

*Petersburg*. By ANDREI BELY (Trans. J. ELSWORTH). Pp. 569. London: Pushkin Press. 2009. £14.99. ISBN: 978-1-901285-96-3

Andrei Bely's novel, *Petersburg*, never fully appreciated in its own time and country, has attracted considerable attention in the West especially after it was proclaimed by Vladimir Nabokov as one of the four finest novels of the twentieth century, alongside James Joyce's *Ulysses*. An excellent annotated translation of the second substantially revised and a shortened 1922 Russian version has served scholars and students admirably (Maguire and Malmstad, 1978).

John Elsworth provides us with the 1916 novel to be read slowly, to be savoured, read aloud in places, letting the lips, tongue, ear and eye combine for a mind expanding literary experience. The translation begins as did the original propelling us onto the prospects of Petersburg, where we follow the senator and his son, the assassination conspiracy and conspirators, all cloaked in a prose that is dense in sound and sense, a complex construct of sign and symbol. Elsworth's scholarship (*Andrey Bely: 1972; Andrey Bely: A Critical Study of the Novels: 1983*) and a career devoted to Bely are in the background as he foregoes extensive notes and commentary. Instead he recreates the mellifluousness and cacophony of Bely's own highly demanding language where 'sodden autumn winged its way over Petersburg' (p. 60). Often he takes liberties with literalness to duplicate for the English reader an effect similar to that of the original on the Russian reader. Thus the largely meaningless 'baron-borona (harrow)' pun is rendered as 'Grocer, grow, sir' (p. 18). What distinguishes this translation is the sustained effort to employ assonance and alliteration, as did Bely himself, often letting sound dictate sense. Over and over the precise word appears at the right time, granting the English speaking reader access to the full range of Bely's poetic prose that in T. S. Eliot's image was the 'wrestle of words with meaning'. The text is by no means simple and readers will need a good dictionary and encyclopedia (or in the twenty-first century an array of electronic resources) for Bely's reference and allusions to Russian literature and culture and the esoteric writings at the beginning of the twentieth century. Elsworth has, however, made some choices to make his text flow, so that the 'ominous Everest of events had towered over him and toppled' (p. 419) replaces the 'Gaurisankars' of the original. Translators invariably know better than critics or readers the sacrifices they make to preserve and protect the original while still making it accessible in the new language. Elsworth's *Petersburg* is an extraordinary accomplishment, a text in English that masters Bely's substance and style. Time, the ever present concern in the novel, will reveal if this translation succeeds where others have failed, in appealing first and foremost to readers.

Elsworth has breathed new life into this complex text, as he did with his exceptional translation of Bely's *The Silver Dove* (2000). Bely's so-called 'Moscow novels', *Moscow Eccentric*, *Moscow under Siege*, and *Masks*, have all to date defied English translation. One hopes they too might soon be challenged by Elsworth. Bely has finally found a translator-scholar-writer in English equal to his prose.

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