

INTRODUCTION

When we began to consider organizing the first international conference on Remizov, the late Alexis Rannit and I thought the moment particularly appropriate. It would provide an opportunity for bringing together specialists in the field to share their archival finds, recent scholarly discoveries and new approaches to methodological questions. The simultaneous exhibition of Remizov's art from the Thomas P. Whitney Collection provided the rare possibility of evaluating the writer's graphic art as an important part of his legacy.¹ Our sense of timing for the occasion proved right. The exchange of material and ideas was important not only for the Remizov scholarship, but also for the still unwritten history of the Russian Silver Age.

The sense of the current rediscovery of the cultural renaissance of the Silver Age, cut short by historical events, contributes to the particular feeling of challenge and excitement among the scholars of this period. The idea of bringing Remizov specialists together with scholars involved in the study of other major figures of the Silver Age emerged also from their many shared concerns. Although Remizov's contribution and influence have been generally recognized, the study of the biography and the works of this major writer has had a belated and slow beginning in recent years. The Amherst Remizov Symposium thus fell into place as one of a series of international working conferences on "difficult" single writers, such as Bely, Cvetaeva, Pasternak, and Xlebnikov.

In his opening remarks Simon Karlinsky noted that "A Remizov conference is a necessity." The aim of the conference was two-fold: to provide a forum for sharing information and raising larger questions pertaining to the period; to examine existing presumptions and to begin working towards establishing a sound methodological basis for the study of this writer, whose own claims and reputation for elusiveness need a careful critical reappraisal. The dearth of publications on Remizov has left room for misunderstandings and a lingering sense that he was too "obscure" and too "difficult," not unlike his fellow émigrés, Cvetaeva and Nabokov. Their contribution could not be studied until recently because of the discontinuity in Russian literary history that made research and critical evaluation difficult.

Aleksej Remizov's remarkably long and prolific career spanned the time of the most intense creative period in Russian culture, from the beginning

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

of this century to the twenties, and continued well into the fifties. Remizov was an important influence for the writers of the twenties, particularly in the sphere of literary language and genre, both of which he revamped along with his contemporary, Andrei Bely. As one of the leaders of the literary avant-garde, Remizov was not acceptable in the Soviet Union, nor could he be a favorite of the generally conservative European émigré literary community. Indeed the French artists and writers appreciated his work much more than his compatriots in Paris or Berlin. This situation persisted at the time when, as Lazar Fleishman had noted, the inner mechanism of literary evolution in Russian letters called for continued experimentation. In the years of emigration (1921-1957), Remizov's obsession with writing and being a writer reflects the same commitment that sustained the voices of his contemporaries—Cvetaeva, Mandelštam, Pasternak, and Axmatova.

In addition to problems of literary history and reception, there are also particular obstacles in the study of this many-faceted writer. A Remizov scholar must have a high threshold of frustration, a detective's sense for clues to be searched in unexpected places and connections to be made between seemingly unrelated phenomena. He must be an anthropologist and a medievalist. He must share to some degree in Remizov's own "archeological clairvoyance" in reading the writer's legends about himself as a unique, marginal figure, and in unraveling his "mystifications," compounded over the years by memoirs of dubious factuality left by contemporaries. As several papers amply demonstrate (Møller, Pyman, Sinany MacLeod, and Hughes), literature and play are inseparable in Remizov's relationships with fellow writers.

The format of the symposium as a small working seminar allowed the discussion and polemic to focus on several issues so that connections between problems emerged and could then be tied to larger theoretical questions of poetics, intertextuality, narrative, isomorphism in arts, and the concept of authorship. These particular problems were considered in the broad historical-literary context, since Remizov's status as a writer calls to question, as Fleishman pointed out, the complex problem of center and periphery (shift of literary activity to émigré centers in Berlin and Paris), as well as the ever-present problem of what constitutes a "literary fact."

The conference program was divided into small panels such as "Problems and Definitions," "Image. Music. Word," "Neo-Primitivism," "From Petersburg to Paris," "The Revolutionary Period." The divisions have not been retained in the volume because of the overlap both in individual contributions and in the discussions. Vladimir Markov opened the meeting with a lively account of persistent problems in Remizov scholarship. His paper is a

challenge to discover this "unknown writer" whose literary reception has been marked by a mixture of unquestioned influence, obscurity, and misrepresentation. A rigorous approach to the writer's work and creative biography is essential, especially since he has been generally received in terms of clichés, such as his disregard for Russian grammar and syntax, his use of "skaz," and his penchant for stylization. In Markov's view, a thorough investigation of the extensive body of Remizov's work should aim at correcting the existing misconceptions, some of which have been perpetuated by the writer himself. Remizov left the most fascinating commentary on his own work which is still to be critically examined. On the other hand, early critics judged his work largely in relation to the canon of realism, although the complex nature of this canon and its relevance for twentieth-century Russian literature has yet to be unraveled.

The papers and discussions that followed met Markov's challenge by sorting out facts and pointing to the many possible readings of Remizov. It appeared important in several presentations to attempt an evaluation of the specific nature of Remizov's handling of Russian verbal art. In the context of what John Malmstad refers to as "retrospectivism," participants explored the implications of Remizov's use of traditional forms that were ignored by written literature for generations. Remizov's philological approach to Russia's oral, popular tradition is part of his creative effort to appropriate this heritage (Baran). Inseparable from this is the emphasis on memory, which takes various shapes in Remizov's work, including his use of dreams as a literary device (Pyman).

In the papers collected in this volume, it becomes clear that Remizov's tendency to undermine binary oppositions, such as old/new, literary/non-literary, high rhetoric/lowly colloquial, realistic/subjective, fiction/non-fiction, prose/poetry, calls into question conventional literary definitions and approaches. Alex Shane's paper on Remizov's poetry and its connection with his rhythmic prose leads to a consideration of the boundary between rhythmic prose and the Russian "vers libre" as it developed after the Revolution. Antonella D'Amelia's detailed account of Remizov's unpublished *Merlog*, which represents a compilation of heterogeneous writings on art, criticism, and self, and is a synthesis of his artistic principles, raises the issue of the concept of the "book." The papers of Burke and Zavalishin, together with Jean-Claude Marcadé's presentation on Remizov's graphic art and the art of the book, contribute to the intricate question of isomorphism of visual art and writing.

The well-defined notion of primitivism in art is contrasted to its as yet insufficiently explored nature and function in literature. Various forms of

primitivism in Remizov's work are placed in a larger context in the papers of Burke, Carden, Zavališin, and Rosenthal. Henryk Baran considers Remizov's efforts to fuse individual creation with the popular national tradition, along with those of Xlebnikov and Vjačeslav Ivanov. Olga Hughes examines the use of fairy tale form or "skazočnost," as an underlying structure in the autobiography of Remizov's exile years, *Iveren'*.² From the complexity of the definition of primitivism in literature, the emphasis shifts to its possible functions.

Remizov's use of folk forms in the period immediately following the Revolution appeared, as Simon Karlinsky remarked at the conference, in what would at first seem to be mutually exclusive situations. Horst Lamp finds these forms in the satirical columns of the anti-Bolševik *Prostaja gazeta*, while Katerina Clark places Remizov's *Tsar Maksimilian* in the context of the current polemic on the new popular mass theatre. Perhaps Andrej Siniavsky's extensive and probing reading of Remizov's autobiographical legend provides a possible methodological concept for illuminating the full range of Remizov's use of traditional and popular forms.

Several papers focus on particular problems in understanding the language and form of Remizov's innovative writing. The first steps toward overcoming the difficulty of "reading" Remizov are illuminated by Mirra Ginsburg, a foremost translator and a discerning reader. Sinany MacLeod discusses the techniques of montage and the use of spatial and temporal forms in Remizov's syncretic memoir of the Revolution, *Vzvizrennaja Rus'* (*Whirlwind Russia*). In the final paper of the symposium, Peter Jensen addresses the methodological problem of the frequent neglect of semantics in favor of the concern with stylistics in the study of Remizov. He questions the traditional view of Remizov's prose as "subjective" in relation to an implied sense of norm in the realist canon. Warning against a misleading disregard for a new or different objectivity, Jensen offers an alternate reading of Remizov's early novels which reflect a major shift in modern consciousness. This theoretical approach succeeds in opening up possibilities for reading Remizov's work on its own terms, while reevaluating traditional literary notions such as realism. It is our hope that the symposium's focus on this major literary figure will contribute to the widening scholarly discussion of the heritage of the Silver Age.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Professors Sona Aronian, Lazar Fleishman, René Guerra, the late Yuri Ivask, Gerald Janeček, Simon Karlinsky, John Malmstad, and Stanley Rabinowitz for their valuable discussions of the symposium papers. Their participation enlivened the polemic and contributed a broader perspective to the specific concerns of the indi-

vidual presentations. Mme. Natalja Reznikova provided much appreciated assistance by opening her Paris archive to scholars. Professor Robert L. Jackson kindly shared with me his expertise in organizing successful conferences on individual writers. I would like to thank the Dean of Faculty at Amherst College, Richard D. Fink, for his support and Missy West of the Development Office for her assistance in the preparation of this volume. I am grateful to Prof. Dean S. Worth for his enthusiastic and expeditious attention to this collection. The symposium and the publication of the proceedings would not have been possible without the personal interest and commitment of Thomas P. Whitney and the generous support of the Julia A. Whitney Foundation.

Greta N. Slobin, Amherst College

NOTES

1. For the catalogue of the exhibition see: Greta Nachtaier Slobin, *Images of Remizov* (Amherst: Mead Museum, 1985).
2. *Iveren'*, edited and prepared for publication by Olga Raevsky Hughes (Berkeley: Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1986).