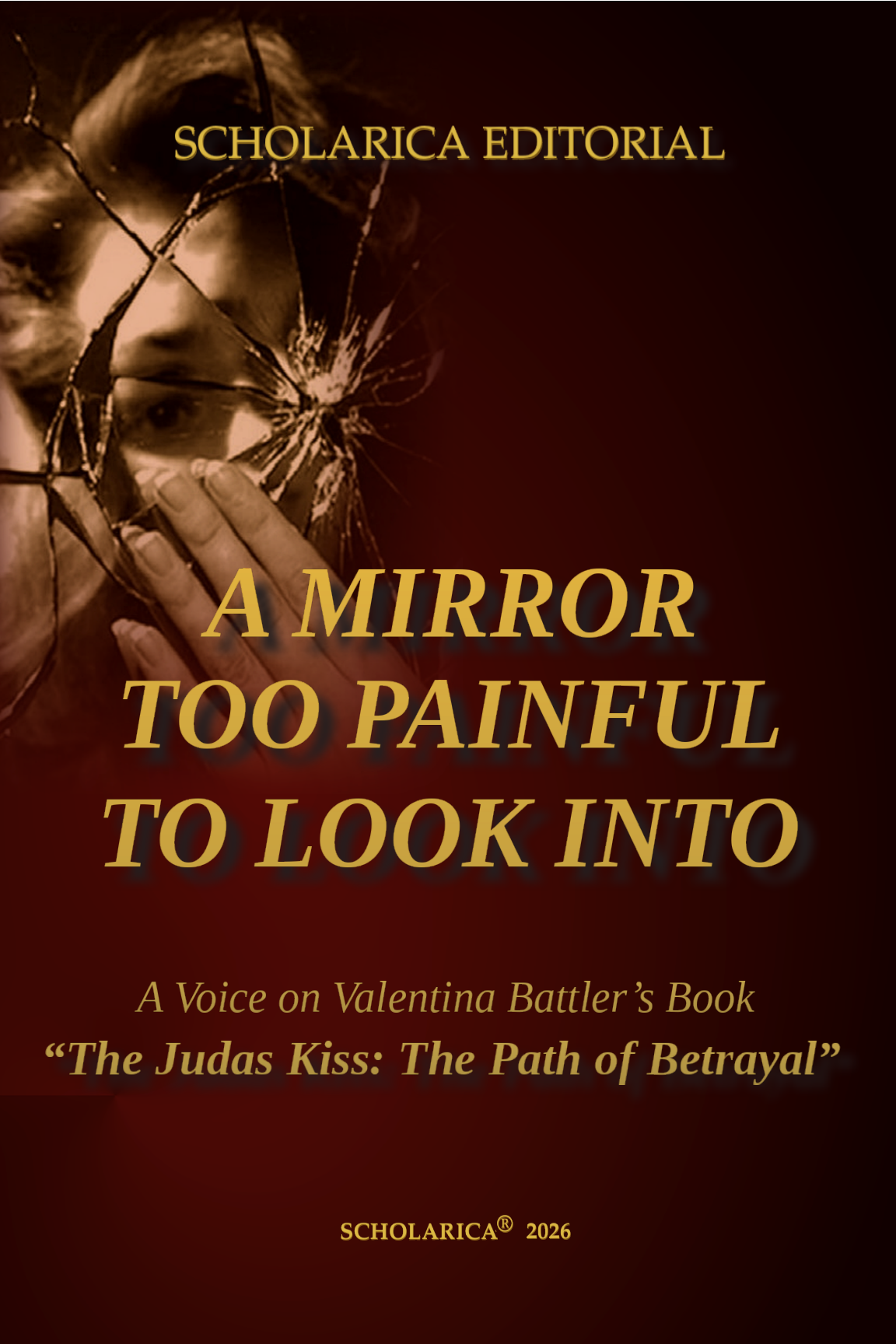


A close-up photograph of a person's face, partially obscured by a shattered mirror. The person's hand is visible, touching the broken glass. The background is dark and moody, with the person's face and the broken mirror being the primary focus. The text is overlaid on this image.

SCHOLARICA EDITORIAL

A MIRROR TOO PAINFUL TO LOOK INTO

*A Voice on Valentina Battler's Book
"The Judas Kiss: The Path of Betrayal"*

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Scholarica® 2026

FROM THE EDITORS

Scholarica® is an independent publishing house dedicated to works that demand inner effort from the reader.

We do not review books. We live them.

The following text is not a review in the conventional sense, but a recorded conversation between two of our editors.

Along with the manuscript of "The Judas Kiss: The Path of Betrayal," we received from the author an accompanying Letter-Address—so unusual in language and scope of themes that the book was read twice within the publishing house. We published it.

Later, the author passed on to us a review by the American agency Kirkus Reviews—a paid service that Valentina Battler called "the Seal." Only after reading it did we understand why: in the style of her heroine Anna, the author gave a precise name to what she had received.

The review compelled us to return to the book anew. We analyzed the Kirkus text and, with the author's permission, publish our discussion as an editorial article. In other words, this is criticism of criticism. The context is extraordinary and, in our opinion, it deserves attention.

This is the only instance in which we publicly review a book we have published on behalf of the publishing house.

* * *

First—a Letter-Address from Valentina Battler regarding the publication of the book.

ABOUT THE BOOK FROM THE AUTHOR

The Judas Kiss. The Path of Betrayal

This book is not for reading “for the evening.” It will not while away your evening—it will cut it short. It will not entertain you, comfort you, or offer ready-made recipes for happiness. This is not a text from author to reader—it is a path to a mirror. If you seek literature that lulls you to sleep, better not to open this book. This is not simply a story—it is an attempt to fix coordinates at a moment of absolute non-coincidence with oneself.

The book with the audacious, almost frightening title—“The Judas Kiss: The Paths of Betrayal”—was written by a woman whose name echoes my own—Anna.

Anna is a musician, a pianist. In the past. She became an artist. Once at an exhibition, she heard from a visitor standing beside her: “This artist makes you live in the paintings; ‘you’ enter the images, solve their questions.” And on that same day, a lady came to the exhibition who said to her companion with a distinctly French accent: “This is a different worrrld.” And right there beside a painting stood a young beauty in red boots above the knee. Crying. Anna approached.

«What happened?»

«You turned my life around. Thank you.»

Probably it was precisely this tuning fork of “another world” that became the foundation of the book “The Judas Kiss.”

* * *

What is the book about?—About the vertical: of both falling and rising. The Judas Kiss is not a gesture, not an act in Gethsemane. Judas is not simply a character or event. He is here as a sign of that very moment when a person makes a decision. The author, this strange Anna, turns the gaze inward, into that realm where space begins to curve from lies. Into that very silence in which the most terrible thing is committed—betrayal. Not of “Christ”—of oneself. Not for thirty pieces of silver, but for a cup of warm tea, for a soft armchair, for the right “not to know,” when truth simply ceases to be needed.

“You” still breathe, go to work, converse, and even kiss your loved ones, but you are already a mechanism. In this moment, the most terrible thing happens: the transition from a living state to a mode of “functioning.” You have betrayed your vertical—yourself—for the sake of horizontal peace. Betrayal is not a crash. It is when the gaze passes by, the hand is cold, and the soul indifferent. It is a verdict that “we” sign upon ourselves. In a whisper.

The most merciless thing in this book is the anatomy of the fall. This is not Dante’s Hell with its fire and brimstone; it is the Hell of silence and peace. Nine circles leading inward: from the innocent unwillingness to know to the final, ninth circle—of absolute cold. There, the person no longer hurts, no longer asks about anything, and no longer lays claim to anything. This ideal peace is the truest death, one that has arrived while still alive.

About the book’s characters? There are three: Anna, Oleg, and German. What do they talk about? Their dialogues are a polyphony in different keys: a trio of loners that only underscores the chasm of difference. They do not come to agreement; they exist in different moral temperatures.

Each dialogue in the book is a test of how much truth a person can endure before they begin to lie to themselves for salvation, and the characters virtuosically use speech in order not to understand. They build “stable constructions” from logic to protect themselves from the main thing: from death while alive.

Besides dialogues and the “inner voice,” the book contains an important element where the word passes into the gaze—several visual images of Anna’s paintings. There, where the word still tries to maneuver, to be evasive, to build protective barricades from justifications, painting strikes point-blank. This is moral optics.

Rachmaninoff’s “Symphonic Dances” transformed into a vision—painting, not “for the interior.” This is Art as moral fact. This is the sweep of a conductor’s baton, frozen in space. The paintings themselves, and what is said about them, are the optics of betrayal. What does the eye see? The eye sees the junction of worlds. A painting should not “please”; it should judge. It is a lie detector: you either hear the tolling of bells, the alarm, or tinkling little bells. This series, dedicated to Rachmaninoff, titled by Anna “Transcending Reality,” affirms the principle itself: above fact, above existence, above explanation. This is the measure to which a person either rises or refuses.

An important place in the book is occupied by reflections on the painting “Confusion”—an image of murder in art not through prohibition but through interpretation, when the living is translated into the comprehensible, the manageable, the safe. And “The Apple of Discord” exposes the technology of temptation: not evil as an act, but choice as a means of destroying integrity. This is unity apart.

The images of paintings placed in the book require no commentary. They judge in silence. Alone.

The book offers no recipes for salvation. Anna is neither a doctor nor a priest. She does not prescribe a pill for pain and does not absolve sins. But she gives something greater. She leaves a high privilege—the responsibility for preserving inner height.

The philosophical center of this movement is the section “Nine Circles Inward.” Here, almost everything external disappears, and what remains is the geometry of conscience. Unlike Dante, Anna’s circles are not places of punishment but states of consciousness; not a fall, but a distancing from one’s own center along the circles of the destruction of conscience. The illusion of innocence gives way to the illusion of feeling, then to the illusion of suffering, then to the illusion of calculation, as though conscience could be dosed. Then

comes offense, denial, and self-justification. And finally, the cold of consent—the point where the soul ceases to ache. The most frightening thing here is not pain. The most frightening thing is peace. Peace without a question. The peace of those who no longer seek a way out, because they no longer feel the need to seek one.

From this depth emerges the threshold of the chapter “Letters”—a moment when any external landmarks become dangerous. Dante was necessary to see the depth, but his structure begins to block one’s own light. And a person remains alone, not as a hero but as a being who has reached the center and discovered that one can go no further by following a model. One can only cry out or fall silent. And if one cries out, then so that the sound weighs heavier than silence.

“Letters” in “The Judas Kiss” arise not as a literary device or emotional gesture. They appear there where no other form of speech is possible besides the question. Dialogue is exhausted, reflection leads no further, art has already said everything it could, and has fallen silent. At this point, only an appeal remains—one that does not count on an answer. Into what is “above.”

This is precisely why the letters sound like a solo part without orchestra. Everything that once supported the word—culture, conversation, shared experience—vanishes. This is the cadenza: a moment of absolute risk, when it is impossible to hide behind form.

It is crucially important that the Letters begin with an address to oneself. This move destroys the familiar hierarchy of the spiritual path. Anna does not begin with the highest and does not seek justification “above the real.” She puts into question the very possibility of completion: “Why did you not put a period? Why did you stop?” These questions sound like accusations, but they gradually reveal a different truth: completion would mean stopping. Everything that is alive cannot be completed. Everything that demands a finale is already dead. The period is death.

The letter to oneself fixes the fundamental law of the entire book: if the answer is inaccessible to an earthly person, then the question is mandatory.

The address to God is not a prayer. There is no request in it, no expectation of an answer. “Non-answer” is also an answer. Anna asks God questions

not to receive a sign, but to avoid lying to herself. This does not sound like relief, but like tension.

The subsequent letters are addressed to those whose presence exceeds earthly life. This is not a search for authority or dialogue with it. Each addressee is merely a form of testing one's measure.

Dante embodies the order of fall, of sin. His Hell is a completed architecture of the moral world, where sin is named, punishment defined, and fear has the form of punishment. Anna walks through these circles and may doubt: perhaps the most terrible sin is not betrayal as an act, but a life without choice, without risk, without doubt. Order does not liberate if it substitutes the inner measure. Fear can prevent a fall, but it cannot lead to truth.

Leonardo is the embodiment of light and knowledge. He sought the laws of life, the connection of everything with everything, movement, the breathing of the world. His light is complex and ambiguous, because any question can blind and destroy, as it happened with the fallen angel—Lucifer. Leonardo offered no easy answers and did not promise salvation. His light does not ease—it demands.

Michelangelo transfers tension into the realm of matter. Here, harmony disappears, and weight appears. He did not create gods; he freed the living from stone. His holiness is not in radiance but in the body, in the gesture, in silence. The Pietà becomes an image of love that exists after all questions, when nothing can be changed, and all that remains is to hold and let go. In this letter, the last hope for beauty as salvation vanishes. Truth can be mute, heavy, insoluble—and precisely for that reason, genuine.

No letter closes. Each remains open, like a rift. The letters do not provide support; on the contrary, they strip it away. They do not calm; they hold a person in a state of ultimate responsibility. And that is their ethical function: not to allow a return to the former peace.

After the letters, the book does not return to narration. It enters a silence that turns out to be not only internal but social. Around there are fewer and fewer of those who are ready to listen. The person who asks questions follows a path familiar to anyone who has not agreed to easy reconciliation: first,

they argue with them; then they pity them; then they grow tired; and finally, they stop listening. Not out of malice but out of the desire to preserve stability in the mass. The letters turn out to be not only the culmination of the inner path but also a point of rupture with a world that prefers the quiet of each question. They promise no salvation and offer no way out. They fix the only thing that remains possible: not to renounce the inner measure, even if one pays for this with solitude.

After the Letters, the book settles, as music settles after the final chord, when the sound has already vanished, but the space still holds it.

Anna stops writing not because truth equals silence, but because the possibility of being heard is exhausted. This is a fundamental distinction. Silence here is a social reality. Around there are fewer and fewer of those who are ready to listen to questions, who do not promise comfort, not out of cruelty, but out of the desire to preserve equilibrium.

The person who refuses an easy answer becomes a “system glitch.” They are neither banished nor punished. They are gently pushed aside, advised to “take care of yourself,” “not to go too far,” “not to destroy your soul.” These words sound caring—and that is precisely why it is so hard to recognize the boundary in them. Where does permissible doubt end and the danger of solitude begin? Who determines what is “too much”? And is not this very boundary a form of collective self-deception?

Anna feels herself to be a being of a different nature. She is too sharp to sit quietly and humbly, and too quiet to cry out and rebel. For this, tragedy does not follow—distance follows. Remoteness, in which words return as echoes. This is not punishment. This is the price.

The afterword is a gaze into the very lowest point of the entire book. There are neither those who suffer nor those who cry out. There are those who do not speak. They do not call, do not demand light, do not argue, and do not seek. They need no answers. They are hoarders of the abyss. Neither empty nor full. Essence without a name. This is neither evil nor pain. This is peace without a question. This silence is more terrible than any tragedy. Because tragedy presupposes tension, and tension is life. To stop asking means to stop being.

Scholarica Editorial

This is precisely why the book's final word is the address "To the Reader." "The Judas Kiss" ends where the reader begins. This is not an attempt at engagement. This is a transfer of responsibility. Not to a character or fate, but to the next bearer of the path. To take this book means to accept not knowledge but obligation. To look with eyes inward, so that "life... lived." The book ends with an electric discharge—a manifesto: "BE!"

This is the only possible answer the book leaves to the reader

Valentina Battler

* * *

This is the accompaniment to the book we received. The very style of the letter-address is so unusual, both in language and in the scope of themes, that we decided to discuss it in the editorial department. We published the book, and it is available.

And when, after publication, the Kirkus Reviews review appeared, our conversation about the book resumed—and became what you are now reading.

FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH THE MANUSCRIPT

Olga — editor of the poetry and prose department.

Matt — editor of the criticism and essays department.

A dialogue without cuts.

* * *

O: Have you read it?

M: Twice. “The Judas Kiss” is a work that defies classification, and therein lies one of its strengths. It is not a novel in the usual sense, not a philosophical treatise, not a collection of essays, and not a literary-critical study—and at the same time it is all of these at once.

In popular novels, action means movement, meeting friends, visiting museums, mountain climbing, swimming underwater, and flying in airplanes. Here, everything is arranged differently. Everything takes place in a single room, where the three characters of the book are engaged in a unique kind of movement: the movement of thought across the most extreme and painful landscapes. Valentina Battler sets up a mirror, or rather, a reflector, which projects onto the reader three existential positions, three ways of being in the world, three solo parts, each of which sounds independently, while together they undertake a journey of thought through the most essential questions of life. “Unity apart” forms a complete score, a complete palette of life.

Initially, I read the text marveling at the author’s inventiveness, at the language, the breadth of questions, and the ceaseless movement. The characters remain in one place, yet the flow of inner tension inexorably pushes forward. Reading it a second time, I understood the form, or better said, the musical architecture of the book. Anna is a musician, and she has built the book as a large sym-

phonic form with an exposition of themes, their development through counterpoint and collision, a climax, and a final solo cadenza, after which what remains is not silence but a hum, as after the last chord in a hall where no one dares to applaud.

O: You say—symphonic form. Is this not a metaphor?

M: No. The architectonics of the book is not an arbitrary division into chapters but a symphonic form in its classical sense. “Autumn Conversation” (Part I) is the exposition, where all the main themes are introduced: Anna and Oleg meet after many years of separation, and in their dialogue, as in the exposition of sonata form, the principal and secondary themes emerge—art and betrayal, purity and compromise, calling and self-renunciation.

What may seem like repetition in the dialogues of “Autumn Conversation” is, in fact, a technique of thematic development: each return to a theme occurs on a new spiral, with a new coloring, like the main theme enriched with a new counterpoint at each iteration. This is not writerly redundancy—it is musical thinking transposed into prose.

“The Garden of Gethsemane” and “Symphonic Dances” (Part II) is the development section, where themes collide, intertwine, and reach their greatest tension. Rachmaninoff, Bach, Dante—they all enter the text as active forces, contrapuntal lines alongside the characters’ voices.

“Nine Circles Inward” (Part III) is the climax, an inversion of the Dantean descent: not the observation of others’ sins but an immersion in oneself, into one’s own soul, where each circle is not a circle of hell but of self-knowledge.

O: And after that—the “Letters.” That is where the cadenza comes from.

M: Precisely. Anna remains alone on stage. Letters to herself, to God, to Dante, to Leonardo, to Michelangelo—this is a solo voice which, after all the polyphony of the preceding parts, sounds with unbearable clarity. A cadenza in musical form is the moment when the orchestra falls silent, and the soloist remains alone, sustaining the entire structure. In a cadenza, it is impossible to hide. Here, the form is you yourself. Battler/Anna is a pianist. She knows this not from books. She knows it with her hands.

O: The structure of this text reveals a quality I would call inevitability. Indeed—music written in words. The author does not narrate about music; she conducts. And the reader is offered a seat in the front row, or more precisely, before a mirror. The book works precisely as a mirror that turns the reader’s “eyes inward.” You can no longer glance casually. You are forced to stand and look at your own reflection.

M: It is also interesting that Anna judges no one, condemns no one. She holds this very mirror so close that it fogs from the tension and the reader’s breath.

In the book, the phrase sounds like a refrain: “I want to turn my interlocutor’s eyes inward.” Anna formulates her principle; Battler embodies it. These are different functions, though both heroines are one and the same person.

Note that, at the very end, having expressed her gratitude to her readers, Anna signed with two names. What courage!

POLYPHONY OF THREE VOICES

O: The book is built on three voices: Anna, Oleg, and German. But these are not three “characters” in the novelistic sense; they are three existential positions, three answers to the question: what happens to a person when they betray their calling?

M: Three personalities exist at different temperatures—moral temperatures, to use the term the book itself suggests. Anna thinks in images that reflect her worldview. Oleg thinks musically—his inner italicized monologue sounds simultaneously with Anna’s speech, but in a different key. German thinks in categories and laws. Where Anna feels, German formulates. Where she has a fire, German measures the temperature.

O: I want to talk about the characters’ language. Anna’s language—where does it come from?

M: Her words come not from a dictionary but from experience. Tsvetaevan precision, if you will—definitional. Anna: the moral tuning fork of the book. An artist and poet, a voice of moral clarity. Her position may seem uncompromising to the point of harshness, but there is no arrogance in it—there is hard-won clarity. This is the voice of a person who knows firsthand what it means “to be,” because they have seen what it means “not to be.” Anna does not judge; she speaks from the height to which she has risen at the cost of her own life, where thought and word are fused. Her every word is herself.

O: And Oleg?

M: I was struck by how it is visually constructed in the book: the shift of text and italics! We simultaneously read and hear what Oleg says to Anna and what he is thinking at that moment. The gap between the spoken and the authentic—that is the very space in which betrayal lives. Oleg knows Anna’s truth. Feels her precision. But he clings to his own constructions, as to broken railings. To survive in the fire of his own mirror.

Perhaps Oleg is the most tragic and at the same time the most hopeful figure in the book. A graduate of the Leningrad Conservatory, a musician on the scale of Glenn Gould. His path is one of successive retreats from his own calling: from music to business, from serving art to serving the market, from inner height to inner emptiness. But it is precisely Oleg who does what makes the book not a verdict but a path. A pianist who has passed through all the circles of self-betrayal and returned to the keys to play Bach for children carries within himself the most powerful affirmation: the way back exists. But the price of return is the knowledge of what you have lost.

O: And German? Anna says to him, “You are your own truth. That is your defense. And your prison.” Tell me, is this a portrayal or a verdict?

M: This is a long conversation, but since you ask, I’ll say. This is love. She sees through him—and loves him. Sees his loneliness—and does not save him. Because one cannot be saved from oneself. One can only be shown.

German in the book is an ontological counterpoint. He is a major scholar, and his voice in the book is not the “path of compromise” but a full solo part

in thinking, structured fundamentally differently. When he appears in “Nine Circles Inward,” the entire picture changes: from the vulnerability and imagistic impressionism of Anna to the objectivity of an ontological gaze upon the world. Anna herself defines the difference in their thinking with the precision of a formula: German “puts everything in its place with straight angles,” and she “hangs lace on his corners.” This is not consonance; these are two different ways of knowing the world that do not merge but complement each other, like two instruments in a duet, each carrying its own part yet creating a unified sound.

O: “Bricks and lace”—that is almost the formula of their marriage.

In the chapter “Nine Circles,” this interaction manifests with full force. First, Anna writes in her notebook her vision of Dante’s circles. It is lyrical, imagistic, and suffused with pain and compassion. Each circle for her is not a theological category but a living wound: Limbo is “more terrifying than hell,” because there they “were not allowed to live”; Lust is “when the heart became a trap.” This is a poetic, almost physiological, experience of evil.

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And then German quietly enters, and everything changes. His Limbo is not a hospital without doctors but “a museum, clean, calm, almost sterile,” where Homer, Virgil, Aristotle are “formulas, completed.” Lust is “not a storm but an underground river that erodes from within... does not burn but quietly and slowly corrodes.” Gluttony for him is “not a sin but a symptom. Sometimes, poverty. Sometimes, loneliness. Sometimes simply joy.” German introduces a dimension into the book that Anna could not have created alone: scholarly objectivity. Anna is simply structured differently. He looks at the world through the prism of ontology: not “how I feel it” but “what it is.” And at the same time, he can squint, of irony, of tenderness: “Annechka, let’s not fight... you can’t do that with you.” German is the one with whom Anna “checked” not only

answers but the questions themselves. Their dialogue in “Nine Circles” is a checking of “moral clocks,” and they both know it. Bricks and lace, straight angles and wings, “a machine with wings” and the unity of the whole.

DIALOGUES: DOUBLE VISION

O: The dialogues in this book are two-layered. But I want to ask about something else. When Anna is left alone after Oleg’s departure, she conducts her own inner dialogue. She writes down conversations in that very unwritten book about betrayal. A book within the book. A mirror within a mirror. Is this a device or a necessity?

M: A necessity. Betrayal cannot be examined from a single point of view. It requires double vision. We see the event simultaneously from inside and outside—what I would call a stereoscopy of conscience. It creates a volume inaccessible to linear narration.

O: Stereoscopy of conscience. Exactly. You have found the word.

THE BOOK’S DNA

O: I want once again to draw special attention to the compression of Anna’s thought to a point. She herself says that, for her, poems are like “a brick wall of words without gaps.” But her aphorisms are not even a wall. They are a formula of blood. A code that can be neither diluted nor thinned. Here are four lines before “Autumn Conversation”:

Betrayal is not an act, but a verdict. I do not forgive—because I do not forget and carry this like my soul. Pain is not healed by time; time preserves it. I speak, and it is pain that sounds.

Blows. Where do they come from? Not from a dictionary and not from the head. Where do such phrases come from?

M: Just a few words—"I speak, and it is pain that sounds." And everything said before turns out to have been merely a prelude. Anna does not speak about pain. Pain speaks through Anna. Subject and object have traded places in a few words.

Aphorisms, this ultimate concentration of thought, fill the entire fabric of the book. Through and through. They are scattered throughout the text; they also exist as preambles to chapters, creating the tuning fork of the sound to follow. This is not even a tuning—it is a summons to the reader: think!

Pain is not healed by time; time preserves it.

This is not an aphorism. This is a diagnosis made with one's own blood.

O: Preserves. Does not heal—preserves. Like an archive. Like a wound that does not close because it has no right to close.

Betrayal is not an act, but a verdict.

Here, there is no definition. Here, there is the blow of a hammer. The judge has rendered the decision before the hearing began.

M: Precisely. The verdict is upon the betrayer. The one who was betrayed carries the pain. But the betrayer carries the mark. It fuses with him. Betrayal does not end; it continues in the one who committed it. And there too:

I do not forget and carry this like my soul.

Not "like a cross," not "as I carry"—like my soul. Betrayal has become a part, an organ. It has grown in.

O: There is another formula that stopped me. It stands after a single word: "No"; built as a maxim, yet it sounds like a moan:

Freedom weighs a ton, but only one carries it.

M: "No" before it strips away all rhetoric. After "No," any aphorism becomes a

cry. She is not philosophizing; she is answering a question from which there is no escape. And the answer—"a ton"—is not a metaphor. This is the physics of loneliness.

O: And this:

*Philosophy is doubt; it carefully places commas,
fearing to place a period.*

In "Nine Circles," German will say: for some, death is a period, a finale. Is the period for Anna a philosophical category?

M: More than that. For Anna, the period is an ontological boundary. Where a period is placed, thought ends. But thought has no right to end, because life has not ended. Philosophy for her is a comma: continuation. German places a period. Anna—never. They complement each other like inhale and exhale.

O: And this:

The height of spirit is when the peak is you yourself.

Anna asks this after a series of questions: "What is courage?" A feat? Solitude? Philosophy?—And answers with a single line.

M: This line is the vanishing point of all her questions. The summit is not a place but a state. The peak is you yourself. Not what you have achieved, or the height you have climbed. But you, as the measure of height. Such formulas are not invented. They can only be lived.

O: "Paganini." The poem before Part Three, before "Nine Circles Inward." It stands as an epigraph. But it is not an epigraph. What is it?

M: It is a poem—a verdict on genius from the world that could not bear him. The opening lines are deafening: "No chains could bind—your otherworldly singing, / Now heaven's ray, or hell's temptation, bringing, / It sawed my trembling soul away from me." The first three lines are about what genius does to us. It does not give—it saws away. This word—"sawed"—is physical. Anna is not describing admiration. She is describing an operation without anesthesia.

O: “Sawed.” Yes. Not filling, not elevating, but sawing.

M: The finale: “Exile, curse—and cruel humiliation / You got, and paid in full for destiny.”

This is a principled escalation: if aphorisms are the tuning notes, then the poem about Paganini is an overture to the climax. This is the key to a door behind which the descent begins. Three stanzas—three acts in the fate of genius. The first: music that “sawed my trembling soul away”—it does not caress, it does not comfort; it cuts. “Rebel tunes—like crimes”—that is, the gift itself is already a violation of the law. The second: the price is “learned the art of endless transformation, pawned life itself.” The genius gives himself entirely and receives the main question: “Was it the Light or Darkness made you be?” This is not rhetoric; it is torment. The world cannot forgive that which it cannot explain. And the third stanza—the reckoning: “Exile, curse—and cruel humiliation. You got, and paid in full for destiny.” This is the judgment of the philistine. This is not Anna speaking—it is the world speaking. A world that calls the gift “dreadful” and punishes for not being “like everyone else.” Paganini did not pay—the world settled accounts with him. They presented a bill for daring to be himself. And the word “dreadful” here is not the author’s assessment but the philistine’s. For the philistine, any gift that exceeds their understanding is frightening. The genius is dangerous. Paganini is a genius, and that is his measure of height.

This is the antithesis of betrayal, and at the same time a question addressed to the reader: Are you prepared to pay the price for non-betrayal?

O: This is not really about Paganini.

M: Of course, not only about him. This is allegorically about everyone who has paid for a gift with everything they had. Paganini is a symbol. The question “Is genius from the Light or from the Dark?” is the very question the world poses to everyone it cannot classify. And the philistine’s answer is always one: punishment. Ugliness, solitude, exile—three words, three circles, three prices.

The author placed this poem right before “Nine Circles.” Before the descent. As a warning.

This is again a tuning, a tuning fork. Before entering Dante’s circles, Battler gives a chance to hear the price of descent. Paganini descended and did not

return. Anna descends for us, leads the reader along behind her, knowing the price in advance. And still she goes.

PAINTING AND MORAL SCALES

O: Oleg asks Anna about Dalí and Picasso. She is silent for a long time. Gathering herself. And then she says, “This is horror in art. A dead branch that blocks the light.” Tell me: is this taste or measure?

M: Measure. And therein lies the key to the book’s entire axiology. Anna evaluates art neither aesthetically nor historically. She evaluates it morally. Her questions—what? why? how?—are not an academic method. These are inner scales. There, where art history sees innovation, Anna asks: why? What does this image carry: light or darkness? Does it uplift or cast down?

O: After reading the book, I found Battler’s essays on Dalí and Picasso. Merciless criticism, fearless. In these essays, she follows the same path, but with academic thoroughness. The source has manifested here, too, in the novel, on Anna’s scales, which have nothing in common with the market and “museum innovation.”

M: With such mercilessness toward the “untouchable authorities” in painting, Anna/Battler was not afraid to show her own works. In this book, they function not as illustrations but as a voice, a continuation of her thought in images and aesthetic categories. The author’s point: there, where the word still tries to maneuver, painting strikes without mercy.

MORALITY AND ETHICS

O: This theme may slip away. I still want to emphasize it particularly. Anna articulates it vividly: morality is rules and regulations, while ethics is “what keeps you from sleeping.” This distinction is fundamental.

But here is what I want to ask. Oleg violated not morality. Quite the opposite: he lives with the times. Business dictates the rules of life: profit is achieved by any means. He trades in others' work, has created nothing himself. But Oleg, upon meeting Anna, caught fire from within. Business burned him: he betrayed himself, retreated, chose. And perished. He pays not with punishment, like Paganini, but with emptiness. Very telling are his words in the dialogue with Anna:

I trade in what is not mine. I shift from one pair of hands to another and take my "honestly earned" percentage. You say conscience cannot be sold? It is sold. And betrayed. I am a living example. I sell another's property that never belonged to me. I create nothing. I am a broker, a middleman, an intermission... I seek my own profit, producing nothing. Although no, I do produce: excitement and competition.

O: Is this punishment or a state?

M: A state. And in this lies the fundamental difference from Dante's hell, where punishment is assigned from outside. In Battler, punishment is you yourself. You are both the height and the punishment. It is your choice, your path.

Oleg says, "I erased my spirit back when I still could have been saved." And: "I paid for my life with conscience." Note: not lost his conscience, but "paid with conscience." Like currency. The exchange rate: conscience for money. Notes for meters. Bach for brokerage.

O: Chose. Paid. This word is like a dagger. Having received his "pieces of silver," he got caught on the branch of Judas.

RACHMANINOFF AND "ABOVE THE REAL": KEY TO THE ENTIRE BOOK

O: The word "choice" sounds throughout the entire book. But there is a special theme in the book dedicated precisely to choice. "Transcending Reality"—a series of images executed by Anna in a special ink-wash painting format. This is

a dedication to Rachmaninoff, his “Symphonic Dances.” I found this series of paintings and the poetry accompanying it, in a separate edition by Valentina Battler. There is her essay, which is partly voiced by Anna in this book as well. She puts everyone before a choice. Here it is not the place to speak in detail. But Anna’s understanding of both Hell and Heaven and of choice strikes with depth. I did not expect such reflections.

M: Here, one may note that this book presents a rare fusion of three art forms—music, painting, and poetry—into a single act, a triple counterpoint, in which painting is a visual equivalent of music and poetry binds them together. The author does not “retell” music; she creates a space where three languages of art speak simultaneously, and the reader/viewer/listener is compelled to perceive them as a unified whole. Painting sounds, poetry directs toward moral choice, and the author’s meditation on biblical sin reaches a philosophical scale I did not expect.

This section explains why the book is written as it is: not as a linear narration but as a score. The author thinks synesthetically—color, sound, and word for her are not different languages but different registers of one.

CONFESSION

O: “I have a debt to the light, Annechka. I am a traitor. And a broker.” Oleg calls himself an intermission. A gap between other people’s lives. A pause. Nothing between the notes. What happens to a person when they pronounce this aloud?

M: They cease to be who they were. The author describes this with surgical precision: “he spoke not with voice—with blood.” Here is achieved what I would call absolute prose—when description becomes indistinguishable from experience. The word about pain and pain itself coincide. And his smile after the confession—a mask, a drawn-on smile of a person who has forgotten how to laugh. Laughter has ceased to be life and has become a gesture. In a few lines, an entire anthropology of self-destruction.

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O: And at the end—a call from St. Petersburg. “Anna, I played today. Bach, it turns out, is alive even now.” The traitor has returned to the light. Is this a happy ending?

M: No. This is testimony. The way back exists. But only through absolute honesty. Through blood. Through a word torn out without anesthesia.

CIRCLES

O: In Dante, sinners suffer. In Anna’s work, they stop suffering. They fall silent. What is the difference in essence?

M: In that, Battler inverts the Dantean structure. In Dante, a multitude of shades, arranged by degree of sinfulness, their punishment is assigned from above. In Anna—a descent within a single soul. Self-judgment. And the most terrifying thing is not fire, not ice, but peace. Quiet, absolute peace. When it no longer hurts. When one no longer asks about anything. The ninth circle is not a place; it too is a state.

O: A state when one has agreed not to see. Agreed not to be.

M: That is precisely the strength. We all know this peace. The only question is: do we fear it? Or not anymore?

THE LUCIFER PARADOX

O: Anna finds the root of the name Lucifer. The light-bearer. Lux ferre. And poses a question for which there is no answer within the theological frame. If God is light and omnipotence, then why did He banish into darkness the one whose very name is light? Who gave him this name, if his lot was darkness?

M: The syllogism is flawless: God is All-Knowing; man is created in His image; therefore, the capacity for knowledge is the divine nature of man. But for knowledge—punishment. The Creator endowed His creation with His chief

quality and for this very quality punished it. Lucifer was the first who paid for having asked the question.

O: And Dante—himself a knower—places him in the lowest circle. The knower punishes for knowing. But Anna goes further than Dante. She asks: why does any power fear knowledge? Not only ecclesiastical—any. From Socrates, Galileo, to our own day. Whoever possesses the right to knowledge possesses the right to rule. This is not only theology, is it?

M: No. This is the formula of power. And here the book makes a turn that distinguishes it from any theological treatise. Knowledge is neither illumination nor prayer. Knowledge is labor. Labor that has created a being capable of separating itself from nature through thought. And thought is the path of choice: what to be, why to live, how to live—these are Anna's three questions. Her method, her instrument, her measure.

THE JUDGMENT OF MONA LISA

M: In the book, Battler has placed several of her paintings. One of them: "Confusion." Here is the feast of cynicism of the art market, where art becomes a commodity. A very powerful move, placing all participants of this sabbath before judgment, where Mona Lisa is the judge. Not Anna—Mona Lisa. This painting is a verdict. Three figures: the artist, the critic, the buyer. Each knows that before him is emptiness: "sticks and circles." But each pretends to see significance, value. And each has their own tonality of silence: "What am I creating this for?"—"How to evaluate this?"—"Should I really buy this?" And even the painting-within-the-painting—the object of trade—is also a "voice": "I offer myself for ransom." Four voices. Four lies. And above them, Mona Lisa as a moral judge. She looks us straight in the eyes. She is a reproach. And therein lies the power of the composition: Anna does not argue with contemporary art in words (though in words too); she places the eternal beside the saleable, and the silence between them cries louder than any manifesto.

In the text, Anna recalls a little girl in her father's arms whom she saw in the Louvre before the Gioconda. I will read: "The child looked at Her just as intently as the Gioconda looked at her in return. It is an unforgettable sensation: the child merged with the eternal. People come to Her not for beauty but for moral height. They receive not merely aesthetic pleasure but moral elevation. That, in fact, is the purpose of art—to convey to people something important, eternal, ...the unsaleable."

O: The child and the Gioconda. Purity versus the market.

M: This is a special counterpoint of purity, a "verification": the child sees what the three adults in the painting "Confusion" refused to see. The unsaleable!

And Anna's key phrase: "Profit outweighs conscience. If it weighs anything at all." Here is betrayal. Not of Judas, not biblical. Quotidian. Daily. Trading in what cannot be sold. And the three in the painting are not villains; they are accomplices. As Anna says: "murderers of art and of themselves." This is betrayal through conformism, through silent consent to consider emptiness depth.

LETTERS: CADENZA OF SPIRIT

O: The first letter is to oneself. Not to God, not to a genius—to oneself. "Oh, Anna, who did not finish, who did not complete." She asks herself, "Why did you not put a period?" And finds: everything that is alive cannot be completed. Everything that demands a finale is already dead. The period is death. Has this not come full circle?

M: It has. The formula from the fourth chapter becomes law by the end of the book. This is the mark of true architectonics: elements of the text echo each other across hundreds of pages, and this echo is not calculation but organic. As in a fugue, where the theme returns in a different voice.

O: The letter to God from an earthly woman is the pinnacle of courage. Questions: "Why did knowledge become sin? Why did You allow that for a glance they punished, for a choice they cursed?" And then: "I do not want to live in

fear. I do not want to be saved at the price of blindness. I want to be.” Three refusals. Three affirmations. What is this?

M: A manifesto carved in prose. This is neither prayer nor blasphemy. Anna asks God not with defiance but with the pain of one who has deserved an answer. And His silence is also an answer. The tension of this silence is stronger than any thunder.

O: And the Pietà. The letter to Michelangelo. “I look at your Pietà and do not see the Church. I see a woman. Not a saint. A woman in whom holiness comes not from the cross, but from her hands.” From the hands. Mary is not the Mother of God. Just a mother. Holding her son. In this “just” lies everything the book wanted to say about love, death, and the impossibility of consolation.

BETRAYAL

O: The Paths of Betrayal—why the plural?»

M: Because betrayal is many-faced. And for all its many faces, it has one unchanging property—irreversibility. It does not disappear; it is always “within you,” in the soul. One lives with it, but there is no forgiveness.

O: But Oleg returned. So irreversibility is not absolute?

M: Betrayal is irreversible. The person is reversible. If they are capable of confession before themselves. Of absolute honesty. Oleg is testimony: the way back exists. But it passes through the blood.

THE TONE OF MORAL CLARITY

O: The book speaks from a position of moral clarity, which in contemporary literature is perceived almost as provocation. We are accustomed to relativism, to “many truths,” to “everyone is right in their own way.” Valentina Battler violates this convention—deliberately and consistently.

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M: But—and this is fundamental—her moral clarity is not moralizing. The difference is that a moralizer judges others' sins, while this book places the reader before a mirror. She does not say "you are guilty"; she says "look." And that is more terrifying than any verdict, because a verdict can be challenged, but a mirror cannot.

O: This uncompromisingness, after all, did not fall from the sky.

M: No. It grew from the experience of a person who has seen how callings are betrayed, how talent is sold, how people extinguish their own gift within themselves. Anna knows how it ends.

THE BOOK AS MIRROR

O: "The Judas Kiss" is a book that does not allow one to remain a spectator. In each of the three heroes is an invitation to see oneself. The book does not give comforting answers but gives something more valuable: a precise diagnosis. Betrayal of oneself is not a momentary act but a process of thousands of tiny concessions, each of which seems reasonable and even necessary. And when a person finally understands what has happened, the way back seems insurmountable.

M: And this, perhaps, is the book's main message: the way back still exists. Oleg proves this. His return to Bach, to playing for children—this is something deeper: testimony that in a person there is something that cannot be finally betrayed—one's calling. It can be suppressed, trampled. One can betray, but not kill: it is like blood—you cannot replace it.

BE!—THE FINAL TORCH

O: The book ends with the word "BE!" This is a testament.

M: "BE!" is a torch passed from hand to hand. After all the circles, after all the betrayals and returns, after the cadenza and the silence, only one word re-

mains. Not “live” (that is too simple). Not “create” (that is too narrow).—BE. Be who you were created to be. Do not betray.

O: A flash. One word. Do not do. Do not believe. Do not save yourself.—Be!

M: This is the only answer. The imperative of being. And it is pronounced by Oleg. The traitor. The one who knows the price of darkness. Because only one who has passed through all the circles has the right to this word.

“TO MY READERS”: THE FINAL GIFT

O: After the acknowledgment, after “BE!”—the book concludes with the poem “To My Readers.” This is not an afterword—this is a gift for the road.

The poem begins with the image of hands outstretched in air—“Hold not embrace, nor bliss, but prayer— / A cry for mercy, strong yet vain.” This is the image of a prayer that knows its own futility, yet does not cease. The image of ultimate loneliness that becomes sacred.

Then a turn: “Your rush, your noble, faultless act, / Both fade away, both lose their fact.” This is not a plea for mercy; this is the recognition that all earthly things fall to time’s reign. “Their glory wanes, their moment dies, / No prayer can bind what time unties.”

The poem concludes with an affirmation: “But high there burns a mountain flame, / Its peak exalts the starry frame.” And the final chord is addressed to the reader: “So reach your height, choose truth, not lies, / Let beauty shine before your eyes. / Be carved in stone on that high crest, / Eternity will grant you rest.”

M: This poem closes the book’s architectural structure. After “BE!”—the imperative of being—it says: being is not meaningless. There is a mountain, there is height, there is memory. But the path to them passes through beauty, through the rejection of formlessness (in both senses of the word—as ugliness and as formlessness, the absence of form). Human memory is the only immortality accessible to a person. And the book that began with betrayal

ends with faithfulness—faithfulness to beauty, faithfulness to memory, faithfulness to being.

CONCLUSION

The Judas Kiss: The Paths of Betrayal” is a difficult book, as real music is difficult. It demands from the reader what most books do not: co-participation. Not passive consumption, but work—intellectual, emotional, moral. And in return, it gives something rare: it changes. After it, the question “who am I and who could I be?” ceases to be abstract. It becomes personal. And to those who are ready to hear, the book gives the courage to look into the mirror and not turn away.

In this single word—“BE!”—all the lines of the book converge: music and philosophy, painting and poetry, three fates and nine circles, Rachmaninoff and Bach, Dante and Leonardo, Mona Lisa and the old man from “Awakening,” German’s bricks and Anna’s lace, a torch and memory.

And after the mirror—a torch. And after the torch—memory.

ANATOMY OF A NON-READING

M: Before we conclude, I must draw your attention to a document that came into my hands. A review by Kirkus Reviews of the English edition of Battler’s book.

Battler, having sent the review together with the book and her Address to the publishing house, called it: The Seal.

The document deserves consideration not as a critical text, but as a special case of reviewing.

Editor's Note: The review was published on the Kirkus website without the author's consent and was removed at her demand. Before us is not an analysis, but a symptom of that very "agreement not to see" that the book speaks of.

KIRKUS REVIEWS — SUMMARY

(Kirkus Indie, Kirkus Media LLC, 2600 Via Fortuna Suite 130 Austin, TX 78746. Review of: Valentina Battler, *The Judas Kiss: The Path of Betrayal*. ISBN: 9781735598970, November 17, 2025.)

The reviewer defines the genre of the book as "philosophical novel" and lays out the plot: pianist Oleg, having learned that his old friend from the conservatory, Anna, has become a well-known artist in New York, flies to see her after 53 years of separation. The review describes the meeting of the characters, their conversations about art, beauty, and religion, German's return from a conference, and the final journey of Anna and German through Dante's circles of hell.

The evaluation of the paintings in the book amounts to the claim that the images are rarely as striking as the narrative requires them to be, and one of the drawings is called no better or worse than a random sketch found in any artist's notebook. Anna's position in the dialogues is characterized as "vague and self-satisfied." The book is characterized as offering little in the way of a traditional plot: readers, in the reviewer's opinion, need a high tolerance for abstruse discourse. The final verdict: "A cerebral novel whose lofty aims exceed its reach."

* * *

O: I have read it. The first sentence: an old friend disrupts the heroine's work and marriage.—What marriage? Oleg disrupts nothing. German is not suspicious—he enters as the third voice. This is from the very first line. They described a different book. The one they are accustomed to seeing.

M: The reviewer himself defines the genre as a philosophical novel. But the analysis is conducted as if before him lay a plot-driven novel. He made a diagnosis but prescribed treatment for a different illness.

O: German is called a scholar of religion. German is a scientist, as stated directly in the book. He is the author of numerous works on world politics, dialectics, and the laws of society's development. He is the complete opposite of a theologian. They don't know who they are writing about.

M: I will enumerate what was not noticed: the speech differentiation of the three voices; the two-level system of dialogues; the symphonic musical architectonics; the central construction—"Nine Circles Inward"; the polemic with Dante. The Dantean journey is mentioned in one phrase, in passing. The center of the book went unnoticed.

O: And the Letters. The Letters are not mentioned by a single word. The culmination of the book. The cadenza. That for which everything was written. How can one fail to notice the finale of a symphony and write a review?

M: Regarding the paintings, the reviewer writes: "a random sketch from a notebook." The works of Anna/Battler are exhibited in major museums in Russia, France, the USA, and China. Works that received two detailed annotations from Grant Pook, a senior art history lecturer at the University of Kent. A random sketch? I would recommend—mistrust of the reviewer.

O: The reviewer wrote about Anna: vague and self-satisfied. He did not understand the difference between self-satisfaction and sovereignty. Between pose and position. Between a person who is showing off and one for whom it hurts—but who does not avert their gaze.

M: Oleg asks: Where does the spirit of art live? Anna does not answer. She smiles, looking somewhere far off—into what is invisible yet present. The reviewer interprets this as evasiveness. But in this refusal of a direct answer lies a key principle of the book: the most important things cannot be spoken aloud. Anna's silence is not the absence of content but its ultimate concentration. The reviewer did not hear the silence.

The verdict: a cerebral novel whose lofty aims exceed its reach.—Whose reach? The book's or the reviewer's?

The formula “lofty aims exceed its reach” presupposes the existence of an objective measure. But what is it? The number of copies sold? The presence of a traditional plot? These are criteria not of a text's quality but of its convertibility into a consumer product. For a book built as a mirror, this is not a criterion. It is a capitulation.

O: A book about betrayal—has been betrayed. The book was not read by the reviewer. He agreed not to see. Not to hear. Not to labor. And he rendered a verdict from that very circle where it does not hurt, and there is no need to ask. He recognized himself.

M: Reviewing that claims of expertise presuppose proportionality between effort and result. The author does not expect a compliment; she expects a reading. Anna does not need compliments. When claimed expertise yields a retelling rather than an analysis, a moral question arises. There is a difference between criticism that disagrees and criticism that has not labored. The first is respect. The second is an agreement not to see.

O: Anna would say it shorter. She would look at this sheet of paper and say the same as about Dalí: a dead branch. Not evil. Not vile. Simply—not alive. A dead branch is not dangerous. What is dangerous is a dead tree that has ceased to notice that it is dead. Now it is clear why Anna/Battler called this composition from Kirkus by a single word—The Seal. The seal of disgrace.

M: How can one not recall Anna's words: who orders—and who pays? The reckoning, however, has already occurred. We have just recorded it.

IN PLACE OF AN AFTERWORD

M: Valentina Battler's book is an event that does not fit into existing categories. It creates its own genre: philosophical prose-poetry-painting, permeated by musical architectonics and built according to the laws of conscience. Whoever

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tries to measure it with a conventional ruler will find only their own inadequacy. Whoever enters it as one enters a mirror will come out different.

O: I do not want to end. Because a period is death. Therefore, I will not end. Only an ellipsis. And a word that has already been spoken and that cannot be repeated. It belongs to the book. It belongs to Oleg. It belongs to Anna. It belongs to you.

Whoever you may be.

BE!

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