

THE LIVING VESSEL OF MEMORY

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Aleksej Remizov once wrote to his friend Natalja Kodrjanskaja, reminiscing about his childhood,

In the class in handwriting I was attracted at first sight to the sticks of chalk, which were laid out at the board: they looked at me somehow strangely—as if at an acquaintance whose name they had forgotten—I traced their blue veins from the interior outward to the azure smoky tendrils. At first I only looked at how they moved, how they breathed, reminding me of something: then I gently touched them, and then—tasted them. And I liked it. After that I didn't need any lunch in my satchel. At lunchtime instead of a Crane brand sausage from our grocery store and a roll as hard as a rock, I had pure natural chalk.

Chalk has no smell. Even snow, white like chalk, is so frosty.

But this freshness of a snowy breath is especially nice: I always ate snow, gathering it with my hand from the lower ledges on the way to school.¹

There are things here that cannot but recall Tolstoj: the precision of sense observation; the quick apprehension of the child's experience. But, you may say, Remizov and Tolstoj? Isn't that an unlikely combination? Didn't Remizov describe his literary forebears by saying, "I derive my line from Gogol, Dostoevskij and Leskov," and didn't he say that Dostoevskij had more to say about the human predicament than Tolstoj?² Didn't Remizov write indefatigably about Gogol, Dostoevskij and Leskov, while having little to say about Tolstoj? All this is true; yet there is a Tolstoj who is close to Remizov and to whom he explicitly pays honor. He listed Anna Karenina's dream among the works that had had the greatest effect on him.³ Reznikova reports that Tolstoj's "Tri Starca" was among the works Remizov loved to read from the stage.⁴ He once divided the world of the senses thus: "Dostoevskij was of the ears; Tolstoj of the eyes."⁵ Remizov's temperament no doubt drew him to that Tolstoj of whom Ivan Karamazov's devil said that there were dreams of such vividness that even Lev Tolstoj couldn't have invented them.

At the very least Remizov and Tolstoj are drawn together by their fascination with the magical and privileged world of childhood. Both began their literary careers with explorations of the child's consciousness, Tolstoj in his *Detstvo*, Remizov in *Posolon'*. Both were interested in the child's inner life and his moral formation. And the experiences which shape the child are

often surprisingly in resonance. Tolstoj's Nikolenka sees the *jurodivyj*, Griša; Olja in *V pole blakitnom* has as her first memories the *stranniki* who frequent Vatagino. The worlds of Olja and Nikolenka are created by memory. Tolstoj plundered the memories of his siblings, his childhood friends, himself, to construct the composite childhood of Nikolenka; Remizov "transcribed" his own wife's childhood, as she recounted it to him. It is as a repository of memory that the child has particular significance for both writers. The child is a kind of vessel in which the present is being stored up for future use.

This storage is of two kinds: one is of significance for the individual person, for self-development; the other for the race, for the life of the swarm. When the theme of memory as servant of the individual conscience appears in Remizov's work, we might call it "the Tolstoyan Remizov," since this is the essential element of the tradition Tolstoj bequeathed to his literary descendants. But the second sort of memory, which finds its materials in dream, fantasy and play, is particularly associated with Remizov. Surprisingly, we find Tolstoj also interested in this aspect of memory, and so we may equally speak of "the Remizovian Tolstoj." This Tolstoj has not been much studied, so Remizov can serve as an optic to bring into relief features of the great realist writer that might otherwise be overlooked.

Let us begin with Remizov's little story "Kostroma" from the cycle *Posolon'*. There are several levels here, the first a child's chasing game. The "it," Kostroma, takes her place in the center of the ring, while the leader of the *xorovod* asks a series of formulaic questions: "Doma Kostroma?" "Doma." "Čto ona delaet?" "Spit." And so on. The series is repeated over and over with Kostroma naming a different daily activity each time, until suddenly in answer to the question, "Čto ona delaet?" comes the startling answer, "Pomerla." The *xorovod* breaks up and carries Kostroma to be buried, but on the way she suddenly comes to life and a merry chasing game ensues.

Remizov's own footnote tells us that the story refers not only to a children's game, but also to a ritual of the spring cycle:

The burial of Kostroma was once performed as a ritual of adults. . . . A scarecrow was made of straw and funeral rites were held with lamenting. [The figure] was drowned in the river or burned on a bonfire. Sometimes a young girl portrayed Kostroma. She was undressed and bathed in the water. . . . The myth of mother-Kostroma came from the personification of the grain of wheat: the seed, buried in the ground, revives in the ear of grain.⁶

The assumptions about the relationship of myth to culture, of ritual to myth, and of play to ritual upon which *Posolon'* is based are those of the ritual school of ethnography, whose most famous work is Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. The contributions of the ritual school, which dominated the budding science of cultural anthropology in the early years of this century, were rich and many, but the most significant for our purposes is its firm insistence on the primary role of ritual in primitive culture. The students of folklore and myth who preceded the ritual school had belonged to the so-called "mythological" school which interpreted myth as a poetic apprehension of nature. The ritual school rejected this interpretation of primitive culture, calling attention to the importance of the *actions* which are performed in conjunction with the myths, that is, the rituals. According to the ritual school, these actions or rites were an important part of the life cycle of primitive peoples. Far from being mere imaginative daydreaming, the actions taken by primitive peoples to insure the fertility of the earth and the proper maturation of the crops, to placate the vengeful spirits of the dead and so on, were part of the business of life. From this new emphasis on actions (rituals) rather than stories (myths) came the idea of the "calendar" in the anthropological sense, that is, of the arrangement of rituals in the order in which they are observed in the natural cycle of the seasons. *Posolon'* (which we might translate as *Sun-Cycle*) is just such an anthropological calendar.

The ritual school's emphasis on action is reflected in the stories of *Posolon'*. Professor Marcadé rightly remarks that Remizov conceives language as a form of action. In *Posolon'* many of the narratives are not so much stories as accounts of an action with a subtext in ritual observances. For example, Kostroma emerges from the underworld (the groundhog coming out of his burrow), becomes the center of ritual observances of a propitiatory sort (the dancing of the *xorovod* and the ritual questioning), as the ritual persona feigns death and resurrection, and finally undergoes the rite of baptism. The general pattern of these ritual actions had been well-detailed in Frazer's *Golden Bough* and in other works of the ritual school. The specific details of the Slavic observance of spring rituals to make the grain grow had been laid out in Aničkov's work, cited by Remizov. He summarizes it thus: "the myth . . . came from the personification of the grain of wheat: the seed, buried in the ground, revives in the ear of grain."⁷ This is the central idea of Frazer's *Golden Bough*; this key idea became central not only to cultural anthropology of the early decades of the twentieth century, but to literary culture, where it influenced, among other works, T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*.

Of course, at first reading, the stories present themselves to us not as religious observances (Remizov, like Eliot, resorted to footnotes to call his readers' attention to the underlying seriousness of his purpose), but as children's games. One of the main contributions of the ritual theory was that it invested children's play with a new cultural value. In one elaboration of the theory, Edward Tylor had proposed that relics of past cultures survive into the present by being adopted in marginal forms of culture. I am aware, of course, that Remizov knew, and was undoubtedly influenced by other ethnographic theories, for example, those of the comparative historical school. However, there are particular aspects of the ritual school's theory that suit Remizov's poetics better than any other. The emphasis on ritual action is one of these; the theory of survivals, another.⁸

Tylor had emphasized that relics of past cultures survive into the present by being adopted in marginal forms of culture. We can find these past practices, or even objects that had significance in past forms of society, in hidden forms in contemporary life. When a tool, action or ritual loses its significance in high culture, it moves to the periphery and takes on new forms. The bow and arrow, once a serious implement of the hunt, necessary to the tribe's survival, has now become a child's toy. It was his sense of the decay of meaning in once potent rituals that Eliot took for his theme in *The Wasteland*.

We may read *Posolon'* as a demonstration of the validity of the survivals. It shows how rituals and lore which were once used in a serious adult way in the religious observances of the old Slavic culture have been preserved in the seemingly marginal and nonserious culture of children's games, toys and observances. But here Remizov parts company with the ritual school. Frazer once said that he considered the corn rituals "ridiculous" and Tylor's theory of the survivals implies a decadence, a loss of significance. But Remizov clearly believes that the child's culture is the "real," significant one. The preservation of the rituals in the children's games does not point to a loss of the rituals' power, but attests to the rich vitality of the child's culture, which remains close to the fundamental facts of existence—birth, growth, death.

The form of the *Posolon'* stories grows out of the author's holding together in suspension the equation "play-ritual." The child's game is foregrounded in the reader's attention. The child's repetitious language yields lines like "Idut i idut, nesut mertvuju, nesut Kostromušku." But the game is transparent to other meanings: we see through it to the underlying ritual. Either level of symbolization, game or ritual, can draw into the text material from its own sphere. The rite of bathing is incorporated into the game.

A spring happens to be conveniently near. And since we are dealing with a calendar ritual, Remizov takes advantage of the opportunity to insert another bit of lore associated with the arrival of spring, the emergence of beasts from their burrows. This in turn is submitted to metaphorization: the beast coming out of his burrow is like the plant emerging from the earth and both are thus related to the Persephone myth of spring's emergence from winter, the emergence from death and the underworld, resurrection. The *ež* becomes Kostroma, the Russian Persephone.

The child's game draws in material from the child's culture. Kostroma as the mother-goddess becomes the child's vision of mother with her loose soft body and her "overflowing belly" (the breasts). She "knows who is put in the cradle, who nurses and who sips milk, calls every child by name and can tell them all apart." Her identity is slippery and at any moment she can slip from *ež* to mother to goddess and back again. So the dead Kostroma (the goddess) is carried to the spring for ritual bathing, but the revived Kostroma (the *ež*) leaps to her feet and starts lapping the water.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of "Kostroma" is its fabric of language into which are woven strands from all the levels of reality upon which Remizov touches. The motif of the "calendar" allows him to include lyrical passages evocative of the season. The world of childhood brings in infantile language. The ritual brings in colloquial turns of speech, and also justifies certain archaic terms like "Božii zveri" or the evocation of St. George ("Egorij knutom udarjaet"). We are reminded that the survivals occur not only in material culture (the bow and arrow) and in ritual actions (play) but also in language itself, which is both a repository for past forms of consciousness and a means of preserving and unifying all aspects of culture.

Remizov's concern with what we might call tribal culture is not in the least alien to Tolstoj, though he more often centers his attention on the other kind of writing, the depiction of the child's inner world of discovery and growth. But I would point in particular to the Otradnoe interlude in *War and Peace* as a place in Tolstoj where the cultural survivals play a large role and are primarily interpreted through the child's consciousness. Of course, *War and Peace* antedates the ritual school and Tylor's theory of the survivals. But the general attitudes towards folk culture, towards the child's consciousness, and towards literature as a proper place for exploration of these, had been adumbrated in romanticism. Remizov's favorite E. T. A. Hoffman comes close to sharing his vision in this respect, and without the benefit of anthropology. Though Tolstoj's main path was to be a different one, he was attracted to the world of folklore and the common culture. We need only recall his great interest in the peasant singer, and his use of

proverbs for Karataev's speech in *War and Peace*. But it is in the Otradnoe chapters that these interests find fullest play, and in a vein to which Remizov could not but have been sympathetic.

The Otradnoe episode is firmly situated in the novelistic fabric of *War and Peace*. The Rostovs have retired to their country estate because of a decline in their finances and because Nataša has become engaged to Prince Andrej Bolkonskij, who has asked them not to announce the engagement for the present. Madam Rostova, distraught over the Count's mismanagement of their finances, summons Nikolaj on leave from the service to take care of the situation. Nikolaj manages to do very little to improve the situation, but the author has now gathered the Rostov family for one last time at their beloved estate, locus of joys, in the Russian heartland. He now proceeds to recreate for us the primordial happiness of the old way of life, or rather the myth of it, based on simple pleasures and unity of master and peasants.

I should say in what sense I regard this as the "child's world." Nataša is engaged to be married and Nikolaj has been serving for five years in the hussars, so they cannot be regarded as "children" in the usual sense. But it was one of the peculiarities of the Tolstoj brothers and sister, Lev's siblings, to make a cult of childhood; when they were together they recreated that golden time among themselves. It is this atmosphere of the recreated childhood that Tolstoj establishes at Otradnoe during the fall of 1810. There is one among the company, the younger brother Petja, who still has some right to be regarded as a child, but Tolstoj also points out at the beginning of the episode that Nikolaj's service in the army is a kind of long, deferred adolescence in which the troubles of adulthood are put off for a while. Nikolaj is supposed to have come home to enter into adulthood and take on the responsibilities of family, but he has dismissed that and continues his childish pleasures. Moreover, as the chapter develops we move back into the small child's world of pre-rational existence.

The first event of the reunited family is the wolf-hunt. Tolstoj makes his point clear by having Nikolaj try to fob off Nataša and Petja, who are dying to be allowed to go on the hunt. In response to Nataša's query "Are you going to hunt?": "Yes, we are going," replied Nikolaj reluctantly, for today, as he intended to hunt *seriously*, he did not want to take Nataša and Petja. "We are going, but only wolf hunting: it would be dull for you." So Nikolaj tries to put the wolf-hunt into the sphere of the serious pursuits of men, where women and children are extraneous. But the following colloquy puts it squarely back into the context of childhood:

"You know it is my greatest pleasure," said Nataša. "It's not fair; you are going by yourself, are having the horses saddled and said nothing to us about it."

"No barrier bars a Russian's path—we'll go!" shouted Petja.

"But you can't. Mamma said you mustn't," said Nikolaj to Nataša.

"Yes, I'll go. I shall certainly go," said Nataša decisively. "Daniel, tell them to saddle for us . . ."

When Nikolaj resorts to saying, "Mamma says you mustn't go," he has lost the argument, for he has returned the discourse to the world of childhood and given up his separate position in the "serious" masculine world. We might speak here, half-playfully, of "psychic survivals," patterns of childhood behavior embedded in adult consciousness to which we from time to time return.

For lack of time, I will not concentrate on the hunt here; I will just remark that it is one of the most significant episodes in the novel for creating a sense of community that transcends class and moving us back to the "life of the swarm." Rather, I would like to turn to another part of the Otradnoe episode, the one that deals with the Rostov children's conversation in the music room. I have said that perhaps the most fundamental idea that unites Remizov and Tolstoj is the notion of the child as the vessel of memory. This episode shows explicitly that Tolstoj interprets the child's consciousness in this way.

The episode is preceded by a short chapter describing Nataša's capricious depressed state during the Christmas holidays at Otradnoe, when she longs for Prince Andrej to return for her marriage to take place. She wanders about the house "like an outcast" and performs various capricious acts. She sends the footman Nikita for a fowl, a cock and some oats to tell fortunes, but when they are brought she has lost interest in them. She repeats aloud the syllables, "Ma-da-gas-car" to no purpose. She makes Petja carry her upstairs on his back. She runs into her mother's sitting room and cries out, "Mamma . . . give him to me, give him, Mamma, quickly, quickly!" In short, she behaves like a willful and spoiled child. She is in fact in the labile state of openness, vulnerability and expectancy in which intuitions of deeper reality are possible.

The following short chapter develops that idea. Nikolaj, Nataša and Sonja gather in the sitting room, "their favorite corner where their most intimate talks began." Nataša begins the colloquy by asking: "Does it ever happen to you to feel as if there were nothing more to come—nothing; that everything good is past? And to feel not exactly dull, but sad?" And Nikolaj agrees: "I should think so!" he replied. "I have felt like that when every-

thing was all right and everyone was cheerful. The thought has come into my mind that I was already tired of it all, and that we must all die. Once in the regiment I had not gone to some merrymaking where there was music . . . and suddenly I felt so depressed. . . .”

So both Nikolaj and Nataša believe in the loss of spontaneity, gaiety, and the child's direct relationship to the world. Nikolaj explicitly links that state with thoughts of death. They go on to memories of their shared childhood recalling how various strange things occurred: a Negro appeared in the study; they rolled hard-boiled eggs in the drawing room while two peasant women whirled around; Papa fired off a gun on the porch inexplicably. These memories, like Nataša's capricious actions of the preceding chapter, are ways out of the daily round and back into the magical world of childhood, heightened sensitivity, and approach to eternal realities. And indeed, Nataša now begins to speak of memory: “Do you know . . . that when one goes on and on recalling memories, one at last begins to remember what happened before one was in the world . . .” The child's memories bring us into contact thus with the eternal memory of the race. I have written elsewhere about the neo-Platonist origins of this idea in Tolstoj's work and about its affinities with German romanticism.¹⁰ But what is of interest to us here is the persistence of the idea of the child's memory as the source of deep culture, which, as we have seen, is one of the unifying ideas of Remizov's work, as well as of Tolstoj's. And one consequence of this reevaluation of the child is to bring *play* again into the foreground of culture.

When Wordsworth spoke in “Ode on Intimations of Immortality” of the child who comes, trailing clouds of glory, he speaks of the adult state as one of loss or exile. In both Remizov and Tolstoj a deep sense of loss, of exile (for Remizov, even before the fact) seems to be a given of the literary sensibility. Tolstoj longed for the reestablishment of a patriarchal world which he regarded as his birthright, which in fact he had never seen and which likely never existed. In this he comes close to his beloved Rousseau, who longed after a “state of nature” which he admitted had likely never been in any historical reality. Remizov's whole eccentric life-style, so often remarked upon by those who have written about him, demonstrates a desire to never leave childhood, or if forced by necessity to do so, to return to childhood and live in it to the degree possible, to live forever in the condition of divine play. Writing becomes for him an extension of this childhood potentiality and another vessel in which the memory of the race can be preserved.

NOTES

1. Natašja Kodrjanskaja, ed. *Remizov v svoix pišmax* (Paris, 1977), p. 18.
2. Natašja Kodrjanskaja, *Aleksej Remizov* (Paris, 1959), p. 137.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
4. N. V. Reznikova, *Ognennaja pamjať. Vospominanija o Aleksee Remizove* (Berkeley: Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1980), p.80.
5. Kodrjanskaja (1959), p. 139.
6. Aleksej Remizov, *Sočinenija*, vol. VI (St. Petersburg: “Šipovnik,” 1910), p. 245.
7. *Ibid.*
8. For a discussion of the ritual school's impact on modernism in literature, see Stanley Edgar Hyman, *The Armed Vision* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955).
9. In the now-standard Russian edition of *Vojna i mir* (*Sobranie sočinenij v dvadcati tomach*, vols. 4-7, Moscow, 1962) the Otradnoe episode appears in vol. 5, pp. 264-325. The passage quoted appears on p. 273.
10. “The Recuperative Powers of Memory: Tolstoj's *War and Peace*,” in *The Russian Novel from Pushkin to Pasternak*, ed. John Garrard (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 81-102.