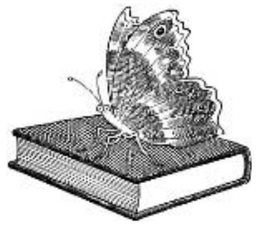

Russian Literature

Serapionovy brat'ya
1921
Al'manakh
446pp. St Petersburg: Limbus Press.
978 5 8370 0616 6

"Manuscripts don't burn", Woland says in *The Master and Margarita* – and here is more proof. *1921: Al'manakh* (1921: Almanac), a debut collection of prose, poetry and drama by the Serapion brothers, has been published in Russia – more than ninety years after it should have been. The twelve-strong group included Mikhail Zoshchenko as its most famous member and was named after E. T. A. Hoffmann's circle of friends and short-story cycle (*Die Serapionsbrüder*, 1819–21), which, perhaps, influenced the brothers' mix of the extraordinary and the mundane.

The brothers did not issue a manifesto and were not united by any specific ideological or artistic platform. According to the poet Elizaveta Polonskaya, the only woman in the "brotherhood" (whose average age in 1921 was twenty-four), "our first commandment was to speak and write the truth". At the time, this primarily meant the truth about the Russian Revolution and Civil War. Graphic depictions of institutionalized or revolutionary violence and betrayed or misguided loyalties dominate *1921: Al'manakh*, which is filled with memorable images of sexually frustrated misfits driving the agenda on both sides of the Red/White divide. Running counter to what would become the iconic representation of the Commissar as hero and martyr, the brothers' detached stand compelled Maxim Gorky, the group's patron and the almanac's compiler, to call the book "counter-revolutionary", intending this as a compliment.

The book was discovered in 2009 by Ben Hellman, a Slavist from the University of Helsinki, in the archive of the Finnish Russian-language publishing house Biblion (1920–22), which had paid the contributors their royalties but not printed the book. Soviet censors would have been unlikely to pass it in any case. Most of the authors, notably Konstantin Fedin and Nikolai Nikitin, eventually conformed to Party demands and became model Soviet writers, reworking their contributions or consigning them to the drawer. As a result, many of the entries appear here either for the first time or in their restored original form.

First-time publications include "The Revolt" by Lev Lunts, which features a Commissar praying to God to save his son; Vladimir Pozner's "A Ballad about a Communist", which describes a Party member executed for his refusal to shoot peasant rebels; and Mikhail Slonimsky's "People in Rags", in which a clandestine anti-Bolshevik unit engages in acts of sabotage and is mistakenly destroyed by the Whites. These are characters defined by their ambiguity – an almost unthinkable phenomenon in Soviet literature of the 1920s to 1950s (unless a clear moral judgement for mass edification was provided). To explain the brothers' outstanding talent, Gorky's preface, which is also published here for the first time, quotes the saying, "The darker the night, the brighter the stars". Although the brothers were robbed of what would have been a groundbreaking debut in 1921, the light of the dead stars has reached us at last – and has not aged much on its journey.

ANDREI ROGATCHEVSKI

"Hilly Landscape" by Charles Reiffel, *c.*1919; from *Charles Reiffel: An American post-impressionist* (176pp. San Diego Museum of Art. $40; distributed in the UK by University of Washington Press. £27.99. 978 0 937108 50 5)

Biography

Peter Ames Carlin
BRUCE
494pp. Simon and Schuster. Paperback, £9.99.
978 1 47111 234 8

On Saturday, June 15, Bruce Springsteen will perform at a sold-out Wembley Stadium. He is likely to play for three hours and take requests that fans have drawn on signs, for songs from any point in his forty-year career. He might jump onto amplifiers or slide across the stage on his knees and he has been assured that the sound system will not be unplugged, as it was in Hyde Park last summer, when his second encore, a cover of "Twist and Shout", overran the curfew. Springsteen is sixty-three and, in the words of his biographer Peter Ames Carlin, "a spell-binding, crowd-destroying lion".

Carlin, who has written biographies of Paul McCartney and Brian Wilson, might have earned Springsteen's favour through his work ethic. *Bruce* meticulously tracks the musician's journey from "street rat poet" (an early band featured a man changing the spark plugs on a motorcycle and four silent Monopoly players on stage) to what the writer Eric Alterman called "the President of an imaginary America". Highlights include the make-or-break writing of "Born To Run", a song "glossy, yet serious as death", Springsteen's meeting of minds with his manager-to-be Jon Landau, and the singer's sadness at being co-opted as an all-American symbol by Ronald Reagan, who, one feels, cannot have listened to *Born in the USA* very closely.

That radio-friendly album made Springsteen an international star. Against stereotype, he has always been clean and largely sober, perhaps his "internal visions, machinations, and riddles" are more than enough. We are not spared his darker moments here: the ego, the struggles with depression, or the frequent treatment of The E Street Band as disposable. The saxophonist Clarence Clemons once spent sixteen hours reiterating a solo, tormented by Springsteen's "bat-eared attention to sonic detail". Clemons's solution: "smoke a lot of pot and try to stay calm".

Bruce is a lengthy book. It can be interpreted as a study of extreme talent, a paean to hard work or a thesis on friendships deepening with age; Carlin keeps his opinions to himself, leaving us free to make up our own minds. His biography ultimately succeeds by the same guideline that its subject, in one thoughtful moment, set out for himself: "to be of good service and be entertaining".

JOSH RAYMOND

Fiction

Thomas Keneally
THE DAUGHTERS OF MARS
520pp. Sceptre. Paperback, £8.99.
978 0 340 95188 0

The Daughters of Mars, which follows two Australian sisters in their service as nurses through the course of the First World War, has plenty of acute observation, strongly realized detail and a courageous geographical sweep. Indeed, there is a sense in which the novel is all sweep and swoosh – with its long roster of characters, painstaking recreations of several different theatres of war, and a constant awareness of the shadows of history.

The Daughters of Mars delivers a narrative which, though not obviously coherent in structure, forms a series of loosely linked plots. The sisters at the centre of things are not particularly characters, nor especially well differentiated from one another; Thomas Keneally gives them a guilty secret to share early on and this becomes a dully recurring motif, brought in when-ever the book starts to run low on psychological fuel.

The many other nurses, doctors and soldiers who busy themselves in the course of the narrative are all more or less functionaries, working away on their sub-plots. Among these, a number of men seem to be of interest mainly as future husbands for the heroines, whose prospects in this regard may (or may not) be cruelly laid waste by the overarching fate that is the war. Deaths happen, mutilations too, and Keneally's dual-heroine structure enables him to provide both happy and sad endings to this lengthy soap opera.

Highlights are historically rooted: the vividly imagined sinking of a hospital ship, and its crew's attempts at survival, as well as the horrors of field hospitals in Gallipoli and on the Western Front. But none of this, colourfully painted as it is, sees *The Daughters of Mars* fully engage with the history its stories draw on. The First World War, for these purposes, is just not tricky enough, and Thomas Keneally's industrious imagining of pain and waste plays not to an argument, but to a consensus.

PETER MCDONALD

Religion

Marcus Plested
ORTHODOX READINGS OF AQUINAS
276pp. Oxford University Press. £55
(US $99).
978 0 19 965065 1

This very fine book should appeal to Aquinas scholars, to historians of the Orthodox–Catholic schism, and contemporary students of the East–West divide in Europe. At the end of Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blow Up*, a photojournalist who thinks he has inadvertently photographed a murder in a park returns to the scene to find a mime group playing a vigorous game of tennis with no ball. When this no-ball lands at his feet, seduced by the mime, he lays down his camera, picks up the ball and returns it to the game. A parable, perhaps, of Orthodox mystical prayer (the mime group) versus medieval Catholic scholastic debate (the photographer), which tradition asserts splits Eastern and Western Christianity until now.

Starting with 1354 – when Ottoman forces gained a first foothold across the Bosphorus, Demetrius Kydones finished translating Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles* into Greek, and Gregory Palamas's views on mystical prayer had become Eastern orthodoxy – *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas* looks backward and forward. Backward to see Aquinas's receptiveness to the Greek Fathers, and Palamas's receptiveness to the Latin Augustine. Forward to see more people welcome Aquinas in the East than in the West during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but a waning from the sixteenth century to the present day. The tradition asserts an unbridgeable chasm between East and West, but the record shows much persistent good will and appreciation towards Aquinas. Marcus Plested merits our gratitude for his book.

The Orthodox tolerated Aquinas's Aristotelian logic; but what about his Aristotelian physics, mediated to him through Islam, which forced him to rethink Neoplatonic mysticism? Plested, like many modern Thomistic interpreters, thinks we can play this down, but Aquinas is adamant: humans cannot know in the way that angels do, and can know only what matter and physical touch mediates. Perhaps Aquinas has first to help both East and West come to terms with another photographer: modern scientific secularism?

TIMOTHY MCDERMOTT

Translation Studies

Javier Jiménez, editor
HIJOS DE BABEL
Reflexiones sobre el oficio de traductor en el siglo XXI
171pp. Madrid: Fórcola. Paperback, €17.50.
978 84 1517 473 8

The editor of this collection of essays on translation holds practitioners in high esteem. Javier Jiménez writes in his prologue that translators are charged with nothing less than reassembling the post-Babel world. Indeed, he says, they are resistors of cultural hegemony: as the powerful instruments of business and marketing push a small handful of languages towards global dominance, translation helps to maintain at least some plurality.

Not all of Jiménez's contributors are as ambitious in their claims. Translation is variously likened here to producing new renditions of well-known music, to making mosaics, to plastic surgery, and to watch-making. If there is a consensus between the metaphors, it is that translation has the status of a highly refined craft. Those who earn their main living from translation are well served up to this point, but not further: where translation is considered an art form, as it occasionally is in this collection, the work is judged to be its own reward and low rates of pay are justified.

The best pieces in *Hijos de Babel* are by contributors who focus on a particular subject to expose truths about translation in general. Lucía Sesma's essay on the schizophrenic writer Louis Wolfson, who suffers from a painful aversion to his native English and so has developed an idiosyncratic French lexicon of his own for his books, is particularly insightful. Pablo Sanguinetti writes illuminatingly about "blind spots" in the brain and how translation is inherent in the act of reading. On the famous idea of the "untranslatable", Martín López-Vega points out that we expect writers not to give up when encountering a linguistic obstacle, but to transform or expand language so that it can accommodate their ideas. There is no reason translators should not do the same. To the charge that all translation is impossible, Mercedes Cebrián answers simply that fiction aspiring to realism involves just as much licence, as many tricks and "pacts with the reader". If we agree to read translations as a purposeful, complex artifice, we will become more interested in how they are made.

OLLIE BROCK

Literary Criticism

Kathlyn Conway
BEYOND WORDS
Illness and the limits of expression
184pp. University of New Mexico Press.
Paperback, $27.95; distributed in the UK by Eurospan. £25.50.
978 0 8263 5324 5

To this eloquent study, Kathlyn Conway brings abundant qualifications. A survivor of three bouts of cancer, each requiring arduous treatment (and about which she has written a memoir), Conway is also a practising psychotherapist and an acute reader of medical memoirs. *Beyond Words: Illness and the limits of expression* treats a number of memoirs as essentially one book, not out of laziness but out of a sharp sense of the common challenges faced by anyone who tries to write honestly about their illness. Accordingly, the book anatomizes such major hurdles as character, plot, language, narrative form, and endings. To Conway's other talents one should add that she is a fine literary critic.

Conway begins by writing about (and against) what Thomas Couser has called "the culturally validated narrative of triumph over adversity", which often plots a memoirist's illness in a U-shaped, smiling curve that assures us that, in the words of another expert in the field, Arthur Frank, "Yesterday I was healthy, today I'm sick, but tomorrow I'll be healthy again". Against this oversimplified and often misleading arc, Conway argues that sufferers from grave illness "long to hear from someone who speaks from within personal experience . . . . We long to hear from someone who admits that even enormous love from others does not erase the essential loneliness of illness. We want to hear not clichés but an acknowledgement that illness is not simply an opportunity for personal growth but a soul-searching encounter with loss, limitation, and the reality of death".

The range of memoirs discussed here includes works by Christina Middlebrook, Charles Mee, Leonard Kriegel, Robert McCrum, Jean-Dominique Bauby, Susanna Kaysen, Nancy Mairs, and others. Irreparable changes in the body, intractable pain, the dissolution of personality or the ability to put an experience into words – such are the challenges faced with honesty and courage, if not always with fluency or smoothness of style, by the writers Conway admires. Not always pleasant reading, their memoirs do not provide facile uplift, but struggle instead to tell the truth.

Kathlyn Conway makes a particularly interesting point about the temptation faced by almost all medical memoirists, herself included, to mitigate, sugar-coat, or otherwise falsify, if not the whole distressing story, then a painful concluding sentence. "Sometimes writers, realizing they have fallen into a triumphant ending, add an afterword or epilogue to set the record straight. They inform the reader that . . . the sentiments with which they ended their book do not reflect the difficult suffering and continual challenge they face in their life. They explain their life was actually much messier than their ending suggests".

RACHEL HADAS

June Sturrock
JANE AUSTEN'S FAMILIES
160pp. Anthem Press. £60.
978 0 85728 296 5

Walter Scott famously recognized Jane Austen's talent for communicating "the current of ordinary life" and for rendering "commonplace things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and the sentiment". Domestic scenes are June Strurrock's focus in *Jane Austen's Families*. The book analyses Austen's central characters' interaction with their own families, other family groups and the wider community; and how this influences their moral and emotional development. As Emma Woodhouse explains, "It is very unfair to judge of any body's conduct, without an intimate knowledge of their situation. Nobody, who has not been in the interior of a family, can say what the difficulties of any individual of that family may be".

Early on, Sturrock stresses that her book is not a biographical study of historical families (such as the Austens and the Austen-Leighs). Yet, particularly in the first chapters, her commentary often treats Austen's fictional characters as if they are real, calling *Mansfield Park*'s Maria Bertram "poor Maria" and so on. When Sturrock does refer to facts and wider historical discourses, her analysis is less repetitive and more engaging. She deftly links Austen's writing process with the development of characters, and her discussion of the "cold unmeaning intercourse of gallantry" from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* serves as a contemporary touchstone for Austen's use of idiolects (in *Emma*, "verbal style indicates [the] moral style" of characters).

In the acknowledgements, Sturrock writes that a few of her chapters were previously published in various journals – and these are the most effective and succinct parts of the book. Chapters on "dysfunctional families" and "spoilt children" occasionally feel too obvious or heavily indebted to past scholarly criticism; but once Sturrock's own ideas surface, the book gains momentum, contributing sensitive arguments, for example, on speech negotiation in communities and on what "family" means – on the distorted idea of family in *Mansfield Park* and *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, as "those who promote or share one's economic interests" and consequently fail in being an emotionally supportive unit. At moments like these, Sturrock's pseudo-sociological study almost has a "naturalist's eye" worthy of Austen herself.

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL