

‘Beyond his Country’s Articulation’: A Review of Artem Mozgovoy’s *Spring in Siberia*

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Reviewed: *Spring in Siberia*, Artem Mozgovoy, Red Hen Press

To propose a *queer* Russian literary tradition is to negotiate a web of historical absences. ‘Belonging’ — here an especially precarious condition — to the digressive lineage of queer Russian émigré-authors which includes Georgy Ivanov, Anatoly Steiger, and Valery Pereleshin, Artem Mozgovoy arrives with the elliptically enchanting *Spring in Siberia*. Published by Red Hen Press, and spanning the dissolution of the Soviet Union to the rise of Putin, we follow Alexey, a ‘quiet pond’ of a boy (236), on a voyage of political and personal discovery: from the dusty treasures of the school library to fellow outcast Andrey, who awakens Alexey to radical politics and equally radical desires.

In prose that blooms with alchemic care, Mozgovoy charts the intricate remains of a collapsing Union. Grounded eggshells, crushed for calcium, dissolve into ‘saccharine powders’ (60). The cheap rhymes of ‘Yuppie’ commercials occlude the ‘familiar’ melodies of nights in the *banya* (45). But translated jingles and imported sugar fail to mask the poisonous diet of Russian propaganda to which Mozgovoy, writing in English, levels his elegant ‘revenge’ (*Geistesblueten*). Situated in a moment of heightened political urgency, Mozgovoy launches a punctual critique of the Russian ‘machine’ through the intimate queer textures of the ordinary.

If ‘coming-of-age’ first re-summons the feeble monstrosity of adolescence, the strange sticky knowledge of hormones and glands, Mozgovoy surprises with a narrative of queer becoming ostensibly ‘clean’ in style and content. While circling the well-trodden beats of gay puberty — the heated confusion of its very arrival, meekdom, diva worship, crushing on dead poets, and still loving our mothers — *Spring in Siberia* pivots from the body to the equally sticky domain of language as the primary vector through which our selfhoods are made and unmade. Surrounded at once by a history of the state’s fabrication and a love with no monument or discernible archive, Alexey is excluded from the identificatory power of language itself. Words

of the blandest neutrality — gay, homosexual, LGBT — are twisted ‘overnight’ into debasing slurs (189). As Russia’s literary leviathans — Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tolstoy — dimly illuminate the haptic and political ‘taigas’ which enshroud the queer Alexey, *Spring in Siberia* hinges upon the dynamic ambivalence of language, its capacity to injure and repair.

From the thorniness of the words to Siberia’s queer spectres, historical energies one can sense but not see, an uncanny chill imbues Alexey’s narrative. An ‘alien’ work of disarming recognition (16), Mozgovoy channels a queer cosmopolitan sensibility only to deconstruct its problematic claim to ‘universal’ experience. Though one might struggle to find a queer whose ‘blackest moments’ (69) were not the ingenious cruelties of physical education, or whose teenage years were not faintly illuminated by Madonna’s artificial halo (59), these tropes are de-familiarised in the frosts and ferments of the crumbling Union. Exophonic writing, and its implication of prosaic unease, proves suggestive for the story of a boy who lived beyond his country’s articulation.

Richly sensorial and politically textured, *Spring in Siberia* leaves a vivid impression. That memories of the harsh Siberian landscape — jumping on frozen pavement to avoid hypothermia — surface with nostalgic longing only attests to Mozgovoy’s lush prose, most effective in its surgical exactitude. These imagistic threads are pulled to a jagged end in the novel’s halting conclusion, symptomatic of the uneven temporality which beguiles and tests its reader. One feels tempted to over-analyse Mozgovoy’s brusque conclusion as merely emblematic of Alexey’s queer boyhood, less an untidy denouement than a self-conscious dislocation to articulate the syncopated rhythms of growing askew. The gap that is the novel’s conclusion would seem to portend the precarious futures awaiting Alexey and his author.

However, *Spring in Siberia* quaintly spans the first 90,000 words of Mozgovoy’s voluminous manuscript, cut to reflect the ‘standard’ size of the contemporary novel as determined by the ‘standard’ size of the contemporary shipping container (*Geistesblueten*). While presenting a bleak portrait of the literary seascape, the demand for slender narratives, for novels to pack light on the oceanic voyage, strikes one as apposite for a novel imbued with the costs of leaving. Despite its austerity in politics and landscape, light speckles this Siberian taiga: the garden, the library, the maternal caress.

On the floristry floor of his mother’s work, Alexey assembles leftover flowers in ‘short and broken’ bouquets (65). No image articulates the deeper subject of Mozgovoy’s novel — the

exquisite precarity of language, that brittle promise to repair and represent — as evocatively as these alien compositions. Caught in the void of the half-bloomed novel, one turns to Pushkin for (inter)textual closure: ‘The flower, very dry and scentless, / I see in the forgotten book; / [...] By whom was it cut? / [...] maybe they both faded / Like this strange flower in this book?’

A strange flower of a book — of a strange flower of a boy — *Spring in Siberia* bears witness to the lives we arrange with language, the frictional impulse to preserve and persevere. One is as jolted by the fact of the novel's existence as by Mozgovoy's radiant re-arrangement of language, for ‘where and in which spring was it [possibly] grown?’ (Pushkin 5).

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Works Cited

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