

SIGHT AND SOUND ENTWINED

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VISIT AND SOUND ENTWINED

Studies of the New Russian Poetry

Gerald Janecek



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Dedicated to

Konstantin Kuzminsky

and

Mikhail Shemiakin

to mark the twentieth anniversary

of the almanac

Apollon-77

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PREFACE

Sources for previously published chapters of this book are the following:

Chapter 1: “Anri Voloxonskij: Poet Scientist,” *Slavic and East European Journal* [SEEJ] 26, no. 4 (1982):434–44.

Chapter 2: “Paronomastic and Musical Techniques in Mnacakanova’s ‘Rekviem,’” *SEEJ* 31, no. 2 (1987):202–19.

Chapter 3: “Comments on Brodskij’s ‘Stixi na smert’ T. S. Eliota,” *Russian Language Journal* 34, no. 118 (1980):145–53.

Chapter 4: “Genrix Xudjakov, Poet of Compressed Form,” *SEEJ* 29, no. 2 (1985):164–75.

Chapter 5: “Minimalism in Contemporary Russian Poetry: Vsevolod Nekrasov and Others,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 70, no. 3 (1992):401–19; “Vsevolod Nekrasov, Master Paronymist,” *SEEJ* 33, no. 2 (1989):275–92; “Teoriia i praktika kontseptualizma u Vsevoloda Nekrasova,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 5 (1993):196–201.

Chapter 6: “The Poetics of Punctuation in Gennadij Ajgi’s Free Verse,” *SEEJ* 40, no. 2 (1996):297–308.

I would like to thank these journals and their editors for publishing the original articles, and Thomas Epstein and Marion Berghahn for the opportunity to present them again in this collection.

Names in the text have been transliterated using a typical journalistic style, but citations in Russian and Russian-language references employ the Library of Congress transliteration without diacriticals.

INTRODUCTION

The origin of this book can be traced to a meeting I had in June 1980 with the poet Konstantin Kuzminsky, who at the time was living in Austin, Texas. Up until then, my research had been devoted first to the work of the Russian Symbolist Andrei Bely and then to Russian Futurism. In connection with Futurism, I had come upon Kuzminsky's article on the subject, and I took the opportunity, while in Houston, to visit him in Austin. We immediately found a common language, and our conversation over tea and an excellent soup prepared by his wife Emma continued until it was too late for me to drive back to Houston that night.

The evening had two consequences for the future. The first was that one of the things Kuzminsky said that evening has now become a personal motto: "Dead poets can wait; you should work on living poets." The Kuzminskys provided me with a place to rest and, should I have trouble sleeping, I might look at a special publication few were familiar with. Kuzminsky handed me the huge folio edition *Apollon-77* (Paris, 1977) assembled and published by Mikhail Shemiakin, and he suggested that I pay particular attention to the poetry of Anri Volohonsky. The quantity of tea I had downed did indeed keep me awake in the hot, unairconditioned apartment, and I moved my mattress out onto the balcony and began reading *Apollon*. This was the second consequence, as a result of which my work took on a new direction. I discovered fascinating Russian poetry hitherto unknown to me or to more than a few others in the West.

The majority of articles in this collection can be traced back directly to *Apollon-77*, from which initially I selected poets in emi-

gration to explore (Volohonsky, Elizaveta Mnatsakanova, Genrikh Khudyakov) because their other work was more readily accessible, as were they themselves. Work on Vsevolod Nekrasov turned out to be possible, but was complicated by the fact that he lived in the Soviet Union and therefore contacts with him in the early 1980s were limited by that circumstance. The other studies can also be seen as outgrowths of that meeting with Kuzminsky. The present collection is thus partly an effort to mark the twentieth anniversary of *Apollon-77*, which, by the way, is still not well known or appreciated in the scholarly community today. For that reason, I am dedicating this publication to Kuzminsky, who had served as literary consultant and contributor to *Apollon*, and to Shemiakin, who published it in grand style and contributed his magnificent and disturbing art to it as well.

In retrospect, it is evident to me that there is another thread linking these articles, a thread not consciously followed, but one which reflects my intuitive preference for literature, poetry in particular, that is both avant-garde and synesthetic. In twentieth-century literature these two factors are often joined, but, as I now realize, the musical side of literature attracts me first, while the visual side (literature is by definition a *visual* artifact) enters into consideration as a consequence of innovative ways poets devise to represent the sonic qualities of their poetry on the page. After all, it is in literature that sight and sound can be most closely entwined. Music may be sightless and the visual arts may be totally silent, but literature always has elements of both. Hence each of the articles below examines a case, often a single work, in which a poet has produced an intersection of sight and sound with especially intriguing and unusual results.

All of the articles collected here, except the last one, have been previously published in some form, but each has been carefully reexamined, revised and updated as necessary, some more extensively than others. The article on Nekrasov is in fact an amalgamation of material from three separate articles. The final essay, a study of Rea Nikonova, has been written specially for this volume on the basis of a paper I gave in Edmonton at the “Eyerhymes” conference in June 1997. The articles move roughly from those most concerned with musical factors to those more concerned with visual aspects, although

all have something of both. The Nikonova study seems to me a fitting conclusion, because she so thoroughly explores the possibilities of sight–sound–literature as to give us an exhaustive panoramic view. All the works chosen for analysis were selected for their inherent interest (avant-garde innovation), because they seemed typical of the given poet, and because of their multimedia dimensions. These studies also reflect my preference for practice over theory, in that their focus is primarily on understanding the works themselves, rather than on any theories that might be attached to them. Art lasts, theories generally don't. One could probably also place them on a scale from maximum focus on meaning, where every item, even the smallest, is semanticized (Vолоhonsky), to maximum focus on innovative form, where meaning is relatively incidental (Nikonova). However, I would not take this too literally or attempt to place the other poets' work in the spectrum between these two poles.

As the author of the first scholarly studies of most of these poets, I can report that the experience has been an exciting one and one which I look forward to continuing. Among the advantages, initially, is that one need not spend much time seeking out and absorbing previous writing and thought on the subject, since there usually is little or none. And there is the excitement of participating in the creative forces of the present, in the so-called "literary process," although this term has too deterministic a feel to it. Perhaps the main benefit is having the opportunity to work directly with the poets themselves, to be able to ask them questions, elicit background information and, finally, to take inspiration and energy from them. In return one may hope that one's scholarly efforts have been meaningful and will expose their work to a wider audience.

Being the first rather than the hundredth on the scene, though, certainly has disadvantages as well. Among the disadvantages are the inclinations of traditional scholarship to wait until the dust has settled before making choices and to think that the greats of the past are more important and worthy of attention than any poet of the present. Let History, presumably, conduct an election of the few, the best. But, of course, "the few and the best" also lived in a present that thought less of them than of the greats of their respective pasts.

Another drawback is the lack of a crowd of public opinion to support and shield a scholar-critic from too personal or too hasty a judgment. Choices do reflect the chooser's taste as well as courage. Then there is a small measure of the avant-gardist's *agon* of loneliness, in which one finds oneself fairly consistently the only scholar on a panel on contemporary Russian literature to report on contemporary poetry (contemporary prose is evidently easier for scholars to discuss). And of course there is the strong likelihood that few in one's audience or on one's editorial board will have heard of the poet in question, much less have become familiar with his or her work. The obvious exception among the poets discussed below is Brodsky, who is quite famous, and deservedly so, although he seems to have unintentionally occupied for many the position of the one contemporary Russian poet known (i.e., taken seriously) by the West, much as Solzhenitsyn at one time filled that position for prose.

Dead poets can indeed be asked to have patience when the living ones are starving for attention. Nor do the living poets have to be from the current avant-garde, as has been my bias; more traditional poets also need more attention than they have been getting. If these essays result in even a slightly broader attention to contemporary Russian poetry, then a sleepless night in Austin, Texas, will have been well rewarded.

Chapter 1

ANRI VOLOHONSKY'S "AORISTS OF THE DECREPIT"

Anri Volohonsky is a recent member of a line of Russian thinkers and poets going back to Lomonosov whose talents and expertise are so broad that they are able to produce significant work in such disparate areas as mathematics, natural science, philosophy and poetry. Moreover, it is typical of Volohonsky and some other poets in this tradition, such as Bely and Khlebnikov, to strive to synthesize this knowledge into a unified vision of science and art. His earliest publications, dating from 1971 during his Soviet period, are on the mathematical symmetry of natural formations: two articles on the DNA molecule and one on the atomic nucleus.¹ As the basis of an atomic nucleus, Volohonsky sees the tetrahedron (a four-sided solid), the first of Plato's fundamental forms² and the simplest geometric shape which exists in three dimensions. On the shape of the DNA structure, he concludes: "the genetic code itself is not a chance product of evolutionary wanderings..., but an organized and unavoidable consequence of initial principles chosen by nature for the production of a code."³

1. A. G. Volokhonskii, "O formal'noi strukture geneticheskogo koda," *Sbornik Perevodov* (Novosibirsk, 1971), pp. 69–85; "O simmetrii atomnykh iader" and "Geneticheskii kod i simmetriia," *Simmetriia v privode* (Leningrad, 1971), pp. 325–30, 371–75, resp.

2. Plato, "Timaeus," *The Dialogues of Plato*, ed. and trans. B. Jowett (Oxford, 1953), vol. 3, pp. 741–43.

3. "Geneticheskii kod i simmetriia," pp. 374–75.