

Doiche Bukh:
some observations on multilingual poetry

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Abstract. This article examines the macaronic Russian-German poems published in Vsevolod Nekrasov's *Doiche Bukh* (1998). In addition to exploring the professional and aesthetic motivations for Nekrasov's use of German at this point in his writing career, the article strives to read these poems in the context of Nekrasov's work as a whole. The use of a foreign language, moreover one that the poet did not know well, would seem to go against a poetics so rooted in the minimal nuances of Nekrasov's native tongue. And yet, when read in the context of both Nekrasov's other poetry and his polemical articles, the multilingual experimentation of *Doiche Bukh* turns out to be working toward the same aesthetic and polemical ends as Nekrasov's purely Russian-language work.

Key terms: Vsevolod Nekrasov, *Doiche Bukh*, multilingual, macaronic poetry, zaum.

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Vsevolod Nekrasov's *Doiche Bukh* came out in 1998: it contained new poems and articles written over the previous two decades (beginning in the early 1980s), most of them with a markedly German cultural and / or linguistic slant. The last two sections («old and various» [*staroe i raznoe*]) consist of already-published and / or rewritten pieces selected for their relationship to the book's main themes. The «German» theme includes direct references to Germany and the German language, as well as in connection with musings on the Second World War and the political and economic consequences of that war in both Germany and the Soviet Union/Russia. In this connection, the poems contribute a new element to the typical Nekrasovian wordplay: the appearance of German-language words and phrases.

Nekrasov's other, Russian-language poems are generally based on the poet's being fully immersed in the speech environment of his native tongue. He listens closely to speech, his own and that of others; makes a study of how people speak and what they say; and he speculates as to what kind of conclusions can be drawn from everyday uses of language. As is made abundantly clear in Nekrasov's poetry, many articles and public statements, this is a poet who perceives a crucial difference between speech and language. Language lives in speech; in speech language is preserved but also able to develop. On its own, language is general, abstract, correct and dead; speech is meanwhile alive, individual, concrete and given to all manner of deviations from the «norm.»

Nekrasov's concept does not depart dramatically from Saussure's famous *langue / parole* dichotomy, except that for Nekrasov this difference is important first and foremost in its application to poetry and «poetic language.» This key position is expressed eloquently in Nekrasov's (sometimes notorious) fondness for interjections, half-words and repetitions of a kind of inner muttering, and in his call to «catch oneself at verse» [*lovit' sebja na stikh*] (that is, preferring the spontaneous poetry of everyday speech to more «prepared» literary production).

It would thus seem that the language of Nekrasov's poetry would necessarily be Russian, emphasized as the native, mother tongue. After all, his linguistic material is usually precisely that which actively resists any kind of translation. So it is surprising that such a poet could produce something like *Doiche Bukh*, with its plethora of words and phrases in a foreign language (and German to boot!).

Foreign-language words do make occasional appearances in Nekrasov's other poems – especially in his later «travel poems,» which chronicle his impressions of cities like Paris, Prague and others. However, there are never many foreign words in these poems, and the ones present serve more as local color than play a significant role in the actual meat of the poem. In essence, these poems differ little from Nekrasov's earlier «Russian» travel poems, which

document trips within the Soviet Union and play liberally with toponyms (see, for instance, «Riga / Nina govorila» or «belye golovy Vologdy»).

The poems in *Doiche Bukh*, meanwhile, are macaronic: some of them feature as many German words and phrases as Russian, or even more. Furthermore, the German words in many of the poems are written in Latin script and thus stand out still further (unlike in the Paris or Prague poems, where the foreign words are written in Russian transcription). It would thus seem that German in the *Doiche Bukh* poems plays a more significant role than the foreign words that appear occasionally in other Nekrasov poems. And this raises another question: to what extent and how do Russian-language readers who do not speak German understand these poems? What is the purpose of including this foreign element? In other words, what is German doing in these poems?

We don't really know how well Nekrasov himself knew German. In the article that opens *Doiche Bukh*, he confesses right away that he «(unfortunately) doesn't know German.» He then quickly adds that «this is one of the rare cases when it seems like you don't really need to know the language.» This statement recalls some of the poet's seminal musings on language and speech given in a 1981 article: «That's what makes language bad, the fact that you can learn it» [...] «our speech – verbalized or not – is always so much more subtle and complete, more highly organized, than any specially refined and complicated poetic artificial system, or 'language'» [Zhuravleva and Nekrasov, 1996, 284–297]. I believe that Nekrasov felt that a certain abstract, conventional German *speech* was poetically accessible to him, even while the German language as such remained unconquered – and unnecessary.

The question of language comprehension, however, is obviously not limited to the poet alone: in the same introductory article he openly addresses his readers as well. For instance, citing a poem by his German colleagues, «ACHTUNG ACHTUNG NACHT,» [attention attention night] Nekrasov asserts that «the majority of Russian readers will understand 'achtung achtung nacht': you can see what's going on right away – your vocabulary allows for at least that much.» And for those Russian readers whose vocabularies might not allow for that much, he even offers hints and explanations to some of the poems in the introduction [Nekrasov, 1998, 6]. In this connection, we can also mention Nekrasov's comments on the grammatically incorrect title of his book:

Yes, I was told that the right word would be *deutsches* or even *das deutsche buch*. But that's already beyond my capabilities. My job is, insofar as these capabilities allow, to correspond to something like *DEUTSCHE BANK*. And it's not *deutsches*: so what can I do? [Nekrasov, 1998, 3]

Meanwhile, the other German words and phrases in the poems are generally written without any obvious mistakes. In my view, the above comments indicate at least one key to understanding the role of German in this book: regardless all

of Nekrasov's inventive use of German and the astonishing interlingual puns, Nekrasov is still first and foremost addressing Russian ears. And Russian ears assume a Russian cultural context. By calling his book *Doiche Bukh*, Nekrasov was counting on the average reader's first association being with the well-known German bank – and only afterwards would grammar perfectionists start consulting their textbooks. In his opinion, the line *achtung achtung nacht* works the same way: at the very least the word *achtung* belongs to a kind of abstract, stereotypical, mostly military (or cinematic-military) vocabulary of the average Russian reader.

The following poem shows some more stereotypical vocabulary:

дас ист

да как
даст

как даст рассвет
им дер ост фенстер

убили немцы

мерседес
БЕНЦ
[...]

In this excerpt, like the earlier poem «*ein zwei drei [ain tsvai drai]*,» Nekrasov is playing with stereotypical «German» associations. A few, simple and mostly familiar German words – *das ist, Ost, Mercedes Benz* – are sprinkled throughout the poem in a fragmentary manner, while the hard skeleton of them poem remains firmly Russian.

There are also poems with a cognitive, even pedagogical leaning:

[...]
рур
уинверзитет-
разуниверзитетштадт
тут
бохум сам
там эссен
и весь
собственно и есть

мир видимый
который тут хир
ландшафт и дальше там
ландшафт на ландшафт
бывшие шахты

туда дорт дортмунд там
а там
дюссельдорф

Here again, the poem's skeleton, its syntax and foundation are Russian. The well-informed reader could read this poem as a rather straightforward list of cities and places in the German state of Nordrhein-Westfalen. But Nekrasov's puns and rhymes reveal entirely unexpected combinations of words and the spaces between them: the repeating wordplay around the city name Bochum (sounding like «god,» *Bog*), the interlingual pun «essen / est',» the unanticipated relationship between *dort* [there] and Dortmund, etc. At the same time, these word games partially explain the meaning and location of cities perhaps unknown otherwise to Russian readers: the university in Bochum is called Ruhr-Universitaet, which indicates the former importance of this region as a center of the German mining industry. In the poem, the cities are listed in a certain order, as if a hand is tracing a line moving south on a map of Germany. In this way the poem acts on several levels at once, depending on the reader's linguistic and contextual knowledge.

Zaum

Most of the German words, however, evoke for the average reader vague associations rather than clear meanings, such that these macaronic poems sometimes produce an effect reminiscent of zaum – a language of «indeterminate meaning» [Janecek, 1996, 1]. In connection with multilingual poetry, it is interesting to recall Viktor Shklovsky's statement that «the Futurist authors of zaum poems asserted that they grasped all the world's languages at one moment»: «It seems to me that there was an element of sincerity in this, that there were moments when they themselves believed that from their quills would come flowing the miraculously familiar words of another language.» Shklovsky concludes: «zaum sound-speech wishes to be language» [Shklovsky, 1919, 23].

Nekrasov, however, is no zaumnik: he is not inventing his German, of course, but rather indicating those zaum-like features inherent to any unknown

language. For some (well-prepared) readers, *Doiche Bukh* really might evoke associations with Deutsche Bank; but for other reader the book's title can function exclusively at the level of sound associations: thus *doi* might recall the verb *doiť* [to milk], and *bukh* evoke the interjection *bukh* used for something plopping or falling. In this connection we can recall Daniil Kharms' half-zaum poem about the cheerful old man, «*Veselyi starichok*»:

Жил на свете старичок
Маленького роста,
И смеялся старичок
Чрезвычайно просто:
«Ха-ха-ха
Да хе-хе-хе,
Хи-хи-хи
Да бух-бух!
Бу-бу-бу
Да бе-бе-бе,
Динь-динь-динь
Да трюх-трюх!

At this point we can say a few more things about Kharms, whom Nekrasov admired greatly and considered an important literary influence. In a 1974 article, in what was ostensibly a theater review, Nekrasov offered a number of insights into Kharms' work. The following observations apply beautifully to the poem cited above: «greatly exaggerated rhythm [...] this is not the rhythm of the verse line, not a conventional literary rhythm, but rather something more like physical rhythm – of real movement. It was no accident that Chukovsky singled out Kharms.» In the latter's work, Nekrasov writes, «words seem to be selected at breakneck speed, racing against each other – just try to keep up, and zaum [...] recovers its essential and primeval purpose, the impulse of childlike spontaneity.» Nekrasov's statements about Kharms reveal quite a lot of self-commentary as well. Indeed, in Nekrasov's free use of an unfamiliar language we can observe a certain «childlike spontaneity» – as is well known, a person with minimal knowledge of a foreign language is thrust essentially into the role of a child. While the limitations of this position can be frustrating, this individual also has the right to violate all manner of grammatical and sociolinguistic rules with childlike freedom and inventiveness.

Nekrasov also saw in Kharms an ideal representative of the tendency toward a «democratization of the poetic – more broadly – of literary language – more broadly still – of all literature. And in this sense toward the rapprochement of

literature and reality.» Over the course of this democratization of literature, the old literary norms fall away, and the question arises as to whether Kharms is «sympathetic to the fate of aesthetic resources.» Nekrasov suggests that Kharms shed no tears over the linguistic and poetic consequences of the Soviet experiment:

Most likely no – he’s happy to fashion his tools out of scraps and fragments – maybe the simplest percussion hammer to beat out the rhythm. Or even just using his own voice to start singing or howling. And he insists that simple doesn’t mean meager or poor. This is also very important.

Everything here, down the choice of words, recalls Nekrasov’s programmatic statements about his own work. Kharms is happy to fashion his own tools out of simple fragments; meanwhile, Nekrasov sees his task in discovering these very fragments: «to open up, heave away and see whether anyone’s left alive, maybe among the interjections» [Zhuravleva and Nekrasov, 1996, 300].

Among his other eccentric passions, Kharms loved all things German, as attested repeatedly in his diaries and notebooks. Judging by the diaries, Kharms did know how to write in German, admittedly with spelling and grammatical errors. Unfortunately, I was unable to determine which of Kharms’ works Nekrasov had access to at the time of writing his article; in any event, he surely knew Kharms’ translations of the 19th century German absurdist Wilhelm Busch, particularly «Plikh i Pliukh.» In his otherwise rather free translation, Kharms goes to pains to preserve most of the original names of characters. On the one hand, the sounds of these names help to create a noticeably «German» sound environment; on the other hand, the names work differently in Russian, they sound funnier and more nonsensical than in German. «Plikh» and «Pliukh» replace the German «Plisch» and «Plum,» and the Englishman Mister Pief becomes Mister Hopp; but Peter, Paul, papa Fittig, Caspar Schlich and the teacher Bokelmann all retain their names in the Russian translation. In comparison to the rather grandiloquent original, Kharms’ poems are shorter, simpler and make more use of sound effects, as in the following excerpt:

Петер крикнул: «Это мой!»
Пауль крикнул: «Это мой!»
«Ты будь Плихом!»
«Ты будь Плюхом!»
«А теперь бежим домой!»
Петер, Пауль, Плих и Плюх
Мчатся к дому во весь дух.

A literal translation from the German would look something like this:

Пауль крикнул: «Плиш – так назову моего щенка»
Плюмом назвал Петер своего.
И так вели Пауль и Петер
Обеих маленьких шавок
Поспешно, зато всячески тщательно
Домой к родительскому дому.

It is my impression that for Kharms, German names work on two different sound levels at once: they simultaneously announce the text's link to the German original, but also give the same kind of aural pleasure inherent to nonsense (especially when the words are repeated multiple times).

As a poetic device, the German in Nekrasov's *Doiche Bukh* poems functions in a similar way. But there are zaum moments in his other work as well. Zaum can appear in the form of citation:

весь ужас-то

и вот вам пожалуйста

и вот он есть

и вот его нет

и вот он это вот

и тут-то его-то

как дыл бул щыл

был был

вдруг
бух

цыц
раз
два

блин

бенц
и капут

а что
еще не очень и плохо

могло быть хуже

и может быть

и может быть
будет

Curiously, this poem seems to rhyme with the *Doiche Bukh* poems through the line «*benz / i kaput*» – and once again we have the word «*bukh*,» here (along with «*tsyts*») used in a purely onomatopoeic way. Some other sounds bordering on *zaum* appear in the following poem:

Скажем
Скажем так

Скажем
Сик
Сик
Сик
Сик
Сик-суальный
Скажем

Скажем
Дух-
ховново
Во
Во
Во
Во

Во
Как скажем-то

Уж мы как скажем
Так скажем

This poem could serve as an illustration of Shklovsky's thesis about sounds always gravitating toward meaning. The fragments «*sik*» and «*vo*» are either wandering around in search of a mother-word that might give them sense, or breaking away again from the mothership and setting out on their own. However, Nekrasov (or Kharms for that matter) can't really be called a zaum-poet: zaum is never the main device nor the main aim of their poetics. And the role of German in the *Doiche Bukh* poems is certainly not limited to zaum. Nevertheless, the zaum element is constantly flickering in the background of these poems, not insisting on any first-order importance, but stubbornly maintaining a palpable presence.

Contact with the German language

Among the many -isms that have been applied to Nekrasov's work, «concretism» was probably the one that least offended the poet's famously prickly sensibility. Nevertheless, he considered even this term imprecise. *Konkrete Poesie* had appeared in 1950s Germany, and Nekrasov learned of the phenomenon only in 1964, when «*Inostrannaia Literatura*» published a selection of contemporary German poetry in Russian translation (accompanied by the slashing commentary typical of the time – the poets Gomringer, Gappmayr, Heißenbüttel, Rühm and others were from West Germany, Switzerland and Austria, and their bold formal experiments were attributed to «inherent bourgeois taint»). With regard to the question of Nekrasov's command of German, it is worth noting that Nekrasov read the *Konkrete* poets in Russian translation, perhaps even in Spanish as well; he did not read them in German for some time to come [Sukhotin].

For Nekrasov and his fellow «Lianozovo poets,» the publication of the German *Konkrete* poets was an astounding discovery and an unexpected aesthetic affirmation: they suddenly realized that their linguistic and poetic experiments, deeply rooted in Soviet reality, nevertheless had quite a lot in common with the linguistic experimentation going on in far-off capitalist Europe [Sukhotin]. At the same time, Nekrasov always insisted that he had

established his recognizable poetic idiom («found his poetic voice») by the late 1950s, long before becoming acquainted with the *Konkrete* poets.

Nekrasov's first foreign (and German-language) publications took place through his acquaintance with the Swiss Slavicist Liesl Ujvari, who was studying in Moscow in the early 1970s. A collection of his and others' poems came out in the Vienna-based journal «Pestsaele» in 1973; two years later, the collection of Russian unofficial poetry *Freiheit ist Freiheit* came out in Zurich (the title was borrowed from Nekrasov's programmatic poem «Svoboda est' svoboda»). In the early 1980s Nekrasov met the German Slavicists Sabine Haensgen and Georg Witte, who would subsequently arrange for many translations and publications of the work of Nekrasov and other Lianozovo poets and Moscow Conceptualists in Germany. Upon their invitation, Nekrasov, Igor Kholin, Lev Rubinstein, Dmitri Prigov and Elena Shvarts came to Germany in 1989 to a festival of Russian and German avant-garde poetry. Their visit was preceded by the publication of *Kulturpalast*, a collection including poems and sound recordings of all five poets, compiled and edited by Guenther Hirt and Sascha Wonders (pseudonyms of Georg Witte and Sabine Haensgen). In 1992 Nekrasov, Kholin and Genrikh Sapgir made yet another German tour, resulting in the collection *LIANOSOWO*, with selections from each poet and German side-by-side translations. Throughout the 1990s, all three of these poets managed to visit Germany several more times, as well as other nearby European countries (for example, they gave readings in Vienna and Luxembourg).

Bearing in mind Nekrasov's years of acquaintance with the German language and German-speaking Slavicists, it is quite possible that in *Doiche Bukh* he is addressing an ideal reader exemplified by these Slavicists (that is, readers who know Russian well, speak German and are furthermore familiar with Nekrasov's poetics). But he nevertheless decided to publish *Doiche Bukh* as a separate edition and in Russia, apparently counting on readers' partial understanding of his texts (which is, incidentally, surely how things stood for many avant-garde and experimental poets in the past and up to the present day). The following poem opens with a significant quotation from a poem by Haensgen and Witte. According to Nekrasov, this is the poem that led him to realize the pair was undertaking basically the same poetic experiments in German that he had been carrying out in Russian:

ACHTUNG
ACHTUNG
NACHT

Хуштадтринг

тут аллес гут
тут аллес ист рихтиг

и химмель унд грунт
и небель им люфт
унд дох-тибидох
Забинхен

Забинхен
морген
марш нах Хауптбанхоф

фом Бохум
цу Оберхаузен

унд Дранг Нах

GRAND PRIX!

In addition to the first three words (German, written in Latin script) and the last two (French, also in Latin script), this poem contains twenty-seven German words and two Russian ones (both conjunctions!). A phrase like the penultimate line «Drang Nach» is a characteristic example of Nekrasov's wordplay with German. On the one hand, many readers would recognize the famous phrase from the Hitler-era military lexicon (*Drang nach Osten* [push / drive to the east] – note Nekrasov's incorrect capitalization of the preposition «nach» [to / toward]). But the next line reveals that the «Drang» is not to the east, but to the *grand prix*, a statement that supports one of the leading ideas of the whole book: contemporary Germany's success in overcoming its Nazi past and achieving economic prosperity. At the same time, however, the Russian ear would immediately pick up on the semi-obscene implications of the word *Nakh*, if perceived as a Russian word; this consideration also suggests that Nekrasov's choice of capitalization may have been more than just a mistake. Perhaps an ideal reading of the line would be simultaneously in German and Russian, *Drang / nah* [push/drive to hell, lit. onto a dick] – which evokes a very different and unambiguous meaning.

Doiche Bukh

Doiche Bukh also includes a long polemic article, «The hazard of nichtsein-art or A step-by-step chronicle of the Germany-and-me relationship,» in which

Nekrasov relates his years of interactions with German Slavic scholars and with the Soviet/Russian poetry world. The article is first and foremost a denunciation and includes a full range of the arguments typical of Nekrasov's polemics of the 1980s–2000s. The poet's main hobbyhorse is expressed in his passionate refusal to accept the version of the history of Soviet- and perestroika-era Moscow unofficial art and literature that has become more or less established. He considers this version intentionally and criminally false with regard to the facts of history, and he is incensed by what he sees as foreign Slavicists' nonchalant acceptance of an outrageously inaccurate story. At the end of the article, Nekrasov demands that none of his work be published in German or in Germany until this expose article is translated and published alongside it [Nekrasov, 1998, 84].

In her afterword to the book, Elena Penskaya draws a connection between Nekrasov's initial motivation to write poetry – his resistance to the fundamental falsehood of Soviet official language and his attempt to «dig out» the surviving fragments of language and speech, to bring them back to life – with the overarching themes of *Doiche Bukh*: both Nekrasov's interest in the German method of post-war reconstruction, and his furious commentary (in prose and poetry alike) on the contemporary Russian art world [Nekrasov, 1998, 170]. In my view, Penskaya's observation explains the otherwise obscure connection between Nekrasov's fundamentally Russian-language poetics and the macaronic poems in *Doiche Bukh*. In conclusion, let us hear the poet himself weigh in:

To a person from Russia – where no matter how you cut it there were a lot more people killed, and incommensurably less clarity and sense – this new Germany and its history as a product of real German work is particularly striking also because the secret is so obvious, the tool itself whereby this work is done. In principle it was always known, so simple to the point of being funny. It's called honesty. Our Soviet genocide was boundless; the German one was more regular and goal-oriented. Which one of them was more terrifying and criminal?

Here in Germany, when history was being worked out, renovated and set right, there was a distinct lack of ambiguity. The word remorse was not unknown, but there was a very clear term being applied as they went along – technically concrete and not very pretty-sounding: *denazification*.

Completely not our style, not Russian-sounding at all, right? [Nekrasov, 1998, 107-108].

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Информация о статье

Название: «Дойче Бух»: несколько замечаний по поводу многоязычия

Аннотация. Рассматриваются макаронические (русско-немецкие) стихи, опубликованные в «Дойче Бух» Всеволода Некрасова (1998). Помимо исследования профессиональных и эстетических побуждений, частично объясняющих использование Некрасовым немецкого языка в тот момент, автор статьи делает попытку читать эти многоязычные стихи в контексте всего остального творчества Некрасова. Казалось бы, некрасовская поэтика до такой степени погружена в родной русский язык – и во все его разговорные тонкости, – что само собой не позволяла бы использования иностранного языка (тем более языка, который поэт знал далеко не в совершенстве). Однако, когда мы читаем «Дойче Бух» в контексте других некрасовских стихов и его полемических статей, оказывается, что многоязычный эксперимент направлен на те же эстетические и полемические цели, что и чисто русскоязычные стихи поэта.

Ключевые слова: Всеволод Некрасов, «Дойче Бух», многоязычие, макароническая поэзия, заумь.

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