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

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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

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