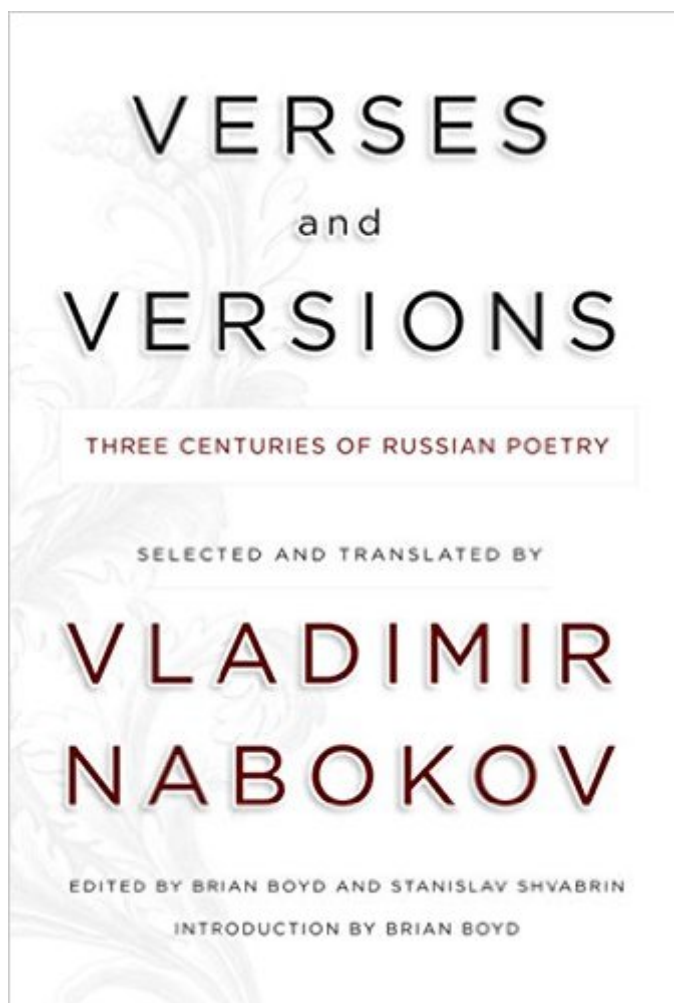


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Verses And Versions: Three Centuries Of Russian Poetry



Synopsis

Vladimir Nabokov was hailed by Salman Rushdie as the most important writer ever to cross the boundary between one language and another. A Russian emigre who began writing in English after his forties, Nabokov was a trilingual author, equally competent in Russian, English, and French. A gifted and tireless translator, he bridged the gap between languages nimbly and joyously. Here, collected for the first time in one volume as Nabokov always wished, are many of his English translations of Russian verse, presented next to the Russian originals. Here, also, are some of his notes on the dangers and thrills of translation. With an introduction by Brian Boyd, author of the prize-winning biography of Nabokov, *Verses and Versions* is a momentous and authoritative contribution to Nabokov's published works.

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Customer Reviews

Some may come into this book with the thought that they are going to be getting some great English translations of little known or unknown Russian poets, and yes, there is that. But the title of this book is *Verses and Versions*. So, the Version aspect of this book--which is the complex process of translation itself and the results thereof--takes center stage as well. From both standpoints, this is a delightful read. It begins with an essay by Nabokov on the art of translation and it is, in typical Nabokovian fashion, both amusing and informative. It turns out that not all translators are created equal, and many are completely awful. A translator might be lazy, or incompetent, but worst of all, he may have his own agenda. Nabokov points out that there are some translations of Russian works into English that have been altered, or "improved upon," or even censored, in some cases to

protect the reader's delicate sensibility, you see, as defined by the translator. And the editor, perhaps not nearly as scholarly as the translator himself, has not the power to oversee this. Nabokov, expectedly, is contemptuous of this. He cites an interesting example. A line from Hamlet, having to do with Ophelia, reads: "There with fantastic garlands did she come, of cornflower, nettles, daises, and long purples." The Russian translator apparently decided that he could improve upon this. Translated back into English, it reads: "There with most lovely garlands did she come, of violets, carnations, roses, lilies." This utterly misses the point. Nabokov suggests, facetiously perhaps, that translators of this nature should be, "punished by the stocks, as plagiarists were in the shoebuckle days.

Another posthumous publication of Nabokov texts, like *The Original of Laura*? Not quite. More a recycling of previously published material, re-arranged and combined with 'new' texts, ie previously unpublished translations. The main sources and core for this book are Nab's book *Three Russian Poets on and with texts by Pushkin, Tyutchev and Lermontov*, and his monumental commentary on Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. Another skimming of the market for Nabokov collectables? Yes and no. Yes, as we have to some extent the same avaricious system of empty pages or half printed pages as with *The Original of Laura*, ie the actual book is much shorter than the one that you buy. 20% empty space. This is aggravated by the fact that the left pages in all actual poetry parts (as differentiated from the introductions and essays) are the Russian originals. I am sure many people appreciate this service. On me it is wasted. I always wanted to learn Russian when I turn 60. Well, one can't reach all one's targets. No, as the book is 'genuine': it had been a project of Vera's since some time, to publish her husband's Russian poetry translations, collected. She didn't manage to do it, the project was left to biographer Brian Boyd and son Dimitri. We have here an anthology of Russian poetry in Nab's translation. Or at least it comes close to an anthology by scraping together a few poets and their poems and Nab's translations. I am not expert enough to judge the selection. It is obvious though that the 'anthology' is heavy on Pushkin. That takes away some of the balance, however it may be explained or justified. The other two of the trio (Lermontov and Tyutchev) are also strongly represented. Many other older poets are represented with miniature texts.

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