

The Flight

By GAITO GAZDANOV. Translated by Bryan Karetnyk. pp. 224. London: Pushkin Press, 2016. £12.00. Paperback. ISBN: 9781782271628.

Following the collapse of Communism, Gaito Gazdanov's works, which were never published during the Soviet period, were finally made available in Russia. The novels were celebrated by critics as psychological masterpieces. However, so far only two of his novels have been translated into English. Recently, Pushkin Press published his second novel, *The Flight*, written before his most famous works, *The Spectre of Alexander Wolf* and *Buddha's Return*. In many respects, the recurring themes of Gazdanov's oeuvre are featured in *The Flight*. Motifs that meditate on life, death and memory are characteristic of Gazdanov's modernist novels.

It is no coincidence that the novel is entitled *The Flight*. Gazdanov depicts a panorama of dislocated Russian émigrés in interwar Paris and their romantic relationships, often finding themselves 'in blurry surreal situations' (p.17). Thereby, the title does not only refer to the circumstances in which most of the characters fled from Bolshevik Russia, but also to their relationships and the reality of their lives. The tale is arranged around Sergey Sergeyevich, a wealthy and reasonable man. He is the only character who does not fall for romance and who handles his affair with his wife's sister Liza in a business-like manner. Although Sergey Sergeyevich lived through the war and flight, he remains an intangible character. In contrast to rational Sergey, his wife Olga regularly falls madly in love with various lovers and disappears with them for periods of time. Finally, they have a son, Seryozha, for whom Liza is one of the few constants in his life.

Whereas Sergeyevich represent the centre, most of the surrounding characters symbolize the periphery of interwar Paris: Lola, an aging actress; Slevtov, a hopeless and permanently broke romantic; and sentimental writers – all driven by the illusion of love and youth. However, the characters' fates are drawn together as they are almost all dependent

on both Sergeyevich's money and approval. Furthermore, as the title indicates, the novel is a tale of transition, featuring the patterns of a coming-of-age story. The tale is mostly set during Seryozha's final summer before entering adulthood, during which he loses his innocence by having an affair with his aunt Liza, the mistress of his father. In autumn, when the characters leave their summer residences, a fatal catastrophe ensues.

Interestingly, Seryozha is the only truly young person in the novel, although almost all the characters are obsessed with the idea of youth, the motif and illusion of which are a constant throughout the novel. The characters' lives are based around their memories and imaginations. Furthermore, the boundaries between reality and imagination are blurred. For instance, the aging actress Lola ponders over her life while writing her memories, and for the first time makes sense of her existence. This can also be read as a literary examination of the concepts of reality and imagination.

Regarding the role of time in the narrative, it is striking that the period covered remains vague. Although the novel begins with Seryozha's first childhood memories, the story mainly focuses on a period of time during Seryozha's later youth. Thereby, it seems that the novel handles time fluidly—as if in a fairy tale, time stands still. This coincides with the fairy tale-like amount of money Sergeyevich possesses.

As a final remark, there are minor weaknesses in the narration. The novel fails to achieve the literary lofty heights of his later works. For instance, in some passages the story floats by, lost in its dramatic plot twists. Hence, the novel sometimes lacks the psychological introspection of *Evening with Claire*.

Overall, *The Flight* tells the tale of imagined lives. The greatest merit of the novel is the intimate observation of the characters, not least thanks to Bryan Karenyk who skilfully translates Gazdanov's translucent style into English. Moreover, the novel plays with romantic motifs and the genre itself by blending romantic tragedy with satire. Gazdanov is an

observant narrator, all too human, but between the lines there is always his well-known Russian melancholic irony: 'Life is over. Goodnight' (p. 86).

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