Cournos, John (Korshoon, Isaac) (1881-1966)

John Cournos was an author and translator associated with the Imagist movement in London. His autobiographical novels and poetry document his transformation from a Russian-Jewish immigrant working in a Philadelphia factory into an author connected to the great thinkers and artists of his day. He is best known for making modern Russian literature accessible to an English audience through his translations and critical reviews.

In 1891 Cournos and his family, who had acquired the last name of his step-father, left their Ukrainian village for Philadelphia. They were poor, and by age twelve Cournos had quit his factory job for better conditions as a newsboy with the *Philadelphia Record*. From there he rose to office boy, then reporter, and eventually became assistant editor of the newspaper’s Sunday edition. However, in 1912 he left this position and his family, whom he had been supporting throughout, and relocated to London to become a poet. Cournos fictionalizes the remarkable journey from his early childhood in a Ukrainian village to his involvement in the literary and cultural world of London in the trilogy, *The Mask* (1919), *The Wall* (1921), and *Babel* (1922). His depiction of Jewish immigrant life and his attempt at integration thematically resembles the work of Anzia Yezierska, yet his work more conscious and detailed imitation of the genre of the *Bildungsroman* in its portrayal of the protagonist’s passionate concern with aesthetics and philosophy.

Once in London, Cournos interviewed important literary figures for US papers, and, in the cases of Edward Gordon Craig and Ezra Pound, befriended them. Through Pound he met a distinguished network of authors, artists, and intellectuals, and his circle of friends grew to include Ford Madox Ford, H.D., Richard Aldington, John Fletcher Gould, Edward O’Brien, Sherwood Anderson, John Galsworthy, Alfred Kreymborg, F. S. Flint, Louis Untermeyer, and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska among others.

Cournos’ initial literary publications were poems, which appeared in the first *Des Imagistes* anthology and in numerous periodicals. At the same time he began pioneering translations of stories and novels (*The Little Demon* [*The Petty Demon*] and *The Created Legend*) by the important Russian Symbolist, Feodor Sologub (Fedor K. Ternikov). The short stories appeared in *The Egoist* before being collected in a volume. Over the course of his career, Cournos also translated works by Alexei Remizov, Leonid Andreyev, Anton Chekhov, Ivan Bunin, and Andrei Bely (B. N. Bugaev) and introduced untranslated works to readers of *The* *Criterion* in his reviews and criticism of Soviet literary journals (1926-1938) (see Ayers).

During the Great War, he translated dispatches from the Russian Government Wireless service for the *Wireless Press* and travelled with the Anglo-Russian Commission to Petrograd, where he witnessed the October Revolution, which he decidedly opposed. Afterwards he wrote an anti-Soviet pamphlet called “London under the Bolsheviks.” A pacifist conscientious objector during the war, he associated the atrocities of the World War and the Bolshevik revolution with what he called the “machine worship” of Futurism and Vorticism. In a letter to the New York-based magazine, *The* *Little Review*, he wrote,

Having been translated into life, being after all no more than an integral part of the social processes which produced on the one hand Prussianism (the Vortex that failed), on the other, Bolshevism (which is all for scatteredness and dispersion), Vorticism (an off-shoot of Cubism) and Futurism have lost their raison d’etre. […]. It was still early in the war that the Russian Futurist Mayakovsky, with an intellectual honesty, which I commend to Mr. Pound, in referring to the pre-war art as ‘diabolic intuition, incarnated in the stormy today,’ declared Futurism was dead because it had become fully realized in life. (47 *Little Review* 6.2).

His viewpoint, however, was crushed by the editor Margaret Anderson’s brief response.

Moving on from his autobiographical trilogy, his friendships and experiences in London (1912-1931) supplied rich new material. His novels *Miranda Masters* (1926) and *The Devil Is an English Gentleman* (1932) depict Cournos as the victim of a double love-triangle between himself, H.D., Aldington, and Dorothy Sayers. H.D. later offered her own version of these years in the novel *Bid Me Not to Live* (1960) (where she depicts Cournos as Ivan Levsky), as did Sayers in *Strong Poison* (1930). His novel *O’Flaherty the Great* (1927) portrays John Gould Fletcher and Edward J. O’Brien, the latter of whom co-edited the *British Short Stories* anthology with Cournos between 1922 and 1927.

In 1931 Cournos returned to the United States, where he remained until his death. Only his *Autobiography* (1935) was met with notable success. He made a living reviewing books for the *New York Times* and other papers and by writing educational books for adolescents with his wife Helen Kestner Satterthwaite (pseudonym: Sybil Norton). In 1959 Cournos undertook his final work of translation, Andrei Bely’s *Petersburg* (which he translated as *St. Petersburg*), a novel often compared to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. While a significant contribution in making a Russian masterpiece accessible to an English-speaking audience (who had waited more than forty years since the novel’s publication), the translation has been perhaps too harshly described by subsequent translators as “bear[ing] only incidental resemblance to the original” and as “a major obstacle” to the novel’s appreciation by English speakers (Maguire and Malmstad xi). He died in New York City in 1966.

References and Further Reading

Satterthwaite, Alfred. (1976) ‘John Cournos and “H.D,”’ *Twentieth Century Literature*, 22(4): 394-410.

Maguire, Robert A. and John E. Malmstad. (1978) ‘Translators’ Introduction,’ *Petersburg*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press: Viii-xxii.

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List of Selected Works

*The Mask*, Doran, 1919.

*London under the Bolsheviks: A Londoner's Dream on Returning from Petrograd*, Russian Liberation Committee, 1919.

*The Wall*, Doran, 1921.

*Babel*, Boni & Liveright, 1922.

*In Exile*, Boni & Liveright, 1923.

*Miranda Masters*, Knopf, 1926.

*O'Flaherty the Great*, Knopf, 1927.

*The Devil Is an English Gentleman*, Farrar & Rinehart, 1932.

*Autobiography*, Putnam, 1935.

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Andreyev, Leonid. (1908) *Silence*, Brown Brothers.

Sologub, Feodor (Fedor K. Teternikov). (1915) *The Old House and Other Tales*, M. Secker.

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Remizov, Alexei. (1924) *Clock*, Knopf.

Chekhov, Anton. (1930) *That Worthless Fellow Platonov*, Dutton.

Bunin, I. A. (1934) *Grammar of Love*, H. Smith.

Bely, Andrei (B. N. Bugaev). (1959) *St. Petersburg*, Grove.

See also his contributions and translations in *Coterie*, *Des Imagistes*, *The Egoist*, *The Little Review*, and *Poetry* magazines (where his involvement with the Imagists is apparent in a manner not reflected in the volumes above) <modjourn.org>

On the images:

johncournos.tiff and theonlythingonwhichtheyagreed.tiff were both taken from the New York Times historical database. They appeared in "Worlds John Cournos Has Known" by Jane Spence Southron, Dec. 15, 1935.

The first is a portrait by Marvin Satterthwaite and the second is a cartoon with a caption I could not include (but ideally will) reprinted from the Literary Review of the New York Evening Post, Aug 2, 1947. This cartoon isn't very illustrative of the entry, however, so if we chose it I may need to add a little background. I am also attaching the original article in which these images were embedded as WorldsJohnCournos.pdf.

blundencournos.tiff is owned by the National Portrait Gallery: <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw89009/Edmund-Blunden-John-Cournos>