

Gogol in Rome

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KATIA KAPOVICH



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For Philip Nikolayev

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In the Bathhouse

And when at last I used to leave the house
after the lazy Sunday rest,
the sun was high. It saw a town in drowse;
a golden rush of leaves lay to the west.
All northern Russian towns are quite alike:
a river, a long street along the river,
a square with a statue of a leader
stretching his right arm forward like a guide.
The crowd headed where his finger pointed:
to a bathhouse on the river's bank.
I walked along with the others, a poor student,
a ghost of those blind alleys, nil, a blank.
In the light and shade of my sixteenth October
I carried but a parcel in my hand.
The smell of soap, of public bathhouse timber
is what I call the smell of the motherland.
And I remember skinny women's shoulders,
curved spines and—with a gasp of awe—
their loose and bulky bellies in the folds
of many motherhoods.

The old stone floor
was warm and smooth under their bare feet,
sunlight fell on it through the upper windows,
rays intermixed with steam and water lit
the hair of the bathing women.
Their faces up, eyes closed, they stood
under the showers, like in an ancient chapel,
and listened to the choirs of migrant birds.
With their necks craned and with their nipples
relaxed under the water, with their palms
caressing chests and falling to their hips,
with bluish veins crisscrossing their slim ankles,

they looked like water nymphs.
Time, hold them still, save them like flies in amber!
I look out of the window across the cobblestone plaza.
I see the autumn river which like a saw
cuts through the log of the horizon.
The eye finds only what was there before:
the sky, the water, many rivers ago.

Gogol in Rome

Annoyed with the parochialism of the “fantastic city”
of St. Petersburg and close
to the unexpected end of his life,
Gogol escaped to Rome.
He settled in a colony of Russian artists,
sharing lodgings with his bosom friend,
the painter Alexander Ge.
On their long walks they discovered
“the inner meaning of everything.”
Gogol, a perpetual titular councilor,
was almost happy there: he could forget
the petty insults of the civil service
and a failed career at the University. He was secretly
working on Book Two of his magnum opus,
Dead Souls, stealing bits of furniture and parts
of the domestic atmosphere
from paintings of his late-Romantic friends
into the mansions and orchards
of his grotesque characters. His own
descent into madness occurred in strongly marked stages.
He saw that everything was alive in Mother Nature—
trees, stones, sand on the beach, seashells—
and everything called for his empathy.
He stopped eating, stopped drinking wine
(that blood of grapes), turned almost into a Jainist.
His friends were appalled; his mother freaked
whenever she received another of his
strange and ambiguous letters,
full of advice for the improvement of the Fatherland.
His doctors prescribed enemas, hazardous treatment
which seeps potassium out of the body,
causing a deterioration at the heart. He destroyed
his novel, throwing four hundred pages

into the fireplace, and would now spend his days
mostly in bed, covered with three woolen blankets.
“It’s cold in Italy, it’s dark!” he complained to his servant.
The doctors bled him with leeches until he was dead.

The Birth of Anarchy

For Glyn Maxwell

I wish we could drink that oily Arabic coffee
on the open veranda till the end of autumn.
I wish the police declared a curfew
and the waitresses sang their anarchist anthem.

I wish the wind broke into a newsstand
and dragged newspapers to the nearest abyss,
and the lights went out, and all bankrupt street vendors
left their goods at the feet of paupers.

And the wind tore into the booth, and the snow
of print settled slowly, gradually melting,
and the lights died down and glowed low—
and who could wish such a thing but an owl or a cretin?

And paupers got drunk, and policemen threw fits,
stuttering in forked tongues like apostles,
and the day was a night, and acacias' tips
were coins on fake marble tables.

Modus Operandi

The curtains drawn, all rectangles are blue.
Four morning pigeons wheel in the school glue.
I hate the treacherous light of December.
Cold. I eat pumpkin soup out of the blender.

The central heating grumbles: “You, get out.”
Right. I put on my coat and off I go
where the salted red herring of the pavement
waits for the imminent snow.

Trot, trot along, you, unbuttoned biped,
across a skeleton of rusty tracks, with others
clutching in hand their steamy paper cups—
their secular candles.

March—ein, zwei, drei—under a crescent sun,
like numbers to infinity, ahead
through all the painted hallways of the town,
through all the scheduled winters of the world,

through all the bleaching mornings of the year
to where the distant clock chimes in the square—
whether to add up or to disappear
in the empire of digits, paying your fare.

A Dance without Music

Oleg from Building 4
strips off his clothes
during the morning walk
and dashes among us
with huge kangaroo leaps,
chased by two male nurses.
Say no more. Smoke.

His bluish boxers brave the nippy air.
And, finally, when almost caught,
he grabs my shoulders and holds me like a shield
between himself and them. Together we
stomp our feet on the bald hospital lawn,
while other patients and their relatives, etc.
stare in awe, yet with indifference.
A contradiction? Say no more.
It is a contradiction, if that matters,
unthinkable to Sunday morning visitors,
compatible with the inmates of Building 4.

Moscow—Berlin

When they lifted our train car into the air
at the Polish border at Brest
so as to resettle it upon a new set of wheels,
(Russia's rail track width is different from Europe's),
I experienced a moment of levitation
and knew I had left my fatherland.

We crawled through the dark winter
outskirts of Eastern Europe.

Passengers in our car, mostly
new generation black marketeers,
were sharing with each other
stories about the vicissitudes
of their previous trips to Germany.
Some gave me advice on methods of smuggling
stuff through Soviet customs
when and if I decided to return.

It was assumed that I would do
“smart things” with my money.
Russian banks in 1989
still sold six Deutschmarks to a ruble,
the then official exchange rate,
reminding us travelers
of the abiding absurdity of our homeland.

“Get a VCR, you can push it
right at the railway station in Moscow!”
whispered a well-groomed woman
with three golden crowns
in her front teeth. “Black jeans
also sell great, but smear them with chalk
so they don't look new.”