

Summer 2002

Review Of "The Ratcatcher: A Lyrical Satire" By M. Tsvetaeva And Translated By A. Livingstone

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Recommended Citation

Sibelan E.S. Forrester. (2002). "Review Of "The Ratcatcher: A Lyrical Satire" By M. Tsvetaeva And Translated By A. Livingstone". *Slavic And East European Journal*. Volume 46, Issue 2. 383-385.
<http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-russian/14>

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American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages

Review

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Source: *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Summer, 2002), pp. 383-385

Published by: American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3086191>

Accessed: 06-04-2016 19:37 UTC

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citizenry: fascist sympathies, commercialism, materialism, gambling and speculation, technology, homosexuality, prostitution, the proliferation of opium and cocaine. Such images fuse in this work to create a sustained atmosphere of excess, vanity, degradation, and finally cultural decay.

Behind it all lurks a sense of imminent chaos. To this degree *In the Kingdom of Shadows* can be understood as a further extension of the eschatological mood typical in late Symbolism, where Russia's traditional fascination with "last days" and "final judgments" coincides with the millenary spirit that permeated turn-of-the-century Western society in general; his use of Africa here recalls his invocation of Asia in his novel *Petersburg*, as Spitzer observes (vii). More broadly speaking, this work exemplifies the Modernist perception of crisis, often associated in one way or another with white Europe's darker "others"—though here that darkness is made to stand, ironically, for the West itself. Attempting to clarify, too, his relationship to the political events of his day, Bely uses the cultural decadence he observes in Weimar Germany as a counter to the vibrancy that he tries—a little too hard—to claim for Soviet Russia, an argument developed particularly in the last essay of the collection, "Moscow and Berlin." Into his characteristic meditations on West and East, the material and the spiritual, he now injects a strain of post-Revolutionary political consciousness in many ways alien to his own worldview. Images of a shadowy otherworld commingle with references to the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, and the Communist International in an oddly fruitful tension.

Given the complexity (and sometimes the convolutedness) of Bely's thinking, Spitzer frames her translation rather too modestly, with a very brief preface, a partial set of notes, and a basic index; some additional contextualization would be welcome in elucidating the writer's cultural points of reference. Bely's style, too, presents a formidable challenge. Aiming for both accuracy and readability, this English translation succeeds more in the latter, though it misses some opportunities to reproduce the cadence of the original text. To this end, even the preservation of such superficial elements as word repetition, punctuation, typography, and foreignisms (the German words that in Bely's hands seem to drip with sarcasm) could have gone a long way. Although the English sometimes suffers from a degree of awkwardness (especially in the translation of verbs), Spitzer's choices usually find their mark and rarely interfere with understanding. As the first and so far only English translation of Bely's text, this edition may well help to pave the way for the consideration of *In the Kingdom of Shadows* alongside other Modernist works deriving energy from the opposition of "light" and "dark," conceived as categories both physical and metaphysical.

Gwen Walker, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Marina Tsvetaeva. *The Ratcatcher: A Lyrical Satire*. Translated, annotated and with an introduction by Angela Livingstone. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000. Notes. 123 pp., \$15.95 (paper).

Tsvetaeva's long poem "Krysolov" was first published chapter by chapter in the émigré journal *Volia Rossii* in 1925–26, and most readers ignored it or found it incomprehensible (D. S. Mirsky and Boris Pasternak being notable exceptions). Critic Yuly Aikhenvald famously dubbed it "extremely musical nonsense." Even for an era schooled in poetry, the poem's broad embodiment of possibilities of the genre of the *poëma*, its biting satire, its shifts of meter, style and lexical level, and its self-conscious play with narrative conventions were troubling—perhaps too "Futurist" for most in that milieu. English-language readers today bring a different but no less serious set of objections: even if my students are willing to believe that Tsvetaeva is a great and fascinating writer, many of them feel a rush of something like

nausea upon opening a book-length poem. A reader's probable unfamiliarity with the author and her context is a lesser barrier than the underlying cultural shift into impatience, at best, with extensive verse. Angela Livingstone's new translation of *The Ratcatcher*, first published in the UK in 1999 by Angel Books, is an impressive achievement: it makes available a crucial work in 20th-century Russian poetry, frames it with copious and responsible detail, and best of all conveys its value as a work of art and entertainment.

The scholarly apparatus is well-chosen and informative: a 19-page introduction economically outlines Tsvetaeva's place in 20th-century literature, cites possible sources for the piece in Czech and German, and offers a canto-by-canto summary to orient readers who may find themselves confused by the "nonsense." Livingstone's notes mention several of the most important recent works on *Krysolov* and on Tsvetaeva in general (in English, German and Russian); her introduction brings out their central ideas briskly and effectively. A three-page section called "The Translation" addresses issues of special interest to translators, listing particular problems, her priorities in addressing them, and a few of the places where her solutions fell far short of the original. One page, "The Text and Publication," gives the *poëma's* publication history from serialization through later émigré publication and Soviet censorship. The "Notes" that follow the translation itself explain biblical or literary allusions in the text and illuminate instances where the translator took the liberty of adding a new word or two or of interpreting an ambiguous passage to make better sense in English. Three pages of suggested "Further Reading" list translations, scholarly works and biographies of the poet. All this is extremely useful for the student, or for the reader who might pick up the book because of its title or striking cover image. A specialist in Russian poetry may also learn quite a bit from Livingstone's notes and the arguments implicit in her reading of the poem.

But what is most impressive is the translation itself. Besides her considerable scholarly production, Livingstone has already translated a selection of Tsvetaeva's essays (as *Art in the Light of Conscience*, Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1992; reviewed in *SEEJ* 37:1, 116–17) and knows her style well. Livingstone takes full advantage of her grasp of Tsvetaeva's authorial features and reveals a nuanced appreciation of the original poem's energy and intelligence, along with her own considerable poetic gifts and sense of fun. For contemporary readers in English, rhymed poetry only works if it's genuinely engaging, and Livingstone's version of Tsvetaeva is. She holds closely to Tsvetaeva's rollicking shifts of meter; her lines are meticulously scanned but never pedantically padded with added syllables. Poetic translation always demands concessions and distortions — this one, of course, has several places where the meaning stands naked without the needed music or narrative flow, but such places stand out in being occasional. "Difficult" lines in Livingstone's English version reproduce the challenges of Tsvetaeva's demanding original; increased enjambment lends a breathless energy and intensified comic effect, as in the introduction to the grand town and worthy inhabitants of Hamlin:

Hands — to squeeze sixpences out of pence,
 Feet — just in case of a debtor.
 But why have a soul? In what possible sense
 Would a soul be anything better

Than futile things like a clarinet,
 Or hammock, or basket of mignonette?

There isn't a single (write this down)
 Clarinet in Hamlin.
 There isn't a single soul to be found
 There — but what bodies, upstanding

Solid ones! A concrete post
 Is worth any amount of ghost.

(from Canto I [36])

The introduction and other notes include occasional factual errors (such as giving Mayakovsky's birth year as 1891 rather than 1893 [16]). Livingstone cites translations of "Krysolov" into German, Italian, and Swedish, as well as a previous translation of sections into English (31), but omits the fine version in Serbian by Draginja Ramadanski (*Пацоловац: Лирска Камура*, with a "Предговор" by Catherine Ciepiela, Kanjiža, 1998). More significant than these omissions, for North American readers, is Livingstone's reliance on markedly British slang to convey a most informal stylistic register. The intrusion of regional varieties of English is hard to avoid in any translation, given slang's markedness by time, place, and various sociological categories, but it does mean here that for non-British readers the otherwise very readable text acquires an occasional "accent," a foreignness additional to its intended Russian/Soviet and German tones. In a few other places, words that are not markedly British still need to be pronounced with the proper accent in order to rhyme as intended. This requires a small adjustment, in return for the many pleasures of a translation into living, breathing verse.

Angela Livingstone's version of Tsvetaeva's *Ratcatcher* is excellent for teaching and for independent exploration and should be in every university library. It is well worth reading for enjoyment as well: if you have not been impressed before by Russian poetry in translation, this one might surprise and delight you.

Sibelan Forrester, Swarthmore College

Andrey Platonov. *Happy Moscow*. Trans. Robert and Elizabeth Chandler, with Angela Livingstone, Nadya Bourova, and Eric Naiman. Intro. Eric Naiman. London: The Harvill Press, 2001. xxxviii + 154 pp., paper.

A number of the more controversial and unorthodox prose works written by Andrei Platonov during the early Stalinist years were not published in Russia until the advent of *glasnost* in the late 1980s and the subsequent collapse of communist rule in the early 1990s. Not long ago, several of these Platonov stories were translated into English for the first time by Robert and Elizabeth Chandler, along with a small group of collaborators, who included them in *The Portable Platonov* (Moscow: Glas, 1999). Now the Chandlers and their collaborators have translated an unfinished novella, *Schastlivaia Moskva*, that Platonov worked on between 1932 and 1936. As Eric Naiman notes in his excellent introduction to the volume, Platonov's mature works belong to a genre that might well be called the "ideological picaresque," in which his heroes function less as fictional characters than as philosophical "problems" that are explored and debated, if never entirely resolved (xi). *Happy Moscow* seems no exception to this rule of genre. The eponymous heroine, Moskva Ivanovna Chestnova, is a young orphan who, inspired by the Promethean myth that surrounds the great Soviet adventure (she has a recurring memory of a swarthy man running down the street with a burning torch in his hand on the autumn night when the October Revolution first begins), finds employment in a series of different positions as she strives to help bring about the radiant future promised by communism. After graduating from the Moscow School of Aeronautics, Chestnova is appointed a junior instructor for parachutists there (she gains brief fame in the press as the "Celestial Young Communist [*vozdushnaia komsomolka*]" who lands successfully with a burning parachute [18], works for a while in a regional enlistment office, where her job, she is told, is to "liquidate registration irregularities" (21), and finally volunteers to become a construction worker involved in the massive project of digging the Moscow subway. Chestnova then suffers a terrible work-site accident that crushes her right leg, which must be amputated and replaced with a wooden prosthetic. After recuperating at a sanatorium on the shores of the Black Sea, Chestnova returns to Moscow, where she moves in with the phlegmatic Komiagin, a military