

Andrey Azov

“Barbaric Yawp” in Russian

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Andrey Azov

Moskóvskiy Gosudárstvennyy Universitét

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Whitman’s poetry was translated into Russian by a number of translators, most notably by Kornei Chukovsky, who began writing on Whitman and translating his poetry in the first decade of the 20th century. His first translations of Whitman appeared alongside the translations by Konstantin Balmont, a prominent figure of the Silver Age of Russian Poetry, and incited a rather heated polemic on whose renditions were better. In 1920 Balmont emigrated from the Soviet Russia, while Chukovsky stayed, and was gradually elevated in the literary ranks, steadily becoming one of the leading authorities on translation.¹ In 1936 he published the first complete translation of “Song of Myself.” As far as I could ascertain, there have been no other published translations of this poem into Russian. This may be explained both by the enormity of the task and, quite possibly, by the general reverence for Chukovsky’s translations.²

As for the *yawp* in “Song of Myself,” the final Chukovsky’s rendition is rather puzzling. Here is what he does (Whitman, 1982: 100):

¹ He is celebrated, for instance, for his book on literary translation *Высокое искусство* (*A High Art*), which was immensely popular in Russia. It was translated into English by Lauren Leighton under the title *The Art of Translation: Kornei Chukovsky’s A High Art*.

² Vladimir Britanishsky, in the foreword to a collection of his translations of American poetry, recalls that when in 1982 (over a decade after Chukovsky’s death) a definitive Russian edition of *Leaves of Grass* was being prepared, he was asked to re-translate several of Whitman’s poems previously translated by Chukovsky. He refused.

Whitman: The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

Chukovsky: *Пестрый ястреб проносится мимо и упрекает меня, зачем я болтаю и мешкаю.*

*Я такой же непостижимый и дикий,
Я выпускаю мой варварский визг над крышами мира.*

Back-translated: A spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me of babbling and loitering.
I too am unintelligible³ and wild,
I emit my barbaric squeal over the roofs of the world.

The word choice for the yawp—*визг*, pronounced as \visk\ and denoting a shrill, high-pitched scream—seems rather odd. Phonetically, it is very different from “yawp”: there are literally no common sounds between the two words, and the open-mouthed “yawp,” no doubt onomatopoeitic, with its broad ɔː\, sounds absolutely unlike *visk* chosen for translation. Besides, no less importantly, a “yawp,” as the Oxford English Dictionary explains, used to mean “a harsh, hoarse, or querulous cry, esp. of a bird”; thus, in the poem, it seems to allude back to the spotted hawk two lines above. Consider how Whitman compares himself to the hawk in the line immediately preceding the “yawp” (“I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable”)—it is only natural to suppose that with the “yawp” he continues this comparison and likens his wild voice to the cry of the hawk. The Russian *visk*, on the other hand, does not bear this association; if there is any animal typically thought of as producing a *visk*, it is a pig, not a hawk.

Curiously, it appears that *visk* was Chukovsky’s later correction; his initial variant was *вопль* pronounced \vopl\ and meaning a single deafening cry. That translation (Whitman, 1922: 141) ran as follows:

³ Chukovsky produced several versions of this line struggling with the word *untranslatable*: it seems he did not want the reader to realize that he or she was reading a translation of the author who declared himself untranslatable. So most of the times he avoided literal translation of this word and rendered it as *непостижимый* (unintelligible, or unfathomable), *невнятный* (incoherent), *непонятный* (incomprehensible). There exists, however, at least one version where this word is translated directly—*непереводимый* (Whitman, 1935: 220).

Chukovsky (1922): *Пестрый ястреб пронесится мимо и упрекает меня,
Он жалуется, что я болтаю и мешкаю.
Я такой же дикий, как он, я такой же непонятный, как он.
Я испускаю мой варварский вопль над крышами мира.*

Back-translated: A spotted hawk swoops by and reproaches me,
He complains that I am babbling and loitering.
I am as wild as he, I am as incomprehensible as he,
I emit my barbaric cry [*vopl*] over the roofs of the world.

So the puzzle is, *why* did Chukovsky, after having come up with *vopl*, which phonetically is so much closer to “yawp” (even though it certainly is a human cry, unsuitable for comparison with the hawk⁴) later on change it for *visk*? One can only guess, of course, but I will hazard a suggestion. Perhaps it has to do with the word *barbaric* that precedes the yawp.

As Ed Folsom points out (see above, p. 254), the word *barbaric* goes back to Latin and Greek; in short, to Classical Antiquity. A stereotypic barbarian, as we tend to picture him when we imagine Ancient Rome, is a Gaul. Russians, on the other hand, were for centuries plagued by other kinds of barbarians, namely Tatars and Mongols. A stereotypic Tatar rider, to the Russian ear, does indeed squeal; the sounds they produce were quite frequently described in the Russian fiction as *visk*. Could that possibly be the reason? Could Chukovsky have possibly been influenced by this Eastern concept of a barbarian when he changed the noun in his translation from *vopl* to *visk*?

Anyhow, the *visk* stuck. When in 1998 Vladimir Britanishsky was translating Zbigniew Herbert’s “Raport z obleżonego miasta” (“Report from the Besieged City”) from Polish into Russian, he recognized Herbert’s *ślucham hałas u bębnow barbarzyńskich wrzasków* as a reference to Whitman, and translated *barbarzyńskich wrzasków* with Chukovsky’s version of the barbaric yawp—*варварский визг* (Herbert 89).

⁴ A possible translation *клекот* (squawk), while preserving the comparison with the hawk, would not go well with the word *barbaric*, which is too human for that kind of sound.

The yawp that appears in *Dead Poets Society* poses another translation problem. There the English teacher (played by Robin Williams) quotes Whitman's line with the barbaric yawp and urges his student Todd Anderson (played by Ethan Hawke) to, literally, sound a yawp. The student says "yawp," first quietly, then louder, then screams it. Chukovsky's *visk* would not work here: first, a yawp is an obscure word that the English teacher comments on, while *visk* is a common Russian word not requiring a comment; second, you would not say *visk* or cry *visk*, whereas *yawp*, being an echoic word, easily allows it; and finally, *visk* is a squeal in Russian, and the student in the film certainly does not squeal. So, since Chukovsky's translation was unsuitable, the translator of *Dead Poets Society* had to come up with another version of this line. The adapted version goes like this:

English teacher: "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world" . . . Now, for those of you who don't know, a yawp is a loud cry or yell.

In Russian: "Я обрушил свой громовой клич 'Яп' на крыши мира" . . . Кстати, поясню: клич "Яп" — это громовой вопль, это рев.

Back-translated: "I threw my thundering cry 'Yawp' on the roofs of the world" . . . By the way, for those of you who don't know, the cry "Yawp" is a thundering scream [*vopl*], a roar.

Here the translation introduces a non-existing cry, "yawp" (similar to other cries, like "Hooray"), which the student then reproduces. This translation is functional, and does the work, but makes those who know the original text smile. And yet, I cannot think of any word that will function equally well as a noun in the line of Whitman's poetry, and as a cry (an interjection) in the movie. Perhaps Whitman's yawp is indeed untranslatable. If so, it certainly will not be the first such word.

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Summary

The essay traces the history of Kornei Chukovsky's translation of Whitman's "yawp" into Russian, points out the oddities of the translation and suggests a tentative explanation of Chukovsky's word choice. It also examines the "yawp" in the Russian translation of the film *Dead Poets Society*.

Key words: comparative literature, translation studies, Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," Russian literature

„Barbarzyńskie yawp” po rosyjsku

Streszczenie

W artykule przedstawiona została historia przekładów „yawp” Whitmana na język rosyjski dokonanych przez Kornieja Czukowskiego. Autor artykułu wskazuje na osobliwości dostrzeżone w przekładach i sugeruje możliwe wyjaśnienia wyborów translatorskich. Analizie poddany został także przekład „yawp” w rosyjskiej wersji filmu *Stowarzyszenie Umarłych Poetów*.

Słowa kluczowe: komparatystyka literacka, studia przekładoznawcze, Walt Whitman, „Pieśń o mnie”, literatura rosyjska