

Sample translation of *De trein naar Pavlovsk en Oostvoorne* by Toon Tellegen

(provisional title in translation: *And the Clouds Were Cossacks*)

Translated by Judith Wilkinson

Chapter 2. A Poet

My grandfather wrote poems, always about God, Heaven and death. When he was writing a poem, I'd often sit on an old couch in a corner of the room. I'd pretend to be looking at a book, but I was actually looking at him, his eyes just above the paper, mumbling in Russian and making scratching sounds with his pen. Once he'd finished a poem, he'd ask my grandmother to join us, and she'd come out of the kitchen, still drying her hands.

‘Listen,’ he’d say.

‘Wait a moment,’ she’d reply, taking her embroidery out of a basket. She couldn’t sit idle while listening to him.

My grandfather read his poems very slowly and solemnly. I recognised the word Bog, Russian for God, in every poem. When he’d finished, my grandmother would say ‘Yes’ and nod. He never asked her to elaborate and she’d just put her embroidery back in the basket and return to the kitchen. He never read his own poems out to me, but he did read me poems by Pushkin and Lermontov. I vividly remember a poem about yellow cornfields, cool forests, purple plums and fragrant dew that ended with the line: ‘And in Heaven I see God.’

‘Poems are meant to help you find something out,’ he said, ‘or to discover mistakes.’ But if you discover them, it doesn’t mean you can correct them.’

Whenever he talked about poems, he always looked very grave. One day he told me that he used to know a poet in St. Petersburg, an unknown poet, who worked as a civil servant for a ministry. My grandfather had to go there once about a licence. He was made to wait in a small room. There was someone writing behind a railing. My grandfather was sitting comfortably, eyes closed, when he heard a soft voice declaiming a poem. ‘Have you seen the daggers of ancient Toledo...?’

‘Sin miedo,’ my grandfather said. ‘Without fear.’

He knew the poem, which was by Balmont. But who had spoken that line? He was alone with the civil servant, who was bent over his papers.

‘A magnificent poem,’ my grandfather said.

The civil servant looked up. ‘Quite good,’ he said. It was he who had spoken that line. They got talking. From that day onwards, this civil servant, whose name was Ilya Dukharov, visited my grandfather regularly, on a Thursday night.

‘It was as if I had a literary salon,’ my grandfather said.

On those evenings they discussed poetry. They talked about sonnets and quatrains, about iambs and oxymorons and about masculine and feminine rhymes. They read each other the greatest

Russian poems. But there was never a single poem that Dukharov didn't criticize. 'Quite good' or 'acceptable' was his highest praise.

'Poets get it right far too often!' he once cried, after my grandfather had read out a long poem by Lermontov, about an angel. 'They should get it wrong and completely miss the point!' He leapt up and banged into a table. A vase toppled over, rolled onto the ground and shattered. Dukharov pushed the shards aside with his foot. 'They should always be wrong!' he cried.

On those evenings they'd drink white wine and eat cake, for Dukharov was mad about sweet things. He'd greedily gobble down enormous pieces of cake, droplets of sweat beading his brow. Towards midnight he'd read out one of his own poems.

'They were beautiful poems,' my grandfather said, 'about the passing of time, about fate and longing. Symbolic poems and yet, at the same time, realistic. He always kept one foot on the ground, but only just.'

Ilya Dukharov was a short, thickset man, almost bald, with some ginger hair around his temples. He would sweat profusely while reading a poem and kept patting himself dry with a large red handkerchief. After he'd finished reading a poem, he'd hand it to my grandfather. 'You keep it,' he said. 'I'll only rip it up. I always end up despising my poems and then I have to rip them up. Even if I wrote a second *Onegin*, I'd still end up destroying it.'

'But what should I do with it?' my grandfather had asked him the first time.

'Keep it,' Dukharov had said.

'For how long?'

'Forever.'

'Forever, forever...' my grandfather said. 'What is forever?'

'That's precisely what I write about,' Dukharov answered.

My grandfather put the poems in a wooden box 'with a heavy heart,' he told me. There they piled up, first dozens and then hundreds of poems. Dukharov never asked for them back.

When the Revolution broke out, Dukharov suddenly disappeared. Perhaps he'd escaped or even been murdered. No one at the ministry had any news of him. My grandfather went to his house for the first time ever. He'd vanished without telling anyone where he'd gone. A neighbour let my grandfather into the house when he told him he was a friend of Dukharov. 'We didn't know he knew anyone on this earth,' the neighbour said. The room was empty and clean. There were a few books on a shelf: Pushkin, Lermontov, Bryusov, Blok, and on the table lay a pile of white paper, with a pen and a jar of ink next to it. On the top sheet, in the top left corner, was the word 'Sun'. Somewhere in the middle it said 'devils, doves', a little below that, towards the right, 'dejected, disfigured' and in the lower right corner it said 'in darkness', followed by a full-stop.

It looked as if he'd been writing a poem and had only completed the beginning, the end, and a few words in between. Perhaps this was how he always worked, my grandfather thought. Perhaps he filled the poems in word by word, in no fixed order, like a painter. There was nothing else in the room. My grandfather left again, without taking anything with him.

Dukharov came from the Ryazan Governorate and his father was a priest. That was all my grandfather knew about him. It was impossible to go and search for him, particularly amidst the chaos of the Revolution.

When my grandparents and their six children left Russia after the Revolution, they couldn't take much with them, but the wooden box containing Dukharov's poems had to come. My grandmother protested at first. Most of the children's toys had to be left behind, even my mother's favourite teddy-bear. Each child had to carry two bags or boxes, to which my grandfather had attached handles. My mother's younger brother, who was six at the time, carried the box of poems. They took a train out of St. Petersburg. My grandfather told the family to look closely as they crossed the bridge across the Neva. He pointed at the river. 'You'll never see it again.'

There were controls at the border. The customs officer impounded the box with the poems. 'Everything incomprehensible must be confiscated,' the officer said, while examining the sheets of paper.

'They're poems,' my grandfather said.

'You're lucky I don't declare you incomprehensible,' another officer said.

In Holland, my grandfather started writing poems himself. At first, he wrote in Dukharov's style, drawing on his memories of those clear and yet melancholy poems, but he soon ripped them up and began to write in his own style. About God.

'I can't think of any other subject,' he told me apologetically.

He kept those poems, but shortly before his death, urged by my grandmother, he destroyed them all. She was worried the children wouldn't know what to do with them. I think she found them too heavy, too serious, too desperate, and felt there was enough despair in the world already.

Later, long after his death, when I had started reading poems myself, I often thought of Ilya Dukharov. I tried to picture him, with his almost bald head, his heavy posture, wearing an ill-fitting suit, the sleeves and trousers too short, wiping his face with a red handkerchief, perhaps with some kind of mole on his chin, and always suspicious of poems in general, not least his own.

I wrote his last poem on a sheet of white paper. It hangs on the wall above my desk.

Sun

devils, doves

dejected, disfigured

in darkness

Ilya Dukharov, 1917

Perhaps this way he's become a little bit immortal.

Chapter 12. Guilt

My grandfather told me that there are at least eleven different words for guilt in Russian, just as the Eskimos have thirty different words for snow. Eight of those words everyone knew, three occurred only in ancient texts and prayers.

He tried to explain the differences between those words to me with the help of a story. In St. Petersburg there was a merchant in linen and damask, known to be an unpleasant man, whose customers moved in the highest circles. He had one employee, Ippolit, who, according to my grandfather, was good nature personified. He lived in a cramped little house together with his wife and three children.

The merchant was rich and stingy, and every time he had to pay Ippolit his wages, he moaned that he would be reduced to beggary one day.

‘This work you do, I could easily do myself!’ he would cry, with a side-glance at an icon. ‘I would do it for free. It’s just that I have such a good heart... Here! Take it!’ And then he’d hand Ippolit a miserly sum of money.

One of Ippolit’s children contracted typhus. It was vital that the child drink milk, but Ippolit had no kopecks left. He asked for more money – just enough to tide him over.

‘What?’ the merchant exclaimed. ‘Even more?’

‘A small loan...’ Ippolit replied.

‘A loan? Didn’t I say you’d reduce me to beggary one day...?’

That week Ippolit was paid even less than usual. His child died. Ippolit didn’t say anything. Not long after, his second child fell ill. Again he asked for money to buy some milk, and perhaps an egg.

‘That again?’ the merchant cried, having just delivered a large batch of Italian damask to Prince Yusupov. He looked at the icon in the corner of the room. ‘Does it never end?’ he wailed, throwing his arms in the air.

Suddenly Ippolit grabbed a stick from a corner of the room and with one blow he beat the merchant to death. With the stick still in his hands, he sat down next to his boss’s body and waited until somebody found him there.

This murder was the talk of the town. The merchant had been widely disliked and everyone knew how stingy he was. Many people defended Ippolit, collected money for his wife and children, and felt that his actions had been justified. But he was still found guilty and sent to prison and, within a few months, he died.

‘Not an unusual tale,’ my grandfather said, ‘and it’s all about guilt: Ippolit’s guilt, the merchant’s guilt and also the judge’s guilt, as he could have been more just.’ With every mention of guilt, he used a different Russian word.

‘The government’s guilt, since no one had taken the matter of poverty and illness into account. The guilt of the cold, damp Russian winters. The guilt of everyone who’d known about the injustice of the situation. The guilt of the lice that spread typhus. The guilt of Russia...’

He paused for a moment. ‘How many have I got?’ he asked.

‘Eight,’ I replied.

‘The guilt of Russia...’ he continued, and he hesitated for a moment. ‘There must be a very old word for that,’ he said. ‘After all, that guilt is so enormous... and yet so different too...’ He rubbed his brow.

‘And there’s someone else who is guilty too,’ he said softly. He was a pious person. I understood what he meant.

He filled his pipe.

‘And *I* am guilty for telling you all this,’ he said, and he named another Russian word.

‘Have we reached eleven?’ he asked.

‘No, I said. ‘Ten.’

He was silent for a long while. I thought he’d forgotten I was there.

‘If I’m completely honest,’ he then said, more to himself than to me, ‘I like guilt.’ He closed his eyes and plucked at his broad Russian beard that always had some crumbs in it.

‘I don’t like people who have no guilt,’ he said. ‘Without guilt, nobody thrives.’ It was the kind of statement you could paint on a blue plaque and hang on the wall. Without God or without guilt: there’s not much difference.

A few days later, when I was at home again, lying in bed, I heard a cart drive past our house. A man was calling out: ‘Guilt... Who still has some guilt to spare...’ And he sounded a bell. I imagined people coming out of their houses and throwing guilt into his cart: pale guilt, fraying guilt, guilt with holes in it, snippets of guilt, rusty guilt, crooked guilt... Eleven kinds of guilt. I pricked up my ears. Was my mother also going outside?

We don’t have any guilt, I thought. I needed to ask my mother about that the next day. Or perhaps we had no old guilt... I think that’s when I fell asleep.

A few days later I wrote the word guilt on my wall with a pencil. Next to the word death – as I’d already written that on my wall quite some time ago. Whenever I lay in bed I’d stare at those words until the moment came when they lost their meaning. Then I could safely fall asleep.

Years later I made up a new word for guilt myself: ‘schnashschnosh.’ It sounded Russian. It could be the twelfth word. It stands for guilt that suddenly arises out of nothing and has no bearing on anything. Whenever I feel that particular guilt, I greet it, in silence: hullo schnashschnosh... and then I think of my grandfather.

Chapter 43 (final chapter). *The Steppe*

My grandfather saw the Russian steppe just once, when his father had to go to Rostov on business and took him with him. His father had a business matter to deal with first: he needed to acquire the sole purchase rights, nationwide, for a particular kind of candied fruit. Once this had been settled, he and his son travelled through the steppe for a week, in the Kuban region.

It was a week that made an indelible impression on my grandfather. He was enchanted by the vastness of the landscape, the trembling horizon, the peculiar, sweet scents that filled the air, the buoyant warbling of larks, the black kites high up in the sky and the sounds of the corncrakes at night...

When it grew dark, they slept outside under the great starry expanse and my great-grandfather taught his son the names of all the constellations – which he never forgot. Occasionally, as they trekked through the steppe, they'd see small dust clouds in the distance that quickly dissolved in the trembling air. Those clouds were Cossacks.

There were many days when they didn't meet a soul, but one afternoon a man crossed their path, walking alongside a horse. Stacked on the back of the horse were ten cowhides.

‘Where are you headed?’ my grandfather asked.

‘There,’ the man said, pointing at the horizon.

‘How long have you been travelling?’

‘For a week.’

‘How much longer will you be travelling?’

‘For another week.’

He had cured meat with him, some bread and water. He'd bought the hides somewhere and would sell them somewhere. This is how he lived, year in year out. The steppe was his home.

‘That’s my window,’ he said, pointing at the sky, ‘and that’s the door through which I’ll exit,’ and he pointed at the ground. My grandfather offered him sweet, dried plums, but the man didn’t want anything from us and said he had to move on.

My grandfather told me that, during the whole of that week of travel, he had a tightness in his throat from excitement, and he kept pinching himself: ‘*this* is the steppe, so *this* is the steppe...’

‘You can only feel this kind of elation when you’re twelve or thirteen years old,’ he told me. ‘After that, things change, a new kind of restlessness gets into you that never goes away.’ He mumbled those last words, as if talking to himself. He also mumbled something about the steppe, how it had wrapped its arms around him and whispered through its tall grass that it would never let go of him again. He looked away as he spoke and I couldn’t catch his exact words. I was about

eleven or twelve at the time. I'd been to the Veluwe National Park, and to the sand drifts at Kootwijk, and to the heath at Nuenen once, but that was the farthest I'd travelled.

'If there is a Hereafter,' my grandfather went on, 'then it must be a steppe. But only if there's nobody there but me... or me and my father... my father as he was then...' He cleared his throat and suddenly changed the subject: 'Did I ever tell you about the Uzbek?'

'The Uzbek?' I said. 'No.'

'The medical wizard who was two metres tall and weighed a hundred and fifty kilos, and who healed people by giving them a good shaking?'

'No.'

'And who, shortly before his death in 1880, cured Tsar Alexander II of his headache by shaking him so wildly that he lost four teeth?'

'No.'

'I'll tell you about him,' he said. But he didn't tell me anything and simply sighed and stared at the table. I understood that he didn't want to talk about the steppe any more. Later, I asked him several times to tell me more about the journey he and his father had made through the Kuban region, but each time he shook his head and said: 'Another time.'

Since that morning, during the Christmas holiday, in the dark sitting-room of the tall red house on Haagweg in Leiden, I have felt that same longing for the steppe that my grandfather felt: a greater, more persistent and intense longing than any other longing I've experienced.

I've never been to the steppe and I've never seen undulating grass all around me as far as the eye can see, nor do I know what the steppe smells like. My grandfather knew. Perhaps he inhaled its scent whenever he closed his eyes – which was often.

My Hereafter is a steppe too, just like his, and I too want to be alone there, or together with him.

'Can you hear that?' he'll ask.

I prick up my ears.

'That's the corncrake. And that's Cassiopeia.' He points.