

AperTO - Archivio Istituzionale Open Access dell'Università di Torino

**A Spy for an Unknown Country: Essays and Lectures by Merab Mamardashvili. Ed. Julia Sushytska and Alisa Slaughter. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2020. xiv, 248 pp.**

**This is the author's manuscript**

*Original Citation:*

*Availability:*

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1877880> since 2022-10-29T09:44:59Z

*Published version:*

DOI:10.1017/slr.2022.195

*Terms of use:*

Open Access

Anyone can freely access the full text of works made available as "Open Access". Works made available under a Creative Commons license can be used according to the terms and conditions of said license. Use of all other works requires consent of the right holder (author or publisher) if not exempted from copyright protection by the applicable law.

(Article begins on next page)

Accepted Version. *Slavic Review*, 2022 Doi: 101017/slr.2022.195

*A Spy for an Unknown Country. Essays and Lectures by Merab Mamardashvili*. Eds. Julia Sushytska and Alisa Slaughter. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2020, 248 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. \$32.95, hard bound.

Merab Mamardashvili's figure and thought is arousing increasing interest in the international scholarly community. In 2019, appeared Alyssa DeBlasio's monograph (*The Filmmaker's Philosopher: Merab Mamardashvili and Russian Cinema*) and a special issue of the journal *Studies in East European Thought* on his "philosophical legacy". But only a few translations of the philosopher's original works into English, as well as into other languages, are currently available. This collection edited by Julia Sushytska and Alisa Slaughter is meant partly to fill this gap by providing the English translation of some of Mamardashvili's works dating back to the last years of his life, which happened to be the last years of existence of the Soviet Union as well. Here one finds interviews and papers delivered at conferences and seminars, published between 1988 and 1989, and three lectures on Marcel Proust (number 1, 6, and 11), from a course offered first in 1982 and a second time in 1984. The translation of an unpublished text, under the evocative title of "What Belongs to the Author," is provided together with the fascinating facsimile of the first pages of the original typed draft with handwritten notes. Two essays complete the volume: a brief survey of Mamardashvili's biography and thought by Annie Epelboin, and a very interesting contribution by Miglena Nikolchina on the concept of *Verwandlung* (transformation), from Mamardashvili's early work on Karl Marx's "transformed forms" (*verwandelte Formen*) up to his interpretation of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (*Verwandlung*).

The particular character of Mamardashvili's work explains the editors' preference for interviews, papers, and lectures. In opposition to the dead and deformed language of official Soviet ideology, Mamardashvili practiced philosophy as a "personal experiment." He never conveyed to his audience already established "truths," but offered the concrete experience of thinking, where the

living language of thought creates a space for authentic encounters and discussions. Language as a “form of life” can only take place in public conversations, in the *agora*, which Mamardashvili created every time he engaged his audience in his own thinking, during a lecture, a seminar, or an interview (158-162). His philosophy takes shape with an always unconventional and fully deliberate language, in the concrete practice of oral discourse.

Such a combination makes translation particularly difficult. Mamardashvili constantly deviates from the trivialized meaning of current language, thereby creating a tension that potentially generates authentic and original thoughts. But he does so in the apparently effortless flow of oral discourse, where implicit references, common sayings, and even gestures help destabilize the audience and move them from the dead space of the official language into the living experience of thinking. Here the translators are well aware of such a challenge. In the introduction they offer an interesting discussion, for example, about their handling of the translation of “Russian” in the double sense of nationality and citizenship, and the even more complex rendering of the Russian terms *chelovek* and *lichnost*’ as “human being,” “individual,” “person” (43-46).

This collection offers English-speaking readers the chance to “hear” Mamardashvili’s voice as an important philosopher both within the late-Soviet context, and in himself, because of the depth of his theoretical questions and the originality of his answers. Mamardashvili develops a noncanonical interpretation of Marx, René Descartes, and Immanuel Kant, as well as of Proust and Kafka. Read in the context of the current discussions of nation and freedom, Mamardashvili’s idea that “culture as such is an ability or capacity to practice complexity and diversity” (59) points out the role and the responsibility of the European traditions of thought in dealing with present-day crises.

The title of this collection alludes to the philosopher’s condition, which, “like any human being whose goal is to recreate themselves,” can be described in Proust’s words as a “citizen of an unknown homeland” (25). The spy’s strategy to keep oneself invisible is not only a way of life that allows the philosopher to stay free under unfree circumstances, but also provides a diverse point of

view from which to observe the whole European culture. The editors of this collection compare Mamardashvili's belonging to Europe, and at the same time his acknowledgement of his own distance, to some ideas of recent post-colonial studies (50-51), thereby offering new perspectives and new reasons to discover one of the most compelling thinkers of the late Soviet times.

Daniela Steila, University of Turin