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ОГНЕННАЯ ПАМЯТЬ

ВОСПОМИНАНИЯ О АЛЕКСЕЕ РЕМИЗОВЕ

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INTRODUCTION

Alexey Remizov lived a long life. A close friend of Lev Shestov and of Alexander Blok, he had personal ties with most of the important figures of the Russian cultural renaissance of the early twentieth century.

A complex personality for whom the acute awareness of the suffering of a man or a beast was an ever present reality, and who at the same time was full of mischief, always ready for a practical joke; a helpless nearsighted man who spoke of crossing a street as a heroic feat; a man, apparently, totally dependent on his friends and benefactors, but capable of protecting his way of life and his work from even solicitous intrusions; a meticulous chronicler of everyday life, and the creator of a fantastic dream world, Remizov remains a puzzle for many readers.

He began writing at an early age, and his first published work appeared just after the turn of the century. It is Dostoevsky, with his acute perception of pain and an ability to penetrate into the dark recesses of the human mind, who is perhaps the most obvious source of Remizov's poetic sensibility. He was very much a part of the Symbolist movement and, although he did not have a wide audience, his work was highly valued in the literary circles of the time. His influence—like that of his younger contemporary Andrey Bely—on later Russian prose was enormous.

Although Remizov's first book, *Sunwise (Posolon')*, is a book of stylized folk tales, during the pre-revolutionary period he wrote principally in the genres of story and novel. At the end of

his life, however, assessing his art as a whole, Remizov spoke of himself as a “singer of songs” rather than as a storyteller: “I did not become a novelist, my [novels] are a kind of a litany and a eulogy, but not entertaining winter reading [...] It is easier for me to speak in my own voice [...] because it is natural for me to sing.”

In his later years—aside from folk legends retold in his own way and dreams of which there are several books—Remizov developed a hybrid genre of a chronicle where a variety of small forms is included. Here documents neighbor with fiction; the author’s thoughts about life and literature are placed side by side with comical scenes; and, in keeping with his view that there are close ties between dream and reality (he speaks of “a splashing of dream over into reality”), descriptions of everyday occurrences intermingle with dreams. A frequent form in the mosaic of a chronicle is the “obituary,” where the deceased is often addressed directly. This reflects one of the central concerns of Remizov’s art, that of memory. Not simply reminiscing, but re-creating, reviving by means of his creative memory, and not only his own life or the life of his friends, but the events, words, documents, and through them the times and life gone by. In his writings Remizov “remembers” himself as a participant in events long past. As he writes in his autobiographical *With Clipped Eyes (Podstriżennymi glazami)*: “To write a book of ‘knots and twists’ [of one’s memory] is more than to write one’s own life dated according to a birth certificate ...”

Remizov’s range as a writer is enormous. It is not surprising that memoirs about Remizov, like the critical appreciations of his work, are contradictory. This fact only demonstrates the complexity of his personality and of his art. More often than not, readers who appreciate Remizov the author of stories and novels have no enthusiasm or understanding for the author of fairy tales, legends, dreams, or the idiosyncratic autobiographical chronicles.

His primary concern was language—to *hear* and to *see* the written word. Possessing considerable graphic talent and a penchant for calligraphy, Remizov was attracted by the visual form of old texts, and in his own writing he reproduced and experimented

with antique scripts. His numerous drawings on the subjects of his books or illustrations of his dreams are often essential for the comprehension of his verbal art. But more than the visual representation of the actual form of the old text, it was the language itself—the words and, most of all, their order—that was his passion. In his preoccupation with language, Remizov has a pronounced affinity with Gogol and Leskov, his acknowledged teachers and predecessors, both with a strong predilection for the spoken modes of Russian.

It is almost a commonplace of Russian criticism to term his language difficult, nearly incomprehensible. Remizov indeed studied sixteenth and seventeenth century documents as a source of Russian spoken “modes” before literary Russian experienced the overwhelming domination of the nineteenth-century schoolmaster’s syntax (and the features of spoken Russian are quite pronounced in his language), but, he insisted, he did not attempt to restore or reconstruct the Russian of pre-Petrine times: “I do not want to resurrect anybody’s style. I follow the natural movement of Russian, and as a Russian from Russia I am creating my own.”

Remizov often complained that he was little read and appreciated. No doubt he is a writer’s writer and hardly popular with a wide audience, the absence of which he lamented, but he never demeaned himself by courting his reader. He was annoyed by the recurrent suggestion that he simplify his language and write in a way comprehensible to an “average” reader: “It is better to perish than to turn out average. During my entire life as a writer [...] I had only one aim and one intention: to perform verbal pieces the way a musician performs music on his instrument.” One cannot imagine Remizov suddenly becoming a “popular” writer, even though he always had a faithful if limited audience that included some of his most illustrious contemporaries.

From 1921 and until his death in 1957 in Paris, Remizov lived in emigration. After leaving Russia he published forty-five books, among them, in my opinion, the two most significant of his entire *oeuvre*, *Russia in a Whirlwind* (*Vzvizrennaja Rus’*) and *With Clipped Eyes*. At the end of his life he wrote: “I lived a full and

enviable life. Consider that I write, read and draw only for my own pleasure and do nothing that is mandatory, or is forced on me. At the same time, my life was difficult—like steep stairs. For those who are used to ‘on time’ and ‘like other people’—it is better not to peek into those abysmal pits; it is hell for their eyes.”

The output of Remizoviana for the centenary of his birth and the twentieth anniversary of his death clearly indicates that not only has he not been forgotten, but that there are changes in the general reader’s attitude as well as in literary scholars’ interest in his work. 1977 saw the republication of his *The Fire of Things* (*Ogon’ veščej*, YMCA Press), originally published in 1954 and long out of print; and the publication of Natalya Kodryanskaya’s *Remizov in His Letters* (*Remizov v svoix pis’max*, Paris), a part of the voluminous correspondence of the postwar years. The following year the long-awaited volume of Remizov’s selected prose (*Izbrannoe*, Moscow, 1978) came out in the Soviet Union; and a bibliography of his works appeared in Paris (*Bibliographie*, Institut d’Études Slaves, Paris, 1978), a volume of immense value to any student of Remizov. The double anniversary was also celebrated in the émigré press. The major Russian newspapers in Paris and New York, *Russkaya Mysl’* and *Novoe Russkoe Slovo*, devoted several pages to Remizov on this occasion. The oldest émigré “thick” journal, the *Vestnik Russkogo Khristianskogo Dvizheniia* (No. 121, 1977), published, among other Remizov materials, a long chapter from Natalya Reznikoff’s memoirs entitled “Alexey Remizov in Paris.”

Several other chapters of her reminiscences had been appearing in Russian émigré periodicals since 1962. Reading them was always a satisfying experience, as if a glimpse of the “real” Remizov had been caught; at the same time, the reader was left with the feeling that the author had more to say on the subject. Now that we can read Mrs. Reznikoff’s book in its entirety, the intuition is proved to be correct.

It is a significant contribution to the memoir literature about Remizov the man and the artist. In part this is due to the memoirist’s vantage point. Beginning in the early ’twenties in Berlin, Mrs. Reznikoff herself, like her mother and her sisters, was a close friend of Remizov and his wife. The amicable relation-

ships grew through the years. In one respect this book is a chronicle of over thirty years of friendship between the author and her family and the Remizovs. Many previously unknown details and facts about Remizov's life are recounted. The story of the Remizovs' daughter, Natasha, is fully related here for the first time. The tragic complexity of this family situation explains much in Remizov's character and behavior and in his relations with his wife. The book also includes the author's conversations with the aging writer about Russian literature and Russian writers and about his own art. Remizov's contacts with French writers and publishers, especially during the postwar years, are discussed in considerable detail. So is the story of her own translations of his texts into French. (Mrs. Reznikoff's translation of *With Clipped Eyes* came out shortly after Remizov's death.) In this connection there is included here a previously unpublished letter from Boris Pasternak to the author in which the poet advances some of his ideas on translating. The book also presents a detailed account of Remizov's working habits during his final years. His life is chronicled to the very last moment.

Natalya Viktorovna Reznikoff comes from a background that makes her especially receptive to Remizov's art and that contributes to an understanding of his character and personality. Some apparently minor biographical coincidences emphasize the congeniality. *Sunwise*, Remizov's first and in many ways most remarkable book, the author encountered at the age of ten; many pages of the book she knew by heart at an early age. This perhaps trained her ear for a later appreciation of Remizov's prose, just as painting lessons in her youth made her receptive to Remizov's graphic art. Her mother, Olga Eliseyevna Kolbasin Chernov, was one of the first readers to appreciate in manuscript Remizov's *The Clock* (*Časy*); it was to be serialized in *People's Action* (*Delo Naroda*), her husband Victor Chernov's newspaper, which however was closed before the novel was published. This does not exhaust the "pre-historic" crossing of paths of the Remizovs and the family of Mrs. Reznikoff; his first original work had appeared in 1902 in a Moscow newspaper *The Courier* (*Kur'er*) with the help of the well-known writer Leonid Andreyev, whose son Vadim later married Natalya Reznikoff's twin sister Olga. All these co-

incidences are indicative of the general similarity of the background of the two families. In Mrs. Reznikoff's case it was a matter not only of devotion on a purely personal and human level, but also of an intelligent appreciation of Remizov's art, and during the last decade of his life of an active, almost day to day participation in his work.

Although Mrs. Reznikoff undoubtedly had a store of memories of her own about the Remizovs, she was helped in her work not only by their letters, notes and diaries, but also by the collective memory of her remarkable family. The mother, a writer and journalist, was an early admirer of Remizov's prose. Her three daughters, Natalya, Olga and Ariadna, in some ways took the place of the Remizovs' missing daughter (she was the same age as the twins). Literary talent and interests continued in this as well as in the following generation. The sisters translated Remizov's prose into French; many years later Olga wrote valuable memoirs about their childhood and the years of the Revolution in Russia. The husbands of the sisters wrote prose and verse, with Vadim Andreyev, Olga's husband, the most prominent among them. As the author and her sisters got married, their husbands and eventually their children, like the members of the preceding generations, acquired Remizovian nicknames and became a part of the friendly circle around the writer and his wife. The only girl in that generation, Olga Andreyev Carlisle, now a writer herself, was a goddaughter of Remizov's wife.

The whole family followed the lead of Olga Eliseyevna in taking interest in Remizov as a man and a writer. This was especially true after the Second World War and the death of Serafima Pavlovna, Remizov's wife of forty years, to whom he was exceptionally devoted and to whom he dedicated all his books. They all helped out, from financing the publishing enterprise *Oplshnik*, to reading proofs and seeing his books through the printer's where Mr. Reznikoff's expertise proved invaluable.

During the last decade of Remizov's life, Mrs. Reznikoff spent long hours working with the aging writer, whose eyesight was gradually failing. She was his translator and his secretary, answered his mail, conducted negotiations with his French publishers, read to him, wrote down his new texts and read proofs. Although

she was not by any means the only friend who helped Remizov during these years, she was one of the steady ones.

The character of the author herself—devoted, and at the same time sober and down-to-earth—exemplifies the best qualities of the Russian pre-revolutionary intelligentsia. (She was the adopted daughter of the well-known political figure, Victor Chernov, a leader of the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party.) Mrs. Reznikoff was a close friend whose vision was not distorted by adoration. She does not overlook the weaknesses and the shortcomings of her subjects, nor does she accept the long-established view, which Remizov himself helped perpetuate, that he was never recognized or appreciated. To be sure, Remizov's writings did not attract large audiences, whether in Russia or in emigration, but Mrs. Reznikoff's book provides enough first-hand information to show that in many ways his lot was not substantially different from that of other émigré writers. Since she was a part of that émigré world herself, her judgements necessarily carry greater weight than those of any outsiders.

Memoir literature about Remizov is not scarce, but the repetitious descriptions of the Remizovs' apartment, of the striking and contrasting physical appearances of the writer and his wife, and of his often provocative behavior and practical jokes make one wonder how much is actually remembered and to what extent the memoirists depend on their predecessors or on some common first impressions. To be sure, the problem is inherent in the genre: it is not always easy to distinguish what is remembered from what is adopted from other sources. However, Mrs. Reznikoff goes far beyond "first impressions". Her perceptions were substantiated and verified through years of observation and interaction. She is not only a keen observer, but also a great admirer of Remizov the writer. Her reading of Remizov began early; the years after the War, when Mrs. Reznikoff worked closely with the writer, brought a new and a deeper appreciation of his art.

No student of Remizov will be able to ignore Mrs. Reznikoff's book. It is a worthy tribute to the memory of one of Russia's most original writers of the twentieth century.

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Olga Raevsky Hughes