

**Nabokov, “the Wretched Aksakov”, and Early English
Translations of Sergei Aksakov’s Autobiographical Prose.
Problems of Natural History.**

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Abstract: This article considers English translations of Sergei Aksakov’s pastoral trilogy (1856-58), or parts of it, by ‘a Russian lady’ (1871), James Duff (1916-24), and M. C. Beverley (1924), in the light of Vladimir Nabokov’s pronouncements about literary translation in general and his dismissive statements about Aksakov as a writer. Particular attention is devoted to Aksakov’s descriptions of the flora and wild life of the province of Ufa and the difficulties this posed for the translators. It concludes with selected passages from the trilogy in which these matters are especially prominent, in the author’s English translation.

Key words: Nabokov; Sergei Aksakov; English translations; natural history.

Я стараюсь, насколько возможно, быть верным оригиналу, но только там, где верность или точность не вредит художественному впечатлению.

(I try to be faithful to the original as far as possible, but only where fidelity or accuracy does not compromise the artistic impression.)

A. K. Tolstoi

(1963, IV 214)

Dismissive references to Sergei Aksakov form a recurrent motif in Vladimir Nabokov’s *oeuvre*, like those to butterflies and “racemosa”. Professor Pnin once earned his living in Paris at the “Aksakov Institute”, while moonlighting at “Saul Bagrov’s Russian book shop” (Nabokov, 1960, 37). The hero of *The Gift* speaks with fleeing contempt of “the wretched Aksakov” and his “disgraceful blunders” in hunting scenes and descriptions of nature (Nabokov, 1963, 85). Nabokov’s celebrated commentary on *Eugene Onegin* mentions Aksakov as “a very minor writer, tremendously puffed up by Slavophile groups” (Pushkin, 1964, III 139). Aksakov is

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the name given to a fittingly minor character, Van's "chaste, angelic Russian tutor" (Nabokov, 1969, 149), in *Ada*, whose subtitle *A Family Chronicle* pays back-handed homage by introducing a family most unlike that in Aksakov's *Family Chronicle*.

Nabokov is of course well known for his provocative *ex cathedra* pronouncements, and I shall have occasion to mention others concerning matters of translation, but while Aksakov himself, a modest man, would have accepted "minor" without demur, many readers, writers and critics, and not only "Slavophile groups", would strongly disagree. Among the writers of his day, Dobroliubov, Turgenev, Gogol, Nekrasov, Dostoevskii and Chernyshevskii were quick to acknowledge his talent, as were critics like Semen Vengerov, who also makes a fleeting appearance in *Ada*. The writers and critics of the twentieth century who paid unstinting tribute and often followed where he had led are too numerous to mention, but include Konstantin Paustovskii, Vladimir Soloukhin, Ivan Sokolov-Mikitov, Mikhail Prishvin, A. V. Chicherin, V. V. Vinogradov, S. Mashinskii, S. Lobanov and S. Fateev (Windle, 2003).

Aksakov, a distant relative of Nabokov, is much admired by Russian readers for his uncommon ability to evoke a period and a place, his eye for detail, and gift for the presentation of characters. His pastoral trilogy describing a rural childhood in the province of Ufa *A Family Chronicle* [*Semeinaia khronika*, 1856], *Memoirs* [*Vospominaniia*, 1856], *The Childhood of Bagrov's Grandson* [*Detskie gody Bagrova-vnuka*, 1858], soon came to be seen as a classic. Aksakov may have entered the field of literature later in life than most of his illustrious contemporaries, but his place in it was quickly established beyond doubt. His late flowering was largely because in the heyday of the novel he felt that he lacked an essential attribute: imagination. Not only did he claim to have none; he also declared himself incapable of invention. He could, he thought, only describe what he knew from experience. The mask of fiction in his trilogy is therefore thin, notably thinner than in another "Childhood" from the same period, by Lev Tolstoi (1852), which was not strictly autobiographical, and as Aksakov's work progressed he dropped the mask altogether. In the earlier parts he had changed names and made a half-hearted attempt to fictionalize his own early life, but his *Memoirs* by their nature required him to give the same characters their real names. "Bagrov" and "Bagrovo" were no longer needed. Edward Crankshaw wrote that *A Family Chronicle* was "a classic example of that essentially Russian genre, a factual record faintly disguised as fiction, or a fiction

so actual, so apparently inconsequent and uncontrived, that it reads like fact” (Aksakov, 1982, xi).

Most readers and critics agreed that Aksakov’s great forte lay in vivid and precise description, in conveying what Prince D. S. Mirsky called “the impression of photographic, unswerving, incorruptible fidelity to fact” (Aksakov, 1924, xi). His liking for precision went hand in hand with a vocabulary of exceptional range and richness, which makes certain demands on the readership, not to mention his translators. In this respect, if in few others, Aksakov and Nabokov may be said to have something in common. In Russian editions of Aksakov’s works it is common practice to include a glossary of unusual words, since not all modern urban readers will have a clear mental picture of, for example, *polba* (spelt), *otava* (aftermath), or *zhelny* (black woodpeckers, *Dryocopus martius*). Of Aksakov’s use of language Aleksei Khomiakov wrote,

It was unbearable for Sergei Timofeevich to use an incorrect word or an adjective inappropriate to the subject he was discussing and which failed to express it. He felt incorrectness of expression as a kind of insult to the subject itself, as a kind of untruth in relation to his own impression, and he would rest easy only when he found the right word. (Quoted by Hodge; Aksakov, 1997, xx)

The literary historian Vengerov echoed this opinion:

We have no doubt that [...] the dictionary of his language will be one of the fullest, one of the richest in subtle and various shades of meaning. And, of course, this dictionary will be rich and abundant not in abstract words, but in concrete terms necessary for the description of real qualities and traits. (Quoted by Hodge; Aksakov, 1997, xxi)

Statements such as these have clear implications for the translators of Aksakov.

Outside Russia Aksakov has not achieved the renown of his great contemporaries; he has been to a large extent overshadowed by the novelists of his time and overlooked by the arbiters of literary taste. This despite the fact that in the English-speaking world there have been very competent translations of his major works from an early date, though some of those works were abridged in translation, while others, not universally considered “major”, eluded the attention of translators until relatively recent times. His hunting and fishing notes, masterpieces of the genre,

appeared in English only at the close of the twentieth century (Aksakov, 1997, 1998), and his more “mainstream” prose remains less translated than that of, say, Leskov or Goncharov, to say nothing of Turgenev or Chekhov.

However, some of that mainstream prose did reach some English-speaking readers not many years after his death, though not those of Britain or North America. What appears to be the earliest version of *A Family Chronicle* was published only fifteen years after the original, in 1871, under the title *Memoirs of the Aksakof Family*, translated by “a Russian lady” and published in Calcutta (Aksakof, 1871). Forty-five years later, beginning in 1915, came the admirable versions of James Duff, who undertook the translation of the complete trilogy (Aksakov [reprinted], 1982, 1951, 1978). These versions were soon followed by one by M. C. Beverley, *Chronicles of a Russian Family*, which includes all of *A Family Chronicle* and parts of *The Childhood of Bagrov’s Grandson* and *Memoirs* (Aksakov, 1924). Some aspects of these translations, in particular their treatment of natural history, are considered below, with occasional reference to a later version of *Childhood*, by Alec Brown (Aksakov, 1960), and selected passages of special interest are provided in my translation (see below).

The Calcutta version by the “Russian lady” (hereafter RL) offers much of interest to the student of inter-cultural mediation, being designed for readers whose points of reference are in India, as the Preface makes clear:

These Memoirs have been very popular in Russia as depicting the state of Russia under despotic landlords in the days of Serfdom : they also give a faithful picture of family life in a country district. Some of the scenes brought forward are most touching, others quite tragic, while the condition of the peasants will recal [*sic*] many points of resemblance to Bengal, in relation to zemindar and ryot.

Editorial notes inform the reader that mosquitoes are as troublesome in parts of Russia as in India, that “Chota Hazri is taken in Russia as in India, and breakfast or dejeuner a la fourchette in the forenoon”, and that the police in both countries are equally corrupt. Other notes assume some familiarity with social conditions in Ireland: “The Russian country gentleman was a type of the [*sic*] Irish landlord, ignorant and rollicking” (Aksakof, 1871, 34); “The petty nobility, resembling an Irish squireen or petty Bengal Zemindar, were cringing to their superiors and insolent towards the peasantry” (Aksakof, 1871, 54); “The Russian priests, like the Irish priests, are taken

chiefly from the ranks of the peasantry, and are held in little respect by the upper classes” (Aksakof, 1871, 48).

In the translation, some idioms receive a somewhat unsatisfactory rendering: *s legkoi ruki Stepana Mikhailovicha* (Aksakov, 1966, I 71)—“under my grandfather’s liberal policy” (Aksakof, 1871, 19). Exact equivalents are certainly hard to find, let alone idiomatic equivalents, but the original contains no suggestion of policy, and Stepan Mikhailovich is no liberal. In context, the sense of *s legkoi ruki* is little more than “thanks to/owing to”, or perhaps “at his initiative”.

Other idioms are rendered word-for-word, such as “a berry of their own field” (*odnogo polia iagoda*, Aksakof, 1871, 100; Aksakov, 1966, I 130), which then requires an explanatory footnote (“their equal”). Nevertheless the translation as a whole, despite some cuts, succeeds in conveying a clear impression of much of the original content, if in places seeming more dated in style and tone than the author’s Russian prose. RL’s stylistic attainments are mixed, and Aksakov’s poetic apostrophes to his native region, e.g. “Thou thyself art still the same beautiful land” (Aksakof, 1871, 15), cohabit uneasily with lines of song rendered as follows: “The Kinel River / Not rapid, not deep, / Only muddy” (Aksakof, 1871, 7; sensibly omitted by Duff).

James Duff (1860-1940, hereafter JD), a Cambridge classicist, self-taught in Russian, was a scholar of great distinction, a highly skilled translator and fine writer of English. His editions of classical texts and translations of Juvenal and Lucan were among his achievements in his primary field. From Russian, besides Aksakov, he translated the memoirs of Alexander Herzen. His translations of Aksakov are meticulous and thorough, true to the content of the original, capture the wonder of a child’s perception of the natural world, and are above all immensely readable. Omissions are few, and “fidelity” is not seen to consist in diligent reproduction of the original words in their original order. These versions have also proved the most enduring, having been reprinted in the late twentieth century for later generations.

The translation by M. C. Beverley (hereafter MCB) of *A Family Chronicle* (1924) and selected chapters from the subsequent volumes, endorsed and introduced by Mirsky, also has much to recommend it. Like JD, MCB demonstrates a sure command of Russian and a mastery of English prose, though some might object that the translator did not feel bound to follow the original closely, and that “bushes ... bedecked with verdure” and “spring in her full panoply” (Aksakov, 1924, 340) smack

of a self-conscious antiquarianism, which is absent from Duff, and indeed from Aksakov.

There appear to have been no attempts to translate the trilogy since Beverley, with the sole exception of Alec Brown's workmanlike version of one part of it, *Childhood* (Aksakov, 1960), clearly made with painstaking attention to detail. Unlike Dostoevskii, Tolstoi and some others, Aksakov has thus far been spared the dubious honour of "new translations" in the twenty-first century, sometimes with endorsements from Oprah Winfrey, by a "translator" who is unable to work directly from the Russian.

They have also benefited by being untouched by some of the thinking which has dominated much of the field of Translation Studies in recent times. What Jiří Levý termed the "extreme theory" of Friedrich Schleiermacher has probably never exerted much influence on practising English-speaking translators (Levý, 1963, 74). The idea that a translator, faced with a foreign literary artefact and not being fully at home in the source language, might experience a *Gefühl des Fremden* (Schleiermacher, 2002, 80), which should be communicated to the reader, remained alien until taken up in different form by Lawrence Venuti and given a name: "foreignization". All the versions of Aksakov "domesticate", in the sense of bringing a thoroughly Russian original to the English-speaking reader, with a large measure of success, while in no sense removing their author from his native context. All the translators are clearly expert practitioners of English prose-writing. They would have been perplexed by the idea that by their style of translation they were abetting Anglo-American cultural hegemony or committing "ethnocentric violence", and that "fluency" was to be avoided in the interests of maintaining foreign-ness. This particular line of thinking, now firmly associated with Venuti, was, however, anticipated by Nabokov, who single-handedly succeeded in propelling Russian-English translation onto the front pages of the US literary press in the 1960s, and who endured "spasms of helpless fury", he claimed, when told that a translation read "smoothly" (Nabokov, 2010, 115).

While many literary translators develop from an apprenticeship of cautious and awkward literalism to confident and sure-footed fluency, Nabokov, who never lacked confidence, evolved in the opposite direction. His superbly inventive *Alice in Wonderland* (*Ania v strane chudes*) (1922/1992) is a gem among translations precisely because he did not chain himself to the words of the original. Only forty

years later did he declare that the phrase “literal translation” was tautological, because true translation took no other form (Nabokov, 2010, 121), and proclaim his “ideal of literalism” (Pushkin, 1964, I x), with the result that his English *Eugene Onegin* was aptly summarized by Alexander Gerschenkron: it “can and indeed should be studied, but despite all the cleverness and occasional brilliance it cannot be read” (Gerschenkron, 1966, 340). Impervious to the arguments of those such as Kornei Chukovskii, who wrote of “inexact exactitude” (*netochnaia tochnost'*) (Chukovskii, 1964, 51ff.; 1968, 56ff.), Nabokov upheld his word-for-word method as the only form of “fidelity” and claimed—surely disingenuously—that he would like his *Onegin* to serve as a “pony” (a crib, or *podstrochnik*), perhaps thereby seeking to deflect adverse criticism, because a crib, by definition, is not a finished translation. Defying Pushkin himself, who had written, “Word-for-word translation can never be faithful” [*Podstrochnyi perevod nikogda ne mozhnet byt' veren*] (Pushkin, 1977-79, VII 341), he condemned all who did not follow his prescriptions as “paraphrasts” and contemptuously dismissed the notion of fluency, ignoring the oft-stated truism: that a literal version can in effect betray the author while baffling the reader. Further, in a categorical but unconvincing disclaimer he laid the blame for any lack of fluency squarely at the door of “the model, not [...] the mimic” (Lermontov, 1958, xii). His assertion that “any translation that does *not* sound like a translation is bound to be inexact upon inspection” (*ibid.*) suggests its corollary, that a translation which does sound like a translation will be “exact”, when in fact the one does not follow from the other, and, as all translators know from experience, precision is often relative.

For all that, in certain fields Nabokov’s strictures on accuracy and his reflections on the associations of words should not be thrown out with the literalist bath-water. Had he examined the English translations of Aksakov, he would certainly have noted the translators’ handling of some specific terms, where “exact” translations are indeed possible but not always achieved. In matters of translation, particularly in the translation of literature, of course, “photographic fidelity to fact” cannot always apply, yet it is in factual matters that areas of uncertainty reveal themselves. A prominent defect of the English versions of Aksakov lies in the semi-technical field of zoological and botanical nomenclature. In another writer, this might seem trivial, particularly when it affects only small portions of long works. In the case of Aksakov, however, it is far from trivial, because these are matters to which he attached great importance, and he would have wished a translation to ring as true as

the original. It is an area where accuracy is a fully appropriate and achievable criterion, and inaccuracy undermines authenticity.

Nabokov once rebuked a French translator of his *Pale Fire* for confusing *hickory* and *walnut* trees (Boyd, 2012, 16). In his commentary on *Onegin* he canvasses the problem of *cheremukha* (Nabokov's "racemosa", bird-cherry, *Prunus padus*), little-known to native readers of English, but beloved of Nabokov and Russian readers generally, as much for its "fluffy and dreamy syllables" as for its "gentle pendulous appearance" (Pushkin, 1964, III 9-15; Boyd, 2012, 17f.). The translators of Aksakov are faced with similar problems: the names of numerous species of trees, birds and fish, sometimes appearing in lists. Andrew Durkin has remarked upon the importance of the lists themselves in Aksakov's descriptions, pointing out that a "catalogue of species" may offer "a stylistic analogue of the fullness of life" (Durkin, 1983, 86). In translation, the catalogues are often compressed, and the species rendered in approximate fashion at best. A list of trees occurs early in *A Family Chronicle*: *bereza, osina, riabina, kalina, cheremukha, i chernotal* (birch, aspen, rowan, bird-cherry, guelder rose and black willow) (Aksakov, 1966, I 63). It does not include the blackberry (hardly a tree) or elder, which appear in RL (Aksakov, 1871, 8). MCB's list is made shorter by subsuming "bird-cherry" and "guelder rose", not entirely accurately, into "wild cherry trees" (Aksakov, 1824, 9).

Like *cheremukha*, most of the other Russian terms have their own phonetic effects and produce a unique *zvukopis'*, or pattern of sound. Just as Nabokov was conscious of the evocative power of "fritillary", "swallowtail", "hairstreak" and "Camberwell beauty" (Nabokov, 1966, 119-39, 231), so Aksakov was fully alert to the musical resonances inherent in *riabina* (rowan), *ivolga* (oriole), *gorlitsa* (turtle dove), *gorikhvostka* (redstart), *solovei* (nightingale), *kronshnep* (curlew) and *veretennik* (godwit). These resonances are almost inevitably altered in any translation, purely by the substitution of target-language terms (Uindl, 2001, 83).

In addition to their phonetic properties, the terms will vary from one language to another in their associations, and some, through unfamiliarity, may have none. Brian Boyd cites the example of New Zealand's *pohutukawa*, a word which conveys much to those who know it, but little to a reader with no knowledge of New Zealand (Boyd, 2012, 17). However, many of the botanical and zoological species of which Aksakov writes are widely known beyond the borders of Russia. Their English names will usually convey some connotative associations, besides their denotative meaning,

depending on the reader's geographical location, general knowledge, and sensitivity to such effects. Nabokov's view, that it is not "the translator's duty to trouble much about the rendering of associations", would not find universal acceptance among literary translators; it might be argued that a translation which does not convey important associations is a failed enterprise. There is no doubt, however, that this may pose insurmountable difficulties and compel the translator, by default, to "use any available term as long as it is exact" (Pushkin, 1964, III 11).

At a more general level, Aksakov's *chernyi les* (I 63) and *chernolet'e* are transformed by RL's misleading calque. The meaning is not "black forests" (Aksakov, 1871, 15) or "blackwood" (1871, 8), which to some will suggest the Australian acacia of this name, illustrating how "precision" can prove less than precise. MCB's "linden woods" (Aksakov, 1924, 9) is also wide of the mark. JD's "hardwood trees" (Aksakov, 1982, 7) is correct.

It is the bird-life of Buguruslan which is most affected by imprecise translation; and as the theme is recurrent in the trilogy, so are the flaws. All versions make repeated mention of "mocking birds", which most readers will understand as meaning the North American family, not found in Eurasia. The translators confuse the very different *krechet* (gyr-falcon, *Falco rusticolus*) and *krechetka* (sociable plover, *Vanellus gregarius*), introducing a bird of prey where none is mentioned: an unspecified "hawk" in JD (Aksakov, 1982, 7) and MCB (Aksakov, 1924, 10); gyr-falcons in RL (Aksakov, 1871, 8). JD's readers may be puzzled by an ornithologically improbable "perfect cloud" of "rollers playing over the wheat-field" (Aksakov, 1951, 291; Aksakov, 1966, I 466), and by non-existent species such as "marsh partridges" (Aksakov, 1951, 319; *bolotnye kurochki*, Aksakov, 1966, I 486). Like some other phrases, these awaken a suspicion that the translator is floundering in unfamiliar thematic territory. The "rollers" are in fact golden plovers and the "marsh partridges" are moorhens; the original does not mention rollers (*Coracias caudatus*, Russian *raksha* or *sizovoronka*).

Where JD has the boy's father drawing attention to the drumming of a snipe (Aksakov, 1951, 291; Aksakov, 1966, I 466), this may appear fully plausible, as this sound is reported elsewhere in the text, but at this point no snipe occur in the original, which instead speaks of curlew calling, using both the standard term *kronshnep* and the informal *stepniaga*. When correctly identified, the dilemma for the translator is whether to let "curlew" stand alone, to retain the alternative vernacular name in some

form which reflects its in-built semantics (e.g. “steppe-dweller”), or to substitute an English synonym, such as *whaup*. The “domesticating” translator may prefer the latter, although its Scottish associations must give one pause. There is no such bird as “crested snipe” (Aksakov, 1924, 10; Aksakof, 1871, 191), apparently arrived at by calquing *kron-shnep* (*Kron-Schnepfe*). In Brown’s version, the names *kronshnep* and *stepniaga* are incorrectly understood to be two different species: woodcock and “crested plover” (Aksakov, 1960, 269).

Vernacular names, especially local names, may of course be difficult to locate, even with twenty-first-century search engines, and matters are further complicated by the fact that in Aksakov’s day usage was not stable: *nyrok* now applies to various duck related to the pochard (*Aythya* family), but in Aksakov’s time it was commonly used for the goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*) (Aksakov, 1998, 296), rather than, as JD has it, divers (*Gavia* family). Some speakers applied the name *sivka* to the dotterel (*Eudromias morinellus*), as in standard modern usage, while to others, like Aksakov, it meant the golden plover. RL preceded the famous dictionary of Vladimir Dal’ by many years, to say nothing of a reliable Russian-English dictionary. JD may also have lacked access to Dal’, and been unaware, perhaps, that another invaluable source lay close at hand: Aksakov’s *Notes of a Provincial Wildfowler*, which provides not only detailed descriptions but also informed discussion of Russian names. These leave no doubt that Aksakov’s *sivka* is the same as *Zolotistaia rzhanka*, *Pluvialis apricaria* (golden plover), (Aksakov, 1966, V 205; Aksakov, 1998, 189, 298).

Though invisible to the monolingual reader, a significant and unnecessary change occurs in RL when Aksakov writes (I 68) that “*ufimskaia kunitsa, bolee vsekh uvazhaemaia*”). The Ufa marten, a mammal, correctly rendered by JD and MCB, becomes “the thrush of Oufa, most musical of birds” (Aksakof, 1871, 15).

JD’s consistent use of “jackdaw” for *grach* (rook) is of little significance, as the two corvids are closely related, though for many readers in Britain, at least, both will be sufficiently familiar to have different associations. The humble rook, regarded in Britain as a pest, is welcomed in Russia as a harbinger of spring, as may be seen in Aleksei Savrasov’s famous painting “The Rooks have Arrived” (Windle, 2003, 37).

Zor’ka, according to Dal’ a term favoured in Orenburg, where Aksakov spent much of his youth, gives rise to much difficulty. It is synonymous with *varakushka*, bluethroat (*Luscinia svecica*), a species not widely known in Great Britain, much less other English-speaking territories, but renowned in Russia for its rich and varied song

with elaborate mimicry. Both terms are mistranslated in all versions. *Varakushit'* is a synonym of *peredraznivat'* (to mimic), which has presumably led JD, MCB and RL to introduce “mocking bird” for *varakushka*. Unaware that *zor'ka* is the same species, JD renders it as “finch” (304) and “linnet” (328).

Modern Russian usage might suggest that the falcon to which Aksakov (1966, II 492) refers as *kopchik* [*kobchik*] is a red-footed falcon (*Falco vespertinus*), but his description, here as in *Notes of a Provincial Wildfowler*, points to a hobby (*Falco subbuteo*), as the ornithologist M. A. Menzbir pointed out (Aksakov, 1998, 298). JD's “hawk” (Aksakoff, 1951, 325) makes sense as a broad generic, but will prompt knowledgeable readers to think of the *Accipiter* family, rather than a falcon. It also brings with it a certain levelling effect, as “hawk” was used earlier, and incorrectly, for *krechetka*, and at another point (Aksakov, 1978, 73; Aksakov 1966, II 61) for *cheglik*, which the author, in line with common usage at the period, may have intended in the sense “tiercel” (male falcon, various species).

MCB's “red-legged snipe” (*kulik krasnonozhka*, Aksakov, 1966, II 101; Aksakov, 1924, 375) which distracts the young Sergei from his studies, is clearly a redshank (*Tringa totanus*), as given in JD (Aksakov, 1978, 126). Very occasionally, JD resorts to generic phrases such as “songbirds of all kinds” (Aksakov, 1978, 85; 1966, II 70), where the original speaks of bluethroats and robins [*malinovki*]. For the most part, Duff and the other translators do not resort to this procedure, disapproved of by Levý (Levý, 92) and Jan Parandowski (Parandowski, 132), instead preserving the names of species. MCB introduces “hedge-sparrows” in lieu of robins (Aksakov, 1924, 340).

The comments above bear only on the translations of Aksakov. Minor inaccuracies, and some larger ones, are almost inevitable in a translation of any length, and we would do well to bear in mind that the original may contain small faults of its own. It is a pity that Nabokov's *Gift* does not identify the “disgraceful blunders” committed by Aksakov in his nature descriptions. Scientifically-minded readers have observed no “blunders” of consequence. In all probability Nabokov, an expert lepidopterist, had in mind Aksakov's essay “Butterfly-Collecting” [*Sobiranie babochek*], which he found particularly objectionable: the “utterly talentless” notes of the “inveterate nature-lover” were, he opined, “well-intentioned prattle, larded with fatuities of every kind” (Nabokov, 1989, 75). He failed to note that Aksakov made no claim to scientific infallibility, and indeed never thought of himself as a scientist. He

was glad when able to make factual corrections in new editions of his works. Later editors of *Notes of a Provincial Wildfowler*, relying on ornithologists like K. F. Rul'e and Menzbir, pointed out occasional mis-statements concerning the migration routes, plumage and habits of some birds (Uindl, 1995, 106). It is not for translators to intervene here, beyond, perhaps, appending a note. They should, however, guard against making mis-statements of unimpeachably accurate statements, and misleading the reader where the author does not.

The translated excerpts presented below have been produced independently of the previous versions, to the extent that independence is possible when a translator has perused such versions. I have not consciously drawn on them, but if a felicitous turn of phrase has happened to lodge in my subconscious, I have not tried very hard to avoid it. As indicated above, some of the early versions set a high standard, and in many respects JD, whose lucid prose comes closest to the original, can scarcely be bettered. The present version should therefore be seen merely as an alternative. It has, however, placed a premium on much-needed clarity in natural history. It rejects Nabokov's "ideal of literalism" and seeks to avoid the "sacrifices" he regarded as inevitable, of "elegance, euphony, clarity, good taste" (Pushkin, I x), "neat diction, and even grammar" (Lermontov, 1958, xiii). To jettison any of these would be to make Aksakov appear incompetent in his chosen trade. It rejects utterly the view of Aksakov as a "very minor writer", and the notion that the "model", rather than the "mimic", bears responsibility for any awkwardness—something which is hard to find in Aksakov. It does however bow to Nabokov's demand that the product be as accurate as possible. Without this, a writer with Aksakov's lifelong dedication to technical accuracy and *le mot juste* would feel himself short-changed.

Translated excerpts from *A Family Chronicle* and *The Childhood of Bagrov's Grandson*

[All page references are to Aksakov, 1966, I]

From *A Family Chronicle*

[57] In his ancestral lands in the province of Simbirsk, granted to his forebears by the Tsars of Muscovy, my grandfather began to feel confined, not because he was in any real sense confined, or because the forests, pastures, and arable and other land were insufficient, but because the estate which had been the exclusive property of his great grandfather now belonged to several owners. The cause was very simple: in three successive generations there had been one son and several daughters, some of whom had received a portion of the lands and the serfs as their dowry. [...]

[63] Twenty-five versts from the town of Buguruslan, my grandfather bought some land [...] along the Greater Buguruslan, a deep, fast-flowing river, always brimming with water. For forty versts around, there was no habitation on either bank, and on both sides what wonderful wide open land it was! [...] Along the river and in the neighbouring marshland, all kinds of duck, sandpiper, goose, common snipe, great snipe and ruff built their nests and filled the air with their mingled cries and whistles, while on the hills, which soon levelled off into plateaus covered with lush grass, the air rang with the calls of different birds. There all the fowl of the steppe lived in abundance: great and little bustards, cranes, curlews and sociable plovers [63]. Huge numbers of black grouse dwelt on the forested spurs. The river teemed with all the kinds of fish which could tolerate its cold water: pike, perch, chub, ide, and even grayling and Siberian salmon were common in it. The steppe and forest harboured every kind of wild animal in improbable numbers. In a word, it was—and remains to this day—a corner of the Promised Land [64].

[75] The weather was very hot at the end of June. After a humid night, a light fresh easterly breeze sprang up at dawn, but it always died away when the sun grew hot. Grandfather woke with the sun. [...] [77] His elderly housekeeper also awoke, emerged from the cellar where she slept, and went down to the Buguruslan to wash, groaning and sighing as she went (that was her unchanging habit). There she said a prayer, turning in the direction of the sunrise, and starting washing, scrubbing and rinsing the pots and crockery. Swallows and martins circled, chirruping and twittering merrily in flight; quails called resoundingly in the fields; the song of skylarks tinkled in the air; straining to their utmost, corncrakes gave their hoarse cries in the bushes; from the nearby marsh came the whistles of spotted crakes and the drumming display of snipe, while bluethroats took turns at mimicking the nightingales. A bright sun rose from below the hill. [77]

From *The Childhood of Bagrov's Grandson*

[464] In the very middle of Lent, the beginning of the fourth week, a sudden thaw set in. The snow began to melt rapidly, and there was water everywhere. The approach of spring in the country had an unusual stimulating effect upon me. I experienced a special kind of excitement which I had never known before. This was largely due to my conversations with my father and Evseich, who, being hunters, born and bred in the country and passionately fond of nature, rejoiced at the onset of spring; they were not, however, really conscious of this, would not have described themselves in this way and never used the terms I have applied to them. Finding in me an eager response to their feelings, they would gladly give in to the pleasure of recounting how the hills would thaw and the streams would flow down from them, how they would raise the sluice gates of the dam and the flood water would spread out, the fish would come up into the meadows, to be caught by their withy-traps and muzzle-traps; how the summer migrant birds would return, the larks would start singing, the marmots would awaken and begin whistling, sitting up on their haunches above their burrows; how the meadows, the forest and the thickets would turn green, and in them the nightingales would burst into their clucking, rippling song. These simple yet fervent words took a deep hold on my heart, touching some unknown chords in it and arousing unfamiliar languid and sweet feelings. [...]

[465] The rooks had long been strutting about the yard and set about building their nests in Rookery Wood; the starlings and larks had also arrived. And then the *real* birds began to appear—the ones hunters knew as game. My father would delight in telling me that he had seen some swans flying so high that he could hardly make them out, and that geese had begun passing over in great skeins. Evseich had seen some goldeneye and mallard which had settled on the pond, some wild doves in the stackyards, and thrushes and lapwings near the springs. So much excitement and noisy elation! [...] [465]

[466] The river burst its banks and enveloped the low-lying scrubland on both sides, claiming half of our garden and merging into the lake of Rookery Wood. The fringes of the flood waters abounded in game of all kinds: large numbers of duck swam among the crowns of the submerged bushes, while great and small flocks of various migratory birds passed over without end: some flew high, never pausing to rest; others flew low and often landed; some flocks alighted, others took wing, and yet

others flew short distances from one spot to another. The air was filled with their calls, cries and whistles. Not knowing which bird was which or what its particular characteristics were, not knowing which was calling or whistling, I was dazed by the spectacle. My father and Evseich, standing beside me, were also very excited, pointing out various birds to each other and naming them, often identifying them by their calls, because only those close at hand could be told by their plumage. “Pintail! Look how many pintails!” said Evseich hurriedly. “Look at those flocks! And mallard! Heavens, masses of them!” “Do you hear that?” my father would say. “Those are curlew, whaups calling! But they’re flying very high. And those there are golden plover wheeling over the winter cereals, a whole cloud of them! And look how many black-tailed godwits! And ruffs! I’ve never seen such flocks!”

I watched and listened, at that time understanding nothing of what was taking place around me, but my heart would almost cease to beat, then pound like a hammer. [...]

[467] Suddenly a shot rang out right under the windows. I rushed to the window and saw a wisp of smoke dispersing in the air and Filipp (the old falconer) standing there with his gun, while Triton the poodle, known to all as Trenton, emerged from the water onto the bank with a bird held by the wing in his jaws. Soon Filipp came in with his booty: it was a mallard drake, I was told, with such beautiful plumage that I admired it at length, examining its velvet head and neck, purple throat, and the dark green curls in its tail. [467] [...]

[476] There were so many things I had to do, so much to worry about! Twice a day I had to visit the wood and check on the rooks incubating their eggs; I had to listen to their tiresome cawing; I had to look at the leaves unfurling on the lilacs and putting forth grey clusters of flowers to come, and bluethroats and robins making their homes in the blackcurrant and barberry bushes; the ant-hills stirring into life; the ants appearing at first in small numbers, then emerging in innumerable swarms and setting about their work; the swallows beginning to dart and dive into their old nests under the eaves of the buildings; a mother hen clucking as she protected her tiny chicks, and kites sailing and circling over them. Yes, I had much to do and much to worry about! [...] My father went with me to observe the small birds in the garden bushes and would tell me they were already building their nests. He also went with me to Rookery Wood and got very angry with the rooks for killing off the tops of the birches by breaking off twigs to furnish their shapeless nests; he even threatened to

destroy the nests. How pleased he was to see the first lungwort! He taught me to pull away the purple flowers gently and suck the sweet, white rootlets. And his delight was all the greater when he heard the first bluethroat singing in the distance. “There, Serezha,” he said. “Now all the birds will start singing. The bluethroat is always first. As soon as the bushes come into leaf, our nightingales will start singing, and Bagrovo will be even jollier!” [477]

At last that time came: the grass began to turn green, the trees and bushes came into leaf, and the nightingales began to sing—and they sang without pause, day and night. During the day their song made no particular impression on me; I even asserted that the song of the skylark was not inferior. But late in the evening, when everything else around me was still and twilight was fading, and by the starlight, their song so thrilled and delighted me that at first it kept me awake. There were so many nightingales, and at night they seemed to come so close to the house that, although the shutters were closed, their piping peals and trills burst forcefully into our tightly closed bedroom from both sides, because it projected at an angle into bushes full of nightingales on a bend in the river. Mother would send out a servant to scare them away. Only now did I believe my aunt, who said that the nightingales kept her awake. I am not sure if my father was right about Bagrovo becoming jollier, or if I felt generally happy at the time. I only know that the memory of it has filled my heart with quiet delight throughout my life. [...] [477]

[492] I enjoyed the haymaking so much that I did not even want to go home when my father called me. From a forest gully, along which ran a little, softly purling brook, came the cooing of wood pigeons or turtle doves, and the cat-like shriek and doleful fluting call of a golden oriole. These notes were so utterly unlike that for a long time I could not believe that both were produced by the same pretty yellow bird. Occasionally I would hear the piercing trumpet cry of the black woodpecker. Suddenly a hobby appeared over the clearing, soared to a height and circled over the reapers, who sometimes startled small birds in the grass; it watched for them to fly out and fell on them like a lightning bolt from the clouds. Its speed and agility were so thrilling, and one’s sympathy for its poor prey so keen, that the peasants loudly hailed both the dashing spirit of the hunter and the agility of the hunted bird whenever the latter succeeded in gaining refuge in the grass or the trees. Evseich was particularly carried away in his enthusiasm, uttering cries of encouragement at the marvellous speed of that handsome and nimble falcon. For a long time the hobby entertained us

by its agile pursuit of its quarry, though at first unsuccessful, but in the end it caught a small bird and flew off into the forest, carrying it in its talons. “The poor thing’s caught! And now it’s taking it to its nest to feed to its young!” came the voices of the reapers, interrupted and sometimes muted by the sweep of their scythes and the rustle of falling swathes of grass. [...] **[492]**

[493] My dear little sister, who did not share all of my summer’s pleasures, was my true companion and assistant in collecting grasses and flowers and observing the nests of small birds, of which there were many in the old blackcurrant and barberry bushes, and in collecting grubs, butterflies and various bugs. [...] When we found a bird’s nest, usually that of a bluethroat or a redstart, we visited it every day to see the female bird sitting. Sometimes we were careless and startled her so that she left the nest; then we would gingerly part the thorny twigs of the barberry or gooseberry to see the pretty little speckled eggs in the nest. Sometimes, the mother, irked by our curiosity, would desert the nest; then, when we noticed that she had not been there for several days and was not circling or fussing near us as usual, we would take the eggs or even the whole nest into the house, considering ourselves the rightful owners of a home abandoned by its mother. When a bird succeeded, in spite of our attentions, in hatching its eggs, and we suddenly found naked youngsters in their place, feebly and pitifully cheeping with huge mouths constantly agape, and saw the mother flying in with midges and caterpillars for them ... heavens, how delighted we were! We did not cease observing the nestlings as they grew, acquired feathers, and finally left the nest. **[493]**

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