



BOOK REVIEW

Sara Wheeler (2019). *Mud and Stars. Travels in Russia with Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Other Geniuses of the Golden Age.* New York: Pantheon Books.

Rachel Polonsky (2010). *Molotov's Magic Lantern. Journey in Russian History.* London: Faber and Faber.

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Published within nine years from each other by British authors with a philological background, these books have quite a lot in common, primarily, the deep love for Russia – “a country which is lovable despite it all” (Wheeler, p. 16). Both of these books can be described as superb examples of post-modernist travelogue aiming to embrace the whole complexity of the traveler’s physical, intellectual and emotional experience (as Sara Wheeler puts it, the focus of her book is “a Russian literal landscape, and its emotional counterpart” [Wheeler, p. 16]). Thus, the journey or, to be precise, multiple journeys across Russia encompass not only the movements from point A to point B but also the author’s reading list, her attempts to learn Russian or to cook Russian dishes. In S. Wheeler’s book, the latter adds a new sensory dimension to the author’s quest as she is trying to recreate Russian dishes back home in the UK with the help of a recipe book compiled by an exiled Russian princess and adopted for America (“a sentence in uppercase in the preface to *The Best of Russian Cooking* expresses an acute source of anguish concerning the produce available in Massachusetts: ‘NOT ENOUGH DIFFERENT KINDS OF MUSHROOMS!’” (Wheeler, p. 47).

Both *Mud and Stars* and *Molotov's Magic Lantern* can be considered as an "intellectual" version of a footsteps travel narrative¹ as their geography is organized around famed literary figures: the "big-beast Russian writers of the nineteenth century" in the case of *Mud and Stars* or, as is the case with *Molotov's Magic Lantern*, in addition to poets and writers, around a diverse array of political and social leaders, spies, explorers, party functionaries, scientists and literary scholars. Thus, S. Wheeler's and R. Polonsky's travels turn into a pilgrimage of sorts to places associated with the names of these famous men and women. Interestingly, the figures and places can coincide in both accounts or in some cases the footsteps destination for the same writer can be different: e.g. both authors pay tribute to Dostoevsky by travelling to Staraya Russa while for Chekhov, R. Polonsky goes to Taganrog and S. Wheeler takes the Trans-Siberian to travel to Sakhalin. The travel across space thus turns into a travel across texts and time as multiple allusions, references and associations are invoked along the way.

The latter circumstance adds complexity to the country's imagined landscape as modern, twenty-first century Russia gets mixed with nineteenth-century or Soviet Russia. In both cases, the travelogue presents a sophisticated narrative, brimming with facts, anecdotes, digressions, personal reminiscences and ruminations. Contrary to popular preconceptions, as S. Wheeler explains, she is not aiming to search for the mysterious Russian soul, which is a concept that fails to capture the diversity and grandiosity of this country: "There is no such thing as the Russian soul, or perhaps even Russian culture – it's too big a country: one-sixth of the earth's landmass, and it's too diverse and too socially divided" (Wheeler, p. 16). This description agrees with that of R. Polonsky, who adds to the cultural and scenic diversity a temporal dimension: in her book, different Russian regions are "inhabiting" their own time as the south is associated with Scythia, Siberia, with prehistorical times, and so forth.

This complexity and multidimensionality in terms of content and structure, however, do not make these travel books particularly reader-friendly (R. Polonsky's book is especially demanding on the reader). They do not provide "light" reading as the authors are not too eager to "play by the rules" of the genre. Their insistence on juggling strangely sounding Russian names of people and places may be seen as "pretentiousness", leaving the reader confused or frustrated or both. Some of the reviewers on Goodreads web-site describe S. Wheeler's book as "neither fish nor fowl", and R. Polonsky's, as "disjointed, distracting encyclopedia of Russian history". It may seem that these books should appeal simultaneously to two groups of readers: those interested in travelling and those who like Russian literature and history. However, it is precisely this quality of combining the two domains that may be off-putting to the reader and that leads to these books coming across as an incoherent collection of facts or, as one of the reviewers complained on Goodreads, the failure of the book "to come together".

¹ In a footsteps narrative, the traveler seeks to retrace the same route as his or her predecessor or another famous figure, that is, to follow in his or her footsteps.

While for an English-speaking reader *Molotov's Magic Lantern* and *Mud and Stars* may be quite a challenge primarily due to the lack of background knowledge, which can be insufficient to trace this winding path across the Russian spatio-temporal landscape, for a Russian reader they may present a challenge of a different kind. Since most of the figures mentioned are a part of the secondary school program in literature or history in Russia, it is mostly the way these figures are approached that may be a problem. To the best of our knowledge, neither of these travel books have been translated into Russian. Therefore, we can only speculate about the extent and tone of the public controversy that would have surrounded their publication in contemporary Russia. For example, in the case of S. Wheeler's book, it is quite likely to be seen by some as an encroachment on the Russian holy of holies – the golden canon of Russian literature – as she brings to light the details of the famous writers' private lives that are considered to be inappropriate to discuss openly in the public domain. For example, the "Sun of Russian Poetry" Alexander Pushkin is dealt with rather unceremoniously in the first chapter of *Mud and Stars*, which begins with the following characteristic: "Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin was a lugubrious, bawdy, impetuous, whoring gambler who seldom missed an opportunity to pick a fight" (Wheeler, p. 18). In general, however, the book offers a refreshing perspective on these iconic figures, making them slightly less awe-inspiring but at the same time much more human.

Meanwhile, R. Polonsky's text may present another kind of problem: it is not the figures of the past as such that may raise objections, but mainly the period she is interested in – Stalin's Purge of the Thirties – as her narrative mingles together the victims and executioners. In doing so, Polonsky raises some tough questions – Russia's "damned questions" – about inequality, violence and power, pointing out the connection between the monstrous regimes of the past and the present of Putin's Russia. The same question, though approached from a slightly different angle, is put by Wheeler as she describes the love-hate relationship between the Russian writers and their home land and shows how the legacy of state violence persists in contemporary Russia in "its miasma of rumor, intrigue and killing" (Wheeler, p. 45).

Strangely enough, there are few ordinary Russians in the vast panorama of the country's life portrayed in Polonsky's book: the narrator appears to be disinclined to "go to the people", like the *Narodniki* did, and prefers to marvel at the twists and turns of the fates of those long dead (in some cases, e.g. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, they are not exactly dead but can hardly be described as "ordinary Russians" either). R. Polonsky's Russians, unless they are prominent and/or dead, are for the most part bleak, static and unfriendly, not much more than a backdrop for the drama of Russian history. In contrast, S. Wheeler gives much more consideration to Russia's everyday life: her characters inhabiting *khrushchevkas*, "that are as Russian as cucumber", and striving to get by are infused with a peculiar charm of their own and portrayed with warmth and humour.

Both of these books make an enjoyable reading, tempting one to visit (or revisit) the books and places so lovingly described. It should be noted, however, that the pleasure of reading these books is proportional to the reader's willingness to approach them with an open mind and on their own terms rather than following her own preconceptions.