



אוניברסיטת בר-אילן
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Vaslav: A Translation of Vaslav, by Arthur Japin

A Proposal for a Thesis in Literary Translation

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1. Introduction

“I danced frightening things. They were frightened of me and therefore thought that I wanted to kill them. I did not want to kill anyone. I loved everyone, but no one loved me, and therefore I became nervous”.

Vaslav Nijinsky, *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*

Vaslav Nijinsky (1889-1950) was a Russian ballet dancer and choreographer of Polish descent. He was one of the most gifted male dancers in history. His ability to perform seemingly gravity-defying leaps was legendary. Nijinsky created choreography that exceeded the limits of traditional (classical) ballet. For the first time, his audiences were experiencing the futuristic, new direction of modern dance.

Arthur Japin, an award-winning and best-selling Dutch writer, describes the crucial event that occurs on the 19th of January 1919, when Vaslav gave his last performance, in St. Moritz, Switzerland, after which he never danced again. He spent the rest of his life (another thirty-one years) in mental institutions diagnosed with schizophrenia. In my thesis I will translate Japin’s *Vaslav*, which unlike most of his other works has not been translated into other languages.



2. Aims and General Description

For my thesis, I will be submitting a 120-page translation of the novel *Vaslav*, by the Dutch author Arthur Japin, which was published in 2010. This novel is historical fiction, yet it is also a psychological story. Unlike many of Japin's novels, *Vaslav* has not yet been translated into other languages. I hope to bring Vaslav's story to a wider, English-speaking audience and for the work to better acquaint the readers with Vaslav Nijinsky. The story of his famous life and downfall is told from three different perspectives. In the translation I aim to capture the three different voices written by this single author. I hope to succeed in the translation to bring Vaslav Nijinsky come to life in the same fashion as Japin.



3. Conceptual Background.

I have chosen to translate *Vaslav* because the author's style is poetic and it has not been translated to English. Moreover, the concept - a retelling of the protagonist's life from the perspectives of three people who were close to him, though never that of Vaslav himself - intrigued me, and caused me to delve into his life. Watching the movie "Nijinsky, a True Story" and a re-enactment of *l'Après-midi d'un Faune* (The Afternoon of a Faun), (Eksteins, 27) provided an additional dimension to the translation, which helped me to visualize Vaslav on stage, and hence better translate the detailed excerpts of him performing. Unfortunately, no actual footage of Nijinsky is known to exist, but there are reviews of the play "Vaslav", written by Japin. Through these reviews, the book and Japin's introduction of the play I sensed that Japin built a distinctive affiliation with Vaslav, one that I hope would be apparent in the translation. Reading fragments of Vaslav's diaries (Nijinsky), written very shortly after he stopped dancing, gave me a better picture of this dramatic story.

Most of Japin's novels, such as *Overgave (Someone Found)* and *Een Schitterend Gebrek (Lucia's Eyes)*, are based on intense events in history. These further inspired me to translate *Vaslav*. During this exercise, I have compared the original Dutch and the English translations of the two above mentioned books in order to learn from the techniques of the translator. I understand that on one hand, I must take a measure of freedom, and on the other hand, be as true and faithful to the text as I can. Through reading fragments of Nijinsky's diaries I learned that besides his genius, he felt lonely and misunderstood. The reason for his madness remains a mystery to this very day. The reader gets only three different perspectives of people who loved him



and describe the path leading to the eventful day when everything changed for him. More so, I have listened to the audiobook *Vaslav*, read by Arthur Japin. Hopefully, Japin's voice and personal intonation will be helpful in the translation in a manner that reflects the author's imagination.

An intimate picture of the three characters that speak not only about Vaslav but also about their own personal issues in life is transmitted to the reader. Nonetheless, the ultimate focus is on Vaslav and thus the novel has elements of the biography of the famous ballet dancer. As a result, the novel is categorized as an historical novel. At the peak of his fame, the legendary ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky decides to give up dancing during a performance and leaves the audience with the words: "*now the little horse is tired*" (Nijinsky). For the rest of his life, another thirty-one years, he never danced publicly, and stayed in and out of mental institutions. Essentially Vaslav left the 'real world' and continued living in his fantasy world. This decision had an enormous impact, not only on his fans, but especially on the people close to him such as his former lover, his wife, daughter, and his servant. Three eyewitnesses, each one from a different perspective, tell the story of what transpired that particular day, January 19, 1919 in Sankt Moritz: his wife Romola, who struggled her whole life to live by the side of 'the God of the dance', as she adored him; his lover Sergei Pavlovich Diaghilev, who destroyed Vaslav once he was rejected by him as a lover; and his servant Peter, who changed his life radically after his master's dramatic decision. During the chaos of the First World War, Nijinsky hoped to bring love to humanity. But, as he realized nobody understood him, not even the people who loved him, he shut himself of from the world (Nijinsky).

The book is divided into four sections, each named after the narrator of the section: Peter (pp. 13-121), written in the first person;, Sergei Pavlovich Diaghilev (pp.



125-214), written in third person narration; Romola (pp. 217-295), again in the first person; and once more Peter (pp. 299-366). The first and last part of Peter is chronologically written with the precise times of the day. The novel ends with a fragment of Vaslav Nijinsky's diary, followed by an epilogue of Arthur Japin regarding the rest of Vaslav's life.

Set in the world of dance, the themes explored in this novel include love, art, fame and madness. The main theme is 'love'. The three storytellers speak about their experiences with love. Peter speaks about his love for Lise, a girl he knows since childhood with whom he grew up with. Therefore, he says their relationship lacks passion because he knew her body before he had sexual contact with her. Sergei is homosexual and in love with Vaslav. Romola, Vaslav's wife, claims that Vaslav himself was disgusted by Sergei and forced into a relationship with him because of the situation. Sergei was extremely upset when he heard about the wedding of Vaslav and Romola. Romola was instantly in love with Vaslav and fought for his love many years. She did everything to get close to him. The citations from Tolstoi, Nietzsche and Vaslav used in the novel relate all to love as well.

Furthermore, art, be it music, ballet or visual arts, each represents an important theme. Nijinsky lived during a period of time of dynamic development in art. His breathtaking performances with the 'Ballets Russes' from 1909 to 1913 took Western Europe by storm. His avant-garde choreography for the "Afternoon of the Faune" and the "Rites of Spring" provoked riots when performed and are now regarded as the foundation of modern ballet dance. He worked together with the artistic elite of that time, such as the painter Picasso, and the composers Claude Debussy and Igor Stravinski. Peter Lieven describes how Stravinski and Vaslav worked together "to communicate the same message" (Lieven). He stated that by the end of the nineteenth



century the arts had moved steadily toward each other. The *scandale* of the 1912 season was the Paris première of Debussy's *L'Après midi d'un Faune*, "inspired by Mallarmé's poem, choreographed and danced by Nijinsky, with *art nouveau* sets and costumes" (Eksteins, 27). This ballet with Nijinsky dressed in skintight costumes and provocative movements "broke all the rules of traditional taste" (Eksteins, 27). Sergei Diaghilev, the founder of Ballets Russes, and who brought them to Western Europe, made Vaslav a world star.

During the fabulous Diaghilev years, Nijinsky lived in an atmosphere of perpetual hysteria, glamor, and intrigue. The theme of 'fame' shown in this novel is the vulnerability of a famous person. In 1913, when he married a Hungarian aristocrat, Romola de Pulsky, Diaghilev abruptly "dismissed him from his company" because of his jealousy at Vaslav's marriage (Scheijen). Due to this personal conflict, Vaslav was disconnected from the 'Ballets Russes' and remained without support of Diaghilev; he could not make it on his own. Five years later, he was declared insane. The fabulous career as the greatest dancer who ever lived was over.

Vaslav's 'madness' is a theme that the novel deals with and shows the impact madness has on himself and the society surrounding him. For six weeks in early 1919, as his ties to reality were giving way, he kept a diary – the only sustained daily record existing by a major artist, of the experience of entering psychosis. At times, he is filled with hope, claiming he is God, and will save the world. At other times, he falls in deep despair; or he is dogged by sexual obsessions, or he is grieved by World War I. Eksteins claims that the "Great War was the psychological turning point...for modernism as a whole. The urge to create and the urge to destroy had changed places" (Eksteins). Furthermore, Nijinsky seems to be aware of his madness and is "afraid of going insane" (Acocella).



4. Shape of Project

As I have mentioned before, I will capture these three voices in the novel. From the assigned 120 pages, I will devote equal attention to the three different voices. I believe it sufficiently demonstrates the various themes that the novel sorts out, and portrays the characteristics of each character, as well as the differences in their voices. The first part of translation will be an introduction of Peter and the bulk will be in chronological order from the precise time of 5.40 am till 7.27 am of that particular day. The following section will be a translation of Sergei Pavlovitch' voice, which will be two chapters out of the four. The last section will be Romola's introduction and three out of the five chapters.

There are two layers of time in the novel. The most important one is the day of the 19th of January 1919, which is mainly described in parts 1, 2 and 4. Romola relates to a period about 30 years later, so the time leaps to 1949. She focuses on Valsav's madness and the difficulties during World War I.

Japin translated quotes by Friedrich Nietzsche, Sergej Pavlovich Diaghilev and Vaslav Nijinsky from their original languages into Dutch. Similarly, I will translate them into English. In addition, I will use Arthur Japin's audiobook in order to perceive the emphasis he places on certain words, and the intonations. Clifford Landers claims "style in a translator is an oxymoron. Ideally, the translator will strive to have no style at all and attempts to disappear onto and become indistinguishable from the style of the source language of the author" (Landers). Therefore, I will do my utmost to convey his poetic style in the same manner. Gregory Rabassa writes in his article "No Two Snowflakes are Alike" that translation is what we might call "transformation, it is a



form of adaptation, making the new metaphor fit the original” (Biguenet, Schulte, 2). Japin often uses metaphoric language, an exciting but daunting challenge for any translator, one that requires the translator to search for that one word or phrase heard somewhere in the “corner of my mind” as William Weaver calls it in his article “The Process of Translation” (Biguenet, Schulte, 117). It is important to keep in mind that “the original words are only the starting point” and the translator must do more than “convey information” (Biguenet, Schulte, x). Nevertheless, the fact that this novel has three completely different voices, tones and styles of which I must capture, presents a particular challenge. The voice of the servant is direct and honest, written in first person narration. His tone is one of extreme worry. Sergei’s voice is written in third person narration, and therefore further distanced. His character is ambitious and his tone is often upset. Romola’s voice is again in first person narration, an adult woman who collects memories with an emotional tone that moves between determination, frustration and anger. I feel that the extremely short sentences that Japin uses recurrently have a strong impact of surprise on the reader. I intend to follow these sudden short phrases and will try to create that same effect as in the original language, in addition to making the correct vocabulary choices for each of the different character’s voices. Ultimately, I wish to turn problems of translation into pleasures of solving them.



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