

Traveller Alone

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We, the malingerers, games-haters and fourth-form intellectuals, compelled to watch the game as a punishment for refusing to play it, were standing with our backs to both the cruel northeast wind and the rugby, on a dour February afternoon in February 1946. We were talking about travel, and a boy who later became a professor of economics in Australia quoted Hazlitt: "One of the pleasantest things in the world is going on a journey; but I like to go by myself." I remember pondering that for a moment – and then the ball I hadn't seen coming, booted into touch, hit my head and knocked me unconscious.

2

It took me around twenty seconds to regain my senses, and the notion of solitude on journeys must have stuck. Eight years later I called a first pamphlet of poems *Travellers Alone*; the title-poem imagined travellers arriving by themselves in an unfamiliar city, so my journey to Russia in summer 2010 provided an odd parallel. I'd never taken any significant trip without a companion, or if by myself, without a friend or host waiting at the other end. To have a companion suddenly drop out this time was a blow from which it took more seconds to recover. But I invented consolations. There was an unexpectedly lavish table space in the Moscow hotel room. It would have been a generous amount even to share, but for myself alone it provided an absolute luxury of surfaces on which to lay out giveaway street maps, my very basic itinerary, the Berlitz *Russian in Sixty Minutes*. And there was the entire expanse of an unoccupied twin bed.

3

The air-conditioning works. But Moscow is enduring a heat wave of 38-40 °C. I walk, very slowly and carefully, almost the whole length of Trevskaya Boulevard and find no postcards in its shops or kiosks, let alone a post office. And how to handle a city where speeding is routine and there appear to be no pedestrian crossings in the main streets? Already near the Kremlin, I pause for another mineral, a gaseous Bon Aqua delivered in a Pepsi cardboard beaker. I want to find the Tolstoy Museum. I know where I am on this give-away tourist map but would experience a fatalistic, slightly delirious pleasure by getting lost here, far from home, whereas in London I would feel merely foolish and incompetent. At last I see a Metro sign. At the barrier, "17" flashes up when I swipe my card on the machine, the number of journeys I still have out of twenty; I have used three by alighting at the wrong station, not realising one place can have three names if three different lines are converging on it. Outside Kropotkinskaya station, my destination, there are no signs telling me how to find the Tolstoy Museum, but an elderly woman with shopping – the best sort of person to ask – gives me signed directions. They take me to the Pushkin Museum, good enough, and the Guide says it is open on Saturdays. Today is Saturday, and it is closed.

4

In the Pushkin *Art* Museum, two blocks away, a great classical and Renaissance collection, I look up at their vast Melpomene, Muse of Tragedy on her plinth, almost the shape of a gigantic rugby ball. I step aside: it could topple over and hit me. Wandering the Italian Renaissance galleries I muse yet again on the pugnacity on the faces of so many infant Jesuses; but make an exception for

Neri de Bicci (1419-91) in his 'Madonna and Child with Pomegranate'. Here the infant is amiably offering his mother a segment of the fruit. Everywhere except in these Italian rooms the heat weighs down relentlessly on slowly patrolling visitors and seated staff. In a dim Egyptian hall an attendant is fanning her face wearily and falls asleep. Outside I stroll from drink to drink and am back accidentally at the Kremlin again. In this heat just watching water is a popular activity, and a sizeable crowd of well-dressed, respectable citizens and laughing children has gathered round the fountains at the top of the nearby Alexandrovsky Gardens. I realise that I have been negotiating complicated Metro journeys for short distances, and Mayakovskaya station is just two stops away. There is a memorial plaque for the poet at the foot of one long escalator and I am surprised again to see how modest it is.

5

But I had been missing the enormous black statue in the square opposite the exit. There is very different crowd here the following evening, Sunday, when I return from a boat trip along the Moscow river. They are listening to a young woman reading passionately from typed and handwritten pages, asking her listeners whether they want to hear more. "Da—*da!*" But she knows when to stop. The older man who follows her doesn't, neither does the younger man who follows *him*. I recognise all this, an open mic session apparently for all comers. No one around me speaks English except for a young man who could be the convener. He laughs and apologises and is shy, and has little to say. But when I try to make conversation by informing him that I am a poet from London, England, I regret it. Immediately I am pushed forward to stand under the towering marble Mayakovsky and make my contribution. Now I am genuinely missing a companion who would have joined in.

6

Next day I at least see the grieving statue of Marina Tsvetaeva, in a suddenly quiet street off Novy Arbat, a sweltering thoroughfare of junk food joints and junk music. Her house is also closed, but the Bulgakov Apartment Museum turns out to be open every afternoon of the year and free. This is a small, entrancing warren filled with his furniture, books, a horn gramophone, a magisterial typewriter (will we ever imagine a writer "pounding" on the keys of a laptop?) and a black cat looking almost old enough to have been owned by Bulgakov himself. There is, appropriately, something mischievous, mocking even, about this austere little flat with its tiny cafe area, a counter offering numerous kinds of coffee and tea if someone can be raised to take an order. Will Akhmatova's house in St Petersburg look so lived in?

7

A long quiet hall with a well-swept stone floor, in a big building in Leningradsky Street. Along the wall on either side runs a series of doors, each open at exact right angles. Between them are windows, inside which individuals or small groups of people sit at what might be small dining tables. By each open door stands to attention a uniformed woman – crimson cap and skirt, white blouse. At my allotted door the brisk Intourist guide leaves me with Natalya, who first looks at my passport and ticket, then asks a solemn question which he translates: "Coffee or tea in the morning?" This is the 11.55 to St Petersburg from Leningradsky Street station, Platform 3. Unpacking the few things needed for the overnight journey, I am interrupted by a hard rap at the door of my double compartment. This is a uniformed seller of minerals, wines, cognacs and vodkas carried in a plastic bucket. I accept a mineral, and arrange my ticket, toothbrush and tranquillisers on the spare bunk, for the first time by myself in a sleeper. Suddenly the train is

gliding away through industrial outskirts and forests barely visible in the dark. I remember a Soviet claim that this service ran so smoothly you could play snooker on it. Can I find something that is round and designed to roll, so I can put this to the test? I can't; but my mineral in its unopened bottle doesn't shift on the ledge where I have set it down.

8

Aleksanda Nevskogo is the last Metro station on the eastern side of the map provided by the hotel (where, despite its name, neither beds nor breakfasts are particularly Grand). I alight, walk the wide hall, and emerge at the top of the steps to find the usual noisy traffic junction. But on the far side, if I can manage to cross the road, there might be a park to walk in (and soft drink stalls) judging by that long white wall topped by high trees. No, not exactly a park; accidentally I have arrived at a famous cemetery. There is no breeze this afternoon, and the shade along this dusty path gives no relief from the heat. I work very patiently on the names in Cyrillic script and recognise none until I realise with a shock that I have been standing alone by Tchaikovsky's grave. This is all so powerful that I have to sit down for a moment on a green bench, and get a concerned look from a couple who have brought two quiet children here for an afternoon stroll. Then I go back to the kiosk and buy a ground plan in English, which I unfold to see that this is, in effect, the composers' section of the St Petersburg Necropolis of the Masters of the Arts: Balakirev, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin ("chemist and composer"), Glazunov, Glinka. This last, a famed alcoholic, looks suave and sober on his modest monument, but the gay Tchaikovsky is given a floridly religious memorial. Borodin seems to be the only one accorded some bars of music, picked out in gold under his genial countenance. I walk past all of these graves several times, and feel glad that this burial ground – especially given its other famous names – is not, at least so far, tidied and embellished to attract tourists (the last thing one would want is for it to be "alive" with the sound of any music). Anonymous traffic noise comes in from the other side of the wall.

9

A lazy misapprehension actually enhances my day-long trip to the great complex of palaces, gardens, statues and fountains at Petrodvorets, by the sea about thirty kilometres away from the city. I believed I had a ticket for a guided tour in English, but the moment the bus leaves from the stand near the Kazan Cathedral I realise I am in a Russian party with an imperious woman guide who would not have been out of place in one of the large, high-hung portraits. At a great gate she asks us all a question about the tour option we prefer. I say, in English, "I'm sorry, I cannot speak Russian." "Can't speak *what* Russian?" she demands. Unanswerable. I accept the ticket she holds out and join a group escorted by attendants through one immense golden baroque stateroom after another – understanding literally nothing at all but nodding approvingly. I am very pleased and relieved not to understand. There is no question of taking in facts, conveyed in an imperfect English monotone, which would only leave me aware of my inadequate knowledge. If I contrive to stand at the front of the group at every halt, I can be cooled, a little, by the guides' fans. In the park I can see it is the custom to throw up a coin to land at the feet of the statue of Peter the Great. My five-rouble coin falls back again, and as an extra punishment for a day of self-satisfaction I find when I returned to the hotel that I left both my reading glasses and my shades on the tour bus when we returned to the city.

10

And this is frightening. It evokes a recurring dream I have had for many years, of a journey alone on a boat, leaving from a kind of sloping, terraced jetty, crossing a stretch of water, and arriving at

a similar landing stage. Then I travel on through a country of lakes and rivers and shorter crossings until I am back at the beginning: a terraced jetty, a boat... Today's boat on a St Petersburg river and canal trip has struck out onto the Neva at its widest point and I am in that dream, with sea air fresh on my face although it is so hot there is no relief until we pass under a bridge. But unlike the dream this vessel provides a recorded audio guide in English; except that it's nightmarishly wrong. "We now go under the Dvortsovyy Bridge." But we don't, we are on open water. "To your left is the Winter Palace." Not so. We are entering a canal. About halfway through, we are thanked for our attention and told to enjoy the rest of our day. Soon there really is a bridge, and a few moments of coolness. And a final stretch of canal which brings us back to the start. I am not going to land, cross the terrain of the dream, and begin again.

11

Reception at the hotel think it unlikely that I should recover my lost spectacles, and decline to call the tour company although their number is on the ticket I have retained. But the woman in Nevsky Prospect, from whom I bought it, recognises me, raises the bus driver on her mobile – and in two hours my lost property is returned. Now I can face the sunlight, and read and write again. I start to notice and write down details about my surroundings which I think worth saving: telephone kiosks still have directories, tattered and rained-on but useable, not vandalised and withdrawn as in London; a cement-mixing truck passes, its rotating cylinder painted like a big Russian doll; the young waiter I hand my pen to write down the Russian for a tumbler (I had wrongly asked for a wine glass to drink my latest Bon Aqua) cannot understand how you apply the nib to the paper. On my latest trip in the Metro I realise that everyone stands still on the endless escalators. It too far to walk either down or up, especially in the heat; and two days later, on a Sunday, with thinner crowds, some people joining the escalator at the top actually sit down. I have brought with me a copy of the English-language *St Petersburg Times*, and wish I could have known about one item of news when I spoke to the people at the Mayakovsky statue in Moscow. "Court Declares Poet Militant Leader" is the headline. Yulia Privedennaya, thirty-four, has been given a four-and-a-half year suspended sentence for crossing the line between art and crime. Her 'Poetic Society for the Common Good' has allegedly stored air guns, hunting rifles and a pump rifle at a camp organised "to educate the young through poetry." If this story is true – or indeed the allegations are untrue – and is indicative of anything, it may be that you first read about it here.

12

Did I *automatically* get the cushioned cornerseat right next to the piano in this restaurant designed to resemble Chekhov's dacha because I was a man booking the table for just one? I settle myself in a little awkwardly, receive silver cutlery from an austere cabinet, and scan gratefully a menu in Russian, French – and English. Then I take in my fellow diners. Whether in couples or larger groups they all speak in low tones, not shouting in the way that seems to have become compulsory in English eating-houses. The pianist arrives, stoops to open a low cupboard, and switches off the easy-listening muzak I hadn't noticed. Taking in her likely audience with a small shrug she begins to play, languorously, 'Reflets dans l'eau' three feet away from me. "Debussy," I say, because I have to speak. She affirms that. A quiet guessing game follows. "Chopin?" "Da." "Chopin again?" "Nyet, Sibelius." "So – the young Sibelius." "Da." And then – "Sibelius?" "Nyet, an old Russian song." She is a school music teacher needing to earn a little extra; there is something inevitable as well as deeply saddening about all this. The literary parallels don't work and seem insufficient, but in these circumstances they keep coming back. In this heat and evening sunlight

we could indeed be in a cottage on Ranevskaya's doomed estate, with a view of wheat fields tilled by peasants whose fathers were serfs. A fly runs down my forearm missing the sweatdrops.

13

I pass through a broad archway and am in a yard strewn with unaccountable rubble – there is no demolition, or building or renovation going on. But now it gives way to a large garden with paths and seats and a few strollers. That could be a reception entrance for the Akhmatova Museum, and it is. I pay at the counter and am directed to sit down first and see an introductory film which will be in an English version. The resident cat here is marmalade colour, very slim and classy. She watches, with me alone, a harrowing account of the poet's life, the exuberant early years, the hopes of the revolution, her and her son's subsequent persecution (the son's imprisonment), the queues for bread and for prison visiting, the irony of the respect temporarily restored to Akhmatova as a patriot in the darkest days of the war. At the end of the film, I cross the garden, go up some stairs and arrive in a meticulous re-creation of the poet's home. As in Bulgakov's haunting little flat in Moscow, so here in Akhmatova's more spacious first floor apartment. I notice the careful disarray of the writing desk, the steep rake of the typewriter keyboard, the well-used furniture. Last night I was in a fashionable penthouse terrace restaurant, where "New Russians" were dressed down, some so expensively it might have been cheaper to dress up. I was treating two penniless LSE students at the next table to a drink in (ambivalent) celebration of the fact that at four o'clock I had entered my eightieth year. Round this corner is Akhmatova's kitchen. Without much light: brown walls, a tiny sink with a thin tap. On a narrow surface to one side there are polished copper cooking vessels – for cooking what, during the siege of Leningrad? I sit down for a moment.



Alan Brownjohn's *Ludbrooke & Others* is reviewed on pp. 113-5. His novel, *Windows on the Moon*, is published by Black Spring Press.