Feminine resolve

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

Albertine Sarrazin

ASTRAGAL
Translated by Patsy Southgate
192pp. Serpent's Tail. Paperback, £8.99.
978 1 84668 941 3

Patti Smith paid ninety-nine cents for a copy of *Astragal* in the Eighth Street Bookshop in New York in 1968. It was all the money she had at the time, and should have been spent on food. As she read the first few pages, however, "one hunger trumped another and I bought the book", as she explains in her introduction to this new edition. Twenty-one years old and recently estranged from Robert Mapplethorpe, Smith was guided through her troubled youth by Albertine Sarrazin's "luminous eyes": "I truly wonder if I would have become as I am without her. Would I have carried myself with the same swagger, or faced adversity with such feminine resolve . . . ?" This resounding endorsement of Sarrazin's semi-autobiographical novel, originally published in France in 1965, is not unfounded.

We first meet Anne, a young woman, after she jumps from a thirty-foot prison wall on the outskirts of Paris in the dead of night. She is escaping ("the sky had lifted") from a seven-year sentence for armed robbery. An awkward landing fractures her ankle bone ("astragale") and she desperately drags her body across the mud, "one knee, one elbow, one knee, one elbow . . . the first step was a white-hot poker, the second jelly", towards a light in the distance. At this early stage in the novel, Anne's raw, honest voice tells us how her plan began that afternoon: "I was full of atropine and had injected some benzene into my thighs . . . . I fixed it to have myself sent to the hospital". From there she made her escape, and she subsequently hitches a ride from a motorcyclist, Julien, who also turns out to be a criminal on the run, with whom she falls in love. Julien takes her to his mother's house and carries her to "the bed of a big child" in a nursery where two little children are asleep: "we were three kids, and my foot was down there at the end of me like a huge stuffed doll".

Moved from place to place, hiding from the police and unable to walk ("a sorry package, me: crippled, dumb, badly dressed, and a drunk"), Anne works as a prostitute while Julien disappears for long stretches of time: "my new freedom imprisons me and paralyzes me". The quick-paced, disjointed first-person prose reflects Anne's world view: "I was bursting with images . . . I'd been locked up too young to have seen much of anything, and I'd read a lot, dreamed and lost the thread. For me, reality was distorted like everything else". (Occasional slip-ups by Patsy Southgate, the original translator, further muddle the writing.)

Sarrazin echoes her own difficult life in this book. She, too, had a dysfunctional upbringing, was a young prostitute on the streets of Paris, was arrested at the age of eighteen for armed robbery and married a man called Julien. She wrote her first two novels, *L'Astragale* and *La Cavale* (1965) in prison; her final novel, *La Traversière* (1966), was completed after her release, just before she died at the age of twenty-nine.

Anne's tenacious spirit is endearing, but she lacks remorse and her behaviour can be unnerving and repellent. She boasts, "I'm an adult! Criminally adult, mentally adult, completely adult . . . . I waited two years, like a big girl, so that they could hang five more on me". Her physicality is constantly in focus. We see her sweat dripping on grass when she sunbathes naked in the garden of one of her hideouts (a dilapidated former brothel) after drinking too much whisky from a bottle stolen from her hosts – whose mute, elderly relation she's meant to be taking care of. And, in a flashback, she slips her hand inside a fellow prisoner's pocket to feel, joyously, the "one-two of the joint . . . your bone walking".

Light-hearted moments save *Astragal* from crushing sadness. Anne says her injured leg is stuck in the position of a "motionless cancan"; she asks Julien for "a glass of water. With five times that amount of Ricard"; she imagines that prising her leg out of its plaster cast would be like taking a soufflé out of the oven (though Sarrazin gives no other indication of Anne's experience of domestic tasks). It is ultimately her vulnerability that stays with us. She is, after all, just a scared kid "jiggling about shyly on a grownup's chair".

Other allures

PETER CLARK

Yusuf Idris

TALES OF ENCOUNTER
Translated by Rasheed El-Enany
128pp. American University in Cairo Press.
Paperback, £9.99 (US $14.95).
978 977 416 562 7

Elias Khoury

WHITE MASKS
Translated by Maia Tabet
304pp. MacLehose. Paperback, £14.99.
978 0 85705 212 4

Samar Yazbek

CINNAMON
Translated by Emily Danby
124pp. Arabia Books. Paperback, £9.99.
978 1 906697 43 3

The American University in Cairo Press retains its unrivalled reputation as a promoter of Arabic literature in translation. It has published all the work of Naguib Mahfouz in English and has recently been producing translations of other work written a generation ago, of which Rasheed El-Enany's rendering of *Tales of Encounter* by Yusuf Idris (1927–91) is the latest. The "tales" are three novellas written between 1959 and 1980, and all are variations on encounters between men and women, East and West – the stuff of much Arabic fiction in the twentieth century. The stories are set in Vienna, New York and Egypt, and though all have narrative power, there is something outdated about them, an occidentalism in mirror image to Edward Said's orientalism. In each case the sexual allure of "the other" takes centre stage.

MacLehose Press has also published an earlier novel, by a distinguished Lebanese writer. Elias Khoury's *White Masks* first appeared in Arabic in 1981 in the shadow of the Lebanese civil war. Now translated by Maia Tabet, it is an ingenious detective novel about the disappearance and death of a middle-aged civilian in Beirut. The civil war is seen here like a plague – hardly anyone can escape the effects of the breakdown of law and order. People survive on their wits, practising deceits, with basic loyalties to family and community stretched to the limits. We see the murder from the perspective of the victim's friends, family, acquaintances and those involved in his disappearance. Each of the people on whom a chapter is concentrated knows a part of the full story. It is the reader who must construct the bigger picture.

The third book reviewed here is the most original. Samar Yazbek, a journalist and social worker from an Alawite family in Damascus, was an early public opponent of the Bashar al-Assad regime, and her book *A Woman in the Crossfire* was one of the first accounts of the Syrian civil war. She now lives in exile in France, and her novel *Cinnamon*, which was published in Arabic three years before the war and is now translated by Emily Danby, tells the story of a lesbian relationship between a middle-class woman and her servant. Each is confronting a crisis of identity and the narratives explores the disparities of wealth and opportunity between the two. Yazbek writes well of the different worlds – the desperate poverty of the servant, brought up surrounded by violence from family and contemporaries, and the unreal comfort of the Damascene bourgeoisie. There are few novels in Arabic exploring same-sex relationships, and this one is written with a keen sensitivity to the wider social context. As in older Syrian fiction, the bathhouse plays an important role. It is a place where women can operate outside a male-dominated world, and in this case it provides a sensual setting for the novel's sexual ambiguity.

Independence days

BRYAN CHEYETTE

Layle Silbert

YUDL AND OTHER STORIES
301pp. Seven Stories Press. Paperback, £11.99.
978 1 60980 440 4

Layle Silbert (1913–2003) was best known as a distinguished photographer of writers and artists. Away from the public gaze, she wrote over 100 short stories, many of which were published in four previous volumes. *Yudl and Other Stories* is a posthumous collection, set mainly in Chicago in the 1920s, and it follows two generations of an émigré Russian-Jewish family perhaps not unlike Silbert's own. Some of the characters first appeared in *The Free Thinkers* (2000) but, unlike the earlier volume, the main focus here is on the figure of Ellen, the American daughter of Ryah and Yudl.

Yudl begins with a surprise birthday party for Ellen as a toddler, who is overwhelmed by the sudden appearance of her parents' Russian-Jewish friends in her home and is inconsolable: "it is as if the child's own angel of death is passing, carrying the deep bitter knowledge of what it is to live". Much of the collection concerns Ellen's "salty" coming of age during her teenage years. She is surrounded by ideological sparring; even when her family and friends visit the countryside their cottages are divided into those of Labour Zionists, Bundists or "trade union needle workers . . . everybody was in some movement". Ellen's adolescent response to such strange divisions is to be innocently quizzical, displaying a writerly detachment. At one point, she actually decides to become a writer, but is forced instead to work in a friend's bakery. Elsewhere she enters a competition for short fiction but, realizing her lack of experience, travels to the other side of Chicago to discover how the wealthy live. Her curiosity brings her close to rather insidious men or hysterical women as she gradually understands what it is to be "independent". This ideal comes from her somewhat overbearing mother, which is perhaps why Ellen is so keen to get away.

Ryah describes herself as a "socialist woman", a phrase she believes indicates her emancipation from the "old ways", and that also gives her confidence to buy property and start a business. Whereas Ryah looks to the American future, her husband is shaped by his Russian past. Silbert devotes a novella-length story to Yudl's time as an advertising salesman for the Yiddish language *Jewish Courier*. His is a world where speaking "English felt like being with strangers" and where being a "socialist" meant refusing to own a property. The tale captures Yudl's resentment that their unbuilt new home is making him temporarily homeless. His frustration with the "world of women" gradually deepens until he finally explodes, renouncing his Labour Zionism for a non-Palestinian Jewish "territory" as if this would prevent his wife turning him into a homeowner. At the end of the story, Ryah leaves Yudl after he attacks her physically – a shocking act mirrored in its impact on the reader by Ellen's subsequent unconstrained pleasure at being left alone with her father. But by the time Yudl's daughter is sixteen and at college, she is ashamed of her once beloved father: "she felt perpetual embarrassment because of his accent and his throaty voice more suitable to speaking Yiddish or Russian than English".

Silbert has a cold photographer's eye for the unsentimental minutiae of immigrant life. These exquisite stories will undoubtedly reinforce her already distinguished reputation.