

## A BEARER OF TRADITION: REMIZOV AND HIS MILIEU

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In the first decades of this century two trends pervaded all of the arts in Russia. There was a movement away from European models to native Russian ones and a tendency to stress and to value the irrational, psychological conditions of the creative process. The former trend found its origins in the last decades of the nineteenth century among the artists and writers at Abramcevo and Talaškino where, under the leadership of Mamontov (at Abramcevo) and Teniševa (at Talaškino), attempts were made to revitalize the best traditions of native culture. At that time the crafts were dying out at an alarming rate due to industrialization which not only made the hand-crafts outdated but also lured the craftsmen to the cities for factory work. Mamontov, in particular, through his considerable influence and patronage, helped "Russian" to come into vogue in the arts. The canvasses of V. Vasnevov and M. Vrubeľ (from his Abramcevo period) are good examples of the forms which this art took. It was "Russian" made beautiful and heroic through a confluence of native forms, particularly from wood carving and painting, and art nouveau designs from the West.<sup>1</sup> From that time, native Russian, which often came to be equated with "primitive," had a respectability in Russian arts. The height of this respectability occurred in the years 1908-1912, when in art Neo-Primitivism was the dominant movement. The artists of this movement were looking to the simpler, less monumental forms of the native crafts, for example, to the *lubok* and had added an element not emphasized among the Abramcevo and Talaškino circles—an appreciation of what they perceived to be the spontaneous and impressionistic nature of the folk arts. This belief in the irrational and intuitive nature of the primitive's creative process corresponded to the Symbolists' interests in the irrational, intuitive nature of creation in general. The most prominent proponent of this view of artistic creation was, of course, Vasilij Kandinskij with his theory of creation by "inner necessity"; but the interest in the irrational side of creation permeated Russian society at the beginning of this century.<sup>2</sup>

Remizov fit well into this primitivist-intuitivist atmosphere. In 1905 he returns to the capitals, to St. Petersburg, after years of exile in the provinces and in the south of Russia. He left at the height of the Abramcevo-

Alexej Remizov. *Approaches to a Protean Writer* / Ed. by G. Slobin.  
Columbus: Slavica, [1987]. 286 p. (UCLA Slavic Studies; Vol. 16).

Russian vogue, lived in the provinces themselves, and reemerged into this symbolist-neo-primitivist milieu. He is a figure who is almost immediately appreciated and recognized as a kindred soul by the avant-garde groups in particular, for he would have emerged already in 1909 for them as an embodiment and bearer of the Russian tradition both in literature and in art. He would have been seen as such in part because among his first published writings were the collection of rewritten Apocryphal legends, *Leimonarian: The Meadow of the Spirit (Limonar'. Lug duxovnyj)*, and a work which treated children's games and ancient folk rituals, *Sunwise (Posolon)*.<sup>3</sup> While such works were praised, they were also controversial and misunderstood and at one point were responsible for Remizov's being called a plagiarist. My primary purpose here is to indicate what it means to say that Remizov was a "bearer of tradition" in literature and art, and a secondary purpose is to suggest that this aspect of his work was rooted in particular to the years just after he returned to the capitals. My contention is that Remizov took on the role of a bearer of tradition early on and maintained that role throughout his life. His assumption of this role, furthermore, had implications not only for his "rewritten" works but also for other genres and his art.

It was in 1909 that Remizov was accused of plagiarism in the press when a critic discovered that a certain tale by him was not an original creation but was a rewriting of an already existing Russian tale.<sup>4</sup> The writer M. Prišvin jumped to his defense as did Remizov himself in a letter to the editor of *The Golden Fleece*.<sup>5</sup> It is in this letter that Remizov clearly stated his intentions regarding his tales. He said that as a writer he set himself two tasks: 1) to recreate the folk myth, fragments of which he found in ceremonies, games, superstitions and apocrypha and 2) to give an artistic retelling of works in folk literature. Regarding the latter task he wrote that when all of the extant variants of a tale had been collated and one text selected, he next developed details in the chosen text or supplemented the text in order to give the tale in its most ideal form. He continued that he considered it his duty to reveal his sources in footnotes, for to recreate the folk myth is a task which only the collective energies of a series of generations could hope to accomplish. He hoped, furthermore, that his footnotes would lessen the work of future writers engaged in this task.<sup>6</sup> In other words, in his tales—which would come to comprise half of his published writings—he intended to create an ideal tale, a tale which would adhere to his understanding of the folk tradition and which would then take its place in the Russian folk tradition and thus would aid in recreating the folk myth. The actual rewritten tale was usually a much expanded version of the original, although parts might be retained word for word. Additions to the original were

mostly of two sorts: they made the tale, if necessary, closer to the folk tradition<sup>7</sup> and brought the tale closer to the author himself so that the rewriting might be, in Remizov's words "a recreation of the proto-original by an eye-witness."<sup>8</sup> In following this arduous process, Remizov was acting out in print the actual oral process of retelling. A. B. Lord has aptly described this process in his study of the oral nature of the epic tale where he notes that a singer may compile his version from a number of variants or may just use one variant for he is seeking expression, not originality in his work.<sup>9</sup> Remizov's contemporaries, collectors of tales such as Ončukov and Veselovskij, held similar views about this process, so that Remizov, who used these compilations for his sources, would have been aware of this view of oral creation. He, therefore, wanted to rewrite tales in the manner of a folk teller and made no claims that the material was completely original. That would have gone against his purpose, which was to help recreate the folk myth and take his place among past and future bearers of the Russian oral tradition. Remizov, however, did understand that a teller did not just "repeat"; that he added his own perceptions and personality to the tradition. "I come across a legend, I read it and suddenly remember: I participated in the legendary event. And I begin to tell it in my own way. My 'retelling' is never a reprint. It is the reproduction of the original by an eye-witness."<sup>10</sup> He understood that he was an individual writer plus tradition, at one and the same time an individual creator and a bearer of tradition.

In a similar way Remizov approached the Russian literary tradition, "borrowing" from writers both to express himself and to continue a particular tradition, in this case the "true Russian" line of Russian literature, the Gogol'-Dostoevskij line.<sup>11</sup> As in the case of the folktales, his "borrowings" were noted by a critic, this time with slight embarrassment rather than with hostility. In two of his early writings, *The Tale of Ivan Semenovič Stratilatov (Poves' o Stratilatove)* and *The Fifth Pestilence, (Pjataja jazva)* there are direct references to works by Gogol': in the former the references are in the main to "The Overcoat" ("Šinel'"), and in the latter to *The Inspector General (Revizor)*.<sup>12</sup> The references were striking or perhaps shocking enough that the critic A. Rystenکو, author of an early monograph on Remizov, felt that he had to apologize for them. After noting some parallels between Remizov and Gogol', Rystenکو commented that "life itself could . . . have whispered to Remizov these Gogolian traits; and I, therefore, have decided not to defend here the thesis of intentional borrowing; rather I am inclined to the concept of the unfailing and blameless influence of Gogol' on everyone who has read his works."<sup>13</sup> Apparently, for Rystenکو

to accept the thesis of "intentional borrowing" as practiced by Remizov would have made the works in question less original at best and bordering on plagiarism at worst. I believe that one of the reasons the borrowings are so noticeable is that they are as though footnotes to Gogol' and serve to emphasize rather than hide the fact that the work as a whole is in the tradition of Gogol'. They appear to function like the footnotes to his tales, giving sources to establish the tradition. This contention—that Remizov footnoted himself into the Gogol'-Dostoevskij line—is supported by Remizov himself in a reference to his later project, *Resurrection of the Dead* (*Voskrešenie mertvyx*). Towards the end of his life he was working on filling out the biographies of some of the characters from *Dead Souls* (*Mertvyje duši*) in response to Gogol's request in the second edition of the novel for his readers to send him comments and thoughts on what might befall his heroes later.<sup>14</sup> Remizov said about this project: "I am continuing *Resurrection of the Dead* (*Dead Souls*). . . . My task as it turns out is to deepen Gogol', not repeating any of the textbooks."<sup>15</sup> If one compares this statement to those he made about tales, it is clear that Remizov intends to use but not repeat a source. He is Remizov plus a source, a writer continuing and bringing a tradition into the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup>

Had Remizov's art been more recognized it might have suffered some of the misunderstandings that befell his writings. Many of his drawings from the beginning were calligraphic in nature and continued to be so throughout his career. He had training in calligraphy at the Stroganov Institute in Moscow and took drawing courses for a time at the Moscow Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. His wife, whom he married in exile in Vologda, was a paleographer, and the two often worked over manuscripts together. As a result Remizov was fully versed in the art of calligraphy and in ancient Russian manuscripts. Remizov says that he always sketched but dates himself as an artist the year he returned to the capitals, 1905. Both his writings and drawings were recognized and appreciated by the avant-garde artists who asked him to contribute to the Writers as Artists section of the *Triangle* exhibition of April, 1910. The works he exhibited there were calligraphic ones and were based on the cursive script of the 16th-17th centuries as were the majority of his subsequent drawings. His first published drawing, again a calligraphic one, was in the avant-garde almanac *The Archer* for 1915. It is both interesting and understandable that these calligraphically based works were appreciated by his artist contemporaries, for they are for his art much like his folktales are for his writings and would have been appreciated as such; i. e. for their relationship to the pre-Petrine Russian tradition. In both forms, folktales and calligraphy, there is a similar

attitude toward tradition and the act of creation. In both forms there is a freedom which does not exist in other art forms. A calligrapher is not recreating some image from nature. He is dealing with the interpretation of set forms, with nothing less than his own past and all past forms before him. In his interpretation there is a freeness and a strong element of chance, especially when he is working in the cursive script, in which, by the way, Remizov worked. Indeed Remizov was attracted to this art precisely for these qualities; for its freeness, formlessness and spontaneity, for its quality of "chance"<sup>17</sup> and for its ability to reflect tradition at the same time. The parallels to the tales should be apparent.<sup>18</sup> It should, furthermore, be apparent that Remizov looked to those forms which not only allowed for individual expression but also were vehicles for the expression of past traditions. He found these elements in the oral tradition and in calligraphy, and his interest in tradition and his relationship to it spilled over into other genres and other areas of his *œuvre*.

There remains to be mentioned the role of intuition in Remizov's writings and art in order to round out the discussion of him as a bearer of tradition and to establish his place firmly in the first decades of this century. When he spoke of the process of writing he spoke of it as an intuitive act, as a moment which came from within and revealed his "distant past" to him. To recall a passage already cited: "I come across a legend, I read it and suddenly remember: I participated in the legendary event. And I begin to tell it in my own way. My 'retelling' is never a reprint. It is a reproduction of the original by an eye-witness."<sup>19</sup> Remizov implies here that he chose his materials because he "remembered" that he had been there. His writings are full of such statements. "At the time of Ivan Fedorov, the first printer, I was a scribe, and under the threat of the printed word I burned the printing house in desperation. . . ."<sup>20</sup> "Van'ka played Kitovras, — and suddenly I remembered, — I played Solomon."<sup>21</sup> Remizov explained his ability to "remember," maintaining that reality was always different for him because of his bad eyes, "clipped" as he called them. "I was born with eyes and eyes were given to my soul. My clipped eyes opened the many-dimensional world of moons, stars, and comets before me. . . . For ordinary eyes space is not filled. For clipped eyes there is no emptiness."<sup>22</sup> Remizov thus perceived himself to be a writer with special vision both literally and figuratively. This vision enabled him to see more rather than less of reality, and it was this expanded conception of reality which he brought into his writings and into his art. "Art creates reality, reality is measured by art; the more alert ones perception is, the broader and more varied reality is."<sup>23</sup> He would "remember" and then he would "see," and because he saw

through the "eyes of his soul," he saw more than the ordinary person.

From the above discussion it should be clear why Remizov would be so appreciated by certain avant-garde groups and conversely why he would be condemned by others. His interest in the Russian tradition be it literary, graphic or oral, his attitude towards creation as an irrational, intuitive moment, and his expanded vision of reality—all were shared by the members of the Russian avant-garde in the first decades of this century. Compare Remizov's literary and artistic statements and practice to the following excerpt from the intuitivist critic Vladimir Markov's (pseudonym of Waldemars Matveus, 1877-1914) essay of 1912: "We cannot be responsible for our ideas taking forms that in their embodiment seem, as it were, absurd and coarse but that demand their realization in precisely these forms. Neither are we responsible for the fact that our soul demands 'plagiarism,' that we repeat old things. . . . The development of world art clearly shows that folk arts have been created only by way of plagiarism. . . . I would go so far as to say that there is no art without plagiarism, and even the freest art is based on plagiarism in the above sense because beloved forms of the past instilled in our soul unconsciously repeat themselves."<sup>24</sup> I do not know whether or not Remizov was familiar with Markov's writings, although, most likely, he was as a result of his many contacts with the artists of the avant-garde. Whatever the case, Markov's writings are typical of the years 1908-1912 in their strong symbolist connections and their appreciation of Eastern and folk arts. Before these years the symbolist element, the stress on the irrational nature of the creative process, would have been stronger and later the resultant formal qualities would have been stressed.

When Remizov left the Soviet Union for Germany and then France, these ideas still had some currency, but in immigration they had less. He, however, must have felt his role as a bearer of Russian traditions even more acutely because of his physical separation from these traditions and because of the state of his own works in his homeland. In fact, his writings in immigration attest to this fact. Cut off from Russia he turned more often to past traditions and wrote more about his access to them. As he did so he came to be more recognized and appreciated by Western critics for his understanding of the native Russian forms. By the time of his death in 1957, in his writings and statements about the creative process, Remizov somewhat anachronistically bears the additional tradition of the avant-garde milieu of the years 1908-1912, a role he may not have anticipated.

In conclusion, Remizov's references to and use of past traditions were both appreciated and condemned. His detractors saw these works as imitative and lacking in creativity. This attitude is understandable, for Remizov

was indeed challenging the particularly twentieth century notion of creativity, which demanded and still demands new forms at all costs. His version of creativity was like a folk teller's or a medieval scribe's. While it required expression it also required an adherence to tradition.<sup>25</sup> For him the artist-writer should not seek only new forms, he should look into himself, into his culture's past for the forms carried therein. Fortunately there were those who appreciated this most Russian of Russian writer's attempts to bring past traditions into the twentieth century and applauded the innovative forms which resulted.

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#### NOTES

1. Mamontov was influenced by the Englishman William Morris' writings and workshops.
2. It is outside the scope of this paper to discuss the correspondences between the Russian and European movements at this time. There were, of course, many.
3. *Limonar' Lug Duxovnyj*, St. Petersburg, 1907; *Posolon'*, Moscow, 1907.
4. "Pisatel' ili spisivatel'?", *Birževye vedomosti* (evening edition), June 16, 1909, p. 6.
5. M. Prišvin, "Plagiator li A. Remizov?," *Slovo*, June 21, 1909, p. 5.
6. *Zolotoe Runo*, Nos. 7-9, 1909, pp. 145-149.
7. This process has been described by the Soviet critic R. P. Dmitrieva in "Povest' o Petre i Fevronij v pereskaze A. M. Remizova," *Trudy ot dela drevnerusskoj literatury*, Vol. 26, Moscow, ANSSR, 1970, pp. 155-176.
8. N. K. Kodrjanskaja, *Remizov*, Paris, 1959, p. 132.
9. A. B. Lord, *A Singer of Tales*, Cambridge, 1960.
10. A. M. Remizov, *Krug sčast'ja*, Paris, 1957, p. 61.
11. Remizov's notions of what is "true Russian" are well documented in his diaries, letters and autobiographical works.
12. The dialogue between Remizov and Gogol' in these works is complex. Critics have attempted to interpret these references as parody or travesty. Such conventional literary interpretations do not hold up.
13. A. Rystencko, *Zametki o sočinenijax A. M. Remizova*, Odessa, 1913, p. 109.
14. V. Gippius, *Gogol'*, Leningrad, 1924, p. 169.
15. N. K. Kodrjanskaja, *Remizov v svoix pis'max*, Paris, 1977, p. 219.
16. It should not be surprising that Remizov's image of himself as a bearer of tradition should not be confined to his rewritten tales and dramas. His opinions about the decline of the Russian language are well known as are his attempts to "give it back to the Russians" by ridding it of foreign elements. That he saw himself in this role is clear from the following quote: "I . . . never said that I write and that everyone should write like they did in the XVI and XVII centuries. I repeated and I repeat that the Russian writer must follow in the direction of the Russian turns of speech, which are distinctly expressed in the bureaucratic language of the XVI and XVII centuries, and on that verbal foundation, create his own speech." (N. K. Kodrjanskaja, *Remizov*, Paris, 1959, p. 243.)
17. A. M. Remizov, *Podstrižennymi glazami*, Paris, 1951, pp. 40-48.
18. In the case of his art Remizov's practice was related to that of medieval scribes who, in fact, functioned much as folk tellers did in their relation to and interpretation of texts.

19. A. M. Remizov, *Krug sčast'ja*, Paris, 1957, p. 61.
20. A. M. Remizov, *Podstrižennymi glazami*, Paris, 1951, p. 130.
21. A. M. Remizov, *Krug sčast'ja*, Paris, 1957, p. 61.
22. N. K. Kodrjanskaja, *Remizov*, Paris, 1959, pp. 96-97.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 307.
24. V. Markov, "The Principles of the New Art, 1912," in J. Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde. Theory and Criticism 1902-1934*, New York, 1976, pp. 34-35.
25. Critics normally miss or downplay the "expressive" element in this form of creativity or find "expressive" incompatible with "bearer of tradition." The writings of the current Latin American authors of Magical Realism have posed a similar problem for critics.