

THE ITALICS ARE MINE. By *Nina Berberova*. Translated by *Philippe Radley*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1969. viii, 606 pp. \$12.50.

In the opening sentence of this large volume the author declares, "this book is about myself, not about other people; an autobiography, not a set of memoirs." But strangely enough Miss Berberova's intentions do not coincide with her actual achievements: this loose, rambling narrative, crowded with names, incidents, and all sorts of details on a great variety of things, arouses less interest as a search for "the meaning of my life" than as a description of men and women of different layers of émigré society with whom she came into contact during the last half century.

Nina Berberova, born (in 1901) and educated in St. Petersburg, started writing verse in her teens, and literature occupied the central place in her whole existence. After the 1917 revolution she followed courses at the Petrograd University and at the House of Arts, met poets (including Gumilev), attended Blok's funeral, took part in the Serapion Brothers gatherings, and got acquainted with Vladislav Khodasevich, then in his thirties and already an established poet. They fell in love at first sight and became inseparable: they lived together as man and wife for ten years. In 1922 they left Russia, came to Berlin, and joined the émigrés. The main part of Miss Berberova's autobiography is devoted to the quarter of a century she lived and worked in Europe, mostly in France. Khodasevich introduced her to the numerous Russian writers in Berlin, Prague, Rome, and Paris, and she herself began the difficult literary career of an expatriate.

The material on Khodasevich offered in her reminiscences draws an impressive picture of his struggles, poverty, anxieties, and creative passion, and is indubitably of great value. No future historian of Russian literature of the twentieth century, and particularly the biographer of Khodasevich, will want to ignore it. He will also find in *The Italics Are Mine* a wealth of information about Russian émigré literary life in the twenties and thirties and numerous characterizations of important and minor writers of the period. Here, however, he will have to proceed with caution and keep in mind the highly subjective and biased approach of the author which mars her writing.

The two most interesting and best written chapters of the book, "Tobias and the Angel" and "The Salt of the Earth" (pp. 153–325), contain a series of sharp portraits and some literary sketches. In the first category we find Gorky, Bely, Bunin, Merezhkovsky, Gippius, Zaitsev, and many others; in the second, Pasternak, Nabokov, Tsvetaeva, Remizov. Most of the portraits based on personal impressions are bright, witty, and at times malicious pieces of imaginative prose. They usually underscore some curious trait of the individual, as in the case of Gorky, in whose company she spent a great deal of time in Berlin and in Italy between 1922 and 1925. Those were the years when Gorky was closely associated with Khodasevich as the coeditor of *Beseda*, a periodical which was established, they hoped, as a bridge between the émigrés and Soviet writers. Even though Miss Berberova knew Gorky less well than other outstanding figures of Russian literary Olympus, her recollections have the advantage of presenting him from an unadmiring, critical viewpoint, and this is a welcome change from the customary expressions of praise and idolatry we find in Soviet "Gorkiana." Other portraits, bristling with satirical thrusts and unsavory details of doubtful taste, seem conceived as polemics or caricatures rather than fair representations of the truth. The literary sketches are deliberately controversial and provocative, but lack any serious foundation. Typical

of Miss Berberova's categorical judgments is, for example, her blaming Tsvetaeva for not having achieved "maturity" and being guilty of "escapism"; she does not, however, define these ambiguous and gratuitous terms. The limitation of space prevents my quoting other instances of the same order.

In general, Miss Berberova's love for high-sounding generalities cramps her style. There is something irritating, almost screeching in her self-consciousness, intellectual snobbery, and pseudophilosophical digressions in which commonplace conclusions are presented as supreme wisdom. This is a pity, for Miss Berberova has talent and is intelligent, and when she turns from showing off and quibbling to expository descriptions, she can produce impressive and moving pages, such as those on Khodasevich's illness and death or the poetic retelling of the story of Tobias and the angel. This is not surprising, since she had already been singled out in the thirties by émigré critics (including this reviewer) as one of the most promising writers of the young generation abroad. Her novels *The First and the Last* (Paris, 1930) and *Without Sunset* (1938), her stories *Billancourt Holidays* (1928–38) and *The Easing of Fate* (Paris, 1948), as well as her other fiction published after 1950 in the United States in *Novyi Zhurnal*, show a craft which unites emotional intensity with verbal control, and expressiveness with precision.

Two things, however, weaken *The Italics Are Mine*. She speaks here about dozens of people and hardly finds a kind word for any of them, and she profusely labels people as "very stupid" or "dumb (not middling stupid, but exceptionally so)" (the last epithet is about Bunin's wife). She displays so much hostility, is so bent on attacking and accusing her contemporaries or making innuendos and offensive hints, that the reader is left with a bad taste in his mouth. He has the impression that she is not only gossiping but also settling personal accounts with individuals. This passion for literary revenge makes her commit factual mistakes (such as her treatment of Zamiatin or the false information on Boris Bozhnev, a minor but good poet who, she writes, had died in 1940 after a mental illness, and a number of other errors too long to be listed in a short review).

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UNTIMELY THOUGHTS: ESSAYS ON REVOLUTION, CULTURE AND THE BOLSHEVIKS, 1917–1918. By *Maxim Gorky*. Translated, with an introduction and notes, by *Herman Ermolaev*. New York: Paul S. Eriksson, 1968. xviii, 302 pp. \$6.95.

Gorky's articles in *Novaia zhizn'* are known by repute to every student of modern Russian history and literature; yet not many people have actually read more than a few paragraphs from the grand total. Professor Ermolaev has had the good idea of collecting into a book all Gorky's contributions to this short-lived periodical. The title comes from Gorky's own incomplete edition of 1918.

These articles are generally considered as eloquent anti-Bolshevik propaganda. If they had been only that they might have achieved greater results, but Gorky was concerned less with the realities of practical politics than with the will-o'-the-wisp of saving Russia and Russian culture. For him the real enemy was the Russian mob with its traditional disposition toward violence and vandalism, and his complaint was that all political parties, particularly the Bolsheviks, were