

One of Russia's leading authors is finally brought to an anglophone audience

Sentimental education

BORIS DRALYUK

Mikhail Shishkin

MAIDENHAIR

Translated by Marian Schwartz
506pp. Open Letter. Paperback, £12.99
(US \$17.95).
978 1 934824 36 8

THE LIGHT AND THE DARK

Translated by Andrew Bromfield
364pp. Quercus. £16.99.
978 1 78087 105 9

Since his literary debut in 1993 with the short story “Urok kalligrafii” (“Calligraphy Lesson”), Mikhail Shishkin’s star has risen so dramatically that, as one Russian critic recently put it, “in contemporary Russian prose there is Mikhail Shishkin, two or three more authors – and everyone else”. This is surely hyperbolic, but it does reflect Shishkin’s increasingly imposing stature, underlined by his status as the only novelist to have received all three of Russia’s most important literary honours: the Russian Booker Prize, the Big Book Award, and the National Best-Seller Prize. And yet, if one were to ask an anglophone reader to list the “two or three” leading Russian authors born after 1950, one would expect to hear the names of Viktor Pelevin, Vladimir Sorokin, Tatyana Tolstaya or, more likely, Boris Akunin well before that of Shishkin. Until very recently, he was virtually unknown in the English-speaking world. None of his four novels, each of which produced progressively bigger splashes in Russia, had been translated. This omission was nothing short of glaring, but it has now been partly rectified.

Marian Schwartz’s brilliant translation of Shishkin’s *Venerin volos*, a novel that won the Big Book and Best-Seller prizes, appeared late last year as *Maidenhair*. It is now joined by Andrew Bromfield’s equally impressive rendition of Shishkin’s latest novel, *Pis’movnik* (Letter-Book), which earned the author another Big Book prize in 2010, and has been renamed *The Light and the Dark* by its English publisher. This grand entrance affords the reader a rare opportunity to take stock of Shishkin as an evolving artist – to note the diversity of his achievement as well as the signature of his style and the persistence of certain thematic preoccupations. But before we delve into the books – or perhaps as a means of delving into them – it is worth considering an important element of Shishkin’s biography. After all, despite the postmodern polyvocality that seems to characterize his work, Shishkin is a distinctly autobiographical author; as he once stated in an interview, “All male heroes are a unified ‘I’, and all female heroes are my perception of a woman”.

Among the things that set Shishkin apart from many of his contemporaries is the fact



Mikhail Shishkin, 2012

that he has spent most of the past eighteen years abroad. This places him in the illustrious tradition of Russian émigré authors and has invited the resentment, if not ire, of several critics back in Russia. The fact that he makes his home in Switzerland has also invited inevitable comparisons to Vladimir Nabokov, from which Shishkin has not shied away. He often points to Nabokov, along with other formally innovative modernists such as Joyce, as an early inspiration. “After all, I love Nabokov and, after all, I was once saved by his books that were banned in our home country during my adolescent years”, he wrote in the essay “Nabokov’s Armchair”.

At first glance, *Maidenhair* seems to bring these modernist influences to the fore. The novel weaves together a number of genres – the memoir, the epistle, the bureaucratic Q&A and standard third-person narration – which coalesce around the figure of “the interpreter”, a man charged by the Swiss immigration service with translating the interviews of asylum seekers. This is a job Shishkin himself held for several years, and his riffs on this most incongruous of situations – in which life stories unfurl, and questions of life and death are weighed in a drab governmental office – are nothing short of dazzling.

So you say you’re searching for a haven for your weary, wounded soul, which is exhausted from the humiliations and trials, from boors and poverty, from scoundrels and fools, and that everywhere you go you’re threatened by the impending danger of becoming evil’s toy and victim, as if an inescapable curse lay on

your line, and on everyone else, too, and how your grandmothers and grandfathers suffered, and how the current generation is suffering, too, and how the unborn are going to suffer to the seventh generation, and possibly even beyond . . .

begins one “Question”, which continues for seventeen pages and is larded with references to Pushkin and Gogol, Apollo and Niobe, the Sadducees, the Battle of Waterloo and Captain Nemo’s *Nautilus*. The asylum seeker’s “Answer” is a shattering sputter: “Yes. I think so. I don’t know. Maybe I got something mixed up. You have to forgive me, I’m upset”.

Shishkin’s prodigious erudition, lapidary phrasing and penchant for generic play are conspicuous components of his art in both *Maidenhair* and the earlier novels, such as *Vzyatie Izmaila* (The Taking of Izmail, 1999). These characteristics do indeed ally him with Nabokov, as does his faith in the power of the written word: “The story is the hand, and you’re the mitt. Stories change you, like mitts. You have to understand that stories are living beings”. And yet, unlike Nabokov, Joyce and many of their postmodern acolytes, Shishkin is unabashedly and unironically sentimental. This bold tendency is evident throughout the interpreter’s tale and his letters to his son, Nebuchadnezzasaurus – but it emerges most clearly in the interpolated diary of a Russian singer named Isabella, whose biography the interpreter plans to write:

It’s always been this way. Someone’s head is being cut off, while two people in the crowd on

the square in front of the scaffold are knowing first love. Someone is admiring the picturesque sunset, while someone else is looking at the same sunset from behind bars. It will always be thus! It should be thus! No matter how many tens or millions have their head cut off, at that very moment someone should know first love. This sentimentalist strain, reinforced by a fair dose of didacticism, owes much to Shishkin’s admiration of Tolstoy. In a recent interview, the author claimed to have traded in his earlier infatuation with authors such as Nabokov and Sasha Sokolov for Ivan Bunin, Chekhov and Tolstoy; the latter taught him “not to be afraid of being naive”. It may be precisely this naivety that has appealed so strongly to readers usually put off by postmodern texts. Reviewers and commentators often note that they are swept up by *Maidenhair* not because of, but despite, its complex structure and arcane allusions.

The Light and the Dark – the English title of which places the Tolstoyan influence in sharp relief – represents another step further in the direction of sentimentalism. Here the author abandons most of the postmodern contrivances of his earlier efforts, adopting the form of the epistolary novel. A young man named Volodenka writes letters to his lover, Sashenka, from China, where he is serving in a regiment suppressing what appears to be the Boxer Rebellion, and she responds with news from home. His letters waver between hope and despair, register the mundane cruelty and senseless horror of war, and are full of meditations on the nature of time and the universe: “After all, what is the cosmos? In Greek it means order, beauty, harmony. Death is the defense of universal beauty and harmony against us, against our chaos. But we resist”. Her replies are rich in the poignant details of domestic life:

You often remembered how one day, when you felt you just couldn’t go on, you closed your eyes and suddenly felt very happy. That was probably the way happiness had to be, momentary, like the prick of a needle: the child is whining, the oilcloth smells of urine, there’s no money, the weather’s abominable, the milk has boiled over, now you have to scrub the cooker, they’re broadcasting an earthquake on the radio, there’s a war somewhere, and all of this together is happiness.

The words “broadcasting” and “radio” indicate a postmodern twist to the exchange: the two lovers are writing from different epochs, and it soon becomes clear that Volodenka has not survived his deployment, and yet their letters continue. Of course, the theme of love frustrated in this world but potentially fulfilled in the hereafter is, like the epistolary novel itself, a sentimentalist mainstay. Shishkin’s postmodern “letter book” bares the genre’s devices, but not to an ironic end.

Mikhail Shishkin is as earnest as he is skilful. The form of his next novel is sure to surprise us, but we can predict where its heart will be.