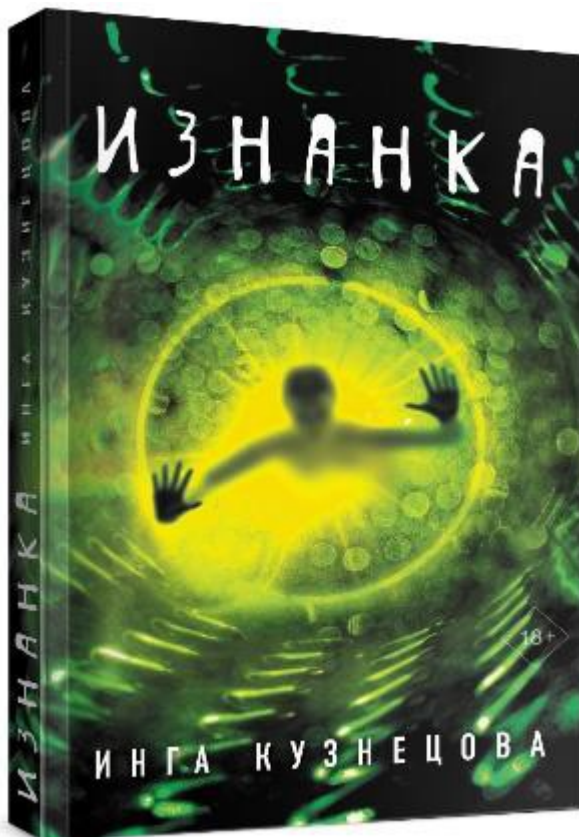


From the novel Coronavirus to the Coronavirus novel: Inga Kuznetsova's *Inside Out*
(*Iznanka*, 2020)

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In July 2020, after a month's intensive writing, the Russian poet and editor Inga Kuznetsova



completed a 35,000-word novella, *Iznanka* (literally, *From the Inside*; currently marketed as *Inside Out*).¹ AST (one of Russia's largest, most prestigious publishing houses) rushed out a hardback edition in September 2020, in an initial print run of 1000 copies which had sold out by December (see image on left); two new runs totalling 5,000 copies were duly ordered and sold out in their turn.² As early as mid-August, Kuznetsova's editor Igor Voevodin felt sufficiently confident of the book's potential for overseas sales to commission me to translate the first six chapters, and later the entire text, of *Iznanka*. This allowed Kuznetsova's literary agent, Thomas

Wiedling, to pitch the rights to international publishers. The extremely topical subject (and narrator) of Kuznetsova's new novel (her third) proved to be the novel coronavirus, COVID-19.

Iznanka is a novel narrated by a coronavirus, or more precisely, by one specific coronavirus: the original mutation which propagated Covid-19 among humans. This philosophically minded, preternaturally empathetic microorganism gradually develops its own ontology, meanwhile learning several human languages and speculating about the structure of human

¹ See Kuznetsova's page on the website of the Thomas Wiedling Literary Agency, <https://wiedling-litag.com/authors/Kuznetsova.html>

² Information derived from emails exchanged with Igor Voevodin, Inga Kuznetsova's editor at AST.

society. It radically defamiliarizes concepts that humans take for granted, including temporality, movement through space, memory, emotion, and sexuality. In the course of the novel's eighteen chapters, the virus is transmitted between almost as many hosts, starting with a bat somewhere in China and including a cat, a Chinese stallholder, a rape victim, a German pensioner with dementia, and a serial killer. Growing fond of each host, the virus regards every transmission as a personal rejection; only slowly does it realize that its existence harms its beloved 'Giants'. As the English-language translator of two of Kuznetsova's books – *Intervals* (*Provezhutok*, 2019) and also *Iznanka* – I will discuss in this paper the novel's structure and reception, touching on the unique complexity of translating a novel about the coronavirus during a pandemic.

How did Kuznetsova come to write what her publishers call the world's first novel narrated by a pathogen? Kafka is a strong influence on her fiction. Still more significantly, although Kuznetsova has at the time of writing fortunately not yet suffered the infection, she was exceptionally well-informed about the virus' life cycle. In April 2020, she edited for publication with AST an information book about the pandemic intended for non-expert Russian readers, Ancha Baranova's *Coronavirus: A Manual for Survival*. Later in the year, she published several poems on a new Russian-language poetry website, [Coronaverse](http://Coronaverse.com), intended to showcase 'poetical texts, written during and under the influence of the COVID-19 quarantine'.³ She was therefore pre-primed to explain the virus' life-cycle and the pre-history of the pandemic. Still more significantly, Kuznetsova's predilection for mystical, often abstract expressivity (*Intervals* is a near-future dystopian novel in which nonhuman creatures and even inanimate objects, including moss, a station platform and a breadcrumb, take turns to narrate the story from their unique points of view) prepared her to write an entire novel – a love story, even – from the perspective of a travelling microorganism. Here is the virus reflecting on the nature of love:

All my Hosts have intrigued me, but Myson is special; he shares with me not only himself (and although I have never been inside him, I love him already). Strange to say, it's as though Myson, knowing nothing about me, has just given me the external world as a gift, exactly as if allowing me to see it through his eyes – and for a few moments I can imagine I am Myson. It's an extraordinarily powerful sensation. In reality, no-one gave me any such gift. But when I'm with Myson, I am so much closer to being fully alive; I am a little *more* than a half-being.

³ '[...] поэтические тексты, написанные во время и под влиянием карантина COVID-19'. See www.coronaverse.com. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

[...]

How does it happen that creatures feel affection for each other? How do they start loving each other, if they are both the same size? If neither of them can dwell wholly within the other?⁴

The structure of *Iznanka*

As I write these words, the *Washington Post* has just reported that ‘Many experts now wonder if we will ever get a complete picture of the origins of a pandemic that has killed more than 2.7 million people’; a report jointly prepared by the World Health organization and the Chinese government is said to be inconclusive about the virus’ origins, but not to ‘recommend additional research on the lab leak hypothesis’.⁵ Kuznetsova has no such scruples about propagating hypotheses; *Iznanka* tours most of them. Her novel opens in a forest, near a river; the virus is clinging to the fur of a bat, swooping through the night. This bat is captured by Chinese hunters and sold to a laboratory operated by foreign scientists, where the bat is injected with a preparation that profoundly alters the original virus. Before its symptoms develop, however, the bat is attacked and eaten by a cat admitted to the lab by a technician’s carelessness; the same cat later steals shellfish from a stall in a Chinese wet market, bites the stallholder, and thus physically transmits the virus to the surface of a human’s skin. From this point, the virus rapidly crosses the globe, like a chain letter: transmitted from the stallholder, to her son; from the son, to the girl he loves, who is flying to Germany to study; from the girl to another passenger on her flight; from that passenger, to his aged, solitary father, whom it kills; and so on. The virus takes no interest in its replications, or ‘doubles’, or in the ‘fragments’ it constantly sheds within the host’s cells; it is fascinated exclusively by its human hosts, in an almost erotic, yet inevitably one-sided obsession. It first realizes its role in causing its beloved hosts harm when the German pensioner dies of pneumonia; its access to his consciousness, and his memories, has taught it about the importance of family life to humans. Only when in the body of its next host, a young computer science student who works part-time pushing trolleys at the hospital, does it become aware (through overheard conversation) of the pandemic:

“Our prof told us today that in extreme circumstances, uni might actually close temporarily.”

“If any more of the students get sick, it really might close. For quarantine.”

⁴ All translations from *Iznanka* are from my own final, currently unpublished translation. The source text is Inga Kuznetsova, *Iznanka* (Moscow: AST, 2020).

⁵ Emily Rauhala, ‘WHO Wuhan report leaves question of coronavirus origins unresolved’, *Washington Post*, march 29 2021, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/who-wuhan-report-/2021/03/29/cb6ca64e-7778-11eb-9489-8f7daced51e75_story.html.

“And then we all get to go home...”

“Which is not an idea I’m crazy about...”

“I’d love to see my Mom...”

The virus does not have enough information to realise that it, and its replicants, have been instrumental in causing the pandemic. Instead, it empathizes with the apparently one-sided adoration (resembling its own feelings for its hosts) expressed by the stallholder’s son for the girl who travels to Germany. In an extraordinarily serendipitous episode, the virus’ current host has an altercation with the stallholder’s son (who has followed his beloved abroad), enabling the virus to re-infect him and continue to observe his search for the girl. As it travels from host to host, the virus struggles to resolve various philosophical and structural questions: the nature of time; the external appearance of humans; the meaning of love; and of course the mystery of non-existence, which the virus refers to as ‘the abyss’.

Textual difficulties

As mentioned above, I had recently translated Kuznetsova’s previous novel *Provezhutok*, still unpublished in English, as *Intervals*. I was therefore accustomed to her intense, playful, intellectually challenging style, which includes extended passages of direct-speech dialogue; myriad cultural references; pathetic fallacy; and multiple, alternating narrative perspectives. *Iznanka* was in many ways *easier* to translate than its predecessor, since the virus was a single narrator with no cultural references, whether obscure or popular, at its command. With this book, textual difficulties arose from the virus’ lack of conventional perceptual structures (or apparatus), a difference which Kuznetsova creatively and evocatively addressed in the original. The simplest examples of this relate to characters’ names: the virus refers to humans as *Gigy*, short for *Giganty* or ‘giants’; there was no obvious, effective way to abbreviate ‘giants’ in English. I thought briefly of ‘Bigs’, but this (at least to me) conjured up images of multiple Chris Noths (from *Sex in the City*). Eventually, I opted for ‘Giants’; I missed out on the affectionate informality of *Gigi*, but at least I retained the meaning. I was happier with the issue of naming the stallholder’s son. Since the virus’ knowledge of human languages was still imperfect at the time it infected this first host family, it made a basic mistake about his name. His mother called him ‘Malysh’, the Russian for ‘little one’; the virus thought his actual name was *Lysh* (the second syllable). As *Lysh* became a recurring character and indeed the virus’ favourite human host, I would clearly have to sort out his name. I fixed on ‘Myson’; I could imagine the Chinese lady calling her adult boy ‘my son’ affectionately in such a way that the virus would mistake this form of address for a given name. I decided not

to shorten this phrase to (for example) ‘Son’, as the latter is arguably a fairly standard name. I wanted the reader to encounter the same faint sense of oddity that a Russian reader would experience, decoding ‘Lysh’ as a distortion of ‘Malysh’.

Much more difficult to convey intelligibly was the virus’ sense of time. Like all its experiences and perceptions, this dimension was painstakingly defamiliarized by Kuznetsova. The past was usually referred to as ‘*sdvinutaia nazad realnost*’ (literally, moved-backwards reality); the future, as ‘*sdvinutaia vpered realnost*’ (moved-forwards reality). In my initial draft translation, I tidied these awkward formulations up. But Kuznetsova, with whom I was fortunate to have a regular, helpful, and above all efficient email exchange during and after the entire translation process, swiftly reminded me that the point of these phrases was to remind us of the virus’ necessarily alien sense of reality. I therefore arrived at a flexible solution. Instead of using exclusively positional language, as did Kuznetsova, or exclusively temporal, as I originally wished to do, I tried a mix of both, changing the formula in different situations. My standard translation for *moved-backwards-reality* was ‘there-behind’; *moved-forwards-reality* became ‘there-ahead’. Reality (*realnost*’), when used on its own, I often translated as ‘now’ – exchanging a temporal expression for an arguably spatial one. But sometimes I mixed my system up again, particularly if the context already suggested physical or spatial transition. For example, here is the virus (clinging to the surface of a human eye) observing its host ring a doorbell:

The Clear Host (*Otchetlyvyi khozain*) makes a sound come out of an inanimate object, which he did not bring with him. He has certainly never used one like it before. The sound is so lifeless, yet strangely and piercingly lovely, that, it might just be a signal that *now-before* [*sdvnutoi nazad realnosti*] is making way for a *new-now* [*novuiu*]. New times [literal translation of *novye vremena*] are coming. Our *now* [*realnost*’] is moving forwards. Where did this object come from? Where are we?

The Host makes the same simple movement several times, shaking us but not too fiercely, muttering something that sounds like “Mussht get m’self keez made.” Then he repeats the strange, lovely sound. Nothing happens where the Host is standing. The pause lingers glutinously, like the slime we inhabit.

Note how the virus perceives the movement of time as one of physical intervention and substitution (‘*now-before* is making way for a *new-now*’); it interprets an auditory perception (the doorbell) as a ‘signal’ for this sort of change in the nature of reality; and it makes an ambitious analogy between a temporal state, the pause after the second ring at the door, and a physical condition (‘the slime we inhabit’ – this was my modulation of Kuznetsova’s original

‘our slime’ (*nasha sliz*)). My agenda as the translator of *Iznanka* – I hesitate to call it an ‘aesthetic’ – was one of restrained domestication: I sought to preserve the intransigence of the original without risking unintelligibility.

The translator’s experience

As *Iznanka*’s first English translator, I was aware that the manuscript lacked a contract with any non-Russian publishers or any non-Russian reviews. As a result, I felt it was my responsibility to produce a text that was as challenging and absorbing as the original, yet not so challenging that the Anglophone reader (potentially less tolerant of intellectual games and cultural cross-references in their fiction than Kuznetsova’s Russian audience) would lose interest. I therefore felt a responsibility to market the book, as well as to translate it. I saw its extreme topicality (more on this below) as an advantage, a selling point; on the other hand, Kuznetsova’s insistence on defamiliarization and extreme coincidence were factors that might alienate some readers. My hesitation between literalism and domestication was perhaps well-expressed in my attitude to the title, *Iznanka*, which literally means ‘from the inside’. In Russian, the word ideally expresses the virus’ perspective, narrating from within the body. In English, there is no catchy equivalent preposition or adverb; ‘inside out’ seemed obvious and catchy, but not literal. After long hesitation, I recommended ‘From Inside’: it was a best worst solution (it carried, after all, unwelcome overtones of prison). In the end, and without consulting me again, the editor and agent settled on ‘Inside Out’; the title may well change again if the book finds a publisher.

Translating a novel about the novel coronavirus during the pandemic was, to say the least, a novel experience. At times, it felt suffocating: it was as if I was inhabiting the coronavirus experience on several levels, in daily life, in my work, and in my imagination. I was irresistibly reminded of Tolstoy’s dictum that ‘[t]he test of art is infection’, and that an artist or writer’s purpose is to ‘infect other people so that they share his feelings’.

If an author has moved you so that you feel as he felt, if you are so united to him in feeling that it seems to you that he has expressed just what you have long wished to express, the work that has so infected you is a work of art.⁶

As the kind of reader who prefers escapism to autofiction, I found the experience of translating *Iznanka* emotionally difficult: while trying to avoid infection in the real world, I

⁶ Leo Tolstoy, “What is Art?” (“Chto takoe iskusstvo”, 1897), translated by Aylmer Maude (1904), accessed at <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/64908/64908-h/64908-h.htm>>.

was being metaphorically ‘infected’ by a narrative about infection; and my job as translator was to do my best to make Kuznetsova’s novel ‘catch on’ contagiously. Even on a pragmatic level, my creative process was challenged: I like to work on translations in my local café, which was of course obliged to turf out its regulars due to the UK government’s restrictions on indoor hospitality services. With no access to libraries, cafes, or even my office, I really was working on *Iznanka* ‘from inside’, in an uncomfortably restricted and intimate domestic space. It’s worth noting that the writer was herself working under difficult conditions; the Russian publishing industry was as badly affected by sales and cash flow issues during the first year of the pandemic as in any other country, and government funding for translations and marketing – and Kuznetsova herself struggled to combine novel-writing with protecting her family and doing the editorial work that pays her bills.⁷

Reception

To date, Inga Kuznetsova’s novels remain little-known outside Russia. In Russia, however, *Iznanka* in particular has enjoyed enthusiastic reviews: in the trendy cultural journal *Snob*,⁸ in the prestigious *Literaturnaia gazeta* (whose reviewer daringly links Kuznetsova’s humble, imperceptible, yet good-natured virus to the august Russian novelistic tradition of the ‘little man’),⁹ and interviews between Kuznetsova herself and well-known critics in the newspapers *Sankt-Peterburgskii Dnevnik* and *MK*.¹⁰ Due to, naturally, coronavirus-related restrictions, the first formal in-person book launch for *Iznanka* occurred in March 2021, at Moscow’s prestigious Library of Foreign Literature.¹¹ If the London Book Fair happens in-person this year, Kuznetsova and her editor will attend and publicize both *Intervals* and *Iznanka*; they also hope to make a splash at the Frankfurt Book Fair this autumn. I feel a mingled sense of excitement and vulnerability about the prospect. I’d love to see *Iznanka* and its big sister spreading across the world in multiple translations, mirroring the progress of its topic in a

⁷ See my interview with Kuznetsova and her editor at AST, Igor Voevodin, here: <https://rustrans.exeter.ac.uk/2020/05/25/writing-and-publishing-in-russia-during-the-pandemic-the-coronavirus-crisis-blog-iii/>

⁸ ‘Iznanka, ili Pervyi v mire roman c geroem-koronavirusom’, *Snob*, 25 September 2020, <https://snob.ru/profile/16332/blog/170407/>.

⁹ Igor’ Bondar’-Tereshchenko, ‘S liubov’iu, virus’, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 17 October 2020, <https://lgz.ru/neformat/s-lyubovyu-virus/>.

¹⁰ For example, Vladislav Tolstov’s interview with Inga Kuznetsova in *Sankt-Peterburgskii Dnevnik*, ‘Avtor romana o koronavirusе Inga Kuznetsova: “Pandemiia ne izmenila moego chuvstva skorotechnosti zhizni”’, 9 November 2020, <https://spbdnevnik.ru/news/2020-11-09/avtor-romana-o-koronaviruse-inga-kuznetsova-pandemiya-ne-izmenila-moego-chuvstva-skorotechnosti-zhizni>.

¹¹ The launch can be watched here (in Russian): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k55SUpqKskg>.

much more benign way; but where criticism of my translation is concerned, I am far from immune.