

Editor's Note

THIS IS MY LAST ISSUE AS EDITOR OF *NER*, AND SOME READERS MAY BE wondering how it came to be a large double issue containing a special section entitled “The Russian Presence.” There are many reasons for this, including the arrival of Rosamund Bartlett’s fine translations of an intriguing duet of Chekhov stories, but at some point I found myself remembering that for my first issue (Vol. 17, No. 3)—just about twenty years ago—I had asked my late, beloved colleague Eve Adler, who was spending a year in Russia, if she could provide us with a “Letter from Moscow.” A brilliant scholar of Classics, over the course of her career she had also learned Arabic, Hebrew, and German, as well as a full range of Romance languages, and because she had heard that the best translations of the Greek epics were in Old Church Slavonic, she taught herself that language, too. This soon prompted her to teach herself Russian, and fascinated by the language and the culture, she began spending as much time as she could in that country, which was how she came to be there in 1994–95. When she asked me what sorts of things to include in her account of daily life, I suggested that she try to give our readers a sampling of the kinds of jokes that she was hearing; so she concluded her letter with a series of the “Armenian Radio” jokes that were then circulating in the Russian capital. The last joke in the series was this one:

Armenian Radio has been asked:

Is there life on Mars?

Armenian Radio answers:

No, not there either.

Her remarkably observant letter also noted that at that time people in Moscow were worried “about the Chechnya war” and confirmed that “the reports from Chechnya are indeed alarming.” As evidence, she provided a particularly vivid account of the situation, then went on to point out that the report she had quoted was actually “from Tolstoy’s story ‘Hajii Murat,’ first published in 1912, and referring to the events of 1851. My Russian friends [she continued] complain that their government’s wrongheadedness in Chechnya is the result of poor literary education. Haven’t those jerks read Tolstoy?” In light of her spirited participation in such free-wheeling conversations, it hardly seems surprising that within a year she would be the co-author of a dictionary of Russian slang, from which a few representative entries have been taken for this issue.

Over the next seven or eight years, before her untimely death, Eve Adler also supplied us with her translations of the highly original and insistently

uncategorizable writings of the Russian political philosopher Mikhail Epstein, and she told me that I should be sure to get to know Michael Katz, who was leaving the University of Texas at Austin to join the Middlebury College faculty and direct the Language Schools and Schools Abroad. During one of the first talks I had with him, I mentioned that I was interested in publishing a new translation of Chekhov's wonderful comic monologue entitled "On the Harmfulness of Tobacco" and asked him if he might be willing to undertake that job. Funny thing, he said—as a matter of fact, he was just at that moment working on a translation of that very work. We published his translation in 1998, and in the years since then, in addition to numerous critical articles, many of his translations from Russian have appeared in our pages—of works by an unusual range of writers, including Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Akunin, Shcheglov, An-Sky, Jabotinsky, and Sophia Tolstoy. Besides a great deal of editorial assistance, for the special Russian feature in this current issue Michael Katz has provided us with excerpts of his new translation of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, as well as a new translation—for the first time with detailed annotations—of the record kept by Frida Vigdorova of the 1964 trial of the poet Joseph Brodsky.

As it happens, also included in my first issue of *NER* was an essay by P. Adams Sitney, whose intricate analysis of the densely-conceived films of the Russian director Andrey Tarkovsky has found its way into this special issue. In addition—not coincidentally, perhaps—in that first issue there was a poem by Ellen Hinsey, whose first book had just been selected for publication in the Yale Series of Younger Poets. Then, as now, she was living in Paris, and since that time, along with her poetry and literary essays, we have published a sequence of her extraordinarily well informed reports on cultural and political developments in Germany, Poland, Hungary, and Russia. Once again, our long association comes full circle with this issue, which owes a great deal to the sustained engagement and advice of Ellen Hinsey, an issue in which one of the series of interviews she's done with the poet Tomas Venclova is included—this one concerned with the poet Anna Akhmatova.

As all this would serve to indicate, over the past twenty years there has been a more or less continuous Russian presence in *NER*, so it seems only fitting that this special double issue should confirm and call attention to that fact, and to its range of implications. Some of those larger implications—and related overall ambitions—were identified in the editorial plans that I described in my opening "Editor's Note" for that first issue:

In future issues we will maintain our recognized determination to publish poetry and fiction of the highest quality. Intensifying our exploration of all forms of cultural expression—in the United States and elsewhere—we will also present our readers with new speculative and interpretive essays, as well as probing reassessments of the work of contemporary authors, and of vital authors of the past who may have dropped beyond the horizon of current literary consciousness. There will be more letters from abroad, and communiqués from American places, both well-known and familiar. We'll hope to present you with memoirs and letters; personal essays; historical reflections; literary rediscoveries;

manifestoes; statements by artists working in various media. By providing an expanded range of what we hope you'll find exceptionally compelling texts, we'll seek to situate contemporary cultural developments within larger imaginative and temporal contexts, working against the temptations of provincialism and encouraging readers to evaluate the work of the moment against a broader, more comprehensive range of achievements.

In striving to meet these commitments over the past twenty years, I have relied unceasingly on the help of C. Dale Young, a highly accomplished poet whose uncommon openness and exacting judgment have consistently led to his being recognized as very likely the most gifted and discerning poetry editor in the business. In putting together a two hundred page compilation of writings in various genres four times a year, I have done my best to insure that every issue could be picked up decades later and still seem new, in keeping with Edwin Muir's conviction that "things truly made preserve themselves through time in the first freshness of their nature." For almost ten years now, Carolyn Kuebler has shared this vision, and from the time of her arrival at *NER*, her unfailing critical attentiveness, incandescent energy, remarkable generosity of spirit, and far-reaching imagination have been altogether indispensable to our common enterprise. There could be no one better qualified to lead the magazine into the next phase of its history, and I am confident that whatever the challenges presented by changing publishing environments, the work selected for our readers in the future will continue to command serious attention and respect.

—S.D.