

## “TRANSLATION IS A BASTARD FORM”

### An Interview with Michael Scammell

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Michael Scammell is the author of the prize-winning biography, *Solzhenitsyn*, and the forthcoming *Cosmic Reporter: the Life and Times of Arthur Koestler*. He has published many translations from Russian, including works by Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and two novels by Nabokov: *The Gift* and *The Defense*. He is the founder and first editor of the British journal, *Index on Censorship*, a former president of PEN American Center, and a Vice President of International PEN. He teaches nonfiction creative writing and translation at Columbia University in New York.

YURI LEVING: Let us begin with an attempt to define your own philosophy of translation in relation to Nabokov's definition of the three kinds of translation. At one end of the scale, according to Nabokov, is free translation, which he calls paraphrase; at the other end is word for word mechanical transposition, which he calls lexical; and in the middle of these is his choice, the literal translation. Could you describe your own preferences, and have your approaches changed over time?

**MICHAEL SCAMMELL:** When I translated *The Gift* and *The Defense*, my way of thinking was very close to Nabokov's. I believed it was the translator's job to follow every twist and turn in the original language, and to try to capture every lexical and cultural nuance on the level of the sentence. For that reason I attempted to stay as close as I possibly could to Nabokov's original Russian, and to produce a translation that was close to, if not identical with, Nabokov's concept of a literal translation. Since then I have

altered my views. I believe that a translation has to capture the larger significance and resonance of images and meanings that transcend a literal rendering, and that this task frequently requires a departure from literalism. I also don't accept Nabokov's three definitions of translation. Translation is a bastard form, and every version of a work in a language other than the original represents a compromise. I prefer the metaphor of a musical performance, which captures the notion of interpretation inherent in the practise of translation. It is open-ended, leaving room for a variety of interpretations, each of which will differ from the others in terms of emphasis, quality and conviction.

**YURI LEVING:** In 1941 Nabokov suggested that Peter Pertzoff translate *The Gift*, giving him the option on the project until 1 December 1941. Pertzoff had earlier translated a number of Nabokov's short stories from Russian to English. This proposal, however, was rejected by his publishers and Pertzoff's translation was never completed (See Shroyer 1999, 556). Twenty years later, secured now by a contract with G. P. Putnam's Sons, Nabokov successfully approached you. How did it happen that young Michael Scammell (born at the time of the composition of *The Gift*) turned out to be the right man in the right place to translate the most intricate and multilayered novel of Nabokov's Russian period?

**MICHAEL SCAMMELL:** Sheer happenstance. I had found a rented room during my first year of graduate studies at Columbia with a genteel Russian émigré called Anna Feigin, who, unbeknownst to me, was Vera Nabokov's cousin. In the course of occasional conversations in the kitchen (where I had privileges to go and cook my meals) Anna

learned that I was working on my first professional translation - *Cities and Years* by the Soviet novelist, Konstantin Fedin. Anna disdained the author and book, but was impressed by my diligence. She was also impressed by my monastic existence, unusual in one so young (I hardly knew any of my fellow students and being British, had no family in America), my devotion to my graduate studies, and my grasp of Russian, and evidently communicated some of this to Vera. Nabokov, meanwhile, had just concluded his contract with Putnam for several of his Russian novels to be published in English, and at the same time had lost his putative translator, his son Dmitri, owing to Dmitri's desire to travel to Rome to study opera. Beyond that – and I didn't understand this at the time – Nabokov was clearly looking for someone young and malleable enough (like his son, presumably) who wouldn't object to the extensive rewriting that Nabokov proposed to do in revising the translation. As so often happens, I chanced to be the right person in the right place at the right time, and it saved Nabokov a great deal of time and trouble to settle on me and press me into service.

YURI LEVING: At what point did you become aware of the connection between an elderly Russian émigré landlady and the author of *Lolita*?

**MICHAEL SCAMMELL:** Not until almost the end of my first academic year at Columbia, which would make it the spring of 1960. When Anna and I met in the kitchen one day, she asked me if I would be free on such and such a weekend. Having very little social life at the time, I found it easy to say yes, and she asked me to join her for tea on a certain Saturday afternoon. She indicated that she wanted to introduce me to someone,

but gave no hint of his or her identity. It was only when I entered her living room that I realized whom I was meeting, but I still had no idea that Anna was related to Nabokov, or that he had a reason for wanting to meet me. It was only when Vera asked me to send her a sample translation (I chose a short story by Chekhov) that it dawned on me they might have some work in mind, but even then I didn't grasp that it would be a novel like *The Gift*.

YURI LEVING: Nabokov rarely met with his translators. In fact, Michael Glenny, the translator of *Mashen'ka* (*Mary*, 1970) never once met Nabokov. How did *you* meet Nabokov for the very first time?

**MICHAEL SCAMMELL:** We met only once after that encounter, and it was mainly at my insistence. Nabokov was planning to spend that summer in a rented villa in Mandeville Canyon Road in Los Angeles, working on the screenplay for *Lolita*, and I had chosen to spend the summer at a place called Sausalito, just outside San Francisco, translating *Cities and Years*. I had also decided to buy a car out of my royalties and drive to Los Angeles before crossing the country to New York. Having signed a contract to translate *The Gift*, I felt it imperative to meet with Nabokov to hammer out some of the details and clarify our *modus operandi*. He graciously agreed to receive me at his villa for lunch and we discussed the whole project. After that, I fully expected to meet him again to discuss the actual translation, and several times suggested a rendezvous, but my fate from then on was the same as that of his other translators.

YURI LEVING: What were your literary tastes at the time in general, and what was your attitude towards Nabokov's prose (whether Russian or English) in particular, when you realized that you were going to impersonate his English voice for such a major piece of fiction as *The Gift*?

**MICHAEL SCAMMELL:** My tastes in prose were schizophrenic. I had grown up loving English realism: Fielding, Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, and Arnold Bennett, and I greatly admired the Americans, Steinbeck and Hemingway. I preferred Tolstoy and Chekhov to Dostoevsky and Gogol, and Balzac to Flaubert. Yet I had developed a private passion for some of the great jokesters and modernists of fiction – Sterne, Joyce, and Nabokov's own master, Bely, along with a couple of Nabokov's near contemporaries, Babel and Zamyatin. So I had some models before me, but I knew very little of Nabokov's own work: *Pnin*, which I thought amusing but decidedly minor, and *Lolita*, which struck me as being enormously clever, but cold as ice at its core, and which I had never finished. As for the task of impersonating Nabokov's voice in *The Gift* (which struck me as a much warmer and more interesting novel than *Lolita*), I must confess I was cocooned in the arrogance of youth and didn't think twice about it.

YURI LEVING: Before offering you the option to become his chosen translator, Nabokov had you pass a test unbeknownst to you. It seems that it would have been more logical to assign you the very beginning of *The Gift*, especially since it could have been compared with Dmitri's already available draft translation. How can you explain this particular choice of his – the opening three pages from the notorious Chapter 4?

**MICHAEL SCAMMELL:** I'm sorry to say I have no idea. Its possible he saw some hidden traps there that might trip me up, but he never explained it and I didn't ask. Unfortunately I don't have either version of the novel before me as I write this, so I can't look it up..

**YURI LEVING:** What were the set conditions for your translation of the novel?

**MICHAEL SCAMMELL:** Goodness gracious, I suppose they were set out in the brief contract drawn up by Vera, but that too is out of reach at the moment. It stipulated, I remember, that I would have no rights to the translation after it was done, but payment was quite generous and that was a common feature of translation contracts at the time. (By the way, when parts of *The Defense* were published in *The New Yorker*, Nabokov sent me a portion of his honorarium, which I thought was extraordinarily generous of him.) We haggled a bit over deadlines, and how we would confer about the changes Nabokov made, but in my memory, everything went very smoothly and the Nabokovs were exceedingly gracious and easy to deal with. Perhaps it was made easier for them by the fact that I was rather young and extremely inexperienced at the time, but I had absolutely no reason to complain.

**YURI LEVING:** Could you elaborate on the term "collaboration" as applied to the nature of your work on *The Gift*?

**MICHAEL SCAMMELL:** I don't think it was a collaboration in any meaningful sense of the word. I did my translation, and Nabokov checked it, changed and improved it as he went along. We had quite a correspondence at one point about the differences between English and American terminology (as a Briton living in the USA I was extremely sensitive to those differences), and I remember Nabokov saying he didn't mind at all mixing them in the same text – the arrogance of genius, I suppose. At times I would challenge this term or that, but his was the last word, and I was the unskilled laborer to his craftsman.

**YURI LEVING:** What do you think was your biggest challenge (or challenges) in translating *The Gift*?

**MICHAEL SCAMMELL:** Vocabulary. Nabokov was the master of a colossal range of synonyms for every conceivable action, object, thought, idea, appearance, sound, or smell, and he played the instrument of language like a virtuoso. I couldn't possibly match him for range of reference, or for nuance or exactitude, and was frequently left groping for equivalents. My translation must have sounded to him at times as if his symphony was being played by a brass band instead of a full-blown orchestra (if I was the band, he was the orchestra).

**YURI LEVING:** Could you describe your translation techniques? By this I mean very material things: the number of drafts that you made; whether you typed the translated portions or sent the Nabokovs the handwritten manuscript; what was your production

speed while working on *The Gift*; whether you consulted with anyone to fill in any blank spots?

**MICHAEL SCAMMELL:** Our agreement called for me to translate at considerable speed, which sounds very demanding – and it truly was in one regard (see my comment on vocabulary above). But what many people don't realize is that on the level of syntax, Nabokov is unusually easy to translate. Like Tolstoy's, his Russian is heavily influenced by French (and in Nabokov's case, English) models - quite unlike, say, Gogol's or Bely's prose – and that makes the sentences quite easy to construct in English. I worked by making a first draft by hand, correcting it, and then typing it out on my small Olivetti portable. I was (and still am) a very bad typist, and made innumerable mistakes, so that slowed the work down more than I would have liked. In doing the first draft, I would sometimes make a list of terms that I didn't understand and send them to Nabokov, and he would often, but not always, send me back some answers, or annotate the typescript. I once asked him if I could have the typescript back after the book was published (this was before the days of photocopiers, let alone computers and scanners), but he declined, saying it was already promised, like the rest of his papers, to the New York Public Library. I absolutely hated leaving blanks and did my best to fill them in (though unfortunately, in answer to your other question, I had no one to consult, because I moved around when I was translating and was never in New York). You must remember also that everything between us was done by snail mail between New York, Los Angeles, Maine, Montreux, and (when I was translating *The Defense*) Southampton, England, because we were both peripatetic. I think I mailed him one batch of translations from

communist Yugoslavia, of all places, but that must have been the last part of *The Defense*, which I had completed at my parents' home in Southampton literally on the eve of leaving for Yugoslavia.

YURI LEVING: What dictionaries, both in English and Russian, do you remember using during that project (was Dahl's four-volume dictionary, for instance, available to you)?

**MICHAEL SCAMMELL:** Yes, I had a photo-reprint of Dahl's four-volume dictionary, and a four-volume Soviet dictionary as well, though I often made do with a one-volume Russian dictionary and a one-volume Russian-English dictionary – because of my travels. Looking back I regard this as foolish, since I later realized that it is not very useful to the translator to use a bilingual dictionary: the options offered are very limited. It's much better to consult an authoritative monolingual dictionary in the original language and find the right word in your own language yourself. But again the times were not propitious. Only Soviet dictionaries were in print at the time, which were often useless for Nabokov's vocabulary, and Dahl was a godsend in those circumstances.

YURI LEVING: Could you possibly recall which was the most difficult episode or part of the novel to translate and why?

**MICHAEL SCAMMELL:** I'm sorry, I can't answer that literally, though memory tells me it must have come from the chapter on Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev's lepidopterist father and his expedition to Asia. I remember slaving for days, and consulting several

entomological dictionaries, to translate three pages in the original on butterflies. I was immensely proud of my version, arrived at through the sacrifice of blood, sweat, and tears, only to be told by Nabokov that he planned to drop that section from the English translation as superfluous (and he did).

YURI LEVING: Did you actually have to (re-)read Chernyshevski's *What Is To Be Done??*

**MICHAEL SCAMMELL:** I should have done, but I didn't (yes, I had read it once as part of my literature studies).

YURI LEVING: According to Jane Grayson, from the start of his career as an English author Nabokov assumes an American voice, consciously and deliberately introducing American idioms into his style (Grayson 1977, 190). How did you, an Englishman by origin, deal with this issue of idiomatic flavoring in *The Gift*, whose main heroine by definition is Russian Literature?

**MICHAEL SCAMMELL:** I don't remember that part of Grayson's book. I myself, as I said earlier, was extremely conscious of the English/American dichotomy, and labored very hard to keep things American (as I had done in my translation of *Cities and Years*, and was to do later in my version of *Crime and Punishment* – billed, by the way, as the "first American translation" of Dostoevsky's novel). In his correspondence with me, Nabokov was cavalier about it, and didn't seem to mind, but I never went back and

checked the printed version of the book. Perhaps he changed everything during his revisions.

YURI LEVING: To what extent had you envisioned the metamorphosis of your text in the final draft? Did Nabokov show you the revised version of the translated novel and were you surprised after seeing it published?

**MICHAEL SCAMMELL:** I had no idea the metamorphosis (happy word in this context) would be so thorough, which confirms my impression (arrived at only *after* I had read Grayson's book) that I was the unskilled workman in this enterprise (or brass band, if you will). And no, I was never shown the revised version.

YURI LEVING: In your memoir (*Harper's Magazine*, May 2001) you mention that in the summer of 1962, when your relations with the Nabokovs were extremely cordial, you had planned to meet to discuss the translation of *The Gift* in person. In the summer of 1963 you had still been intending to read the proofs of *The Gift*, but Nabokov wrote to say it would not be necessary (Scammell 2001, 60). In the foreword to the 1963 publication by G. P. Putnam's Sons (signed March 28, 1962) he states, however, that he had "carefully revised the translation of all five chapters" at Montreux already "in the winter of 1961" (Brian Boyd actually confirms that Nabokov was still revising the last four-fifths of your translation between mid-January and mid-March of 1962, "spending up to seven hours a day on the task." See: Boyd 1991, 463). Considering the temporal discrepancy, do you think it is possible that Nabokov had achieved his desired vision

long before he let you know about it and had no intention to discuss any final changes with you at all?

**MICHAEL SCAMMELL:** Yes, I think that's correct. Given that he practically rewrote some passages, I imagine he thought it would be superfluous for me to see them, and would slow an already slow process still further.

YURI LEVING: Looking back and imagining that you could have had such a fantastic opportunity, would you choose now to have done anything differently during your brief relationship with the Nabokovs?

**MICHAEL SCAMMELL:** It's very hard to say. I wish that in my correspondence with him I hadn't been quite so brash on the subject of cruelty to animals, but then he and Vera were so impossibly opinionated and self-righteous that it was irresistible to answer back. By the way, I haven't kept up with Nabokov scholarship, but when I used to read all those critical studies emphasizing Nabokov's navel-gazing modernism and Olympian disdain for politics (as opposed to all those didactic Russian novelists of the past and present) I used to long for someone to put a pin in that balloon. Listen to Nabokov on Freud, for example, or tally up the long list of his dislikes and you'll find an extremely didactic individual, with strong opinions on almost everything, including politics. I was all too aware of it myself, and not prepared to knuckle under when it affected me, but I was too young and inexperienced to tangle with the master. By the way, when *Pale Fire* came out and Mary McCarthy wrote a detailed analysis of its structure and symbolism, I wrote a

letter to the editor suggesting that Nabokov must have prompted and helped her. It was a foolish thing to do and I regret it now. By the way, I later got to know Mary a little, and one day apologized to her. She was very gracious and brushed it off as of no moment, but I still blush a little when I remember it.

YURI LEVING: Today, forty five years after acquiring its English skin, how can you explain the relative lack of success of *The Gift* (compared to other translations such as *Laughter in the Dark* and *The Defense*) among the non-Russian audience?

**MICHAEL SCAMMELL:** I think it's quite easy. The novel is very complex and self-referential. It has very little plot, in the conventional sense of the word, and its action is scattered among a largish number of important characters. It seems to work better on the level of individual chapters than as a whole. Then again, the Chernyshevski chapter depends for its resonance on a knowledge not only of Russian literary and political history, but also of the politics of the first Russian emigration. Thirdly, the "love interest," such as it is, in the form of the central relationship between Fyodor and Zina Mertz, is extraordinarily subtle and refined, at the opposite pole from the love interest in, say, *Lolita*. It's an extremely cerebral novel (in this a worthy offshoot of Bely's *Petersburg*), but novels of ideas rarely play well in English and American literature, and as I said before, the ideas and history related in *The Gift* are better known and of greater interest to Russians than to Americans.

YURI LEVING: Judson Rosengrant, who has written on Nabokov and the theory of translation in connection with *Eugene Onegin*, posed, correctly in my opinion, the question of how in a mere *translation* it is possible to convey all, or at least some of the more important meanings of the original. Either the translator has to jettison a great deal along the way or he has to provide some sort of compensatory apparatus – a massive scholarly and linguistic commentary in order to ensure that as much as possible of the original text and context is carried over into the second language (Rosengrant 1994, 16). One tends to think that this is precisely the type of approach and need of attention that *The Gift* requires today. As someone whose co-translation is very likely to serve as the only definitive basis for any future variorum edition of Nabokov's novel, could you suggest some basic principles of literary commentary and structure to supplement such a hypothetical edition?

**MICHAEL SCAMMELL:** First of all I'd like to comment on Rosengrant's theory. I can see the attraction of such a proposal, especially to scholars like yourself, but to my mind one must be careful not to fall into the implicit fallacy that there can be such a thing as a "perfect" version of a work of literature in another language. I prefer the analogy of music. Each translation of a book is a performance, an interpretation. It can never be definitive, because, as you (and Rosengrant) say, it can never capture every nuance, reference and overtone of the original - and the more complex the original, the more true this becomes. The answer, generally speaking, is multiple translations. In the case of *The Gift* we have what is perhaps a unique situation, because the English version has been overseen by the author, a rare genius with a complete command of both languages, and

by definition he was able to take far more liberties with the original than a translator can usually allow himself. Hence the final translation of *The Gift* (which is far from being "mine," so I can say this), adds up to a "performance" of rare power and fidelity. By the way, I dislike your use of the adjective "mere" in front of "translation." All translations, even bad ones, require a huge amount of knowledge and a huge amount of labor to complete, and though translators have come to be regarded as the donkeys of the literary profession, their work deserves better than that (and how can a translation by Nabokov be "mere?").

In the circumstances it is odd that you should still feel dissatisfied with the English version of *The Gift*, but in the context of my comment about the desirability of multiple versions, I see no reason why you shouldn't provide a scholarly and linguistic apparatus for a new edition of the book. The idea is presumably inspired by Nabokov's treatment of *Eugene Onegin*, and given his novel's complexity, you will undoubtedly provide a fresh and illuminating new context in which non-Russian readers can approach the work. Fortunately, you won't be able to tamper with Nabokov's English text, which is just as well, since Nabokov's English *Onegin* comes across as a glorious folly, composed as if by one of Gogol's madmen. I realize I haven't offered you any pointers, but I expect you know enough already to undertake the task.

YURI LEVING: Thank you very much for this interview, which, by its electronic virtual nature, very much reminds me of Nabokov's own usual method of safely conducting conversations. I'd like to conclude on a more personal note: what brings you these days

the utmost creative and professional satisfaction, and from where do you draw your inexhaustible energy?

**MICHAEL SCAMMELL:** I have just completed the authorized biography of a very different kind of author from Nabokov – Arthur Koestler. Koestler was a living refutation of Nabokov's theories about the author's need to preserve an Olympian indifference to social and political currents, and Nabokov a living refutation of Koestler's theories about the need for relevance. Variety is the spice of life, and that must be where my energy comes from. Thank you for the compliment.

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