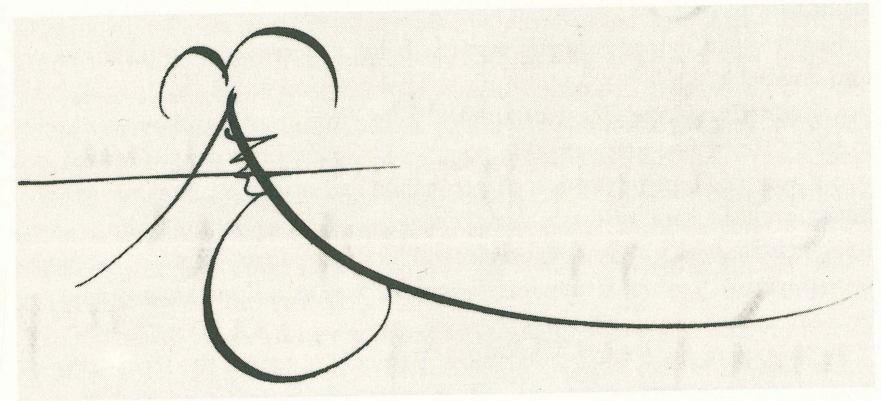


SOME OBSERVATIONS ON REMIZOV'S HUMOR

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1. Can one judge a writer from his signature?

In a letter to the Danish writer Aage Madelung, dated Charlottenburg, June 13th, 1922, Aleksej Remizov presents what he calls his "new signature".¹



It is an untraditional monogram, largely made up of parts selected from his full signature, as it was at that time. The "A"—from his first name Aleksej—is obviously there. And so is—less obviously—the "lek": the short zigzag inside the "A". The "s"—the unvoiced Russian "c"—protrudes like a round belly from the right leg of the "A". Together they form a Russian "P"—the initial letter of Remizov's last name (written as reflected in a mirror—which, by the way, is permissible also in a traditional monogram). Over the "A" is the voiced Russian "3", also from his last name. In his full signature Remizov often wrote this letter above the line, in the manner of an abbreviation in an Old Russian manuscript. And since the "3" is lying down, it also reads as an "M", the initial letter of Remizov's middle name: Mixajlovič.

Furthermore, the monogram is probably not just a monogram, but also a self-portrait. The horizontal line suggests a division of the writer into two halves, with a pair of fluttering wings above the dividing line and an empty stomach below. This monogrammatic portrait—if it is a portrait—could at

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

the same time serve as a brief summary of Remizov's 40 letters to Aage Madelung: they deal with two themes—literature and Remizov's disastrous material conditions.

Even more revealing than the signature itself is perhaps the fact of the 45-year-old Remizov still wanting to present a new signature. In the world of grown-ups the signature is a serious matter. You use it on contracts and cheques, and it should be as stable as your finger prints. It is a legally valid symbol of *you* as a mature person. Adolescents usually work at developing their own individual signature, while adults strive to preserve theirs as an unchanging expression of personal identity. By playing with his signature, Remizov deliberately demonstrated that he was not a full member of this adult world.

Remizov did indeed regard himself as being different from normal people and created a whole myth about his special position in life. In this myth his near-sightedness and his calligraphy were important—and related—elements. “Не знаю, как сказать, жизнь моя была чудесная. Оттого ли, что я родился близоруким, и от рождения глаза мои различали мелочи, сливающиеся для нормального глаза, и я как бы природой моей предназначался к ‘мелкоскопической’ каллиграфии, или я сделался близоруким, увидев с первого взгляда то, что нормальному глазу только может сниться во сне.”²

To designate his own special vision, Remizov invented the term “clipped eyes” (подстриженные глаза), which points to a defect as well as to a talent. This concept is characteristic of his personal myth, with its peculiar blend of an inferiority complex and a traditional Romantic belief in the unique nature of the poet. The myth gave room in Remizov's life and works for the peaceful coexistence of a gloomy outlook upon life and a buoyant humor.

2. Remizov presented himself to other people under the cover of a sad, clown-like mask. This mask might be labelled *only Remizov*.

Nina Berberova shows us this mask in an episode from her book *Курсив мой*. In 1905 Remizov was working as a secretary in the journal *Вопросы жизни* in St. Petersburg. Being only a secretary, he was not allowed to participate in the editorial meetings. During these sessions he would take all the editors' galoshes into a neighbouring room, arrange them in a circle around himself and have his own editorial meeting with them.³

This is the “only-a-secretary” variety of the “only-Remizov” mask, which also came in a number of other varieties. When comparing himself as a writer to Puškin, Tolstoj, and Dostoevskij, Remizov readily admitted that

he was “only a small beetle” (только козявка).⁴ He delights in telling us the sad story of how Czar Nikolaj II in conversation with the artist B. M. Kustodiev compared him to Teffi—much to the advantage of the latter.⁵ Even His Imperial Majesty knew that Remizov was “only Remizov”. . .

When it came to making a living and to coping with the practical problems of everyday life, Remizov was not a normal, responsible person, fit and adjusted, capable of looking after himself, but—in his own words—“a scarecrow”: “. . . среди нормально зрячих в неразберихе трезвой жизни я, как пугало, и конечно, у меня много врагов, а матерьяльно я — нищий”.⁶ Or he was an enchanted fairy tale character, condemned to live among people in the shape of a defenseless frog.⁷ In her memoirs Natal'ja Reznikova tells us that Remizov always emphasized his destitution, his unsettled living conditions, and his isolation, and she hints that much of this was part of a literary image that Remizov strove to create.⁸

There are several animal varieties of the “only-Remizov” mask. The best known is, of course, the image of Asyka, supreme ruler of the Apes (Obezvelvolpal) who signed curious membership documents with his own tail (собственнохвостно)—in a life-long calligraphic game which Remizov played with his friends. This game was, in fact, an elaborate variety of the compensatory editorial meetings.

In a letter to Aage Madelung from 1932 or 1933 “only-Remizov” took on the shape of a bear. A wealthy and successful Swedish writer, Alex Munthe, had recently donated the impressive sum of 100,000 crowns to the protection of wild life in Northern Scandinavia *and (!)* to the support of blind Laplanders. Remizov read about this and, being in need as always, he asked Madelung to persuade the Swedish writer to give some of this money to him. He pleaded that he had always liked bears and written nicely about them: “Nowhere can a bear find better protection than with me.”⁹ The entire letter, written in German, was entitled “Bärenbittschrift”—a bear's petition.

In conversation with his biographer, Natal'ja Kodrjanskaja, Remizov said that he had two kinds of vision: “To see what is ridiculous and what is bitter, those are my two visions.”¹⁰ Remizov certainly applied this double vision when looking at himself and made a unique thing out of being “only Remizov”. But he also applied his double vision when looking at the surrounding world.

3. In much of Remizov's writing the reader is struck by a contrast between, on the one hand, the author's comprehensively pessimistic, depressing view of reality and, on the other hand, the exuberant wealth of

absurd, comic detail. One of Remizov's keyholes to reality, and a keyhole which was particularly well suited to match his double vision, was the "xronika"-column in pre-revolutionary Russian newspapers. There is a letter in his correspondence with Madelung which casts an interesting light on the relation between Remizov's newspaper reading and his writing. This particular letter—dated March 17, 1908, and written when Aage Madelung had recently returned to Denmark after almost ten years in Vologda, has a number of newspaper cuttings neatly pasted along the margin. They are all cuttings from the *xronika*-columns of Russian newspapers, many of them from the popular *Russkoe slovo*. They had been selected by Remizov, who had also underlined words and expressions which he found particularly worthy of notice. Remizov's reason for sending them to Madelung was to remind him about Russia. "Не смущайтесь, что пишу на заклеенной бумаге, пишу на своих вырезках, которые изо дня в день собираю. Думаю, что в таком сообществе слово мое прозвучит роднее и пахнет на Вас милою Русью — колыбелью Ваших желаний. Не так ли старый верный Аггей?"¹¹

The cuttings selected to remind Madelung of Russia had one common feature: they were terrible and funny at the same time. The absurd quality in them was partly due to their genre, the brief newspaper notice, which reduced a whole tragedy to a few lines, addressed to a curious, but not too seriously interested reader. One was just two lines: "В Славянске жена служащего станции в припадке религиозного помешательства, желая принести жертву, *зарезала свою дочь*."¹² Remizov underlined the last three words.

Another short cutting told the story of an inspector at a military hospital who had been sentenced to five weeks' imprisonment for mounting the coffin of a certain General Muravskij. Sitting on the corpse of the deceased general, he had shouted: "при жизни прижимал нас; дай теперь я на тебя сяду."¹³ Remizov underlined this exclamation.

Two cuttings dealt with the case of Fedotuška, a hermit from the Perm region, whose holiness attracted many female believers (богомолки) who went to visit the God-seeker in his isolated cave. They never returned, and when the authorities finally arrested Fedotuška, they found out that he had raped and then strangled these unfortunate women. A whole "female churchyard" (женское кладбище) was found near Fedotuška's cave.

Another cutting was from St. Petersburg—a man by the name of Ždanovskij had been assaulted in front of the Ministry of Communications. When the armed robbers found out that he did not have any money on him they cut off his lower lip. The unconscious victim was taken to the Опухов-скаја hospital, and the robbers got away.

Remizov had intended to show one more cutting to Madelung, but could not find it at the time of writing. Instead he gave its contents in his own words. It concerned a prison in the Fergana region in Central Asia, where the prison warders had tortured a prisoner by inserting finely cut hair from horses into his penis, one hair after the other. This newspaper item, like the rest, matched Remizov's double vision: it was terrible, on the one hand, and absurd, grotesque on the other.

Four years later, when Remizov's story *The Fifth Pestilence* was published, the reading public had the chance to get acquainted with some of this newspaper material. It had been incorporated into the text. The details about poor Ždanovskij who had his lower lip cut off for no reason at all, and the equally poor prisoner who had horse hair inserted into his penis, were used in judge Bobrov's gloomy reflections about the Russian people at the end of the third chapter.¹⁴ The grotesque verbal snapshots which Remizov found in the *xronika* columns, were thus used as indications of the present material condition of the Russian people. They served to underline the tragedy of the Westernizer Bobrov who can do nothing to improve things. The episode, in the same story, about the hermit Šapaev who rapes the girl Vasilisa, may have been inspired by the Fedotuška-story. (For chronological reasons it could hardly be an allusion to Tolstoy's *Father Sergius*, published in late 1911).

The picture of the Russians emerging from *The Fifth Pestilence* and from several other Remizov stories of the pre-revolutionary period—is that of a people doing or saying odd, primitive things out of ignorance, superstition, despair. They suppress and humiliate each other. They all appear to be the victims of an overwhelming destructive power, which is in part the forces of social injustice and political oppression, but also more generally those of time and death. The author's all-pervading pessimistic outlook on life, combined with a longing for beauty, seems related to the moods in Zinaida Gippius' early writings, in Sologub, and even in Lermontov. It is characteristic of the Neo-Romantic aspect of Symbolism. Some of it was probably derived in part from the Polish Modernist S. Przybyszewski whom Remizov and Madelung both admired in their Vologda days. They both knew Remizov's translation of Przybyszewski's prose poem "Sadness" (Тоска) by heart, and referred to it in their letters. The poem evokes and addresses the image of the all-powerful Sadness, wearing a wreath of faded flowers, and a crown of black suns.¹⁵ The most peculiar thing about Remizov's humor is really that it could grow in the shade of this gloomy figure.

4. According to Remizov's later explanation, the picture of Russia presented in *The Fifth Pestilence* was a study in the *балагурье* of the Russian

people. In his definition this word (obviously derived from балагурить—to jest or play the buffoon) means “the wondrous, strange things in everyday life” (чудесное, странное в житейском).¹⁶ Some of these wondrous, strange things Remizov evidently found in the newspapers. This explains some of the many italics in his works: Remizov would often quote a source—written or oral—and signal this to the reader by using italics.

The bitter-sweet *балагурье* is one of Remizov's specialties, and his works are full of madmen, bullied, weird children, drunkards, senile persons, crude practical jokes, strange fantasies and dreams.

One does not easily forget the madman Čerkasov from *In a Rosy Light*: “С утра начинал он свою, только ему понятную, работу: он переставлял мебель. И всякий день по новому всё переставлялось, а то и на дню по несколько раз и за несколько дней переломал все стулья.”¹⁷

It is even more difficult to shake off the impression created by the odd characters in *The Clock*, as slowly, with the passing of time, they drift towards their inevitable destruction. The boy Kostja Kločkov, an outsider because of his crooked nose, fights time by manipulating and finally wrecking the works of the clock in the local church. As the hour of his complete madness approaches, he has nightly fantasies about being swallowed by a monstrous reptile (гад) and afterwards rotating in its cold, slippery entrails.¹⁸ His grandfather, the senile Andrej Petrovič, occasionally sees cows' legs sticking up from his tea cup, and suspects that his own head is full of hatching cockroach eggs.¹⁹ The clockmaker Semën Mitrofanovič is a heavy drinker and has perverse fits of cruelty. His victim is usually a small boy who helps out in the shop. Semën Mitrofanovič forces him to kiss his fusty heel and to drink from the chamber-pot.²⁰

One of Kostja Kločkov's mad ideas is that he can prohibit laughing. “Смеяться никто не смеет, понимаешь ты, смеяться запрещено.”²¹ In *Following the sun (Посолюнь)* there is a story titled, “Flowers” (“Красочки”), where laughter is also prohibited, even if it cannot be. An angel and a devil divide all the flowers of the earth among themselves. The flowers which surround the angel are not permitted to laugh. If they break the rule they must pass over to the devil. In spite of this grave punishment, the flowers burst out laughing, one by one.²²

Like these flowers, Remizov cannot help laughing, no matter how inappropriate the situation. The modernists who surrounded him in the literary life of pre-revolutionary Russia — Symbolists of both generations — were generally serious people. Remizov's place among them and the unique nature of his life-work are still to be explored and assessed in detail. Never-

theless, although his full signature has not yet been adequately described, it is evident that a very characteristic zigzag in it is formed by humor.

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NOTES

1. *Письма А. М. Ремизова и В. Я. Брюсова к О. Маделунгу*, Copenhagen 1976 (Kobenhavns Universitets Slaviske Institut, Materialer 1), p. 52.
2. А. М. Ремизов, *Подстриженными глазами*, Paris 1951, p. 34.
3. Н. Берберова, *Курсив мой*, München 1972, p. 307.
4. А. М. Ремизов, *Иверень*, (as quoted in *Избранное*, М. 1978, p. 20).
5. Ремизов, *Подстриженными глазами*, pp. 281-282.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 301.
8. Н. В. Резникова, *Огненная память*, Berkeley 1980, pp. 137-138.
9. *Письма*, p. 56.
10. Н. Кодрянская, *Алексей Ремизов*, Paris 1959, p. 116.
11. *Письма*, p. 46.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. А. М. Ремизов, *Пятая язва*, Letchworth 1970 (Rarity Reprints, 14), p. 47.
15. *Письма*, p. 79.
16. Кодрянская, p. 116.
17. А. М. Ремизов, *В розовом блеске*, Letchworth 1969 (Rarity Reprints, 8), p. 81.
18. А. М. Ремизов, *Рассказы*, II, München 1971 (reprint), p. 85.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 34 & 36.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 45 & 119.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
22. *Избранное*, p. 318.