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Man out of Time

The moods and evasions of a Russian aesthete.

By Josh Billings • May 27, 2026

LITERARY CRITICISM | BROWSE & SEARCH

FOR SOMEONE LOOKING to escape history, Italy has always been a destination. Mostly this is because of the pictures. Great culture has been produced in a lot of places and times, of course, but the Renaissance produced a particular kind of culture that has been reproduced and reproduced, mutated and produced at their high points—that has provided even the most levelheaded observers, into feeling that, like a passenger entering a train, time is something they can get off at their convenience. Sometimes this freedom causes a kind of vertigo—a psych-disturbing hustle, like a stereogram's leap into the third dimension. Here, for example, is William Butler Yeats squinting at a postcard on the wall of his friend Ezra Pound's apartment in Rapallo, circa 1930:

> He has shown me upon the wall a photograph of a Cuisine Tara decoration in three compartments, in the upper the Triumph of Love and the Triumph of Chastity, in the middle Zodiacal signs, and in the lower certain events in Cosimo Tura's day. […]
>
> I may, now that I have recovered leisure, find that the mathematical structure, when taken up into imagination, is more than mathematical, that seemingly irrelevant details fit together into a single theme, that here is the world of time and colour, all Hodos Chameleontes, except for some odd corner where one discovers beautiful detail like that finely modelled foot in *Pertinax: Disastrous picture*.

"More than mathematical" may feel like a lot to see in a 4ft-year-old painting, but to Yeats and Pound—two self-styles trying to form themselves out of what looked to them like the rubble of the backwaters of the Irish and American 19th centuries—the if-Dante frescoes were not just decorations they were proofs. They demonstrated that art could be constructed by combining daily life and myth into super-works that treated their audience to make connections between things that, at first glance, did not seem to be connected. Even more importantly, they implied, like so many masterpieces of Italian art, that there was a vantage point the artist's mind could reach, a summit from which overwhelming and seemingly conflicting details made sense, fitting together into a single, coherent image.

Cut back to Italy (naturally), 1910, where another brilliant combinist is examining the if-Tura frescoes, this time in person. His name is Pavel Muratov, and he is Russian. For several years, he has devoted himself to the study of Italian culture and art through a combination of grand tours and sporadic expatriations. His compatriots have included (in the years before the war) Vladislav Khodasevich to socialite writer Maxim Gorky to the literary phenom Nina Berberova, whose memoirs contain what remains the single best description of Muratov ever written: he was "a man of quiet, who understood stereos, and a man of inner order, who understood the inner disorder of others," Berov faced with the frescoes, that ordered inner order.

> The frescoes of the Ferrara cycle all radiate the joy of a simple, decorous way of life, and a faith in the irrefutable happiness of existence. Borso is always benevolent and generous, and his lips are always set in a proud smile. His hunting expeditions are always successful; his justice is always fair […] Everything Cosmo [the presumed artist] has painted on the walls has had an effect as intoxicating as the crystalline air of the divine outdoors. His eyes saw constellations dispensing their blessings and was endlessly enthralled by the ethereal outlines of their mysterious signs. Ferrara could contemplate the heading rods of the zodiac without fear.

Differences in style aside, what interests Muratov in the if-Tura frescoes is the idea that everything that interests Yeats, that, in their capacity for fitting the universe together, Yet there's an echo of irony in the Russian's perspective that makes his admiration feel qualified and even a little wistful, at least compared to the prophetic confidence of his Irish contemporary. If Yeats's and Pound's two writers were thinking toward their shared subject not just through different national traditions or genres but through different eras, Muratov's perspective is shaped by the Great War, which (after perpetual Jobs the flagellic of Apocalypse modernism) is writing from inside its present moment, as if his words could been through the chaos of his time and into some structure hidden underneath it. Muratov, on the other hand, seems to be regarding the past from a safe (and ironic, like a lifts) who knows beforehand that her prophecy will be misunderstood.

It's not hard to imagine where this outsider perspective might have come from. By 1906, the year that he began the decade of travel and writing that would culminate in his masterpiece, *Evocations of Italy* (published in Russian between 1911 and 1924, now translated into English for the first time by Lena M. Lenček), the country Muratov had been born into had already started to unravel. The Russo-Japanese War had ended in Russia's defeat. Meanwhile, the unrest that would lead to the October Revolution could already be felt in everything from politics to the Italian opera to symbolism practiced by writers like Alexander Blok and Andrei Bely—writers whose influence was by their point past be prime, even though the period of silver age writers had not yet reached their full cultural relevance. Against the background of these changes, Muratov appeared as an appropriately timelessness talent: the kind of bellettrists just old enough to have had an breath of knowledge made his friends wonder if there was anything he couldn't write about. But it wasn't until his first grand tour that he discovered a subject that answered his energies. Here he is reviewing that discovery in *Evocations*' first chapter, on Venice:

> Only in the first few days is it difficult to find your way in the maze of Venetian streets and narrow canals, but then you become used to it and even begin to love its unexpected logic. And so, presenting the city daylight is a game of chess, you chart a course of right angles and advance into the remote quarter of the Madonna dell'Orto, where there is an astonishing spot: an open air pool, without a living soul, next to the Ferrar Madonna by Giovanni Bellini. The stillness of these shallow waters, the solitude, the enormous, abandoned buildings on the embankment—everything here inspires a sense of an otherworldly peace. Everything is like some ancient, forgotten dream.

With its ceiling, *Pro Raphaelite* minimus, this passage perfectly relays the attraction that we can imagine Venice exerting on someone seeing it for the first time—and not just the first time, either. This stylization is one of the tricks of *Evocations*, which in Russia has reached the kind of classic-status that even the most beloved books on travel, or art, rarely achieve. Muratov's prose is the reason, Muratov uses synesthesia(ally) specific while still providing a sense of abstraction, and it's the reason he's been translated into almost every major European language. Lenček's translation perpetually happening. Muratov uses the simple present tense ("uncomplicated present" in Russian) to transform his paragraphs into palimpsests, on everything that is so less vivid for being repeated. Similarly, he repeats the "I" that most have initially received this impression into a series of "eyes" and "you," allowing us to imagine ourselves seeing these things. The total effect is to create a brisked induction into the "unexpected logic" of Venice, and by extension Italy itself, the "knight's move" of thinking and feeling that *Evocations* of Italy will attempt to transmit over its succeeding 900 pages.

It's an ambition that Muratov's fellow modernists would have recognized, especially Pound, whose long poem *The Cantos* is, after all, nothing less than an insane textbook and Baedeker guide to the history of Western civilization. But whereas Pound aimed his pedagogy using the accusative *thou shalt* (or, more often, *shall not*) of Old Testament prophecy, Muratov uses the more inviting tactics that one might expect from an a-priori guide. He beckons on forward, pointing out a painting or crumbling ruin, assuming in on a subject—the life of the Sforzette Casanova, for example, or the birth of the Italian commedia dell'arte. But even in these more focused chapters, what makes the experience of reading *Evocations* of Italy so dazzling is the effortlessness with which Muratov connects these histories to the contemporary moment. Even one high-brow joke with a touch so light and sure that it makes even its now-obfuscated comparisons feel so immediate.

This is not to say that every step on Muratov's tour is lightheaded. On the contrary, one of the most remarkable aspects of his attention is the way that it turns its "privileged moments" (as Muratov's hero Walter Pater put it) to patient exploration of their context. A few pages after introducing us to the Venice of Madonnas and glimmering pools, Muratov directs our attention, gently but firmly, toward the surveillance state that ruled the city in the 16th century:

> The state watched over everything: it would not allow an assignation to say that it kept track of every step every citizen took. It kept an eye on clothing, family affairs, wine imports, church attendance, secret sins, new fashions, traditional customs, marriages, funerals, balls, and banquets. It permitted only what was necessary in its eyes, and in determining what could and could not be done, it showed remarkable wisdom. Like it or not, every citizen was at the service of the "most serene" republic and was obligated to contribute in his or her own way. Everything that today, in the paintings, looks like nothing more than a Bellotesque or casual juxtaposition of figures in sumptuous clothing, exotic servants, and precious fabrics, concealed a political meaning, the "good of the state" covertly informed every undertaking.

Reading passages like this, it's hard not to think of the Venetians bewitched by intellectual's own experience with "most serene republics," whether the autocracy of Yeats's pride or the communist dictatorship that succeeded it. The years Muratov was working on *Evocations* coincided with the Bolshevik Revolution and the Russian Civil War, and though, of course, he could not foresee the ramifications of these events, the sheer scarcity of his mind and his honesty as a historian sensitized him to the tension binding "artist" and "citizen" that would, at times, sometimes paradoxical ways. Venice is a dream; Venice is a prison; an inescapable nightmare and a dream so good its prisoners never want to leave. While prostitutes and police haunted the streets outside his house, Tintoretto (whom Muratov calls "the last great artist of the Italian Renaissance") painted portraits whose "spirituality" derives not from the transcendent realm but from the subjects he's been the painter's capacity to open those subjects up to the larger contemporary world around them:

> Tintoretto is not a psychologist; characters interest him little because character is only a manifestation of a cultural epoch or entire human spirit. Some of these portraits were good, others were bad, some were pellucid, others impenetrable. Sometimes he was at his matter! It is not perhaps, more important how much of the human, the eternal, and the universal they had in themselves! How much vital energy moved their heavy bodies, draped in voluminous red cloaks, gave their gaze that penetrating radiance, and produced the swarm of thoughts within their frowned skulls?

What does this master? Muratov's question is not just rhetorical. It's the question of a man who, even as he lived through one of the most tumultuous periods in Russian history (the first volume of *Evocations* of Italy, in which the chapter on Tintoretto appeared, was published in 1911, the full three-volume edition of *Evocations* in 1924), was still trying to balance the particular and the general. Muratov's method for doing this, here and throughout the book, is a lot like the one he describes in Tintoretto's painting, in which the "heavy bodies" and "voluminous red cloaks" of his subjects enter not simply because they are beautiful but to ground the "radiance" and *presence* into the painting (the term comes from John Berger, a critic Muratov surely would have loved if he had lived long enough to read him). Similarly, for Muratov, the rank of the critic, rather than just to be off details, is to use those details to evoke something that is essentially beyond them: the timelessness and transcendence that we experience in great art, which is why it continues to matter to us.

Putting an exact name on the presence, and what it can do ("the eternal" "is without human spirit"?) is perhaps less important than being able to see it, and to put us in a position to see it. Even at its trigger, the abstraction of Muratov's prose feels less evasive than precise, as if he were trying to give us spaces to appreciate for ourselves the works he's discussing. The more we acclimate to the rhythms of his sentences, the more we come to anticipate that even the rhapsodies will be followed by contextual storytelling that makes the former feel less like escapism than a distillation of general forces. In his ability to show us both sides of a coin—the expansive singularity of a masterpiece, say, as well as its network of influences), Muratov is himself both a man of his time and a distinctive artist. His translated Walter Pater and Vernon Lee, but he also read Michael Bakounin and Karl Marx. This combination of aestheticism and materialism might sound like an awkward fit, but in *Evocations*' best chapters, they work almost perfectly, enriching each other in ways that can feel thrillingly counterintuitive, as, for example, in his discussion of *The Last Supper*:

> For the artists of the time, *The Last Supper* was a dissent. […]
>
> In Leonardo's work, everything that had made up the exquisite charm of the Quattrocento was eliminated: the grace of its imperfections, the romance of its stumbling thought, the mystery of its hesitant consciousness, and the sweetness of its awkward speech. On the wall of the Cenacolo, as the result of many years of exertion by a great mind, everything had been understood, worked out, articulated. […]
>
> Only Venice was spared by some miracle. Everywhere else, the "joyful craft" of the painter was sacrificed to genius.

Heresy! But even as we gasp, we are inclined to give the benefit of the doubt to a writer with Muratov's titanic grasp of art history. His discussion of *The Last Supper* highlights an interesting limitation of his criticism, which, despite its brilliance, can feel at times unduly inclined toward an esotericism, a stubbornness preference for the lesser known and the obscure. It is a preference that, perhaps, owes something to the venerable Russian predilection for talking around the truth rather than directly at it. This is the tradition that contemporary Russian poetics has called "aesopiaics." It's a tradition that, in the hands of a writer like Osip Mandelstam, produces lines like "Tyrant, tyrant, power is an abscess: the meaningful surprise spoce is a surplus." Though what also is self-conscious aesopiatic book, *Evocations of Italy* tends to avoid the more obvious tourist traps, preferring back roads and side alleys that take longer but provide a richer visit. The participants accumulates a kind of nervous suggestiveness the further we progress. Where exactly is this tour going? And where is the high point we were promised, that dawnrising view our tour guide has been saying?

This kind of impatience grows as Muratov's journey (technically a collage of journeys) winds toward its formal end in *Evocations*' third volume. The final volume concentrates the back half of cramps and frequent snack breaks, but it's also the less pressurized stretch where Muratov's love of slowness and unexpected connections really gets to shine. We encounter discussions on Marino's beloved *Piero della Francesca* ("His petty, profound and ancient, carries more wisdom, meaning, and universality than the ecclesiastical poetry of, say, a Fra Angelico") and the friendship between Saint Francis and Russian everyday (holy fool). Still, despite the clear relish of these and other digressions, a certain heaviness seeps into the tone of the writing, a drag that can feel almost physical, as if the indefatigable writer of the first two volumes were trying to remember which of these grottos will provide the best opportunity for a nap. At times the prose could verge into exaggeration, or at least an end of summer *Phenomenon*: that from which dreams are made.

> So long as white oxen drink from the Springs of Clitumno or they dial in Virgil's time, and so long as larks circle in the warm currents above the fields of Bocagna as they dial in the days of Francis of Assisi, so long will the world seek from the treasure of innocence and joy with which to redeem its many sorrows and moral failures.

This is fairly the haven, fairly the single still point in a tumbling world. It's the kind of refuge that tourists of every age dream of finding. But to the reader in the 21st century, when this larks have been scattered by light pollution and the springs filled with pesticide, Muratov's devotion to the high ground of Truly can feel less like a retreat than a strategic maneuver. Beauty, nobility, spirit: These are, after all, lights by which to judge the failures of our era. In a similar way, during his own visionary travel journal, *Journey to Arzerum* (1910), the poet Osip Mandelstam (whom Muratov would die without ever having met) asked "Which tense do you want to live in?" before going on to answer his question:

> I want to live in the imperative of the future passive participle, in the "what ought to be." […]
>
> Yes, the Latin genius, when it was young and greedy, created first of all the prototype of verbal traction as the prototype of our whole culture, and it was not the only thing that "ought to be" but the thing that "ought to be praised"—laudanter est—[that which pleases].

For all its insight, Muratov's book lacks the poetic audacity to state the case this directly (Mandelstam: "Poetry is the continuity of being right"). But its yearning clearly stems from the same unshakable, homing-pigeon "imperative" for the example of Italy (Mandelstam again: "There is no syntax: there is a magnetized impulse, a longing for the omni of a ship, a longing for a lounge of worms, a longing for an unpronounced law, a longing for Florence"). As Muratov himself acknowledges, the example of Italy is hardly straightforward, on the contrary, it's returned in a way that can feel pedagogically problematic but is just a deeper part of the lesson. At the end of the day, skipping the sweetness of the world to get to its masterpieces misses what may be the grand tour's most enduring truth—namely, that even the most miraculous work of art is born, not just into a world of time, but into a world of people, who are subject to the same forces that make us human and aspectacular, at least those of us willing to abandon our travelogs and embrace a way of thinking about the cultures of the past that is intimate and probably uncomfortable.

It might be disappointing too, but as any good transfer knows, a journey that doesn't risk disappointment isn't a journey; it's a trip, a leisure cruise that glides along without ever giving its passengers a chance to discover that the thing they take away is the same thing they brought. Because Italy, fossil, and the masterpieces of one generation become the mine-works of the next. But longing remains. This is the tragedy of history, which no one escapes; it's also history's hope, or at least the beginning of it. In many ways, it's the only "eternal" truth that Italy dishes, as Muratov acknowledges in his epilogue, writing in the simple past tense as he watches a meaningful passing the same Venice where he began his journey:

> The *Tartana* left at night, and in the morning, I spent a long time looking at the spot on the water's surface where it had set the ship before, glowing enticingly with its white electric lights, and I remembered how, in the past, I had thought that Venice was a place that was destined to see new creations, legendary and extraordinary? So be it. But may the vow I took that moment be fulfilled one day: to return to Italy, even more faithful to it and more liberated by it, and set again the quiet splendor of the Venetian lagoon and in the circle of its horizon here and my days.

His didn't end up doing this, unfortunately, although here again we could remind ourselves that some of the best projections are the ones that stay unfulfilled. Muratov died, after a life spent in exile in Berlin, Rome, Paris, and London, on October 5, 1936, in a small village in Ireland. His grave—a slab of weather-beaten granite—rests on his details in the form of dates and the name (or at least the anglicized version): "Paul Muratoff, 1881–1936."

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