

Autobiographical  
Statements in  
Twentieth-Century  
Russian Literature



Edited by Jane Gary Harris

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## Alexey Remizov's Later Autobiographical Prose

*Olga Raevsky-Hughes*

ALEXEY REMIZOV (1877–1957) was a well-established and influential writer by 1917.<sup>1</sup> Although he never enjoyed wide popularity largely due to his non-belletrist manner, unusual style, and “difficult” language, his influence on the younger generation of writers was of such magnitude that for the period from the 1910s through the 1920s one can speak of a “Remizov school” in Russian prose. Boris Pilniak and Alexey Tolstoy, to mention only two of the most prominent names, considered themselves Remizov’s disciples.<sup>2</sup> He was a friend of Alexander Blok and Vsevolod Meyerhold; the latter saw in Remizov’s dramatic work a new beginning for the Russian theater. But with the wane of ornamentalist prose in the 1930s Remizov was quickly forgotten. In the emigration the fame of his antipode, the classicist Ivan Bunin, was in ascendance, and in the Soviet Union the “return to Tolstoy” all but obliterated the name of Remizov from public memory.<sup>3</sup>

In 1913, at the age of thirty-six and at what would prove to be the peak of his success, Remizov denied having written any autobiographical works and at the same time, rather paradoxically, insisted that everything he wrote was about himself.<sup>4</sup> Coming from a prose writer whose collected works included

<sup>1</sup> A different version of this essay, titled “Volshebnaia skazka v knige A. Remizova *Iveren'*,” was published in *Aleksej Remizov: Approaches to a Protean Writer*, UCLA Slavic Studies 16 (Los Angeles: Slavica, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Alex M. Shane, “An Introduction to Alexei Remizov,” *The Bitter Air of Exile: Russian Writers in the West, 1922–1972*, ed. Simon Karlinsky and Alfred Appel, Jr. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977). See also: Gleb Struve, *Russian Literature Under Lenin and Stalin, 1917–1953* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971); Alex M. Shane, *The Life and Works of Evgenij Zamiatin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); Peter Alberg Jensen, *Nature as Code: The Achievement of Boris Pilniak, 1915–1924* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> See Vladimir Markov, “Neizvestnyj pisatel' Remizov,” *Aleksej Remizov: Approaches to a Protean Writer*.

<sup>4</sup> “Avtobiograficheskikh proizvedenij u menja net. Vse i vo vsem avtobiografija—i mertvets Borodin ('Zhertva')—ja samyj i est', sebja ja opisывaju, i Pet'ka ('Petushok') tozhe ja.” A. M. Remizov, “Avtobiografija, 1913” (Fair copy in the Remizov Archive in the State Public Library, Leningrad: GPB, fond 634, no. 1). I am grateful to Greta N. Slobin for providing me with a copy of this text.

several volumes of short stories and novels<sup>5</sup> this statement is something of a surprise. But with the passing of years it was not the author of narrative fiction but the other Remizov, the one who retold legends and fairy tales and wrote lyric prose, who took over. In his late autobiographical book *Splinter (Iveren'*, 1986)<sup>6</sup> he declares himself to be a "singer of songs" not a novelist. This provides a clue to Remizov's prolonged search for his true genre, for the first twenty years of his long professional life can be described as an attempt to discover a literary form that would free him from the constraints of traditional genres.<sup>7</sup> His professed break with traditional form was, without doubt, an expression of the spirit of the times but at the same time had deeper roots in Remizov's opposition to the classical literary Russian tradition and language of Pushkin, Turgenev, and Tolstoy.

Remizov had a natural affinity with writers whose language, both lexically and syntactically, was dominated by oral modes of communication. This inclination was defended by Remizov throughout his life as a conscious and deliberate choice. Among those whom he considered his predecessors are Gogol, Leskov, and, most significantly, Avvakum. In *Splinter* Remizov's belonging to the "minor" line in Russian literature and his conscious opposition to the main, classical line is made explicit in the author's encounter with Briusov, who according to Remizov rejected his prose as too colorful (231-36). Remizov sees this as a rejection by the literary establishment, which is obviously an overstatement since he was part of the literary life of his times and was widely published during the period.

Except for the retelling of fairy tales and legends and the narratives based on his wife's life, Remizov's major output during the last thirty-five years of his life was autobiographical prose.<sup>8</sup> This prose cannot be classified as either memoirs or reminiscences, nor is it autobiography in the narrow sense of the word. It is a "story" of his life, but the narration is deliberately achronologi-

<sup>5</sup> His collection of works in eight volumes was published in 1908-1910. See H el ene Sinany, *Bibliographie des oeuvres de Alexis Remizov* (Paris: Institut d' tudes slaves, 1978); see also additions to the bibliography by Horst Lampl in *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach* 2 (1978): 301-26.

<sup>6</sup> Published as volume 7 in the series *Modern Russian Literature and Culture: Studies and Texts* (Berkeley: Berkeley Slavic Specialities, 1986), ed., introd., and commentary by Olga Raevsky-Hughes. Page references to this edition are given in the text. *Iveren'* is a rare Russian word and is defined in the dictionary of Vladimir Dal' (*Tolkovjyj slovar' velikoruskogo jazyka*) as "fragment."

<sup>7</sup> He started publishing in 1902; his last book, *Circle of Happiness (Krug schast'ja)*, appeared in 1957, the year of his death. Several volumes were published during his lifetime.

<sup>8</sup> In "An Introduction to Alexei Remizov," *The Bitter Air of Exile*, Shane divides Remizov's work into two categories, derivative and nonderivative. The derivative consists of folktales and legends of both literary and folkloric origin retold in a particularly Remizovian way; the nonderivative encompasses his long and short fiction, lyric prose, dreams, and biographical and autobiographical narratives.

cal; carefully chosen episodes attain special meaning, becoming symbols of his life and destiny.

Remizov's selectiveness goes beyond the expected "selective memory" of a memoirist; there is a design in the choice of facts narrated, and those details of his life that he chooses to talk about attain disproportionate significance. In the introduction to *With Clipped Eyes* (*Podstrizhennymi glazami*, 1951), the high point of Remizov's idiosyncratic genre, he takes the reader into his confidence—explaining that the choice and meaning of the episodes narrated are not external: "To write a book of 'knots and twists' [of memory] is to write more than one's own life dated according to a birth certificate, such a book is going to be about that 'which I cannot forget.'"<sup>9</sup> Interpretation is far more important than the facts themselves, and factual biography is transformed into fiction.

The prologue to *With Clipped Eyes* is a good example of the variety of material included and the associative process that makes Remizov choose certain facts. It is an account of those unforgettable moments that shaped his life. The sound of Moscow's bells in the city of his birth and childhood blends with an image of destitution in Paris, the city where he lived the last thirty-three years of his life. Traditional liturgical singing in the Kremlin Dormition Cathedral appears side by side with his "all-encompassing fear"—fear of crossing streets and bridges: "I fear automobiles, buses, tramcars, trolleys and horses, which are so rare in Paris."<sup>10</sup> The list continues with fear of fires and of being late, of strangers and acquaintances, and ends on a contrasting note of the incomparable joy of experiencing a storm at sea. Among other "knots and twists" is the memory of leaving Russia the day Blok died<sup>11</sup> and of a bird nesting in a plane tree outside his window in Paris. The litany of the unforgettable moments, introduced with the refrain "How could I forget" ("I razve mogu zabyt'"), ends with an evocation of the names of Avvakum, Gogol, and Leskov, the writers to whose language and style Remizov considered himself an heir.

In the course of the narration his creative memory constantly takes him beyond the limits of personal biography. He is not confined chronologically or thematically but moves freely from the story of his life to a discussion of literature; his friends and acquaintances float in and out of his pages. By switching to his circumstances at the time of writing, Remizov constantly reminds the reader of the temporal perspective.

In his autobiographical prose Remizov ranges from vague personal associations, as in *Along the Cornices* (*Po karnizam*, 1929), to a quite precise ac-

<sup>9</sup> *Podstrizhennymi glazami* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1951), 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–10.

<sup>11</sup> Actually, Remizov and his wife left Russia on August 5, 1921, two days before Blok's death, but Remizov repeatedly and consistently connected his departure with the death of Blok—a good example of reinterpreting biographical facts and assigning symbolic significance to them.



count of a specific period in his life in *Splinter*. Dream sequences, which were an indispensable part of his art from the very beginning, continue to play a major role in his autobiographical prose. In *Russia in a Whirlwind* (*Vzvikhrennaja Rus'*, 1927) the use of dreams reflects the indescribable reality of the revolutionary years in Petrograd. The author's contemporaries and friends, who inhabit the book in large numbers, migrate with great ease from reality to dream and back; some appear only in dreams. In *Along the Cornices* factual reality appears as most distant and unreal. This book provides the best illustration of Remizov's view of the relation of the two: dreams are not to be separated from reality. It is more than a literary device; it is an attempt to convey the author's experience of the interpenetration of dream and reality.<sup>12</sup> Dreams allow Remizov's memory to go through "reincarnations": in *Splinter* his inspired memory ranges from the Arab calligraphers to Boileau. The tribute to his predecessors emphasizes his love of writing, of the art of a scribe who preserves culture, the common memory of the people, from oblivion.

Just as he blends fact and fiction, Remizov brings play into serious accounts. His early *Kukkha* (*Kukkha*, 1923), although written in the form of an address to his close and by then deceased friend the philosopher and writer Vasily Rozanov, is full of mischief.<sup>13</sup> So in a certain sense is *A Flute for Mice* (*Myshkina dudochka*, 1953), despite the fact that its chronological framework encompasses the grim years of World War II and the Nazi occupation of Paris.<sup>14</sup> The time frame for *Kukkha* is the revolution of 1905; the selection of material included is influenced by Rozanov. But Remizov shared Rozanov's predilection for the insignificant and the everyday and, in paying tribute to his famous friend, he manages to tell quite a lot about himself.

*Russia in a Whirlwind*, published in book form only in 1927, narrates the author's experiences during the years of the Revolution and Civil War in Petrograd. The text blends the specific and subjective with the general and public. Paradoxically, the apparently limited view of his own apartment and the details of the hardships of life during the years of War Communism allow Remizov to penetrate the essence of developments in Russia at the time. Osten-

<sup>12</sup> *Martyn Zadeka* (Paris: Oplëshnik, 1954), 8.

<sup>13</sup> See L. S. Fleishman, "Iz kommentariëv k 'Kukkhe'. Konkretor Obezvelvolpala," *Slavica Hierosolymitana* 1 (Jerusalem, 1977): 185-93.

<sup>14</sup> Another book to appear in the early 1950s was *In Rosy Shimmer* (*V rozovom bleske*) (New York: Chekhov Publishing House, 1952), a tribute to Remizov's wife Serafima Pavlovna Dviggello, who died in May 1943. This volume includes a section titled "Through the Fire of Sorrows," an account of the war years and his wife's long and incapacitating illness and death. But since Remizov gives detailed accounts of their everyday existence, the somber subject for the most part remains in the background. Descriptions of the evening reading sessions allow him to talk about literature. Daily visitors bring the news of the world beyond the confines of their house and provide a humorous touch. The awesome responsibility and the dreadful loneliness of the spouse destined to survive is depicted through the narrator's communication with a mouse that regularly appears in the kitchen "to help with the dishes."

sibly preoccupied with trivia, *Russia in a Whirlwind* is one of the most profound accounts of the Russian Revolution written by a contemporary. By focusing on the insignificant and unheroic, Remizov is able to show the irreversible change that the Revolution brought to the very fabric of Russian life, not in matters of state and ideology but in the life of each and every individual. A mask of jocosity is only a mask. (How does one talk about everyday chores that are not a matter of choice but a question of survival?)

In *Splinter*, as elsewhere, Remizov is both chronicler-scribe and oral narrator-singer. As a chronicler he registers exact dates and names, trying to fix the past in its most minute details, and as an improvising singer he organizes the text rhythmically, using alliterations and refrains and introducing a lyrical strain.

In a manner similar to Old Russian scribes, Remizov introduces a basic text in different collections and books, often creating new versions to fit new contexts. In this the "scribe" is supported by the "teller of tales" who freely varies—expands and contracts—a given text.

*Splinter*, Remizov's last autobiographical narrative to be published posthumously, covers the period from 1896 to 1903, the years of the author's arrest and exile for his revolutionary activity as a student.<sup>15</sup> This is also the time when Remizov began to write professionally: he appeared in print for the first time in 1902. Remizov did not succeed in publishing *Splinter* in the 1950s, when it was written. In describing it to one of his correspondents, he called it "the simplest of all my books."<sup>16</sup> This statement, although partly meant to counteract the firmly established view of his books as incomprehensible and hence unpublishable, does describe *Splinter* correctly. Compared with the intricately structured *Russia in a Whirlwind*<sup>17</sup> or thematically and chronologically diverse *Music Teacher*, *Splinter* appears simpler and more obviously co-

<sup>15</sup> The other two are *Encounters (Vstrechi)* (Paris: Lev, 1981), the author's title for which was [*Petersburg Gully*] (*Peterburgskij buerak*), and *Music Teacher (Uchitel' muzyki)* (Paris: La Presse Libre, 1983). The first comes closest to "memoirs" in the strict sense of the term, for, although many episodes of the author's experiences as a beginning writer in Petersburg are narrated here, to a large extent it is concerned with encounters with famous personalities. It includes sections on Fedor Shaliapin, Maxim Gorky, Alexander Blok, Sergey Diaghilev, and Vasily Rozanov.

The pastiche nature of his autobiographical prose reaches its highest point in *Music Teacher*. The narrator appears under different names and at various points is identified with different fictitious characters. On the composition and history of writing *Music Teacher*, see Antonella d'Amelia, "'Avtobiograficheskoe prostranstvo' Alekseja Mikhajlovicha Remizova" and "'K istorii sozdanija 'Uchitelja muzyki,'" *Uchitel' muzyki*, i–xxxiii and 555–67, respectively.

<sup>16</sup> *Natal'ja Kodrjanskaja, Remizov v svoikh pis'makh* (Paris, 1977), 352. Remizov's letters to Kodrjanskaja chronicle his work on the book in the late 1940s and early 1950s. On his attempts to publish *Iveren'*, see his letters of 1953–1954 to Yurij Elagin in Yurij Elagin, *Temnyj genij (Vsevolod Mejerkhof d)*, 2nd ed. (London: Overseas Publishing Interchange Ltd., 1982), 419, 420–21.

<sup>17</sup> On the composition of *Vzvikhrennaja Rus'*, see Hélène Sinany-McLeod, "'Strukturnaja kompozitsija Vzvikhrennoj Rusi'" in *Aleksej Remizov: Approaches to a Protean Writer*.

herent, as it covers a well-defined chronological span. But this most obvious aspect of the book is governed by something far more significant for Remizov: a definition of his place in Russian literature. This is not the first time that he treats the subject.

In *Splinter* Remizov reiterates his place in the minor line of Russian literature by sketching his literary genealogy. Through Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Veltman this leads to Bulgarin and Dal as representatives of the natural school. From Gogol he inherits the fantastic and the fairy tale, from Dostoevsky the acute perception of human suffering. In the varied literary output of Veltman, Remizov singles out linguistic and stylistic elements congenial to him.<sup>18</sup> The mention of Dal is not surprising for, like Dal, Remizov defended the "Russian manner" ("russkij lad"), by which he meant word order, and looked for it both in old texts and in colloquial speech.

But that Bulgarin is on the list of literary predecessors comes as a surprise, if not a shock. This, at least partially, is the author's intention. But it is also a testimony of Remizov's unflinching and faithful literary memory. Bulgarin, a writer and a journalist whose name brings to mind not his works but his service in the secret police and his vicious attacks on what was best in the Russian literature of his time, was also the author of "physiological sketches" and the first to use the term "natural school," albeit in the negative sense.<sup>19</sup>

The mention of the natural school gives Remizov a chance to change from author and protagonist into literary character, here a minor Petersburg civil servant. This provides a clue to the relationship of author to character—"an aspiring writer Remizov," he is author and character at the same time. The author looks back at the character from a fifty-year perspective, while the young writer still lives in the aged Remizov.

Frequently the protagonist's thoughts appear to be those of insignificant civil servants like Gogol's Akaky Akakievich or Dostoevsky's Goliadkin, reflecting a desire not to attract attention, to live quietly, and to be on one's own.<sup>20</sup> The author becomes one of the oppressed and the downtrodden: in *Splinter* he is accused of being a police informer and does not defend himself. The autobiographer assumes the role of a fictional character and merges with Dostoevsky's poor clerk. In the end he is exonerated, for his accusers realize their mistake. The ridiculousness of false accusation and his poor-clerk response are made clear at another point in the story when, upon being accused of stealing the silver spoons, he almost feels responsible for their disappearance. The self-denigration of the protagonist of *Splinter* is a consistent and conscious literary position of Remizov the writer. Remizov liked to stress that

<sup>18</sup> Among the features that Remizov shares with Veltman are the mixing of the imaginary and the real, irony and the grotesque, and above all his remarkable knowledge of and dependence on spoken language.

<sup>19</sup> See *Kratkaja literaturnaja ensiklopedija* 1 (Moscow, 1962), col. 770.

<sup>20</sup> *Iveren'*, 31; see also Natal'ja Kodrjanskaja, *Aleksej Remizov* (Paris, 1959), 87.

he was never accepted as an equal by his fellow writers. Emphasizing this nonrecognition, he paradoxically declares that he is not a "real" writer, as opposed to the recognized and the successful.

His literary fate and biography come together in this book as he searches for the first signs of the writer Remizov in the willful young student and exile. He discusses his cultural and literary roots and comments—with passion—on the development of Russian literary language.

Beneath the story of his exile, his beginnings as a writer, and his meeting with fellow exiles<sup>21</sup> is perceived one of Remizov's permanent themes—his musings on the fate of man. Fatalistic acceptance of one's destiny clashes with a desire to live according to one's will (*po svoej vole*). One of the masks that the narrator uses in *Splinter* is a hero of a fairy tale. The classical attributes of this character will allow Remizov to combine the fate that cannot be changed with free choice.

The title *Splinter* in context refers both to a wayward member of a family and to a writer who does not follow a traditional path but chooses his own. At one point this title was almost abandoned in favor of that of the longest chapter in the book, "Nomad" ("Kochevnik"),<sup>22</sup> which covers the period from Christmas of 1896 to the summer of 1900—Remizov's exile in Penza and his thirteen dwellings in that city. Nomadic existence is indeed what the whole book is about: an exile is homeless by definition. Exiled as a student, he returns as a professional writer, which in Remizov's interpretation makes him homeless by profession.<sup>23</sup> During his forced peregrinations in the Russian north he becomes a permanent nomad. And in a way his early experience of the life of a nomad—an exile—foretells his thirty-six years of emigré life.

Remizov's inclusion of diverse and seemingly unrelated stories in a single book and his practice of publishing individual chapters as separate stories and then incorporating the same material in different books may suggest that the material is arranged randomly. This, however, is far from true. In *Splinter* the organization of material plays a decisive role.<sup>24</sup> In narrating the story of his exile and his birth as a writer, Remizov follows the structure of a fairy tale.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Most prominent among those are the future philosopher Nicholay Berdiaev, the famous Socialist-Revolutionary terrorist Boris Savinkov, and future Commissar of Education and Culture in the Soviet Union Anatoly Lunacharsky.

<sup>22</sup> Kodrjanskaja, *Aleksej Remizov*, 87.

<sup>23</sup> Viktor Shklovsky called Remizov a nomad who as an innovative writer is forever homeless: "As a cow eats up the grass, so literary themes are eaten up and literary devices become worn out and threadbare. A writer cannot become a farmer, he is a nomad who moves to new pasture with his herd and his wife." V. Shklovskij, *Zoo, ili pis'ma ne o ljubvi, Sobranie sochinenij v trekh tomakh* (Moscow, 1973), 1:182.

<sup>24</sup> Remizov described the process of composing his books as building: "I am constructing my book" (*stroju moju knigu*). The order of chapters in *Splinter* is carefully reiterated in his letters of the period.

<sup>25</sup> See V. Ja. Propp, *Morfologija skazki* (Moscow: Nauka, 1969); E. M. Meletinskij, S. Ju.



The very appearance of the protagonist is marked by unusual signs. The youngest in the family, he is born on the "magic" night of June 24, the summer solstice and St. John's Eve, the night when according to legend the rare flower of the fern blooms and shows the daring the way to hidden treasure. His magic, "clipped" eyes<sup>26</sup> are open to the hidden and the mysterious, but this gift is offset by his mother's curse, which "casts a dark and bitter shadow over [his] soul" (16).<sup>27</sup>

The hero of a fairy tale usually has rather unprepossessing beginnings and is not distinguished by good looks.<sup>28</sup> The narrator in *Splinter* comments on his own unattractive appearance; his eyes are like buttons, he is nearly a dwarf and a hunchback, and he stutters (12, 52). Other characters also mention his unusual appearance. In the anguished loneliness of his exile his peculiarity is transformed from bad luck or unattractiveness into something loftier: his unusual destiny. Now he begins to see himself as a chosen one, a person with a unique destiny: "I have wandered off so far from the usual world, and what looks rosy to you is neither rosy nor blue to me, it has its own color and flavor, its own fragrance and voice. I live in a different world, and my sorrow and anguish are not yours, I am free from any fetters—'this is permitted' and 'that is prohibited' " (96).

As befits the protagonist of a fairy tale, the narrator has not yet settled on a profession. Not able to make up his mind at the university, he works simultaneously in natural science, philosophy, and law. Before the onset of his wanderings the protagonist is cast out of his world by a senior member of his family. For a formal evening party, a reunion of his graduating class, he dresses "his own way"—wearing an informal red shirt with a royal blue jacket. This unusual and colorful costume nearly causes a scandal when his uncle, a respected chairman of the board of trustees and benefactor of the school, arrives on the scene. The hero is driven out; he finds himself alone on a dark, snowy street outside the warm and brightly lit school building where his peers continue to enjoy the reunion. But soon after his public humiliation the hero is reminded of his "supernatural" powers. As he leaves the school building, the thought of setting it on fire flickers through his mind. In the morning the newspapers bring news of a fire that had broken out in the building that very night.

The episode of expulsion is narrated just before the beginning of his wanderings. Remizov prefers to see it as a symbol of his life in general: exile and

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Nekljudov, E. S. Novik, D. M. Segal, "Problemy strukturnogo opisaniya volshebnoj skazki," *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* 4 (Tartu, 1969).

<sup>26</sup> Remizov explained that his "clipped" eyes did not see less than the eyes of average people but more, for it was not the ability to see that was clipped but that which limited vision.

<sup>27</sup> He was the fifth child in the family, and after his birth his mother left his father.

<sup>28</sup> See E. M. Meletinskij, "Nizkij geroj volshebnoj skazki," *Geroj volshebnoj skazki* (Moscow: Nauka, 1958).

loneliness are the price he pays for his willfulness, for going his own way. His arrest, which follows soon after, is described as a result of a misunderstanding, since at that time he apparently did not take part in any organized revolutionary activity. Once exiled to Penza, however, he throws himself into revolutionary propaganda with a vengeance, so his second arrest over a year later is not unexpected.

The "Nomad" chapter is first of all a story of his inability to manage his day-to-day existence, a theme familiar from his other works. In this case, it is inability to find a suitable dwelling; while in Penza he moves thirteen times. This is the first stage of his travels to the land of midnight sun—as Remizov calls Ust-Sysolsk, the northernmost point of his exile—which corresponds to the underworld of the fairy tale. The descent begins in Penza: his first dwelling is a room in a garret, and by the time of his arrest he lives in a basement.

The shortcomings and limitations of his numerous lodgings in Penza all point to prison: in one place he suffers from cold, in the next from a monotonous diet; in a boarding house he is starving; one lodging has severely limited space, its half-window located near the ceiling; in the next the window looks out onto a wall; and a room with entry through a window necessarily limits access to his quarters, which are devoid of all amenities. When he settles "behind the curtain" his friends stop visiting him, for there is no way of reaching him without disturbing another tenant. The lodging in which the narrator is arrested is hardly distinguishable from a prison cell: it is a half-empty basement room. At this point his revolutionary activity is at its peak, and as a precaution he does not have any visitors. "In the Basement" is the last stage before the final descent into the underworld—he will spend over a year in prison. His attempt at revolutionary activity, at working with people, has ended in disaster. This is not for him; his path is different and lonely.

Although it is mostly the shortcomings of his dwellings that force him to move, once in a new place he invariably regrets having abandoned the old. This underscores the consistent worsening of his circumstances. The chapter ends with the narrator's departure for an exile more distant and more severe, so his exclamation "And suddenly, for the first time in many years, I felt free" (153) comes as a surprise. This apparently paradoxical statement is justified, however, because the liberation he experiences is internal. It is a turning point and a new beginning: the revolutionary dies in the Penza prison, the writer is to be born in Ust-Sysolsk.

In the central chapter, "In the Damp Mists," the protagonist is the farthest removed from his world; he finds himself in the land of the midnight sun and polar night. In this underworld he comes face to face with spirits and sprites, the ability to discern whom he received at birth. The brief introduction to this chapter sets its tone. The narrator finds himself in the "enchanted land," but the beauty of the land only enhances his anguish. The author now manifests himself both as scribe and reciter of tales. The two fundamental aspects of his

art are brought together naturally, for he narrates "in his own way" a largely forgotten story by the Russian romantic writer Orest Somov.<sup>29</sup> In this chapter there are many literary reminiscences: allusions to Russian romanticism pave the way for the fantastic story that follows. Just as in his versions of old legends, Remizov introduces the fantastic and magical into the contemporary and everyday.

The story, concerning the narrator's landlady and her family, begins with a fairy-tale formula. There are three daughters in the family: the eldest, a teacher, stands for the contemporary and the rational; the middle one represents the natural and possesses an animal-like innocence; and the youngest—to fit the fairy-tale scheme—is unlike the other two, a sleepwalker singled out by a sprite of Russian folkloric demonology, *kikimora*. Having unusual sensitivity, this daughter represents the otherworldly in man. In the end the chosen one dies smothered by the kisses of a *kikimora*.

Imprisonment in Penza and exile in Ust-Sysolsk correspond to the underworld of the fairy tale, whence the hero returns victorious, having passed the initiation. Released from prison, Remizov feels like "someone from another world" (141). The land of the damp mists is the point from which the protagonist's physical return begins. Now he moves from the northeast to the southwest. The next stage is Vologda.

Here Remizov, who started writing from prison, for the first time finds himself in the company of contemporaries who are also beginning writers. The history of the publication of his first work, the prose poem "A Lament of a Maiden Before her Marriage," is given in great detail. This is the point where he realizes that he is a writer and begins work on his first novel.

Although the early twenties of one's life are usually years of intensive development of personal and professional identity and so naturally fit into the scheme of wandering and initiation, Remizov's biography supplies ample material for the coincidence of the two: his search for self-identification and self-expression as a writer coincided with his exile and enforced travels in a far-away land. The narration is studded with fairy-tale details that are hardly accidental.

In a section titled "On Fowl's Legs," a usual attribute of the witch's hut in Russian fairy tales, the lady of the house has the role of the hero's generalized antagonist. This grandmother stands for all those characters in the story who persecute or simply do not appreciate the hero, from local authorities to established writers and fellow exiles. Her function is suggested in the description of her house; there are numerous references to her hut as that of Baba-Yaga: it stands by itself, hardly visible in the daytime, but under moonlight it rotates to welcome a visitor or keep him away, or it disappears altogether. She is suspicious of the hero from the start; he settles in her house during her ab-

<sup>29</sup> "Kikimora" in O. M. Somov, *Byli i nebylitsy* (Moscow: Sovetskaja Rossija, 1984).

sence, on the invitation of her grandson. On returning she accuses the hero of stealing the silver spoons and expels him from the house. The translation of the fairy-tale function of the villain into present-day terms is not without humor: it is not only a false but an obviously absurd, "classic" accusation.

Among the fairy-tale elements are the introduction of characters in twos and threes. Historical personages are introduced with fairy-tale formulas and mythological designations: "Once upon a time there lived in Vologda three titans," "two Herculesees," and "in Moscow two demons." Triple appearances continue: "During that year [1902] there appeared three new names in Russian literature and all three under a pseudonym" (211). Remizov's friends, assuming the role of intermediaries, approach *three* famous writers (Gorky, Korolenko, and Chekhov) with his first stories.

The intervention of helpers is not limited to this instance. In "Nomad" his fellow exiles find new lodgings for him and transport him from one room to the next by almost miraculous means. The narrator stresses his own passivity: "How could I have given notice, when, whether I like it or not, I have been taken like a kitten by the scruff of the neck and thrust into 'paradise at Mrs. Tjapkin's?' " (71). In Vologda the hero's helpers are historical personages: his fellow exiles Boris Savinkov and Pavel Shchegolev intercede with the authorities in order to prevent his return to Ust-Sysolsk. Like a fairy-tale hero, the protagonist does not make decisions, he is passive: exiled, transferred, moved, or saved either by his friends or by the police.

The unrecognized arrival of the protagonist, traditional for the fairy tale, is presented here as a joke. During his first unauthorized visit to Moscow, in order to disguise himself, Remizov is wearing a uniform of the Penza Surveying School. The effect is contrary to the desired one, for he attracts attention by the oversized uniform. On seeing him, his mother exclaims: "Why are you dressed like a scarecrow? One can pick you out easily even in disguise!" (92-93). In his letters of the early 1950s Remizov speaks of *Splinter* as a history of the contemporary with the mark of Cain, which is reminiscent of the fairy-tale branding that allows the princess to recognize the hero. It is his whimsical behavior and unconventionality as a writer that doom him to loneliness, which he chooses to interpret as the fate of an outcast.

In the fairy tale the hero, after passing the initiation, marries the princess and ascends the throne. In *Splinter* there are many female characters, but without exception they are minor. The eventual winning of the princess, his muse, is intimated in a dream long before his exile. It is a prophetic dream, the first since getting glasses at age fourteen caused him to lose the fantastic world of his myopic childhood and to discover the human world. In this dream a female figure—her green hair blown about her head without any wind—emerges from the woods and approaches the hero. She is silent, but he recognizes her as a forest sprite (*lesavka*) and hears her silent call. She offers him an apple of gold and honey; upon taking it into his hands he experiences an upsurge of words



that roll like sea waves and leave him in a state of ecstasy (23). In this prophetic dream the forest sprite offers him a magical object that indicates the course he will pursue in reality.

On the train that takes the hero to his exile he meets a woman for the first time since his imprisonment. This encounter serves as a reminder of the forest sprite with the magic apple: the woman's water-sprite eyes reveal details of a misunderstanding that in his opinion helped get his first work published: the unknown author of "A Lament of a Maiden Before Her Marriage," concealed by a pseudonym, was taken for a woman.

Finally the hero, having passed the tests and received the reward, returns to the world from which he was expelled. He is not a passive character anymore; he now freely chooses his own way. Despite the misfortunes of his life that he liked to emphasize—not being accepted by the literary establishment, not having a wide audience, living as an emigré not being able to publish his books—at the end of his life he can say with conviction: "I have lived a full life that one can envy—consider only this: I write, and read, and draw only for my own pleasure, never on orders and nothing 'required'—but this also was difficult: all my life was like a steep staircase" (17).

*Splinter* is different in tone from *Music Teacher*, an autobiographical book about his life in emigration written mainly before World War II but finished only in 1949. It is a more sober book. Although one finds many misunderstandings and everyday mishaps, there are fewer complaints: the author accepts his fate as a free choice.

An unseemly informal costume worn on a formal occasion causes his expulsion from a ball of his graduating class just before his first arrest and exile. Remizov describes in great detail and with obvious relish his glowing "recognizes" him (53). Nor are his first steps in Penza devoid of the magical. Since he arrives there late on Christmas Eve, the connection with Nikolay Gogol's early story of that name is only logical. Remizov never failed to emphasize his debt to Gogol and, indeed, remained throughout his life under the spell of Gogol's verbal magic.<sup>30</sup>

His dream during his first night in Penza transforms the lady of the house where he is staying, the attractive and formidable mother of his fellow prisoner in Moscow, into a sad and ineffable witch. He snatches the willow stick that the witch leaves behind and flies after the sleigh in which she departed. He flies "faster than the wind and swifter than the moon." The witch and nocturnal flight are reminiscent of the Gogol story. The forest sprite, the fellow pas-

<sup>30</sup> Remizov devoted a large part of a book on dreams in Russian literature, *The Fire of Things* (*Ogon' veshche*) (Paris: Oplishnik, 1954), to Gogol.