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Reviewed Work(s): Remizov's Fictions, 1900-1921 by Greta N. Slobin

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Slobin, Greta N. *Remizov's Fictions, 1900–1921*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1991. xxi + 203 pp. \$30.00.

Greta Slobin has capped her many contributions to Remizov scholarship with the first comprehensive study of Remizov in English. The first Russian monograph, that of A. V. Rystenko in 1913, established the importance of Old Russian spirituality in Remizov's work and its connections to Dostoevsky, and it suggested the makings of a twentieth-century mythology in Remizov's interweaving of ancient texts into scenes of contemporary life. The second, in German, that of Katharina Geib in 1970, delineated the intricacies of Remizov's vast store of linguistic devices and formally catalogued them. Slobin has taken a giant leap forward. Using the tools of contemporary critical theory, she analyzes Remizov's experimental usage of an extraordinary range of subtexts in all his longer "syncretic narrative forms" written through 1925, and she identifies the numerous myths he created and places his literary thematics and stylistics within the broader cultural context of both Russian and European Modernism.

Two introductory chapters recreate Remizov's life and literary times up to 1921, in large part through his own self-mythologizing, which was characteristic of the Symbolist aesthetics of the period. Slobin draws primarily upon Remizov's literary memoirs written in emigration, *With Clipped Eyes* and *Splinter*, judiciously corroborating and expanding on significant details from other published as well as archival materials. She presents a fascinating account of the legends created in Remizov's retrospective view. His is a mythic transformation, from childhood to adolescence, wherein the development of his imagination recapitulates the "stages of evolution of verbal art," from orality to print; and from adolescence to adulthood, wherein the discovery of his vocation is a rite of passage from political revolutionary to revolutionary writer. In addition, Slobin elucidates the concepts of literature and writing that underlay Remizov's participation in the creating of a new literary culture, a major Silver Age preoccupation.

Slobin traces chronologically Remizov's development into a master craftsman in the remaining four chapters. His creative adaptations of a variety of oral traditions and literary manuscripts are presented as definitive examples, even anticipatory, of Bakhtin's theory of the novel as an anticanonical genre which incorporates other genres, and the resulting synchronic recreation of multiple layers of Russian verbal culture is seen as one of Remizov's main contributions to the revision of the poetics of Russian prose. This device of interpolation, Slobin argues, creates in Remizov's texts a mixture of narrating voices that subverts both literary realism and the possibility of an authoritative presence, innovations that also were characteristic of modernist prose.

The interpretation of the individual works makes compelling reading. The heterogeneous combination of subtexts in *The Pond*, including erotic folktales, apocryphal legends, oral histories, the Bible, and Pushkin, are shown to "deconstruct" the novel, restraining any potential voice of authority. Along with other texts, Pushkin's "Gabrieliad" and shamanistic ritual combine to give rise to the myth of the writer as the responsible bearer of oral and literary cultural traditions in *The Tale of Stratilatov*, where the voice of authority to be defied is that of censorship. The focus on folk spirituality in *Sisters in the Cross* is seen as an attempt to provide moderating symbols of cultural continuity in a world of sustained existential despair. And the emphasis on historical documents and historicity in Remizov's last novels, *The Fifth Pestilence* and *The Weeping Ditch* (published after Slobin's book in 1991), is seen as an attempt to find meaningful patterns during a period of growing national crisis. The theme of historicity is also central to Remizov's semifictional chronicle-memoir of the Revolution, *Whirlwind Russia*, where the Petrine period serves as the source for the "apotheosis of the St. Petersburg myth" to assure cultural continuity.

Slobin's reading of Remizov's "literary" biography as a series of masks, both in his memoirs and, as a subtheme, in his fiction, raises the nagging question about the man behind the mask. It fails to distinguish, as Tomashevskii puts it, between the writer's empirical self and the "created literary" one. How are we to understand, for example, the "cruel pranks" played

by Remizov himself, when they are also assigned to his fictional alter egos and are interpreted as “an expression of the creative instinct that is not subject to social norms and does not differentiate between good and bad” (p. 53)? One must also question whether *Landmarks*, with its Idealist philosophy, provides an adequate context for *The Weeping Ditch* and the assertion that an authoritative voice dominates in this last novel of Remizov. The adogmatic philosophy of Shestov is surely the subtext that sustains Budylin’s iconoclastic thinking and links him more intimately to Nietzsche and Dostoevsky.

These remain minor concerns, however, in a work otherwise so theoretically sound and so rich in meaningful detail. If it receives the readership it deserves, this study should do much to address the neglect of Remizov in the critical literature on the Silver Age and the early Soviet period.

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Ketchian, Sonia I., ed. *Anna Akhmatova, 1889–1989: Papers from the Akhmatova Centennial Conference, Bellagio Study and Conference Center, June 1989*. Modern Russian Literature and Culture Studies and Texts, vol. 28. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1993. 281 pp. \$20.00.

This conference volume contains seventeen articles in its 281 pages. It has taken four years to complete, which may seem too long, but is not unusual with this sort of publication. The articles are of various quality and ambition; the volume as a whole concentrates on a few central problems in the poetry of Akhmatova.

The most interesting of the articles and the most voluminous one is V. N. Toporov’s “Ob istorizme Akhmatovoi.” Toporov discusses the intricate relation between history and biography in Akhmatova’s poetry, in particular the role of different years and months mentioned in the poetry of Akhmatova. The year 1940 and the months “August” or “April” are, for example, entities combining the biography of the poetess and the history of Russia. These and other dates create the special repetitive character of her poetry. The past is juxtaposed with the present, and together they forebode the future. Along a similar line Susan Amert suggests in “‘Predystoriia’: Akhmatova’s Aetiological Myth” parallels between Akhmatova’s relation to history and Dostoevsky’s.

Many of the articles deal with the most complicated of Akhmatova’s texts, “Poëma bez geroia.” Anna Lisa Crone studies it against the background of the carnival in Bakhtin’s sense and Satyr Play (“Genre Allusions in *Poëma bez geroia*: Masking Tragedy and Satyric Drama”). Sam Norman Driver (“Anna Akhmatova and the Poetic Sequence”) suggests that “Poëma bez geroia” and “Requiem” belong to a new genre in twentieth-century European poetry—“the poetic sequence”—a sort of longer poem loosely organized only by the creative impulse of the writer. This view is shared by T. V. Tsivjan (“‘Poëma bez geroia’ Anny Akhmatovoi: nekotorye itogi izuchenii v sviazi s problemoi ‘tekst-chitatel’”) who writes about the openness of the text, which both has and does not have a beginning or an end and is constructed according to principles quite different from the traditional genre of longer poems in Russian literature.

Leslie O’Bell (“Akhmatova and Pushkin’s Secret Writing”) and Inna Chechel’nitsky (“Akhmatova and Pushkin: *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*”) connect in their respective articles Akhmatova’s search for secret biographical meanings in Pushkin’s writings with Akhmatova’s own poetical method especially in “Poëma bez geroia.” Chechel’nitsky defines “Poëma” as a confession. O’Bell terms it “secret writing” and finds parallels between Akhmatova’s interpretation of Pushkin’s biography and the poetess’s own fate. The topic is once more the complex relation between life, history and art in Akhmatova’s works.

Anna Ljunggren discusses in her article (“Anna Akhmatova’s *Requiem*: A Retrospective of the Love Lyric and Epos”) another important trait in the poetry of Akhmatova—the self