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### Review Of "Earthly Signs: Moscow Diaries, 1917-1922" By M.Tsvetaeva And Translated By J. Gambrell

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## American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages

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Review

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## REVIEWS

Marina Tsvetaeva. *Earthly Signs: Moscow Diaries, 1917–1922*. Ed. and trans. Jamey Gambrell. New Haven; London: Yale UP, 2002. Illustrations. xxxviii + 249 pp., \$24.95 (cloth).

Marina Tsvetaeva is one of the most translated Russian poets. Parts of her substantial prose oeuvre have also been available in English for many years: J. Marin King's version of *A Captive Spirit* (Ardis, 1980) offers mostly autobiographical prose works, while Angela Livingstone's collection, *Art in the Light of Conscience* (Harvard, 1992), gives a selection of the poet's critical and theoretical essays. Jamey Gambrell's translations in *Earthly Signs* bring another distinct and significant body of Tsvetaeva's prose into English. The edition is of admirable quality, welcome both as an addition to Tsvetaeva in English and as a highly condensed experiential and literary depiction of life in Moscow during and after the Revolution. Gambrell is an experienced translator from Russian, with expertise in rendering stylistically challenging authors; here she shows a fine combination of linguistic subtlety with fidelity to the most awkward or difficult aspects of the original.

Gambrell's brief but informative introduction quickly overviews Tsvetaeva's biography, then devotes several pages to specific traits of these translations. The brief selection of photographs may make the texts more accessible to readers new to this author. Several of the pieces are drawn from what Tsvetaeva intended to publish in emigration as a collection entitled *Zemnye primety*; as she wrote, every potential publisher objected to some aspect of her depiction of a politically and morally complex milieu. All but one of the texts were written during the Russian Revolution and Civil War. Gambrell also includes Tsvetaeva's 1925 memoir of Valery Briusov, "A Hero of Labor," not included in the other major translations of prose, which provides extended scenes of her life in Moscow during the difficult Civil War period. The subtitle, *Moscow Diaries*, suggests the personal investment and spontaneity of the writing, but it may not convey the degree of polish in these pieces—"Moscow Journals," though more ambiguous in meaning, might better suggest the literary ambition and energy of these works. After all, it was in this period that Tsvetaeva began to define herself in utter seriousness as a poet. As life writing, the eleven selections richly depict various aspects of Tsvetaeva's experience in Revolutionary Moscow. Gambrell's notes help clarify such ticklish issues as whether Tsvetaeva's "Free Passage," written in 1918, should be read as anti-Semitic; a large part of their space is devoted to detailing how Tsvetaeva "edits" her recollections of written communication with Briusov, which the archives prove were much less curt and provocative than the versions she gives in "A Hero of Labor" (245–47). A one-page list of suggested readings at the book's end includes both translations into English and a handful of the best-known critical or biographical works on Tsvetaeva.

There is very little to object to in Gambrell's translation. She leaves out a few of Tsvetaeva's later footnotes, which were included in uncensored Russian editions of these pieces. Occasionally the state of the original is so lean that adding a word or two would clarify the meaning considerably. For example, an excerpt from her daughter's diary in "A Hero of Labor" reads, "Soon Marina got her 10 Soviets and we started getting ready to leave" (195); this could have been rendered as "10 Soviet rubles" or even "10 Soviet [rubles]" without doing violence to the

style, or, even if confusion seemed a valuable part of the reader's experience, the significance of "10 Soviets" should have been specified in a note. Gambrell uses "Russ" (223) rather than the standard "Rus'," which a curious reader could investigate further, without explaining her choice (which moreover looks confusingly like a name in English) or indicating with a note that her version differs from the standard spelling. Some of the notes address much less important details or issues than this one, creating an uneven level of coverage or detail. A treatment that balances preservation of stylistic interest with an adequate though perhaps minimal scholarly apparatus is particularly important with Tsvetaeva, one of the best-known twentieth-century Russian poets in the Anglophone world, particularly among other poets. Gambrell's work is likely to be read not only by students or specialists, but also by fans who know too little about early Soviet realia to fill in the occasional blanks the translator has left. In places it is hard to tell which audience Gambrell intends this book for: different sections suggest specialists in other areas of literature, students reading for a course, or writers and intellectuals, other than Slavists, who might pick it up out of interest in Russian literature or curiosity spurred by Tsvetaeva's other work.

However, even the decision to keep the translation very spare is a principled one: Tsvetaeva herself explicitly insisted that her reader contribute actively to the meaning of a piece, thinking through any gaps the rest of the way to satisfaction. Gambrell's decision to add relatively little to very "skeletal" parts of the pieces leaves today's reader in the same position as Tsvetaeva's original readers: the record of critical reviews shows how many of her readers in emigration preferred more processed or even pre-masticated writing, and Tsvetaeva's early prose would make them pause in puzzlement. The unfinished dimension should make this a wonderful book to read and discuss with students of Russian literature or culture, or to recommend to friends or colleagues who are not Slavists. Vivid though idiosyncratic pictures of Moscow and the provinces during the Civil War make the collection a potentially valuable addition to readings in a course on Russian history or on comparative revolutionary experience. *Earthly Signs* is available only in hardback, yet the fairly reasonable price should make it accessible not only to libraries, but to any seriously interested reader.

*Sibelan Forrester, Swarthmore College*

Andrey Kurkov. *Death and the Penguin*. Trans. George Bird. London: Harvill Press, 2001. 228 pp., £6.99 (paper).

With his 1996 short novel *Smert' postoronnego*, Andrey Kurkov brushes aside the dreary debates on the future of Russian letters, the role of Postmodernism, and the place of popular fiction, showing us what Russian literature really needs: more penguins. The publishers of this British edition of Kurkov's work are to be commended for jettisoning the rather generic original title and replacing it with something both more catchy and more descriptive, since death and penguins are exactly what this novel is about. *Death and the Penguin* is the story of Viktor, an unemployed writer who has adopted an emperor penguin named Misha from the financially strapped Kiev Zoo. Viktor eventually stumbles into a very lucrative, if not quite ethical, business: he is hired by a local newspaper to write long, meditative obituaries for important Ukrainian public figures who are still very much among the living. But one by one, the subjects of his "obelisks" (the slang term his newspaper uses for obituaries — "krestiki" in the original Russian) are killed by hit men and political rivals, leaving Viktor with the growing suspicion that his writings are somehow responsible.

Throughout the book, Misha the penguin watches his master with silent melancholy, a somewhat absurd counterpoint to Viktor's own impenetrable emotional detachment. There is