

that Russia is trapped in an irredeemable vicious cycle of imperialism and authoritarianism? Certainly Aydynyan suggests so when she speaks of the “historic recurrence of autocracy tied together with imperialistic expansionism” (164). The book raises but does not conclude an inquiry into the shifting historical conditions that have produced and re-produced imperial dynamics in Eurasia—in the 1820s, the 1920s, and now, again, in the 2020s—or the historically contingent ways that Russian culture has engaged them. Hopefully, Aydynyan’s timely book is but an early foray into a much bigger line of inquiry.

Boris Poplavsky. *Homeward from Heaven.*

Trans. Bryan Karetnyk. Russian Library Series. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. xxi, 269 pp. Notes. Illustrations. \$16.25, paper.

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The novel, *Domi s nebes*, describes the romantic adventures of its protagonist Oleg, a young, confused Russian émigré idler living on the French Riviera and in Paris in the years 1932–34. The novel is largely autobiographical. As Bryan Karetnyk, the novel’s translator, tells us in the introduction,

Whether by design or by immutable nature, Poplavsky’s life in exile was characterized by paradox and scandal. He was a poet and a pugilist, a dandy and a drifter, an ascetic and a debauchee, a weightlifter and a morphinist. . . . He was a Russian writer . . . who provocatively declared the absence of art to be more beautiful than art itself. And he was a thinker who was at home discoursing on . . . spiritualism. . . and the centuries-old history of boxing, which, with typical perversity, he dubbed the most metaphysical of sports (viii).

A shifting series of phantasms, illusions, dreams, and realistic descriptions created by a tormented mind, this phantasmagoria of a narrative, in places, does not present translation problems, but in many other places, the text’s explosive, non-sequitur fragments test the translator’s linguistic and cross-cultural competences to the limit, combining as they do eclecticism, moderate intertextuality, authorial neologisms, fanciful metaphors, and “workmanlike” descriptive directness in describing scenes of sexual activity. These latter parts of the text make the presentation of similarly explicit situations by Poplavsky’s contemporaries D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce seem relatively tame.

In a nutshell, the novel portrays a group of dissolute Russian expatriates frittering away their lives in France through the prism of the protagonist Oleg’s torturous inner search for his personal identity, erotically oscillating between two voluptuous females—Tania and Katia. He fails. The story ends by stating that Oleg’s journey back home from his sensual heaven proves to be a failure, nor does he want to go back to heaven—he is to be perennially stuck in between. Luckily for the readership—thanks to the translator Karetnyk’s prodigious achievement—they do not end up in limbo between original and translation, the latter, seemingly, making more sense than the original.

Karetnyk’s translation is the first and only one available up to date. From my perspective, the main translation challenge was to effectively render the distinctive features

of speech and mental processes of the main characters, more specifically, to cope adequately with Russian slang, profanity, outdated vocabulary, the abundance of bizarre metaphors, the occasional authorial neologism, and obscure allusions. The overall strategy to deal with these difficulties has been to tone down some rough turns of phrase, where, for example, “Nigde ne nasrano, ne Rossia” becomes “No vandalism. Not like Russia” (145); “pozhrat” is “to have a bite to eat” (145); “blyad” is “a bitch” (68)—where “a whore” would seem more contextually appropriate, and so forth. Unusual descriptions are mostly translated literally (“Tchernosvitoff. . . this Hispano-Russo-Franco-Slovak schismatic-anthroposophical loner,” 83) or left intact (ἄπειρος, 98). What may seem as the occasional slight mistranslation is, arguably, the translator’s conscious choice based on a wider context (“. . . on ne zaonanirovalsia . . .” translated as “. . . he had survived . . . without masturbation,” 159).

To give a foretaste of the translator’s verbal-syntactic calisthenics involving expert choice of words and combining and fragmenting sentences and clauses, here is a “transcreated” passage from the very beginning of Ch. 7:

O what an unholy pleasure it is to quarrel, to tear up the precious past and, giddy with malevolence, to utter irrevocable words. . . . Oleg remembered how Thérèse would tell him that people are like stones, stones that slowly and clumsily become entangled in a gold web spun by the heavenly insect of friendship, so that one day the thousand-threaded fabric becomes so strong that everyone together can be lifted up, as in a fisherman’s net, and dredged from the riverbed of impermanence. But at the slightest provocation, she said, the stones will suddenly begin to jerk about convulsively, casting off their splendid attire because it hampers their morbid, wild freedom not to exist—and yet, as soon as that flash of wickedness subsides, the golden insect of memory will carry on (149).

On the whole, the translator makes the text more reader-friendly by smoothing over its rougher edges and offering more digestible renderings of conspicuously unconventional turns of phrase.

The Notes section of the book provides an exhaustive explication of cultural and historical allusions in the text. Combined with Karetnik’s excellent translation, this makes the narrative—no less challenging than the original—more accessible, instructive, and enjoyable both for general and academic audiences.

Susan Alexandra Crate. *Once Upon the Permafrost: Knowing Culture and Climate Change in Siberia.*

Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2021. xxviii, 327 pp. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Glossary. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. Maps. \$29.95, paper.

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What can be done when the increasingly unpredictable climatic degradation continues to affect people around the world, distorting their ways of engaging with and thinking about