NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS CLASSICS
"REMEMBERING PAUL SCHMIDT" BY HONOR MOORE
THE AFTERWORD TO
THE STRAY DOG CABARET: A BOOK OF RUSSIAN POEMS
TRANSLATED BY PAUL SCHMIDT

I MET HIM in the mid-1960s at Harvard. I was part of a group of theater-crazy kids making stylish productions of classics that spoke of a world we believed to be teetering on the brink of change, and our "stray dog" was the tiny Agassiz Theatre in Radcliffe Yard. Paul, a graduate student in Slavic literature and a decade older than most of us, was a star of the Loeb Drama Center, Harvard's official theater, which did well-costumed academic productions. It was there I first saw him my freshman year, his passionate authenticity as Gaveston, lover and courtier to John Lithgow's Edward II, breaching the proscenium. Paul turned up at Agassiz in a white linen suit. At first his mere presence in our audience thrilled us; he understood what we were doing, admired it, and explained why. When we did a modern *Measure for Measure* our second season and Paul spurned the Loeb to play Angelo to Susan Channing's Isabella, we were jubilant: he lent our revolution aesthetic gravitas.

Paul had studied mime with Marcel Marceau in Paris, he was writing his dissertation on Meyerhold, and he seemed to have read everything, usually in its original language. When he admired your work, his references were European and his knowledge deep and authoritative. But his looks belied his egghead credentials. He was extremely beautiful, dauntingly well dressed, the first person I knew to carry Vuitton luggage (decades before the brand crossed the Atlantic), and the first man I ever knew who described himself as "queer" while flirting with me outrageously. We had our first conversation when I persuaded him to lend his Vuitton briefcase for Brecht's *In the Jungle of Cities*: "Vuitton," he said. "Vwee..." I intoned to his delighted laughter. At the end of that summer, one morning at dawn, he drove me back to Cambridge from a cast party at the beach, pushing

Copyright © 2007 by Honor Moore. All rights reserved.

my souped-up Corvair to 120 miles an hour. The next summer, playing Oberon to Channing's Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Paul fell in love, and so did Susan. They were our golden couple—it was only natural they should marry.

Through Susan, Paul and I renewed our friendship in New York in the early 1970s. He was teaching in the Russian Department at the University of Texas, and flying East from time to time. Escaping Austin the summer of 1972, he lived in my apartment in Chelsea while I spent a few weeks at the seashore; Susan, by now "Stockard Channing," was living in Los Angeles, acting in her first films. Paul had finished his complete Rimbaud and was translating a Russian woman poet with an unpronounceable last name. "Tsvetaeva," he would say. "Tsve . . ." I would mimic until I had it right; I had read some Akhmatova, but Marina Tsvetaeva was new to me. Paul had translated "The Poem of the End" and that summer was working on her letters to Anatoly Steiger, a young poet who was, Paul explained, probably "queer." Tsvetaeva, he told me, was given to such unrequited entanglements—they inspired her poems. When I returned in September, the Tsvetaeva manuscript was finished, and he had dedicated it to Susan. Their marriage was glamorously bicoastal, Paul's white adobe Texas house their retreat; when in Los Angeles, Paul squired "Stockard" to Hollywood dinner parties. At one, given by Mike Nichols, he was seated next to Elizabeth Taylor, whose worldliness and obvious intelligence, he told me, "enchanted" him.

Back in New York, I was beginning to write, and Paul was patiently encouraging, chipping away at my self-doubt, assuring me my poems were poems and "very American." But I was dissatisfied. During the spring of 1973, at the Manhattan Theatre Club, I organized a festival of poetry by women, including an evening of Tsvetaeva: Paul read the letters to Steiger, and the actress Kathryn Walker, also one of

our Harvard group, performed "The Poem of the End." At the cabaret at the old Manhattan Theatre Club on East Seventy-third Street, spectators sat at tables, much as they had at the Stray Dog in St. Petersburg. Paul found a way to intertwine the letters with the poem, and, even though "The Poem of the End" was not addressed to Steiger, you could feel the kind of raw emotion Tsvetaeva transformed to make her magisterial epic.

I remember the simple room, white light breaking darkness to delineate the two black-clad performers. Paul's stripped-down, gestural translation pitched Tsvetaeva's ironies so that her melodrama was subsumed in the tragic sweep of the story. Kathryn's experience performing the women of Shakespeare and Euripides prepared her for the poem's alternations between image and remark, agony and sarcasm, and her extraordinary, rough, deep voice, a match for Tsvetaeva's baroque extremes, evoked an atmosphere *Thick with breath and tobacco / smoke and endless talk.*

I wondered if my life would ever allow me to write with that force and urgency. That romance and scope. Paul didn't think it at all inappropriate that I should want to emulate his great muse. "Go ahead," he said. My opportunity came a few years later when my romance with a married Russian-speaking painter ended in a railroad station encounter also "thick with breath" and "endless talk." I called my poem, the longest I'd written, "Poem for the End," folding in variations on a line of Tsvetaeva via Schmidt: *Did you think love was just a chat at a small table?*

In due course, Paul, now separated from Susan, became frustrated with his life in Texas. Many of his old friends, including Robert Wilson, were doing spectacular work in New York, and Paul was beginning to feel like one of Chekhov's three sisters yearning for the bright lights of Moscow. Serendipitously, he was handsomely commissioned by the Dia Foundation to translate the works of Velimir Khlebnikov,

the most difficult of the Russian modernists. From his tiny Lower East Side rental, he traveled to Moscow and Leningrad to do research and locate original manuscripts, returning agog with what he was finding. Over lunch or dinner, he'd explain that Khlebnikov was akin to some of the American-language poets, then he'd pull out his working translation of "The Grasshopper" or "Incantation by Laughter" and begin, with the fervor of a conspirator, to declaim "Glitter-letter wing-winker, / gossamer grasshopper…" or "Hlahla! Uthlofan, lauflings!" racing through whole poems by heart. I made a habit of referring anyone curious about those Russians to Paul, including the composer/dramatist Elizabeth Swados, who was planning a musical theater piece about Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, Mandelstam, and Pasternak. Their resulting collaboration, *The Beautiful Lady*, a play with music, was set in the Stray Dog cabaret.

It was from Paul that I first heard about AIDS: "There's a gay cancer," he said one day in 1981, without referring to himself. Soon after, he stopped drinking and taking drugs and began to acknowledge openly the men he loved. Unbeknownst even to most of his closest friends, Paul was diagnosed with HIV in the late 1980s. Now he became newly focused on his work, not only the Khlebnikov translations but an extraordinary range of plays. Soon he was collaborating with the Yale Repertory Theatre, the American Repertory Theatre at the Loeb in Cambridge, and the Guthrie in Minneapolis, and working with such directors as his onetime protégé Robert Wilson and JoAnne Akalaitis. His new theater community was the Wooster Group, which took his translation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and disrupted it into the arresting *Brace Up!* in which Paul also acted. He collaborated with another old friend, Robert Mapplethorpe, on an illustrated edition of Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*, and started to publish his own poems. Paying me a great compliment, he asked that I look at his manuscript; soon he was doing

readings of his own poems as well as performing his translation of Khlebnikov's *Zangezi* at poetry venues in New York.

As the AIDS epidemic wore on, Paul lost more and more friends, but he continued to keep his own condition secret. His usually spirited conversation became melancholy. When his friend the *Saturday Night Live* writer Michael O'Donoghue died suddenly, his protest was as desperate as it was funny: "He wasn't supposed to die! He was my *straight* friend!" In early 1996, I got a phone call that Paul was in the hospital with AIDS; though I'd suspected, this was the first definitive news I'd had of his illness. When I visited him at Roosevelt Hospital, he explained that he had kept his HIV private, but also that his old Cambridge friends were the most difficult to tell. "You are my second family," he said.

Soon he was out of the hospital and working again. His translation of Chekhov's plays was published in 1998, and, he told me excitedly, he was putting together a slim volume called *A Little Book of Russian Poems.* It was that manuscript, found deep in his computer years after his death, that Catherine Ciepiela and I were given by Paul's sister and literary executor, Margaret Sand; it forms the basis of this book.

The last time I visited Paul was on the spur of the moment; after a solitary dinner in Chelsea, I called him. "Oh yes, come over." He was in bed in his meticulously appointed studio apartment on West Twenty-third Street. Beside him was his current project, *Eugene Onegin.* "If I work fast," he said, "I hope I'll have the time to finish."

"Yes," I said, looking at his gaunt face and his terribly thin arms.

Of course Paul would spend his last weeks translating Pushkin. Of course he would live to finish it. He did not, but that his final sense of urgency concerned poetry made a profound impression. I sat there for a while watching him sleep, remembering the man I'd met when I was just beginning,

who'd studied mime in Paris, who, as I once wrote in a poem, *crossed every floor like a dancer.*

Five years after Paul Schmidt's death, teaching a course in poetry in translation and finding no English version of "The Poem of the End" I liked, I dug through my files. There it was, his! The frayed Xeroxed typescript with his penciled corrections brought back his voice and the evening at the Manhattan Theatre Club. In talking in class about that poem and others by Russian modernists, I realized how gently and thoroughly Paul had shared his knowledge with me. Through him, I had come to know these poets not only as survivors of the cataclysms of the twentieth century but as members of the buoyant, imaginative community that first blossomed in 1912 at the Stray Dog cabaret. Through him they had entered my imagination, young again, almost indistinguishable from our own younger selves:

> *In restaurant dark, friends move*
> *through our conversation as if the past were*
> *a bright street. A mime's fingers.* No one makes
> love, and this year there have been so many.
> *Oh darling, old friend—of beauty, of exuberant*
> *knowledge—turn as you close the door, take me*
> *as you did then, a bouquet of lilac, a waltz . . .*[1]

---

1. These lines and the one above are from "Edward," published in *Darling* by Honor Moore (Grove, 2001).