

## REVIEWS

Liberman is an extremely prolific scholar of both Germanic and Slavic languages and cultures. He is also a translator with a remarkable record of translations from and into both Russian and English, including the poetry of Tiutchev, Lermontov and Shakespeare. As a result, Liberman is sure to convince his readers of the greatness of Baratynsky's poetic gift.

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Vesyoly, A. [Kochkurov, N. I.] *Russia Washed in Blood: A Novel in Fragments* (trans. by K. Windle). London, UK: Anthem Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1-78527-484-8. 385 + xvi pp.

Artyom Vesyoly is the *nom-de-plume* of Nikolai Ivanovich Kochkurov (1899-1938). In his 1931 'Avtobiografiia' he pithily summarised his occupations as 'factory – tramp – newspaper seller – cabman – clerk – agitator – Red Guard – newspaper – party work – Red Army soldier – student – sailor – writer' (p. xi, n1). However, as Bolshevik control of literature became more complete, Vesyoly increasingly became *persona non grata* to the establishment. This culminated in a denunciation by Shpunt in 1937 as a counter-revolutionary writer (using the evidence of *Russia Washed in Blood*). Nikolai Yezhov, then head of the NKVD, arranged for his arrest in October of that year, which resulted in Vesyoly's execution in April 1938 (p. xiv).

Owing to the title and half-title, I was a little apprehensive when volunteering to review this novel. However, any apprehensions were misplaced. *Russia Washed in Blood* certainly requires focus and stamina, but the rewards are many: a vivid evocation of the Russian Civil War of 1918-1921, employing wonderfully rich language,

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punctuated by passages characterised by a mordant sense of humour. Because of the alchemy between Vesoly's manuscript and Kevin Windle's translation, I am not surprised that this book was nominated and shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Translation Prize (<https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/awards/nsw-premiers-translation-prize>).

Whilst the half-title (*A Novel in Fragments*) alerts the reader to the salient structural characteristics of this novel, he or she is not fully prepared for what ensues. As the introduction states (p. xii):

[the novel] lacks a unifying plot, and a definite beginning, middle and end. Most parts of the book can be read independently of the others as a series of extended episodes rather than a connected narrative. Nor is unity provided by the characters, though some appear in more than one chapter ... its focus is less on individuals than on the crowd, and the voices we hear, often of unidentified speakers, are mostly those of ordinary people with little education.

The translation includes the seven completed chapters of some twenty-four planned by Vesoly, followed by twelve études which were originally designed as 'musical interludes', to be placed as separators after every third chapter. A novel of almost 400 pages, structured in this way, certainly makes many demands of the reader – specifically in the areas of concentration and endurance. But the atmosphere the author creates and his use of language in the novel spur one on to the next chapter or étude.

The milieu created by Vesoly in *Russia Washed in Blood* must rank as one of the best evocations of the confusion and ambivalence of war that I have read. The novel is a litany of instances of the evils attendant on a Civil War where the pressure of warfare makes for volatile relations with comrades and, additionally, for alliances

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between a number of parties (peasants, Bolsheviks, kulaks, Cossacks, anarchists, Cadets, to name a few) that appear changeable, often daily. Add to this the inevitable concomitants of rapine, looting and drunkenness, as well as the description of wounds – mortal and otherwise – and the reader finds him- or herself immersed in a realistic fog of war.

If this were all, one might be forgiven for bridling at the prospect of reading this novel. Mercifully, it is not – the leavening is supplied by Vesoly (ably assisted by his translator) in the form of the richly evocative language that cushions the description of events, acting as a counterpoint to the harsh reality it describes. The first aspect of this leavening can be seen in the inspired, sometimes lyrical, use of simile and metaphor, examples being:

‘Again and again the town went back to work, like a not-very-bright but willing little horse harnessed to a heavy cart.’ (p. 300)

‘The housewife gave off an aroma of pancakes, her youthful face as red as the sun dipped in butter.’ (p. 351)

In addition to the lyricism evidenced by Vesoly’s use of metaphor, his humour often relies on a wicked turn of phrase, covering all aspects of life:

‘The smell of spirit hung like a cloud over the village. Nowhere did they actually drink any, they only tasted it, but they tasted it so thoroughly that they couldn’t remember where they’d spent the night.’ (p. 330)

‘The district lay buried beneath snow and decrees.’ (p. 313)

‘Shpulkin appeared out of nowhere, like a cholera bacillus, and took Pavel by the sleeve ...’ (p. 302)

In view of his trenchant wit applied unsparingly to all actors in the novel, it is small wonder that Vesoly, like Babel, was yet another tragic casualty of the purges of the late 1930s.

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The translation reads consistently well, with virtually no infelicities. Only two renderings evoked questions: the use of ‘threesome’ rather than ‘troika’ when describing horses harnessed together (p. 68), and the use of ‘daub-and-wattle’ rather than the more colloquial ‘wattle-and-daub’ when describing the construction of dwellings (p. 69). The use of various typographical mechanisms (for example, Courier for a headline on p. 57) was entirely consistent with the content, jolting the reader out of any comfort zone he or she might have inhabited. All things considered, the translation effort is masterful, being consistent and sustained over around 400 pages. It is supplemented by an informative introduction by the translator and Kochkurov’s granddaughter (and Vesoly scholar), Elena Govor.

In summary, *Russia Washed in Blood* requires a considerable investment of time, concentration and emotional energy. However, the reader is amply repaid by a dividend of rich language and an evocative treatment of the Civil War of 1918-1921 in microcosm.

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James Rann, *The Unlikely Futurist: Pushkin and the Invention of Originality in Russian Modernism*. Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020. ISBN 978-0-299-32810-8. xi + 343 pp.

*The Unlikely Futurist* is an important contribution to the study of Russian Futurism, which goes much beyond the analysis of the works of individual writers to situate the movement both within the Russian literary and artistic culture of the early twentieth century and to contextualise it theoretically within European modernism as a whole.