Russian Literature Triquarterly. 1986. Vol. 19, pt. 2

Avril Pyman

Alexei Mikhailovich Remizov

1.

There were just eighteen years behind me when I first met Alexei Mikhailovich Remizov: still, sheltered provincial years on the northeast coast of England. They happened, however, to be those particular years in the course of which the Second World War and the atom bomb had blasted away all sense of security. My generation was not sure it had a future at all; if it did have, then only one thing was certain. Things had begun to change and they would go on changing with ever-increasing rapidity. This made it possible for me, the tennis-playing, pony-loving daughter of a British shipbuilder raised on a healthy diet of fresh air, John Buchan and Robert Louis Stevenson, to recognize and, albeit silently and clumsily, to enter Remizov's world: a world that resembled nothing so much as a chain of explosions, microcosmic and macrocosmic, bursting with frightful energy about the hunched, myopic, bony little figure at its center. Out of the smoke and the shards looked the sad, clever eyes of an artist, a man who made patterns of chaos and mined the dim recesses of folk memory and the subconscious to achieve a curious but penetrating focus on his own life and the lives of his contemporaries.

In the summer of 1948, Alexei Remizov was seventy-one years old. The family with whom I was staying in Paris to learn Russian knew him well and my hostess, Natalya Viktorovna Reznikova,

often visited him to help him with his books and papers and to bring some order and comfort into the big, dingy flat. The first time she took me with her we rang the bell—and waited. Very slowly, as if from the other end of a corridor long as the rue Boileau itself, shuffling footsteps approached from the other side of the door. There was a fumbling sound, heavy breathing, the door eased open about six inches and, on a level with my solar-plexus, appeared the face of a leprechaun, topped by two horned tufts of grey hair. Slyly, ingratiatingly, the eyes travelled up to our faces and a look of mild surprise came into them: "A ia dumal—privedeniia" ("I thought it was—ghosts"). The voice sounded as though to receive live human beings was a rare event its owner did not quite know how to cope with. However, being human, we obviously needed sustenance and were led into a comfortless kitchen—my recollection is of pipes, cisterns and general blackness—and given tea and *biscottes.* Remizov moved with painful slowness and appeared to do everything by feel. Everytime he lit a cigarette, and he smoked incessantly, one had the feeling that the whole match box was about to flare up in his gnarled, uncertain hands and burn his face. After tea we went to his room. The wallpaper was a collage of sharp pointed wedges of paper, many of them gold or silver. It commemorated, he said, the moment a bomb fell near the block of flats and the glass in the window shattered. There were two threads of fishing lines stretched across the room, and dangling from them a variety of *objets trouvés;* quaint, beautiful, with a touch of the occult about them and yet oddly homely. Remizov sat behind a desk which I remember as massive and heavy, but perhaps that is only because its owner was too small for it. Along the wall by the door was his bed. We sat on a low divan opposite the desk and there were one or two armchairs. The flat smelt of gauloise cigarettes and—for all the loving attention of the old man's friends—of poverty.

We looked at Remizov's books, mostly published by the ephemeral "Opleshnik," and I signed my name in a golden visitor's book, a recent present. The books had drawings on the covers which seemed simply a natural extension of the room and of its extraordinary occupant.

I spoke scarcely any Russian, but somehow must have told Remizov that, at the language courses at the École des Langues Orientales, we were reading Alexander Blok's *The Twelve* and that I wanted to go to Russia to find out what it was all about. He gave me his picture of Blok: a white face looking steadfastly into a breaking world.

I did not see Alexei Mikhailovich again until 1955-56, when I spent the academic year in Paris reading for a thesis on the pre-1905 origins of Russian "decadence" and the Religious Philosophical Meetings in St. Petersburg. He was almost blind and I visited him fairly regularly, bringing pistachio cream cakes, for which he had a weakness, and cigarettes. Sometimes, when there was no one else, I read to him. He was a patient listener, used to readers of every kind and quite undismayed by my

imperfect Russian. On one occasion, however, I succeeded in reading him to sleep: in five minutes flat!

Alexei Mikhailovich was a great admirer of Vasily Vasilievich Rozanov, but there was one book of his he had never read: his first, a philosophical treatise entitled *O ponimanii.* After much hunting around, I finally ran to earth what appeared to be the only copy in Paris at a Methodist Library quite unconnected with things Russian. In triumph I brought it to Alexei Mikhailovich. Rozanov is one of the most original, aphoristic prose writers in the Russian language, and our anticipation was intense. After the first few sentences, however, I began to stumble. The sentences were involved, academic, dead. When Alexei Mikhailovich woke up he laughed and told me to return the book to the Methodists. So neither of us ever found out *what* Rozanov thought "of understanding."

A less happy memory is the pain in his eyes after a bad night. "One night," he said, "I am going to wake up and take a breath—and not be able to breathe out again. I always go to sleep with that thought."

2.

Remizov is considered a difficult, by some even an affected writer. His attempt to revive "pre-Petrine" Russian is a stumbling block to the foreigner and, very often, to the educated Russian. In the Soviet Union, of course, his books have rarity value, and while living in Moscow (from 1963-74), I lost two signed copies of his "Opleshnik" books to enthusiastic "collectors," even as I lost the original of his Blok to another such in rural Sussex. Friends who returned books were also eager to borrow and one brought back her copy of *Povest' o dvukh zveriakh. Ikhnelat* with a curious story:

> **I was called to the phone and left the book on the kitchen table. Then I forgot about it and went out. When I let myself in I could hear the most extraordinary sort of moaning, crooning noise coming from the kitchen. I went quietly up to the door, which was ajar, looked in and saw my cleaner-woman sitting reading it aloud to herself, rocking backwards and forwards in her chair. She asked if she might stay to finish it.**

That Remizov's syntax, like that of the early Zamyatin, is perfectly comprehensible to the country people about Moscow was confirmed a few years later. While living in the country one summer we had the great good fortune to persuade our landlady to come back to town with us for the winter to help look after our three-year-old daughter. Maria Ivanovna had had only three years schooling but she had sung for years in the choir of her village convent and she read aloud most beautifully. A war widow, she had brought up three splendid children on "carrots and fresh air" and spent most of what she earned with us (originally intended to finance a slap-up

funeral) on her five grandsons. One day we couldn't find our volume of Remizov's fairy stories. (Folk tales would of course be a more accurate description of these stories, but the connotation is so dull and academic!) "What do clever people like you want with an old book of fairy tales?" Maria Ivanovna wanted to know. "I took them down to Kuprianikha to read to Zhenya on the stove. No, Kirill Konstantinovich, I'll give them back when we've finished them, not before. Marvellous stories, they are. Best book you've got."

3.

Now, writing of Blok, I meet Remizov again and again: a younger Remizov, but essentially the same. Remizov, in 1905, putting his little Natasha into the arms of the blue-eyed student in the blue uniform as he went to answer the bell at the editorial offices of *Voprosy zhizni,* where he fulfilled the function of "domovoi" or house-goblin. Blok, shuddering away from the indifference and brutishness of being by which he sometimes felt hemmed in, and noting: "There is knowledge of all this in Remizov. You can see it in his eyes. I must remember to complain to him about it." Blok thought of Remizov—almost always—with acute pain "... running out of the burning house with little Natasha in his arms in 20 degrees of frost—and the sewing-woman threw a silk shawl over his shoulders." Remizov seemed to him the epitome of incurable misfortune and when he wrote of the Easter Bells ringing out "over all that which cannot be helped" ("Nad vsem, chemu nel'zia pomoch'"), it was, in part, of Remizov that he was thinking: of Remizov and of a poor blind rat he had seen men tormenting in his back yard on Good Friday. Though perhaps that was some other Easter: the theme, for Blok, was perennial.

The Russian people for whom and of whom Remizov wrote are no less "acquainted with grief." At the slap-up funeral, which after all it fell to our lot to attend, our Maria Ivanovna's daughter told me her mother's instructions about beggars: "If you meet a beggar before morning service, always give him something. If you have no money, give a piece of bread. If no bread, a potato. If you have nothing to give, don't hurry past with lowered eyes. Look him in the eye and say openly: 'I'm sorry, I've got nothing myself.'" Remizov, in his *Golubinaia kniga,* wrote this kind of story, involving heavenly courtesy, about Nikolai-Ugodnik. It is not surprising that, on the rare occasions on which his books reach back to the people in whom they had their origin, they are understood and loved. This agonizing, hilarious, *popular* writer is due for a revival, at home and abroad.