

TYOLOGICAL REMARKS ON REMIZOV'S PROSE*

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The prose of Aleksej Remizov constitutes an important step in a development which has been called the 'subjectivization' of Russian prose. This development is well known on the surface, whereas less light has been shed on the deeper changes that accompanied it. Correspondingly, the main features of Remizov's style have been described (Geib 1970), while its semantics have received less attention.

More often than not traditional views of Remizov's prose refer to the prose of realism as a kind of normal, standard, or primary prose, compared to which Remizov's prose appears to be 'subjective', 'expressive', 'decorative', 'ornamental', 'secondary', etc.; it is easy to see how all these designations for what seemed to be the 'marked' or 'dominant' features of Remizov's prose imply a neutral norm, and it is equally easy to see what has served as the basis of this norm, namely the canon of realism.¹ The faithful service done by realism as the implicit ground for comparison has led to a one-sided concern with stylistics and a corresponding neglect of semantics in our description of post-realistic prose. The modest aim of this talk is to approach a more balanced view of the matter. Firstly, I want to underscore the simple, but disregarded point in connection with a prose like Remizov's that its new attitude to language went hand in hand with a new attitude to reality; secondly, by the same token, I want to direct attention to the objective side, as it were, of Remizov's subjectivity.

In recent articles Wolf Schmid has attempted to substitute a new, more differentiated scheme for the formalist distinction between 'fabula' and 'sjužet' (Schmid 1982, 1984).² Schmid suggests that we should distinguish not two, but four levels in the narrative text:

- The level of '*Geschehen*', that is the flow of life, the huge mass of things and events out of which some are selected to constitute a
- '*Geschichte*', a story. The story in its turn is ordered sequentially according to some intention to form an
- '*Erzählung*', a narrative (plot), which is to be
- *presented* in some medium or other, e. g., film or literature. This fourth level Schmid terms '*Präsentation der Erzählung*', i. e., presentation of narrative.

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

The four levels are:

GESCHEHEN
events
GESCHICHTE
story
ERZÄHLUNG
narrative (plot)
PRÄSENTATION
presentation (discourse)

What Schmid has done is, roughly speaking, to supplement the old 'story' and 'plot' with two new levels, one at either end; prior to story comes the Geschehen-level, i.e., the flux of phenomena out of which the story is selected and foregrounded; and after 'narrative' (plot) we get the presentation-of-narrative level (discourse), which is medium specific.

If we consider this revised scheme of a narrative text in connection with Remizov's prose it appears that the two newly added levels tend to dominate here, whereas story and plot are more subordinate. Remizov is not primarily interested in stories. Neither is he concerned with plot in the sense of story organization. What he focusses on is the trivia of life, on the one hand, and, on the other, its artistic presentation in the medium of language. In a realistic text, by way of contrast, the two central levels of story and narrative plot are foregrounded at the expense of the marginal levels of 'Geschehen' and verbal presentation; conversely, Remizov's prose foregrounds the two marginal levels at the expense of story and narrative.

This neglect of what mattered most in traditional narrative is often exposed in Remizov's works. In *Krestovye sestry*, for example, we find the following passage more than once:

"Svadby, pokojniki, slučai, proisšestvija, skandaly, draki, mordoboj, k a r a u l i učastok, i ne to čelovek kričit, ne to koška mjaučit, ne to dušat kogo-to,—tak vsjakij den" (Soč., t. 5, p. 36).

What is nakedly listed here is the very material from which a traditional narrative would have selected the elements for its story. Remizov is not concerned with it. Eventually, he resumes the events of a by-gone season in somewhat greater detail;³ but no consecutive ordering of these events is ever established. It appears that a sequential narrative ordering of them is of no importance. In his later years Remizov once noted: "U menja net dara posledovatel'nosti, ja vse sryvu" (Kodrjanskaja 1959: 109). In fact the

writer did not need 'posledovatel'nost' to say what he wanted to say—he obviously did not believe in its abstraction, i. e., in the relations it imposed on the world. Elsewhere Remizov has noted: "Ja dumaju, čto vse 'natural'noe' iskusstvo èto dekadans (vyroždenie) čelovečeskogo zrenija" (ibid.: 190). Following his own 'zrenie', Remizov "vse sryval", broke it all up. Instead of chronological story and plot he assembled in his text what we experience as pieces of more "real" lives, more concrete bits of a normally backgrounded 'Geschehen'-level, and framed them with the real locus, be it Burkov's Yard or the provincial town, and the "real" time, the passing of the seasons. The pieces were held together not by sequential coherence, but by their very special verbal presentation.

Now, if we ask what is common to the two polar levels foregrounded by Remizov, one answer might be—their seeming *reality*; which, in turn, suggests that the feature common to story and narrative plot which compromises them for an author of Remizov's kind, is their *fictionality*. Story and plot are constituents of a *closed* fictional world, and are indeed responsible for its closure; and this "closedness" of realistic prose makes it unrealistic in the eyes of a modernist. He will, instead, focus on what seems to him really real—*more* "real" life, on the one hand, and its verbal presentation, i. e., language, on the other.⁴

Inherent in the opposition 'real' vs. 'fictitious' is the opposition 'concrete' vs. 'abstract': the 'events' are concrete as are the verbal signs, whereas story and plot represent an abstraction.

With the help of Wolf Schmid's scheme I have drawn attention to "the other side" of Remizov's prose or, more specifically, to its polarity: the fact that the strikingly subjective expression plane serves as expression for a content of no less striking 'objectivity'. In the following I shall argue that the content to which Remizov gave expression is 'objective' in the sense of 'objectively given', and that accordingly it is *presented* rather than created.

In his essay on the 'non-classical' prose of Remizov, Belyj, and Rozanov, Viktor Levin concludes that it displays a 'subject-oriented character' (sub"-ektnyj xarakter), by which he meant the following: "Zaključennaja v povestvovanii rečevaja norma principiaľno nezavisima ot ob'ekta izobraženija. Ona—forma vyraženija samogo avtora" (1981:272). Levin thereby distinguishes this manner from that of 'skaz' where the opposite holds true, and it is clear what he means. But, like the common use of 'subjective' to mean 'expressive of the author's feelings', Levin's 'sub"-ektnyj' may be misleading, for Remizov's prose contains a rigorous objectivity of its own: firstly, its main concern was 'naming' as much as 'telling', and much if not all of its naming lexis aimed at a kind of direct objectivity by *quoting* life;⁵

secondly, the verbal subjectivity involved not only the speaker of the text, but also its addressee *and* the matters presented.

Let us first consider the quoting lexis. In works like *Krestovye sestry* or *Pjataja jazva* it is obvious how invaluable the actual names of persons and things are to Remizov. 'Actual names' include not only concrete personal names, but also nick-names. Often we find entire sections containing elaborated lists of persons present at a given occasion. The lists present the personal names plus nick-names and titles, the latter often in *spaced printing*; the lists are often repeated, but retain their full form.⁶ This repeated, emphasized use of concrete names without our being told much more is a device that seems to be the opposite of realistic 'typization'. There, a social content is conceptualized and incorporated into a fictitious individual and designated by a name that might as well be another (think of, for instance, Oblomov); here, the names and titles of concrete individuals *come first*, so to speak, and through repetitive emphasis acquire their value or content as signs. At the base of Remizov's works lies what might be called a *verbal stock-taking*; the author holds review of the concrete names and wordings placed at his disposal by the area of life (the 'Geschehen'-area) which he wants to present. And this whole vocabulary seems to be objective in the sense of *given*. The text, then, unfolds as its expressive presentation.⁷

In order to consider the 'objective side' of Remizov's 'subjective' expression I shall have to discuss the nature of his verbal presentation. As Viktor Levin noted in the article I mentioned earlier, there is no real 'telling' since nobody tells and nothing is told in the full sense of this word. The text is *performed* rather than narrated (cf. Slobin 1985). Further, it is difficult if not impossible to distinguish the layers in the text which we usually term the 'narrator' and the 'author' respectively. In a realistic text, by contrast, it may be fairly easy to distinguish a governing creator of the text, the 'implied author', behind its speaker or 'narrator'; here, it is as if we are dealing with only one 'sender'. Who is he? To which of our usual authorities does he correspond—to the narrator or the author? Since narration proper has been weakened, my answer would be—to the author; but since he is no longer implied but explicit what we seem to be facing is an explicit author.

This is not merely a matter of terminology. I have been on the watch for Remizov's 'implied author', but have not found one. In classical texts like *Otcy i deti* or *Anna Karenina* we distinctly sense a creating mind (the 'natura creans', to use the scholastic term) as the abstract center of the work. In *Krestovye sestry* we do not—at least I do not—find anything like one. Behind the explicit author I sense not an implied creating author, but rather—life itself. In short, the author in Remizov is not the classical

author-creator or author-inventor: he creates or invents less than he *performs*—as explicit author he is identical with the verbal performance of life at Burkov's Yard. And if I can sense a governing creator anywhere, I do not sense him behind the text, but behind the life presented in it.

In this way, the content plane of Remizov's prose differs just as much from its classical counterparts as the plane of expression. Significantly, the dominant plane of realism, that of ideology, is in Remizov reduced to formula-like sentences such as "čelovek čeloveku—brevno" or "obvinovati' nikogo ne'za" (*Krestovye sestry*). Whereas the whole structure in works such as Dostoevskij's or Tolstoj's serves to represent competing social languages, as Baxtin has taught us, the same cannot be said about Remizov's works. The level of ideology is more simple here and far from being the ultimate outcome of the total structure. Rather, social ideology seems irrelevant in comparison with universal laws that govern the whole 'Geschehen' of life, absolutes that can be stated sententiously, like the ones mentioned above. According to *Krestovye sestry* there is not much more to say about it, for better or for worse.

What, then, takes the place that ideology holds in a realistic text? Instead of ideological analysis the text gives expression to emotional synthesis, namely a feeling about the world presented, be it awe, pity, or belief. This feeling, however, does not appear as *created* by the text or its author, neither does it emerge as the final outcome of its entire structure. It is there from the very beginning, inherent in the way the phenomena are presented. It does not seem to be invented as much as it seems to be *given* together with the things presented, as part of their verbal mode of being.

A case in point is Remizov's use of repetitions. Clearly, such repetitions express emotion, all criticism agrees on that. But through repetition something happens to this emotion—it is, as it were, made intersubjective, collective, i.e. it is objectivized. It is no longer something that the author feels privately, but formulaic expressions that must be shared by the receiver of the text. Through repetition, the emotionality is objectivized, becomes 'conrescent' with the things themselves. The emotionality of Remizov's text is objective and subjective at one and the same time, and it is performed rather than created.

This brings to mind folklore, as well as Remizov's own statements that the song, 'pesnja', was the source of his writing (Kodrijanskaja 1959:109). But, again, the affinity of Remizov's prose to folklore is not only a matter of stylistic loans and analogy, but of semantic kinship as well. Just as in folklore, Remizov the author-singer performs life-situations, the meaning of which is presented as inherent in life itself. This meaning is known to

author and reader beforehand, or is at any rate beyond their control. The author conducts the verbal presentation of this prescribed life-text, and the reader is invited to join in. Through rhythm and repetition, the presentation of the text becomes an enactment of it; it is true that verbal enactment of this kind displays a great many 'subjective' features: but this subjectivity appears to be strongly connected with its object, if not dictated by it;⁸ it is expressive not of an author as an individual person, but of *man's* reactions to the life that the text is about.

By 'repetition' I not only mean Remizov's reiterated use of single words or names, or of whole phrases and sections (leitmotifs); in principle, the whole texture of Remizov's prose is a kind of 'increment', i. e., an act of amplification of its object. This applies to both micro- and macrolevels. On the microlevel, many segments are generated by synonymic amplification:

Pobežali za strelkoj minuty, ne mogli už stat', ne mogli pet' svoju minutnuju pesnju, i bežali po krugu vpered s četverti na polčasa, s polčasa na bez četverti, a s bez četverti na desjať, a s desjať i minut na pjať, a s pjať i na četyre . . . (Časy, Soč., t. 2, p. 20-21)

Slovno rana, razrastalas' prokljataja pečat' i už ne na lice ego, a gde-to v serdce i, kak tjažeť tjaželega ona so dnja na den', stanovilas' obuznee, prigibala emu xrebet (p. 15-16).

Na každom ustupe vstrečalsja s vetrom. Brosal ego veter, oglušal, dljinnymi zamorožennymi palčami tormošil bašlyk, ledjanymi žgutikami stegal po glazam (p. 20).

I zašipeli, stenja, probuždennye, budto pomolodevšie časy, zaxripeli starčeskim prostužennym gorlom (ibid.).

Correspondingly, on the macrolevel—is not the same principle at work there? *Krestovye sestry*, for instance—could we not define this work as a kind of 'existential synonymy', or 'synonymy of fates', i. e., a synonymic amplification of basic tenets in the lives at Burkov's Yard? I think we could. And once more I would like to stress that the effect is not just one of 'subjective' decoration; thanks to this basic principle of increment the text seems to insist on the objective (given) presence and essence of the things presented.

To sum up—terms like 'subjectivization of prose', 'subjective prose', etc., can be misleading, since they imply realism as a neutral norm, which it is not, and disregard the 'new objectivity' contained in prose like Remizov's.⁹ As I see it, this dichotomy between a classical prose text and Remizov's text type¹⁰ should be stated at another level as an opposition between 'anthropocentricity' and 'cosmocentricity'.

The classical text is anthropocentric, the modernist text is cosmocentric. The classical text is based on *man* as the interpreting, acting and ordering center of the world, indeed on historical man as the origin of cosmos. The modernist text, on the contrary, suggests that the center of the world is outside man, whose actions, organizations and interpretations can have no bearing on the essence of things.

Accordingly, the dominant levels and categories of the classical text, such as story and action, character, narration proper, and its explanatory devices, such as motivation, indication of causal and temporal sequences, as well as its man-centered perspective—all this came to be neglected in the modernist text or was deliberately disrupted, since historical man was no longer regarded as the origin of anything like cosmos. On the contrary, in this type of text man is exposed to the world on an equal footing with animals and things.

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NOTES

* The following remarks apply primarily to Remizov's early works, i. e., those published in his "Sočinenija" (1910-1912).

1. It is possible to see it the other way round; at least there are certain grounds for considering a prose like Remizov's as 'primary', and that of the realists as 'secondary'—as markedly *un-decorative*, *un-ornamental*. These grounds are phenomenological; the 'ornamental' text is phenomenologically concrete and simple, whereas the 'realistic' text is abstract and complex. The ornamental text strives for immediate 'presentation' of the phenomena, the realistic for mediated representation (cf. Carden 1976: 50, Hansen-Löve 1982: 298-302, Jensen 1984).

2. Other modifications have been proposed, see Schmid (1982: 83-93) for references and discussion.

3. E.g., *Krestovye sestry*, Soč., t. 5, pp. 128-129.

4. Here it might seem that my argument collides with Remizov's own statements to the effect that he preferred fantasy and literary sources to 'natura': "Ja pri moem—išču v knigax i redko v žizni" (Kodrjanskaja 1959, p. 202); "No ja ljublju vse, čto ne 'realno'". Opisanija iz 'realnoj' žizni dlja menja kak kartofelnaja kožura ili kak upražnenie v pisatel'skom remesle. Čital ja po-francuzski otčetlivoe opisanie nočnogo Londona i tak menja potjanulo k nepravdašnemu, no čem-to dlja menja živee etogo 'realnogo', k carju Vašvamire. Ja sam grešu etim 'realnym' grexom—ot svoej bednosti" (ibid., p. 207); "Mne vseгда nužna kniga, literaturnyj istočnik" (ibid., p. 110). But I do not think that there is a contradiction here; Remizov always depended on the idiom for his means of expression, and naturally the role of the literary idiom had grown during the years in emigration (the above statements are from 1948); further, by "more real life", "bits of the 'Geschehen'" etc., I do not designate raw, non-verbal 'natura', but the world of phenomena which is 1) beyond the scope of traditional [hi] stories, 2) memorized in the verbal idiom. To Remizov, the latter was more real than traditional narration and description, which can also be seen from his interest in documents: "Po otrjvkam dokumentov russkaja žizn' v vekax. Rossija sama, kak sjužet, budto živoe suščestvo" (ibid., p. 116).

5. Implied in the objectivity quoted by Remizov were also elements from the literary heritage, cf. G. Slobin 1982.

6. E. g., A. Remizov, *Pjataja jazva* (Letchworth 1970), pp. 61, 69.
7. As has been noted by Greta Slobin (p. 74), Remizov's manner of writing is reminiscent of 'bricolage' as described by C. Lévi-Strauss in *La pensée sauvage*.
8. Cf. M. Baxtin and R. Jakobson on "the third participant", in: V. N. Vološinov, "Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art", in *Freudianism* (N.Y.-San Francisco-London 1976), p. 103 ff.; R. Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Selected Writings*, Vol. III (The Hague-Paris-N.Y. 1981), p. 24. Cf. also G. Slobin (p. 69 ff.) on literary shamanism in Remizov's "Tale of Stratilatov," and Ernst Cassirer on "word and name magic," in his *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, II (Berlin 1925), p. 53-54.
9. Ultimately, the value of both 'subjective' and 'objective' as descriptive terms is highly problematic; relations between the speaking subject and the object spoken of are, as we know, very complex, and furthermore literature has known several kinds of 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity.' These terms meet with special difficulties in the concrete modernistic sign because of its 'conrescent' nature.
10. For a comprehensive survey of the dichotomy in question with valuable new suggestions, see Hansen-Löve, pp. 298-302.

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