

**MISS HERBERT, BY ADAM THIRLWELL**

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By Nick Shepley

Literary style, even when it's as racy as this, does not sell as well as threesomes. For this reason, *Miss Herbert* will not attract as large a readership as *Politics*. With over 500 pages asking what 'style' is and whether it can be translated, *Miss Herbert: A collage of novels and romances in ten languages, on four continents, with maps, portraits, illustrations and a variety of helpful indexes* does not have the snappy, explosive force of *Politics: A Novel*. Nor is this the intention. *Miss Herbert* opens with Flaubert this time round, not anal sex and pink fluffy handcuffs.

*Miss Herbert* is more than just 'a novel'. It is an atlas, a history book, and a critique of literature bound together in the form of a gossip column. It is vast and international, but it is also local and visceral. With a libertine smattering of anecdote, fact and lateral thinking, *Miss Herbert* is a search engine with soul.

In May 1857, Gustave Flaubert credited Miss Juliet Herbert, his niece's governess, with an English translation of *Madame Bovary* 'which fully satisfies'. But with her return to England, the translation – 'a masterpiece' – was lost. Miss Herbert disappeared along with her translation. 150 years later, Adam Thirlwell, the youngest of Granta's 2003 'Best of Young British Novelists', has recast the prim Victorian governess as a time-travelling literary goddess. Literary history, à la Thirlwell, has been sexed up.

*Miss Herbert* is an acute, critically sensitive, intelligent, and literary polyglot. She (this is *Miss Herbert* – the novel as heroine) is also polygamous, leaping unselfconsciously from one great author's bed to another, stripping off the trappings of each writer until they stand naked, revealed in their everyday humanness. Oblivious to tradition, scoffing at the romantic, the emptily lyrical, the sentimental, *Miss Herbert* bounces between centuries and countries with an irreverent disdain for boundaries, chronology, or reputations.

In the course of her escapades she will regularly leave Flaubert to eye up and unabashedly disrobe the likes of James Joyce, Laurence Sterne, Denis Diderot, Jorge Luis Borges, Georges Perec, Leo Tolstoy, Saul Bellow, Anton Chekhov, Alexander Pushkin, Marcel Proust, Vladimir Nabokov and countless, varied others. Once naked, these authors cling to their one remaining thread of individuality: their style. But in pursuing the nature of translation, *Miss Herbert* threatens to take this away from them too.

For those who do choose to read *Miss Herbert* (and anyone who writes, or wishes to, must) she will be a lifelong friend and companion. Literary style is dark, inexplicable matter which is searching for the stars. *Miss Herbert*, though, with her self-deprecating chuckle forever tinkling in the wings, remains grounded: 'The cosmic,' Thirlwell reminds us, 'is always misspelled as comic.'

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N. B: This review was previously published in the Marylebone Journal