

Review of Maria Stepanova, *In Memory of Memory*, Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2021 (448 p.)

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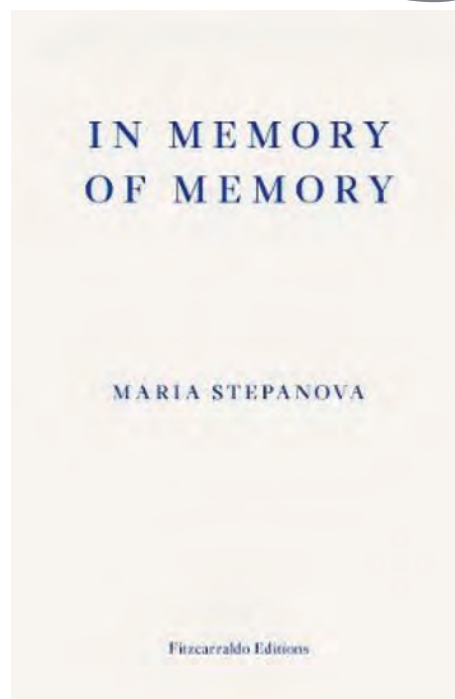
to transcribe his life in a single meaningful, coherent work. As he probes the intersection of racism, nationalism, and war, Magnus dips in and out of history and fiction to reveal telling philosophical lessons about the tendency of man to make black and white the cultures of the world, when in reality we are all pieces of the same game.

Ellie Simon
Norman, Oklahoma

Maria Stepanova
In Memory of Memory

Trans. Sasha Dugdale. London.
Fitzcarraldo Editions. 500 pages.

THE LITERATURE OF MEMORY often explores what consciousness is stored in and speaks from objects. Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* uses the (now legendary) madeleine cakes of Marcel's aunt Léonie to access hidden memories from Combray; Péter Nádas's *A Book of Memories* finds a key motif in the colored stained-glass windows of Berlin and Budapest apartment buildings and the way in which they filter the light coming in. Between these two novels (1913 and 1986, respectively) spans the fiction of recollection of the twentieth century. The poet Maria Stepanova's first long book, *In Memory of Memory*, is clearly in love with this tradition, while it also mourns its



pology across the whole country, and the department at Oxford had only began to take shape. Eventually, a troika of male professors from varied backgrounds, “the triumvirate,” ended up leading the department. None of these three professors had done fieldwork. And the fact that all of Larson’s women did go on to work in the field was, for some, due to the increase of its importance but, for all, born out of their longing to “travel far away.” Fieldwork was an escape “from the strictures of English society” and offered a temporary freedom that was lost again, once they came back. They had changed, but their expected role in English society had not. This dichotomy between who they were and who they were allowed to be brought tragedy for all of their lives, albeit to varied degrees.

Between the two world wars, anthropology’s center of authority shifted away from Oxford and an aging triumvirate to Bronisław Malinowski at the London School of Economics. Today, Malinowski is referred to as the “father of social anthropology,” having introduced a strong focus on fieldwork and taught a generation of anthropologists that went on to practice and teach around

the world. Malinowski was Polish, like Czaplicka. They were friends born in the same year and had come to England at similar times. However, the tragically opposite fates of these two brilliant and driven people point to the divergent opportunities between men and women in early twentieth-century Britain.

A hundred years after her heroines met at Oxford, Larson found that these first five female anthropologists “remained peripheral to the histories . . . of great men” and set out to write a book that was to change that. With *Undreamed Shores*, Larson has not only made a superb effort in achieving this but has also given us, man or woman, inspiring examples of unusual bravery and strength in fighting all odds and daring to follow our dreams.

Undreamed Shores is an extraordinarily well-crafted, many-layered, and captivating book, in which the author makes the amount of research that underlies its chapters seem effortless. We read on, anxious to see how these five lives unfold and, on the way, find Larson opening doors to different cultures and a time far away.

Felix Haas
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irrevocable loss: in the present century, the connections between memory and object, meaning and world, and mind and body have become obscured.

For Stepanova, objects appear “*just as they were*”; the italics are original here, and the phrase is significant, as it chimes with a leading motif in contemporary political thought: could-have-been-different / just-as-it-is denotes an ontological modality that lingers at the cusps of sovereign power, together with a promise of emancipation. Indeed, objects, as they appear to the private archaeologist Stepanova, do not arrive together with their proper meanings and histories; they emerge in excess of narrative. They are just things, although things that communicate, in an obscure or even a negative way, the history of her family to the writer. It is this communication that must be carefully unpacked and deconstructed. In the same way and for this very reason, Stepanova’s writing presents itself as more clearly of a learned or scholarly character: it engages explicitly with Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag, W. G. Sebald, and other writers interested in photography and history.

Clearly, Stepanova testifies to—and warns against—a contemporary, postmodern variant of the separation of mind of body; a decision enforced by the trauma of the Holocaust, which has ripped the fabric of history between generations, as well as our uncanny social mass media that in Stepanova’s analysis resemble the imploding crater of Benjamin’s essay on *The Idiot*. In this sense, when remembering memory, besides contemplating the lives of family members, Stepanova is also making an existentialist statement on the brink of an abyss wherein history disappears. Sebald is the closest comparison in this regard.

For memory has an essential connotation in the work of saving as well as, here, letting go. In a crucial chapter devoted to Osip Mandelstam and Sebald, Stepanova draws out memory’s work of “making the past strange,” restoring it to the thing, giving it back to time. Consciousness withdraws into artifact once again; here, we witness something resembling the birth of Odradek, the mysterious creature from Kafka’s story. *In Memory of Memory* has been Maria Stepanova’s lifework since she was ten years old; this great book is a highly urgent theological treatise on memory and saving.

Arthur Willemsse
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Federico Falco
A Perfect Cemetery

Trans. Jennifer Croft. Edinburgh. Charco Press. 2021. 174 pages.

IN THE AFTERWORD TO *A Perfect Cemetery*, translator Jennifer Croft contemplates the crucial translation challenge of rendering the relationship between place and speech through vernacular, dialect, or peculiar conversation. Croft concludes that the question of “how to represent place in speech” is unanswerable, “because translation isn’t a system. Translation is an encounter between two human beings that takes place in words that belong to dif-

ferent systems.” As an example, she gives her choice, in one particular moment, to translate the Spanish word *hermoso* as “swell,” instead of—as might be expected—“beautiful” or “lovely.” Her explanation for this unorthodox choice lies in another debate that rages throughout the history of literary translation: the question of loyalty. “[I]t is the word to which I’m most attached.”

This attachment to her translation is, in turn, a form of loyalty to Federico Falco’s original Spanish text. Whether a translation is faithful to the original is a question that presumes a text has a fixed and singular meaning and casts the translation as a mere vessel to be judged on accuracy above all else. But, as Croft’s faithfulness to the word “swell” illustrates, a text’s meaning is not fixed but rather uncovered and created, again and again, by all its readers. Croft’s translations of the stories in *A Perfect Cemetery* are loyal to the profound beauty, rootedness, and longing they portray.

The stories, in turn, each focus on relationships between human beings, nonhuman beings, and the spaces they occupy. At the heart of all the relationships are questions of loyalty. The characters explore

how to honor estranged family members, how to show love to people who have abandoned a community, what happens when family members’ philosophies diverge. The stories have been described as “interlocking,” but that characterization is too mechanical, too artifactual for my taste. I’d rather call them “interlaken”: a series of stunning bodies of water, secretly connected by underground rivers. The stories’ relationships aren’t immediately evident, but one can sense they are of a piece, fed by the same spring. More than anything, one is left with a strong sense of place.

Alongside its loyalty to the landscapes of Córdoba (the Argentine province that serves as the setting for all the stories), which are described with intense sensory detail, *A Perfect Cemetery* explores the question of loyalty in the tender, subtle portraits of its protagonists. Whether it is the king of the hares, who finds more comfortable society with the animals of the forest than with the human beings who populate the town; a teenage girl who forsakes her family’s religion in search of new connections; a designer hired to create the perfect resting place for a man’s implacable father; a woman who seeks a new site for her loyalties after her home is threatened; or a widow seeking to maintain her previous life as a wife: all the characters’ struggles in *A Perfect Cemetery* revolve around faithfulness to place and to one another.

Loyalty—that ideal of translation—is also the ideal of the characters in the stories. And what loyalty means, in both Croft’s translation and in the stories themselves, is to be true to an idea—the idea of a person, the idea of a story, the idea of a place—without necessarily being bound by their rules.

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