” 19). For that, his poem states, “you boys are not to blame”, implying that Kabo and Bregel might have reason to consider themselves, rather than him, at fault.

In 1966, when Siniavsky and Iulii Daniel were put on trial for sending their “anti-Soviet” writings abroad, Khmel'nitsky, who knew much about them and their literary work, appeared as a witness for the prosecution, contributing nothing that might ease the defendants' lot. Kabo was of the opinion that the poem “Greetings, dear unrepentant...” showed that Khmel'nitsky's Faustian pact with the KGB pre-dated his twentieth birthday, and suggests that others unknown may have fallen victim (Kabo 118, 120, 128).

The translator is guided by the method advocated by Walter Arndt: the translation should replicate the “total effect” of the original verse (Arndt xiv). Similarly, David Samoilov (cited by Chukovsky 95) and Paulo Rónai (144), like Ezra Pound (cited by Underhill 159), favoured a “poem-for-poem” approach, viewing the product first as a whole, and only then considering the semantic and formal detail.

The translation seeks to reflect the sentiments of the poem, while conveying something of its formal properties and the playful ease of its simple language. The poet adheres to a traditional Russian verse form which has never gone out of fashion: trochaic pentameter with a pattern of rhyme (sometimes assonance) of *abab*. The translation follows similar patterns, in places modulating the metre to iambic without disrupting the regular alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. An attempt has been made to replicate the rhyme or assonance in the /b/ lines, where rhyme is more strongly felt.

Among the difficulties posed for the translator was the need to avoid pop-song tropes in the lines about loneliness and finding love. The imagery involving the Russian coins *piatak* and *grivennik*, in stanzas 2 and 3, necessitated a generalized interpretation, since the alternative, explaining their value in a footnote, seemed inappropriate.

Bibliography

Arndt, Walter. *Pushkin Threefold: The originals with linear and metric translations*. George Allen & Unwin, 1972.

Chukovsky, Kornei. *Vysokoe iskusstvo*. Sovetsky pisatel, 1968.

Khmelnitsky, S. G. "Iz chreva kitova." *Dvadtsat dva*, vol. 48, 1986, pp. 151-187.

Kabo, Vladimir. *The Road to Australia*. Translated by Rosh Ireland and Kevin Windle, Aboriginal Studies Press, 1998. First published as *Doroga v Avstraliuu*. Effect Publishing Inc., 1995.

Matich, Olga. "Spokojnoj noči: Andrej Sinjavskij's rebirth as Abram Terc." *Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 33, 1989, pp. 50-63.

Rónai, Paulo. *A tradução vivida*. Nova Fronteira, 1975, 1981.

Terts, Abram [Andrei Siniavsky]. *Spokoinoi nochi*. Sintaksis, 1984; in English as *Goodnight!*, translated by Richard Lourie. Viking, 1989.

Underhill, James W. *Voice and Versification in Translating Poems*. University of Ottawa Press, 2016.

Windle, Kevin. "The Belly of the Whale Revisited: the history and literature surrounding a character in Terts's *Spokoinoi nochi*." *Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 76, no. 1, 1998, pp.1-27.

———. "Sergei Khmelnitsky: Tantamount to Death." *Cardinal Points*, vol. 9, 2019, pp.157-58.

Sergei Khmel'nitsky

Sergei Khmel'nitsky

Translated by Kevin Windle

Здравствуй, милый нераскаянный
злодей.
Очень рад я познакомиться с тобой,
Потому что я люблю плохих людей,
Потому что я и сам такой плохой.

Может, я с тобой давно уже знаком?
Ты ведь тоже любишь в омут головой,
Тоже любишь прокаленным пятаком
Прокатиться по гремячей мостовой.

Не кривись и не ломай карандаши,
Никого себе на помощь не зови.
Или в гривенники выйти порешил,
Или холодно на свете без любви?

Не печалься, не тревожься и наплюй.
Все прекрасно, только очень может быть
—
Никогда я никого не полюблю
И меня, пожалуй, не за что любить.

Но пройдем мы по земле и по воде,
Наглым смехом нарушая их покой,
Потому что я люблю плохих людей,
Потому что я и сам такой плохой.

7.5.1945

Greetings, dear unrepentant evil-doer!
Glad I am to meet you, yes indeed,
Because I'm so very fond of evil-doers
And I too am of the evil-doing breed.

But perhaps we've known each other for
some time.
You also like to plunge into the deep
And rattle round the town like warm small
change
That tinkles on the cobbles of the street.

No use grimacing or breaking things in spite
Or calling anyone to lend a hand.
Did you decide you'd boost your worth a
mite,
Or is a loveless world too cold to stand?

Don't you worry or lose heart; put it behind.
It's for the best, although it may well be
That love is something I won't ever find,
And maybe there's no reason to love me.

In the meantime we can make a bit of
trouble,
Crassly cackling as we roam the land and
sea,
Because I'm so very fond of evil-doers,
And I too am of the evil-doing breed.

7.5.1945