

“I STRUGGLE, PENCIL IN HAND”:
MARIYA PETROVYKH’S MASTERY OF TRANSLATION AND POETRY

MARTINA NAPOLITANO*
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8989-5012>
UNIVERSITY OF TRIESTE

Abstract: The renowned Russian translator Mariya Petrovykh (1908-1979) wrote original poems throughout her life. Although her poetry was little known outside her circle of friends and admirers, many collections of her works include a selection of both her verses and translations. However, the mutual influence between these two creative activities has not yet received scholarly attention. This article highlights the presence of fruitful echoes in Petrovykh’s work as a translator, poet, and editor. Reading Mariya Petrovykh’s translations against the background of her original poetry (and vice versa) enables a deeper analysis of her poetics and translation approach.

Keywords: Mariya Petrovykh; Soviet translation practice; Russian translation; Russian poetry; poet-translator

1. Introduction

“She was like an actress preparing for a new role. Like a sculptor who studied not only the model, the image to be sculpted, but also the site, the space where the monument was to stand. She did not adapt, like Chekhov’s *Dushechka*, to the new character in her translation works. No, she touched upon a character that was new to her, comprehended it, and in comprehending it, to a certain extent she became that character. She belonged to the category of translators who translate not words and lines, but characters. Poetic characters, that is, entire worlds”¹ (in Petrovykh 1986: 329). With these words, the poet and translator Lev Ozerov described Mariya Petrovykh’s mastery of translation. For her, translation was “not a means of earning money, but a need of the soul to express another soul”, states Emiliya Aleksandrova, herself a translator; “Petrovykh never went against her artistic conscience, but as a rule, selected only what resonated with her. Thus, what was translated ceased to be something translated, it became a fact of Russian poetry” (in Petrovykh 1986: 360). Even Samuil Marshak and Korney Chukovsky, reference points for translation in the

* martina.napolitano@units.it



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¹ All translations from Russian are mine.

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Soviet Union,² appreciated her work; the latter named Petrovykh among the best representatives of the new generation of translators who managed to finally reveal the beauty of Caucasian and Central Asian poetry to Russian readers (Marshak 1971; Chukovsky 1968).

Recognized during her lifetime for her ability to give a powerful and authentic voice to the authors she translated, Mariya Petrovykh, in her later years, held seminars for young translators³ and received special honors from Armenia for her significant role in making Armenian poetry accessible to the Russian public: in 1970, she was awarded the title of “Honored Worker of Culture of Armenia” and in 1979, just before her death, she received the newly established Charents Prize of the Writers’ Union of Armenia for translators.⁴ Remarkably, the renowned Armenian artist Martiros Saryan painted her portrait in 1946.

However, Mariya Petrovykh’s writing activities did not begin with translation. Her creative journey started with her own poetry, which accompanied her throughout her life – sometimes reflecting, as a mirror, her translation work, inspiring and being inspired by it, and at times “half-suffocating” under the weight of translations (Chukovskaya 1997: 334). Her original poems existed in the shadow of the acclaimed translations she authored, reaching publication only once – except for a handful of poems that appeared in periodicals – during her lifetime (Petrovykh 1968).⁵ Interestingly, this collection of poems, along with many that were edited after her death, contains both her original verses and a selection of her poetic translations (Petrovykh 1968, 1986, 1991, 2000).

Although her poetry was little known outside her circle of friends and admirers, as the poet and translator Yakov Khelemsky noted, Petrovykh’s poems and her translations “are truly branches of the same tree, nourished by the same sap” (in Petrovykh 1986: 259). These branches have not yet been studied in their fruitful exchange. The very few analyses that have been produced so far have focused on specific aspects of her poetry (Bogdanova 1991; Kastarnova 2009; Mentszyao 2022) and have reconstructed her biography,⁶ too often, however, reading Petrovykh’s original texts in light of concrete episodes and encounters, thus projecting a one-sided autobiographical dimension onto her verses (Skibinskaya 2020).

² The publication of the volume *Principles of Literary Translation* (Printsipy khudozhestvennogo perevoda) written by Chukovsky and Gumilev in 1919 marked “the birth of modern translation studies” and inaugurated “a tradition of sophisticated reflection on the nature and practice of translation” (Baer&Witt 2018: 10).

³ These seminars (1959-1964) were held together with her colleagues Vera Zvyagintseva and David Samoylov. This collaborative practice demonstrates the importance of teamwork for translators (see Jones 2011).

⁴ Petrovykh was awarded this prestigious prize in particular thanks to the efforts of Levon Mkrtchyan (see Saakyants 2015).

⁵ This publication, which did not appear in Yerevan by chance, was made possible through the mediation of Levon Mkrtchyan. Petrovykh emphasized this special “co-authorship” when signing the copy she gave him: “To Levon Mkrtchyan, author of this publication” (Saakyants 2015).

⁶ Petrovykh’s granddaughter, Anastasiya Golovkina, is also actively working on this subject and has published several works about her grandmother’s biography, including personal letters and other archival materials.

This article aims to shed light on the close relationship between the translation and poetry of Mariya Petrovykh, illustrating the points of contact and mutual influences of these two creative activities. As Aleksandrova emphasized in the quotation above, Petrovykh's translation work harmoniously echoed her sensibility and artistic perception in an original way. This stimulating and productive dialogue with the authors she translated⁷ will be illustrated through an analysis of her poetics (with special attention to the motif of "mutism") and a selection of translated poems from Slavic languages (namely, Croatian, Polish, and Bulgarian). Additionally, since Petrovykh was an indefatigable editor of others' texts and translations as well, her editing suggestions and instructions will provide useful information on her understanding of the poetic word.

2. From Poetry to Translation – From Translation to Poetry

Mariya Petrovykh was born in 1908 in the Yaroslavl governorate. She attended school in Yaroslavl, where in 1922 she began participating in meetings of the local Union of poets.⁸ By the time a collection of works by these young poets was published in 1926, *Yaroslavskie ponedel'niki* (Yaroslavl Mondays), Petrovykh had already left the city and enrolled in the Higher literature courses in Moscow, possibly at the suggestion of Georgy Shengeli, then head of the All-Russian Union of poets and a frequent attendee of the Yaroslavl meetings (Skibinskaya 2020: 260). This formative period was crucial both because of the quality of the teaching staff and of the important encounters and friendships Petrovykh made during these years: in particular, she and her fellow student Arseny Tarkovsky became lifelong friends.

Her chances of securing herself a place as a poet during those years were rapidly diminishing though. Despite a productive period in Crimea within Maksimilian Voloshin's creative circle in 1930, Petrovykh's poetry had little prospect of publication in the Soviet Union. Additionally, her first unhappy marriage to Pyotr Granditsky (a Yaroslavl poet, then employed as a specialist in agro-economics) ended in 1934, and the harsh destiny of her second husband, a repeatedly arrested talented poet, Vitaly Golovachev (he died in prison camp in 1942), placed Petrovykh among the many widows of Russian poetry of that era – most notably alongside Anna Akhmatova, a close friend and confidant of Mariya Petrovykh in the 1950s and 1960s.⁹ This situation

⁷ The relationship between poet-translators and the authors they translate has been studied in (Mata Buil 2016).

⁸ The Yaroslavl branch of the Moscow Union of poets was established in 1919, shortly after the organization opened in the capital (see Skibinskaya 2020).

⁹ From a letter sent by Petrovykh to Atanas Dalchev (December 26, 1974): "I will try to write to you about Akhmatova and Pasternak sometime, but today it is still difficult. They are both my life. I met Pasternak in 1928 and Akhmatova in 1933" (in Glen 1996: 262). For her part, Akhmatova considered Petrovykh's poem "Naznach mne svidan'e..." (1953) a masterpiece of twentieth-century Russian poetry (Osetrov 1965: 187).

possibly pushed Petrovykh to willingly accept Georgy Shengeli's invitation to turn to translation in the 1930s.¹⁰

Petrovykh's first translations were verses by the Jewish writer Peretz Markish, the Kazakh author Abai Kunanbaev (Qunanbaiuly) and the Turkmen poets Ata Salikh and Mollanepes. A collection of selected poems by the latter (published in 1940) was the first volume entirely translated by Mariya Petrovykh. Her renowned Armenian translations, especially those of young poets,¹¹ appeared after her trip to the country in autumn 1944, a period that resulted in deep ties between Petrovykh and Armenia. Another work trip for her translations took her to Lithuania in 1950 and 1951. Her poor health prevented a final trip to Bulgaria in her later years, when poems by Atanas Dalchev embodied her last translation efforts.¹²

The number of languages and cultures that Petrovykh brought into Russian is remarkable: in the Soviet Union, the use of a *podstrochnik* (interlinear translation) was an established – yet little investigated¹³ – practice (Vanechkova 1978; Gasparov 2001; Witt 2013, 2019), so she did not have to know these languages.¹⁴ Yet, Petrovykh's study of the author, context, culture, style and poetic features is attested by many of her

¹⁰ At the time, Shengeli worked in the section of Literature of the Peoples of the USSR within Goslitizdat (State Publishing House for Literature) and was also appointed editor for Western classics. He provided translation work to a great number of poets, especially young authors (Tarkovsky, Shteynberg, Lipkin, as well as Akhmatova and Mandel'shtam, to name just a few). As Susanna Witt summarizes, Shengeli's "role as provider of translation work for unpublished and unpublishable poets is legendary" (Witt 2016a: 27). For an analysis of the management of translation practices by the Soviet literary apparatus, within which Mariya Petrovykh's work and life were situated, see (Witt 2019). Further studies on Petrovykh could assess her role and status among her generation of fellow translators (and poet-translators) as well as for her younger colleagues, while keeping in mind that "each particular translation represents the intersection of the broader ideological context with translators' own literary and personal evaluative approaches" (Khotimsky 2018: 234-235).

¹¹ Maria Khotimsky highlights Petrovykh's strategic choice of translating Armenian women-poets in particular: "While few Russian women-authors, including Petrovykh herself, could publish original poems devoted to private subjects, they found an outlet for such themes in translating works by contemporary women-authors. Such were Petrovykh's translations of Armenian poets Silva Kaputikian, Maro Markarian, and Amo Sahian" (Khotimsky 2018: 232).

¹² From a letter sent by Petrovykh to Atanas Dalchev (June 9, 1974): "I deeply regret that I cannot come to Sofia – I was invited to take this trip, but I had to decline: my heart is not entirely well, and I am not strong enough for such a journey" (in Glen 1996: 253-254).

¹³ "The technology required for creating these translations based on a *podstrochnik*, without knowledge of the original language, requires a separate analysis of each case and is virtually unexplored" (Zemskova 2022: 185). Susanna Witt defines the *podstrochnik* practice as an "eternally temporary phenomenon" of indirect translation (typically by an anonymous author), whose regular use in the Soviet context makes it "one of the distinctive features of the Soviet translation project as a whole" (Witt 2013: 184, 157).

¹⁴ Her second husband, Vitaly Golovachev, reportedly had an aptitude for languages. In a letter to his wife from the prison camp (August 29, 1941) he wrote: "I studied the Armenian language extensively with a well-educated Armenian man. As a result, I have mastered the entire grammatical system and have a vocabulary of 500 words. [...] I must admit that the language is very difficult and foreign in structure and spirit. My main difficulty in conversation right now is that all the phrases are constructed in the opposite way, and as soon as you start to speak, it confuses you. But it is okay, I will manage, and we will translate from Armenian together. They say that Georgian seems like child's play after it. All the better" (in Golovkina 2024: 7-8).

colleagues, students, friends, and her biography as well.¹⁵ Her engagement with the source text and investigation of its context were fundamental to recreating the original in translation; she did not force the original text into a personal poetic framework but strove to do justice to the many nuances of the source text. The careful and thorough research behind Petrovykh's translations suggests the role that this work, only apparently a substitute for her own poetry,¹⁶ played for her throughout her life.¹⁷

As Skibinskaya incidentally suggests, translation became a "personal creative expansion" for Petrovykh (Skibinskaya 2020: 338). If translation functioned as an "expansion," Petrovykh's original poetry – even if unpublished – served as an intimate accompaniment, at times providing a cathartic and redeeming experience. While her first attempt to join the Soviet Writers' Union as a translator failed in 1937, in 1942 (when evacuated in Chistopol due to the war) she was welcomed in the Union thanks to her poetry. "The Chistopol period of evacuation became significant for Petrovykh: here she was recognized by the professional literary circle" (Skibinskaya 2020: 345), a circle animated by such prominent figures as, among others, Pasternak, Tarkovsky, Fedin, Lipkin, Aseev. Here, in 1942, Petrovykh was thrice invited to read her poems to the audience at the local Teacher's House (Dom uchitelya). After the first event, on May 19, 1942, Pasternak exclaimed: "Mariya Sergeevna, I am creatively envious of you" (in Skibinskaya 2020: 356). Konstantin Fedin, chair of the Writers' Union in Chistopol, wrote to Aleksandr Fadeev: "The big sensation here is Petrovykh's poetry: she captivated and amazed everyone with her maturity, purity of voice. Actually, we enrolled her into the Soviet Writers' Union" (in Skibinskaya 2020: 357). The result of this success was twofold: on the one hand, in 1943 *Znanya* published three her poems ("Noch na 6 avgusta"; "U menya bol'shoe gore..."; "Zavtra den' rozhden'ya tvoego..."); on the other hand, she was encouraged to submit a collection of her poetry for publication but received a rude rejection, which led to a temporary pause in her writing in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

3. "The Happiness of Being Music"

Pauses in writing proved particularly hard and suffering for Mariya Petrovykh, converting into a pervasive, painful sense of "mutism" (*nemota*), a key word and frequent image throughout her oeuvre (more occasionally, *molchanie*, being silent). Mutism appears in her earliest poems ("Otryvok", 1928) but grows into a recurring

¹⁵ "The paths leading to [the translation of texts by] Tilvytis were lined with books about Lithuania, Lithuanian customs, Lithuanian folklore," wrote Ozerov, for example (in Petrovykh 1986: 329).

¹⁶ Many scholars have shown how misleading it is to view translation as a secondary form of authorship, especially for Soviet authors. Brian J. Baer describes translation as perhaps "the most Soviet of the arts" (Baer 2016a: 119) and notes that it enabled processes of "reimagining authorship" (Baer 2016a: 131). For many authors, it answered "the question of *how to be a writer*" (Zemskova 2013: 186). For an overview of the global phenomenon of poet-translators (and translator-poets) and of their role as agents in the literary field, see (Mata Buil 2016).

¹⁷ Her translation work and her poetry demonstrate a remarkable internal coherence over time, suggesting a consistent artistic maturity in Mariya Petrovykh throughout her life.

motif especially in her mature works.¹⁸ This debilitating condition, this crippling inability to express the poetic word signified for her the loss of the highest gift of poetry. The young Petrovykh wrote in a 1931 poem (“Neukrotimoyu trevogoy...”): “Но за величие такое, / За счастье музыкаю быть, / Ты не найдешь себе покоя” [“But for such greatness, / For the happiness of being music, / You will find no peace”].¹⁹ For Petrovykh, poets are thus music, but they are also careful recorders:

Стихов ты хочешь? Вот тебе —
Прислушайся всерьез,
Как шепелявит оттепель
И как молчит мороз.

Как воробьи, чирикают,
Кропят следками снег
И как метель великая
Храпит в сугробном сне.

Белы надбровья веточек,
Как затвердевший свет...
Февраль маячит светочем
Предчувствий и примет.
[...] (“Stikhov ty khochesh? Vot tebe...”, 1935)²⁰

[...]
Безмолвие страницы разграфленной
Как бы неволит что-то написать,
Но от моей ли немоты бессонной
Ты слова ждешь, раскрытая тетрадь!
[...]
Я только позавидовать могу,
Как, не страшась ошибок и помарок,
Весна стихи писала на снегу. (“Kakoy obil’ny snegopad v aprele...”, 1956)²¹

¹⁸ See for example: “Zima ustanovilas’ v marte...”, 1955; “U tvoey mogily vechny nepokoy...”, 1956; “V minutu otchayan’ya”, 1958; “Armeniya”, 1966; “Oglyanus’ – okameneyu...”, 1967; “Ni akhmatovskoy krotosti...”, 1967; “Sverchok poet, zapryatavshis’ vo t’mu...”, 1969; “Kogda slagat’ stikhi talanta net...”, 1971; “O ptitsakh”, 1975; “Kogda molchan’e pereshlo predel...”, 1975; “Uzh luchshe by mne cherep raskroili...”, 1976.

¹⁹ All excerpts from Petrovykh’s poems and translations are quoted from the 1991 edition. The English translations provided here are designed to offer readers a literal rendering of the original texts, prioritizing semantic accuracy and informational value over literary recreation.

²⁰ “So, poetry is what you want? Here you go – / Listen carefully / To the thaw lisp / And the frost hushing. // To the sparrows chirping, / Sprinkling snow with footprints, / And to the great blizzard / Snoring in a snowdrift sleep. // The brows of the branches are white / Like hardened light... / February looms like a beacon / Of premonitions and omens.”

²¹ “The stillness of the lined page / As if forcing me to write, / But it is from my sleepless mutism / That you wait for words, open notebook! // [...] I can only envy the spring / That, no fear of mistakes and blots, / Wrote verses on the snow.”

The ability to listen, capture, encode, and recreate the melodies of beauty found in nature is what makes poets worthy of their role. In this sense, poets are “like gods or magicians” (“Prikosnovenie k bumage...”, 1967). If poets are deaf to music and, especially, mute, they are virtually dead:

[...]
 Меня сковало смертной немотою,
 Одно твоё звучание простое
 Могло б меня от гибели спасти, —
 Лишь песенку твою, где нет потерь,
 Где непрерывностью речитатива
 И прошлое и будущее живо, —
 Лишь эту песню мне передоверь! (“Sverchok poet, zapryatavshis’ vo t’mu...”, 1969)²²

Healing from such mutism is not found in graphomania: poets should “keep silent until they get to verses” (“Domolchat’sya do stikhov”, 1971) and avoid “the noise of newspaper odes, / Of magazine chatter” (“Zaveshchanie”, 1970s). The only hope for ‘mute’ poets is to regain their ancestral ability, to have “the speech restored to the deaf and mute” (“Zima ustanovilas’ v marte...”, 1955). Otherwise, only death awaits the poet:

[...]
 Тоска молчит, тоска мычит без слов.
 За что мне, Господи, такие муки!
 Убил бы сразу, только и делов.
 О Господи мой Боже, не напрасно
 Правдивой создал ты меня и ясной
 И с детства научил меня слагать
 Слова... Какую даровал усладу!
 И вот с немой тоскою нету сладу.
 Ты прав. Я за грехи достойна аду,
 Но смилуйся, верни мне благодать! (“Uzh luchshe by mne cherep raskroili...”, 1976)²³

Petrovykh did not conceal the pain caused by her ‘muted’ condition from her friends²⁴ or even from the authors with whom she corresponded. In several letters sent to the Bulgarian poet Atanas Dalchev in the 1970s she described the affliction she felt:

²² “I am paralyzed by mortal mutism, / Your simple sound alone / Could save me from death, — / Only your song, where there are no losses, / Where the continuity of recitative / Brings the past and future to life, — / Only this song, entrust it to me!”

²³ “Melancholy is silent, melancholy moans without words. / Why, Lord, such torment for me! / Kill me right away, and that would be all. / O my Lord, it was not in vain / That you created me truthful and clear / And taught me from childhood to compose / Words... What joy you have given me! / And now, with silent melancholy, there is no relief. / You are right. I deserve hell for my sins, / But have mercy, restore my grace!”

²⁴ To Levon Mkrtchyan she wrote: “I never forgot my poems. They forgot me, sometimes for long years, and it was very painful” (Saakyan 2015).

Verses... this does not depend on us: they either come from a strong emotional shock (and this is not always the case) or from profound loneliness. (At least, that is how it is for me.) But they always come from melody, that is, if you do not hear the melody, you cannot write a poem (August 12, 1974).

[...]

Nowadays only single lines rush in; I sometimes write them down, but I do not return to them, and the poem does not develop. How I envy those who write a lot! Even if it were just a few, even if it were only ten poems a year, I would be happy. Silence [*Molchanie*] is painful (February 19, 1975) (in Glen 1996: 256, 265).

Just as poetry begins with a melody, hearing the music is also crucial when translating another author. In her careful work, “stunned by the love for poetry and the fear of damaging it,”²⁵ Petrovykh aimed to preserve the “intonation” of the original (in Glen 1996: 256, 250). A representative of a new generation of Soviet translators, she criticized literal, word-to-word translations,²⁶ even when the translator was a revered friend like Akhmatova or Shengeli: “in his [Shengeli’s] translations there is a painful rigidity, a desire to squeeze the entire original text into a line at the expense of the Russian language, at the expense of free breathing, of free intonation” (Petrovykh 1991: 366).

However, the role of music, sound and hearing is not the only key to understanding Mariya Petrovykh’s poetics. As if constantly underlining what poets should be, her verses stress that these verbal artists cannot be deaf, mute, or blind: hearing, reproducing, and seeing are essential to poetry (“Эта сказочка стала стара, / Потускнели виденья ранние, / И давно уж настала пора / Зренья, слуха и понимания”; “O kakie mne snilis’ morya!...”, 1967).²⁷

The poetic word has a melody, but it also has its own light: “Весь век лишь слова ищешь ты, / Единственного слова. / Оно блеснет из темноты / И вдруг погаснет снова” (“V minutu otchayan’ya”, 1958).²⁸ The barren soul of the ‘mute’ poet is “severely unable to listen, unable to see” (“тяжело неслышащая, незрячая”) (“Kogda slagat’ stikhi talanta net...”, 1971).

That is why, alongside silence, mutism, and sounds (voices, bird chirping, rumblings, creaks, groans, roars...), colors – and especially the opposition between light and darkness – play an important role in Petrovykh’s poems: “Лишается земля примет, / Когда над ней исчезнет свет, / Все дело в свете, но и он / Лишь темнотой на свет рожден” (“Nas predrassvetnaya zarya...”, 1969).²⁹

²⁵ As much as she feared damaging the translated text, she did not want to “enrich” it: “God forbid if I am ‘enriching’ Nairi Zaryan! You [Mkrtchyan] know the original and you know that there is no enrichment here. I translated this poem very accurately, and that is my only merit” (Saakyants 2015).

²⁶ On the different and evolving approaches to translation in the Soviet Union see (Azov 2013; Baer 2016b; Witt 2016b; Baer&Witt 2018; Baskina 2021).

²⁷ “This fairy tale has grown old, / Early visions have faded, / And long ago the time came / For sight, hearing, and understanding.”

²⁸ “All your life you search for the word, / That only word. / It will flash out of the darkness / And suddenly fade away again.”

²⁹ “The earth loses its signs / When the light will disappear above it, / It is all about the light, but it too / Was but born from darkness.”

Yet, based on Petrovykh's original poems, her translation practice, and her editing suggestions, it is possible to consider the sound dimension as preeminent, dominant in verbal poetic composition. Not only are the motifs of hearing and mutism particularly recurrent, but stylistically, sound effects also appear in a variety of poems (through alliterations, repetitions, etymological figures, homophones, and semi-homophones):

[...] Умолк? Умаялся? Умялся? [...] ("Otryvok", 1928)³⁰

[...] В неполитом, в неполотом саду [...] /
Единственным неповторимым сердцем,
Таинственной единственной душой ("Osennie lesa", 1943)³¹

[...] дрожмя дрожит ("Dal'nee derevo", 1959)³²

[...] Здесь ты со мной, ты здесь со мной [...] /
А небо синее? А снег?
А синева ручьев и рек?
А в синем небе облака? ("K tvoey mogile podoydu...", 1959)³³

[...] Лишь весть о вести [...] /
Все про себя: судьба, судьбе,
Судьбы, судьбою...
Нет, вы забудьте о себе,
Чтоб стать собою. [...] /
Отправьтесь в путь, в нелегкий путь,
В путь — от причала ("O, vetrom zyblemaya ten'...", 1960s)³⁴

[...] Красотою красота [...] ("Est' khudozhnik nepodkupny...", 1968)³⁵

[...] Заря – не зря [...] ("Nas predrassvetnaya zarya...", 1969)³⁶

[...] Исчез мой давний дивный сон [...] ("Net, ne poedu ya tuda...", 1960s)³⁷

[...] никто, никогда,
Ни за что, никуда, ниоткуда [...] ("Na miru, na yuru...", 1971)³⁸

³⁰ "Gone silent? Worn out? Beaten down?"

³¹ "In an unwatered, unplowed garden [...] / With an only unrepeatable heart, / With a mysterious only soul."

³² "Violently trembling."

³³ "Here you are with me, you are here with me [...] / And the blue sky? And the snow? / And the blue of streams and rivers? / And the clouds in the blue sky?"

³⁴ "Only news about news [...] // Everything about yourself: fate, to fate, / Of fate, through fate... / No, forget about yourself, / To become yourself. [...] // Set off on a journey, a difficult journey, / A journey – from the pier."

³⁵ "Beauty through beauty."

³⁶ "Dawn – not in vain."

³⁷ "My ancient marvelous dream has vanished."

³⁸ "Nobody, never, / For nothing, nowhere, from nowhere."

Her work as an editor reflects the attention given to the translated text and to the beauty, the purity of the Russian poetic word. As her colleagues, such as Khelemsky and Ozerov, have reported, “her comments on the manuscript [of a translation] were, as a rule, sniper-like in their accuracy, she instantly detected the slightest sloppiness or minor flaw” (in Petrovykh 1986: 237); “Both (Petrovykh and Zvyagintseva) overwhelmed each other with examples of such distortions [of the Russian language] that reached the point of absurdity. Not the right meaning, not the right emphasis, not the right nuance of the word. Both loved dictionaries and not only consulted them but carried them within themselves” (in Petrovykh 1986: 313). The poet Grigory Levin recalled a specific episode that happened to him:

There is so much that could be said about Maria Sergeevna’s sense of language. I will limit myself to one personal example. My poem “Ya tebya drugoy khotel by videt” [I would like to see you different] was published in the twelfth issue of *Yunost* in 1956. Maria Sergeevna drew my attention to the line “Ne khochu sovsem tebya obidet” [I don’t want at all to offend you] and said something like this: “So you don’t want to offend her at all? But you do offend her, don’t you? Here you should have said ‘vovse’ instead of ‘sovsem.’” Maria Sergeevna said it with some irritation, as if offended on behalf of the language she loved and felt so deeply. I felt ashamed that I myself had failed to notice this annoying inaccuracy. And once, in conversation, I used the word ‘yazykóvaya’. Maria Sergeevna said with indignation: “Remember: there is a sausage called *yazykóvaya* [tongue sausage], but when talking about language, you have to say *yazykováya*” (in Petrovykh 1986: 368).

As Samoylov underlined, “She became upset and disappointed when the feelings and thoughts of the author being translated were distorted by the translator’s willfulness. She always loved the person she was translating. She cared deeply about every line, as if she had written it herself” (in Petrovykh 1986: 336). The colleagues she edited sometimes took offense, Samoylov continues, and someone even called her a “beast” for her passionate attitude toward the translated text. Even the poet Boris Slutsky received her meticulous comments on his translations of the Polish poet Julian Tuwim: the rhyming expression “zychno ya” [loud I] sounded, to Petrovykh, too ambiguously close to the neuter adjective “zychnoe” [loud], while in the line “krov’ zalivaet gorlo diko” [the blood floods the throat wildly] the last two words, in her view, merged too much. She was also very careful in terms of gender choice: “I think it would be better to replace ‘mal’chik’ [boy] with ‘mladenec’ [baby], so as not to offend the girls”, Petrovykh wrote to Slutsky (in Skibinskaya 2020: 446-468).

We will now focus more specifically on some of her translations to identify features of her work with the text. As Anait Tatevosyan has analyzed Petrovykh’s Armenian translations, highlighting the variety of styles and poetic features she mastered (Tatevosyan 2014), the following section will concentrate on Petrovykh’s translations from Slavic languages, namely Croatian (Miroslav Krleža), Polish (Bolesław Leśmian), and Bulgarian (Atanas Dalchev).

4. Mariya Petrovykh's Translations from Slavic Languages

The 1991 edition of selected poems and translations by Mariya Petrovykh includes a wide range of translated texts, from "Poetry of the Peoples of the USSR" (Armenian, Georgian, Jewish, Kabardian) to "Foreign poetry" (Bulgarian, Polish, Czech, Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian, al-Andalus, Vietnamese, Indian).³⁹ Despite their popularity among readers and recognition from fellow translators and even Soviet authorities,⁴⁰ these translations have not yet received scholarly attention, except for the previously mentioned Tatevosyan's article devoted to Petrovykh's Armenian translations. We will now focus on her work on the poems of three Slavic-language poets: Miroslav Krleža (Zagreb, 1893–1981), Bolesław Leśmian (Warsaw, 1877–1937) and Atanas Dalchev (Thessaloniki 1904–Sofia 1978). Interestingly, the work of these authors echoes the motifs and styles that characterize Petrovykh's original oeuvre; her apt translations of these texts attest to the stimulating dialogue between her translation and writing activities.

In "Što znači ružin miris?" by Miroslav Krleža ("Čto znachit zapakh rozy?" [What does the smell of roses mean?], 1937), Petrovykh makes an effort to maintain the repetitions ("kad kao *kaplja kaplje za kapljom* noćni sat?"; "когда за каплей капля мгновения скользят?")⁴¹ and the list of verbs ("*razlistava se, cvate, truni se, niče, vene*"; "цветет и доцветает, средь листьев темных вянет")⁴² that give the original its distinctive rhythm.⁴³ However, when she cannot match the pace of the Croatian, she compensates in her own way, by constructing an etymological figure around the words 'mute/mutism': "цветенье розы *немо* всей *немотой* природы."⁴⁴

In Krleža's "Pismo" ("Pis'mo" [Letter], 1937) Petrovykh preserves the list of nouns at the end of the first stanza, though this comes partially at the expense of the original meaning: "Pismo je ko miris što ne prestane / da miriše *lipom, tijelom, kosom, svilom*"; "Письмо [...] / исчезнет в полете, / оставив дыханье пленительной *плоти*, / и *липы* в цвету, и *шелков*, и *тепла*."⁴⁵

Less, in terms of meaning, is sacrificed in "Loza" ("Vinogradnaya loza" [Grapevine], 1937), except for the syntactic repetition at the beginning of the second

³⁹ On the choice of languages and cultures systematically translated in the Soviet Union see (Witt 2013; Baer 2016b; Clark 2018; Zemskova 2018).

⁴⁰ In 1951, together with her colleagues who had worked on the translation of the Kabardian *Nart saga*, Petrovykh was nominated for the Stalin Prize and received the honorary medal "For Valiant Labor" (Za doblestny trud). Skibinskaya also states that Iosif Stalin appreciated Petrovykh's translation of the Lithuanian poet Tilvytis, praising the "good language" of the translation (Skibinskaya 2020: 427).

⁴¹ "When the night clock drips drop by drop?"; "When drop by drop the moments slip away?" (Here and elsewhere, italics in quotations are mine).

⁴² "Unfurls, blooms, rots, sprouts, withers"; "blooms and fades, withering among dark leaves."

⁴³ The analysis of metrical patterns in these translations (as in the poems mentioned above) is beyond the scope of this article. The meters employed are very diverse and deserve a specific study.

⁴⁴ "The blooming of roses is mute of all the mutism of nature." The original text reads "ruža nijemo cvate" [the rose mutedly blooms].

⁴⁵ "A letter is like a smell that never fades / that smells of linden, body, hair, silk"; "A letter [...] / will vanish in flight, leaving behind the breath of captivating flesh, / and linden trees in bloom, and silks, and warmth."

stanza (*“Iz blata i kiše, iz blata i pijeska”; “На лозах, пророслих из грази, из глины”*)⁴⁶ and for the image of the sun under which the grapes are ripening. In this case, Krleža’s poem itself contains key words that are close to Petrovykh’s poetics, namely mutism and blindness: *“Loza se tiho i nijeto penje, / o, divno je njeno slijepo htijenje!”*; *“Лоза вырастает неспешно и немо / в слепом и прекрасном желании неба.”*⁴⁷

Bolesław Leśmian was, according to Petrovykh, “the most significant, the most talented” of Polish poets (in Glen 1996: 253). It appears that in this author she found a truly resonant chord, evident in her convincing translations of his poems, where she manages to stay close to the original meanings while reproducing their intrinsic melody (see, for example, the poem *“Zakłęcie”, “Zaklyat’e”* [Spell], 1936).

In texts like *“Noc zimowa”* (*“Zimnyaya noch”* [Winter Night], 1912), *“Wieczorem”* (*“Veчерom”* [At Evening], 1920), *“Pierwszy deszcz”* (*“Pervy dozhd”* [First Rain], 1920), and *“Samotność”* (*“Odnochestvo”* [Loneliness], 1936), Petrovykh notably preserves the sound structure, rhythm, and deliberate repetitions, while also finding motifs in Leśmian’s texts that resonate with her own poems and that she accurately maintains in Russian: sounds, mutism, silence, light, darkness, visions, dreams. The sound play of the verse *“Bez róż – bez zórz”* in *“Noc zimowa”* is rendered, for example, as *“Без лоз, без роз.”*⁴⁸ The studied repetition of the adjective *“pierwszy”* [first] in the opening stanza of *“Pierwszy deszcz”* is preserved in Russian, as is the anaphora created by the expressions *“Niechaj”* and *“Niech”* [Let] translated with the equivalent *“Pust’,”* which closes the poem *“Zakłęcie”*.

Her approach in *“Mrok na schodach...”* (*“Mgla u vkhoda...”* [Darkness on the Stairs / Darkness in the Entrance]) to handling the insistent repetition of the word *“śnieg”* [snow] throughout the two stanzas is different and creative: initially substituting *“sneg”* [snow] with *“metel’”* [blizzard], Petrovykh accepts Leśmian’s challenge and works with verbs derived from the required terms:

Trzeba teraz w śnieg uwierzyć
I tym śniegiem się ośnieżyć —
I ocienić się tym cieniem,
I pomilczeć tym milczeniem.

В этот снег поверить надо,
Оснежиться снегопадом,
Затениться тенью нежной,
В тишине притихнуть снежной.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ “From mud and rain, from mud and sand”; “On vines, born from mud, from clay.”

⁴⁷ “The vine climbs silently and mutedly, / oh, its blind desire is wonderful”; “The vine grows slowly and mutedly / in the blind and beautiful desire of the sky.”

⁴⁸ “Without roses, without dawns”; “Without vines, without roses.”

⁴⁹ “Now is the time to believe in snow / And be snowed up with snow – / And be shadowed with that shadow, / And be silenced with that silence”; “It is necessary to believe in this snow, / To be snowed up by the snowfall, / To be shadowed by the gentle shadow, / To fall silent in the snowy silence.”

Atanas Dalchev's poems were Mariya Petrovykh's final translation project, completed when she was already seriously ill. They were published some months after she passed away. Her correspondence with the Bulgarian author (published in Glen 1996) clearly shows her appreciation and high regard for his oeuvre. Samoylov suggests that Dalchev was "possibly closer to her" than other poets she translated during her long career (in Glen 1996: 248). His own struggle with the pain of creative mutism was something Petrovykh could deeply relate to.

In the poems she translated, silence, mutism, blindness, and darkness are present in both the original and her Russian version. Yet sometimes, likely in search of a rhyme, these terms appear in the translation even when they are absent in Dalchev's text, as in the case of "с небес немых" [from the mute skies] in "Snyag" ("Sneg" [Snow], 1929) and "кровь моя немеет" [my blood turns muted]⁵⁰ in "Pladnya" ("Polden" [Midday], 1929).

In any case, Petrovykh's translations of Dalchev's texts display an elegant and inventive recreation of sound images and rhythm. In the poem "Vecher" [Evening] (1930), the closing lines are a balancing act between sense and sound (even though Petrovykh chooses to add a verse to render it completely):

Ний непрестанно мрем и бавно чезнем
веднѣж от туй место, подир от друго,
докле изчезнем най-подир съвсем.

Мы непреодолимо умираем,
вседневно умираем, исчезая
оттуда и отсюда — отовсюду,
пока совсем не сгинем наконец.⁵¹

In general, in the poems of these Slavic-language authors, Mariya Petrovykh seems to have found common ground in terms of poetics and style, which may have helped her recreate the texts in the Russian language.

5. Conclusion

Reading Mariya Petrovykh's translations against the background of her original poetry (and vice versa) allows for a deeper analysis of her poetics and translation approach. The crucial role that translated texts, contexts, and authors played for her is also evident in Petrovykh's poems such as "Armeniya" (1966), "Srednevekov'e" (1967), and "Osen' sorok chetvertogo goda..." (1968), where her ties to the Caucasian country are emphasized, or in a text like "Perevodya Tagora" (1966), where her hard work as a translator is directly reflected. Interestingly, in her later years, she collected a series of

⁵⁰ The original text reads "my blood dries up."

⁵¹ "We are ceaselessly dying and slowly disappearing / once from this place, then from another, / until we will finally disappear completely"; "We are inevitably dying, / dying every day, disappearing / from here and there – from everywhere, / until we will finally vanish completely."

poetic sketches under the working title *Kniga skorbi* [Book of sadness, or Book of lamentations], choosing thus the same title as the mystical long poem by the Armenian monk-poet Grigor Narekatsi (X-XI c.), the Russian translation of which she edited (Petrovykh 2025).

The mutual influences among Petrovykh's poetry, her translations, and her editorial work are thus evident, yet still require systematic analysis. This research has raised many questions that call for further investigation into Petrovykh's precise and meticulous work with the poetic word, a practice that allowed "no deceptions, no substitutions," as she herself wrote in the poem "Redaktor" (1970s):

Борюсь с карандашом в руке.
Пусть чья-то речь в живом движенье
Вдруг зазвучит без искаженья
На чужеродном языке.⁵²

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⁵² "I struggle, pencil in hand. / Let the speech of the other in lively motion / Suddenly sound without distortion / In a foreign language."

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in relation to this research.

Ethics Statement

The author(s) confirm that this study was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.