A Reflection on Sibelan Forrester’s “A Russian in Persia, and Persia in Russian: Translating Yuri Tynyanov’s ‘The Death of the Vazir-Mukhtar’

On November 1st, Professor Sibelan Forrester gave a lecture on her current project, translating Yuri Tynyanov’s ‘The Death of the Vazir-Mukhtar.’ Professor Forrester is a Professor of Russian Language and Literature at Swarthmore College. Among her accomplishments, she has published work translated from Russian, Croatian, and Serbian. Her translations include ‘The Diving Bell’ by Elena Ignatova and soon to be released ‘The Russian Folktale’ by Vladimir Propp. Professor Forrester is also a specialist in Russian Silver Age poetry and women’s and gender studies.

Professor Sibelan began her discussion with a brief introduction to the author and the material she is translating. The author of the novel is Yuri Tynyanov who lived from 1894-1943. He was educated in Saint Petersburg, and he published ‘The Death of the Vazir-Mukhtar’ in 1928. She mentioned that he is most widely known in Russia for his historical fiction, a literary topic in which he had a particular interest. The novel takes place in 1829 with a major focus on Muslim Russian relations.

Professor Sibelan then went on to discuss the actual translation process focusing on the issues involved when working with Russian and East European texts and translating them into English. These texts embody a very particular style that must be translated and conveyed in English, along with the additional challenge of fragments and how to handle foreign words. She discussed the following literary topics that she discovered during the translation process. These included semi-educated speech where a character desires to speak with “elegance.” When translating sentences of informal speech, the English translation is actually longer than the Russian. She mentions that this is because she needed to use articles and at times two different verbs. I thought that this was particularly interesting, and highlighted for me how different the two languages are. In working with formal speech, the English translation tended to be shorter. Another aspect that is important in the translation process is trying to keep the original theme and tone of the original intact. She highlighted an example of translating a soldier’s song and how she tried to accomplish this objective. Successfully translating foreign words was a major component of her project. Based on her lecture, I believe working with foreign words is one of the most difficult aspects of the translation process.

Professor Sibelan’s next step with this project is to continue to review her work and make improvements. She feels that this project has given her “a new interest in Tynyanov as a creative writer.” This lecture was enlightening for me in that it showed me how complex the translation process is as well as introduced me to an interesting piece of Russian literature.

Ryan Eavenson is a first year MA student. He is particularly interested in democratization, human rights, and European integration in the post-Soviet world. His additional interests include Imperial and Soviet Russian history. He received a AB in History/Russian and East European Studies from Lafayette College in 2010. After completion of his MA, he hopes to find employment focusing on international affairs or continue his education.