

“overcome” by the postmodern occasion and by Spanos’s Heideggerian criticism, will *The Errant Art of “Moby Dick”* inaugurate a fifth one?

Robert Pinget

Be Brave

Trans. from the French by Barbara Wright

New York: Red Dust, 1994. Pp. 32. \$6.95

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Théo or The New Era

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Reviewed by John Fletcher

Barbara Wright is our foremost literary translator from the French, and in these short texts she deploys her awe-inspiring skills to impressive effect. The only possible mistake (if it is even that) located in the works under review is in the following lines in *Be Brave*: “There was a boat for the islands. / Only passengers without a ticket embarked” (5). The French reads: “*Il y avait un bateau pour les îles. / N’embarquait que passagers sans ticket.*”

What makes one think at first that Wright has misread the French is that *embarquer* here is the transitive form of the verb, whereas in the English version “embarked” appears to be intransitive. (If the French verb were intransitive, it would of course have to be plural.) Wright is well aware of this, but—quite properly, no doubt for reasons of euphony—translates a French transitive verb with an English intransitive verb, which enables her to place the latter at the end of the sentence, which avoids the rather clumsy “Embarked only passengers without a ticket.” (Another way of doing it would be to put “Only passengers without a ticket taken on board.”) Thus the most that can be said is that Wright is guilty of a possible ambiguity (over whether “embarked” is transitive or intransitive), not of an actual mistake.

Such quibbles aside, there are some marvelous felicities in these translations, such as the following in *Théo*: “*Paroles que le rêve fait resurgir toutes frémissantes.*” “Words that surge up, quivering, from the dream” (6). “*Tout ce qui concerne le bonheur enfui. / Enfoui. Exhumable.*” “Everything that concerns lost happiness. / Inhumed. Exhumable” (6). The latter is particularly impressive, since it compensates for the inevitable loss of the pun *enfui/enfoui* with an English play on words (inhume/exhume).

The only serious doubt in my mind is whether this magnificent translator’s efforts would not be better directed towards producing English versions of texts

that are likely to find a wider audience than these exquisite but, frankly, rather slight compositions. *Be Brave (Du nerf)* resurrects Monsieur Songe from earlier work and has him divert himself with mildly amusing (the blurb exaggerates in qualifying them as “hilarious”) versions of his own death, while *Théo or The New Era (Théo ou le temps neuf)* is about an old man who in answering the questions of his precocious great-nephew Théo discovers what is described as “renewal.”

Red Dust are to be congratulated for persisting with the labor of love entailed in making Pinget’s ever-lengthening list of publications available to the English speaker, but one cannot help wondering how many potential readers of Pinget’s works really are out there, especially since even in France his audience is decidedly limited.

N. N. Shneidman

Russian Literature 1988–1994: The End of an Era

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995. Pp. 245. US \$19.95

Reviewed by Victor Terras

A comprehensive survey of a major contemporary literature poses huge difficulties. The material to be digested is large. The time to analyze it is severely limited (in this case, the author’s preface is dated December 1994!), the author must deal with phenomena in flux and against a background that may change even as his work is in print. Considering these formidable obstacles, Professor Shneidman has done very well at a truly Herculean job. To be sure, his survey has some self-imposed limitations. It concentrates on fiction, leaving poetry and drama out of the picture. Only authors residing in Russia are discussed—a pity, considering the lively activities of Russian writers in the United States, France, and elsewhere. Also, Shneidman’s “selection of authors and works for discussion is arbitrary” (x). Still, a tremendous amount of material is covered, much of it critically, with attention to every aspect of verbal art: plot, structure, ideas, political ideology, social relevance, psychology, language, and style. Shneidman is not afraid to make value judgments—a bold step, considering how often even famed critics have badly misjudged their contemporaries.

Shneidman’s synchronical approach does not wholly ignore diachronical connections, often referring back to pre-*perestroika* and even to pre-revolutionary roots of current phenomena, albeit in a rather general, sporadic, and cursory manner. Enough facts about literary organizations, groupings, journals, and their position within a changing political and socioeconomic ambience are presented: the effects of a market economy on publishing, the transfer of the political forum from literature to journalism and television, the changes in the role of the intelligentsia, the Russian Army, and bureaucratic institutions in Russian society. Shneidman produces a strong synthesis of the developments that have effected