

Tribute to Nina Berberova (1901-1993)

Mona Takieddine Amyuni

Nina Berberova was born in Russia in 1901 and has recently died in Philadelphia. Recognized as a distinguished novelist late in her life in 1985, it took a man of great insight, Hubert Nyssen, editor of the elegant publishing house in Paris, *Actes Sud*, to feel immediately the unique and original talent of Berberova. In a moving tribute he pays her upon her death, Nyssen writes that before meeting the novelist in May 1985 in Paris, he had come across a confidential translation of her novel *The Accompanist* and could not understand why such a luminous and tragic novel, written in 1934 in a Chekovian vein, had not been immediately consecrated. Following his discovery, Nyssen sought Berberova out, found her in Princeton and they both agreed to meet later, that same year, in Paris. Nyssen's career knew a major breakthrough upon this meeting. He started to publish her novels, each at a time, to give the public enough space to appreciate their very fine quality, followed by the autobiography which she had completed in 1965. Originally written in Russian, Berberova's works were first translated into French and quickly into other languages. *Actes Sud*, thus, was instrumental in her worldwide fame as of 1985.

Berberova's books penetrated Russia in secrecy first; later in 1989 she paid her country of origin one short visit upon the publication of her

autobiography *The Italics are Mine*. About this visit she says that it did not move her and when asked whether she would resume writing her autobiography and update it she said: "No, I am tired of italics." When the autobiography came out in New York in 1992, the N.Y. Times wrote under the title "An Émigré in Paris Willing to Start Afresh";

The belated publication last year of Nina Berberova's collection of stories, *The Tattered Cloak*, introduced American readers to a captivating Russian writer: a nimble, observant writer, who captured the lost hopes and dreams of a Russian émigré community in pre-World War II Paris with unusual emotional precision. With the publication of her autobiography, *The Italics are Mine*, in a newly revised edition that incorporates an amended translation from the Russian, fans of her stories now have the opportunity to read Ms. Berberova's firsthand account of that exile experienced by so many Russian intellectuals in the wake of the 1917 Revolution.

In contrast to the sad, Chekovian group of men and women who populate her fiction, spending their days and nights trying to recapture a receding past or imagine an impossible future, Ms. Berberova emerges in this volume as a spirited, indeed indomitable woman, who willfully lives in the present. As a precocious child in czarist Russia, she restlessly rebels against the rituals of domesticity. Even at the age of 10, she is obsessed with finding a vocation, obsessed

with cramming her days full of as much experience and knowledge as possible. "I chiefly hated everything to do with the 'nest,'" she writes, "with family spirit, paternalism, the defense of small ones - that is, me -from something terrible, or dangerous or simply risky."

Deeply independent and autonomous, anti-dogmatic to the extreme, totally free, she leaves Russia in the early twenties with her companion the poet Kodassevitch, when the persecution of intellectuals intensified. Extremely poor, she cultivates the virtues of forgetfulness and liberty, lives fully the moment, and does all kinds of small jobs to survive in her new environment. She draws strength, all along, from her detachment, her basic freedom, her impassioned temperament, and her ironic bend of mind. She gets profoundly attached to the brilliant Paris of the twenties, the Paris of Valerie and Proust, Breton and Tzara. She later turns her back to France and moves to the United States in 1950, with \$75 in her pocket and no knowledge of English.

When a little before her death, Bernard Pivot, the well-known founder of the Paris literary TV program "Apostrophes" interviewed her, he was impressed with her strength. He told her, in admiration, "You are a rock," she replied "No, I am not a rock, I am a river." A little later in Philadelphia where she spent the last years of her

life, she said: "I wonder, when the ultimate moment will come, whether someone would sit by my deathbed and listen to the secret of my life. A secret I would naturally be able to reveal only then."

Well she leaves us hungry for more. Her secret runs through her fiction which is highly charged with emotion, nostalgia, and great irony. Men and women in her novels, love and suffer, share and part, and the human drama goes on. Highly poetic, elusive and suggestive, her narratives move by image and metaphor, by pattern and rhythm, much closer to dramatic poetry than to prose. Below are two excerpts that would speak far better of Berberova's talent than any other comment.

Of her unique relationship with the poet Kodassevitch she writes:

Our life was made of a succession of days and nights which intermingled ... We were two beings within four walls, open to each other, transparent and close in body and soul (my tr.).

And when the heroine of The Rebellious Reed (1988) parts with her lover upon the German invasion of Paris the novel starts thus:

It happens in each one's life that, suddenly, the door banged at your face, opens a little, the iron gate is pulled up again, the final "no" turns into a "may be," the word is transfigured, new blood runs in your veins. This is hope. We have been given a reprieve. The judge's verdict, the doctor's, the consul's, is postponed. A voice announces that all is not lost. Shaking, tears of gratitude in our eyes, we go to the next room where we are asked to

wait before we are thrown into the abyss.

This is what happened to me on the evening during which I waited in a queue close to Einar who was flying to Stockholm. We waited for those who were flying. Without thinking I remained standing next to Einar... Hidden under his overcoat, which he carried, our fingers were interlocked... He looked at me every now and then. I saw in the darkness that he seemed tired, at a loss, strange... He was worried... He is not handsome, I thought... I never knew he was ugly"...

... "Come up" said the bus driver... I couldn't believe it... Even today I can't believe it...

... "I didn't know you could be ugly" I told Einar in a murmur, feeling a sudden burst of laughter. He probably thought I was crying, he kissed me on the eyes. I took his hand and pressed it against my lips. These minutes were a gift to me. I was given a reprieve. One hour only, but so precious...

... "Promise not to forget me" he said.

Seven years pass. She has no news of him. Later, accidentally they meet. He is married. His wife is stocky, bossy, ugly. The lovers stand no chance, whatsoever, to open up again to each other.

She says in her inner monologue, in recitation:

Since my early youth I thought, that in this world, each one of us has his own no man's land, where he is his own master. there is the apparent existence, and also the other, unknown to people, that belongs to us, absolutely. This does not mean that one is moral, and the other immoral, or one is accepted, the

other forbidden. Simply, each man, from time to time, escapes all control, lives in freedom and mystery, alone or with somebody, one hour a day, or one evening a week, or one day a month. And this secret and free existence unfolds from one evening or one day to the other, and the hours run in succession, one after the other. ... Whoever has not known this... discovers one day with surprise that he has never met with himself... I pity those who, outside their bathroom, are never alone. ... Einar and I had met in this no man's land. Then, as usually happens, the new life started to kick out the other...

... At present, my no man's land was full of thoughts for Einar. All boiled down to three questions. Was he alive? Shall I see him one day? Did he still love me? ... Deep in me, in my second existence, these hours full of anxiety, of despair and hope, remained my secret property. I was, as always, the sole mistress of my no man's land (my tr.)

In this fashion, Berberova takes her reader by the hand and allows him/her to penetrate into her no man's land, into the heart of the meaning of life. One comes out a far richer and happier human being, aesthetic joy balancing out the tragic vein which speaks so deeply of the human condition.

Dr. Mona Takiieddine Amyuni
Assistant Professor,
Civilization Sequence
Department, AUB.