

## A QUICK NOTE ON A TRANSLATION FROM RUSSIAN TO ENGLISH

Спустим весь Третий Рим  
С молотка понемногу,  
И надвинется хаос,  
И в нас прорастёт,  
За последний предел  
Сумма зла перейдёт,  
И все вещи вернуться  
К хозяину — к Богу.

Recently the editors of *Бостонское Время* put into my hands an epigram by a poet, Grigory Mark, previously unfamiliar to me, along with its unattributed translation. A brief discussion of this translation and my own might be interesting for those who want to know some of what goes into turning a Russian poem into an English one.

The unidentified translator has rendered these lines into English this way:

By and by, we'll sell off  
All of the Third Rome,  
And chaos will descend upon us  
And will start growing within us.  
The sum of evil  
Will go over the final limit  
And then all things will return  
To their owner — to God.

This English version falls far short of the original. Of course, every translation must (except for those rare examples of translation that surpass their originals, like Brian Hooker's English translation of Edmond Rostand's French play *Cyrano de Bergerac*), but this translation falls even shorter than it needs to, even on the literal level.

"To fall (or go) under the hammer" is a common enough English-language expression for selling at auction that it does not need to be weakened into "sell off." Moreover, "selling off" can just refer, say, to overstock, while falling under the hammer implies a liquidation under duress or unfortunate circumstances — an estate sale or a bankruptcy. The translator moves the verbal motion of falling from the first clause to the "descent" of chaos, and shifts the physical selling off "little by little," or "piece by piece" into a temporal mode which means something entirely different: "By and by," or "sooner or later." The flabby, repetitive endings of the third and fourth lines are unacceptable as English verse, and can not be otherwise justified as representing the tone of the original. "The sum of evil / Will go over the final limit," is literally accurate enough, but is not a sentence anyone might actually say in English. Literary translators call this "Translationese," a language particular to inadequate translations. And the line's too short. Moreover, the translator misses a sound-play with nearly the effect of a rhyme between *предел* and *перейдёт*. Is it possible for an English version not to reproduce, but re-create this, as well as the triple alliteration of the next line?

Taking all this into consideration, I try my own.

The Third Rome will all go  
Under our hammer bit by bit,  
And chaos will draw near,  
Take root in us and sprout.  
The accumulation of evil