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THE HERMITS OF PRAGUE: RUSSIAN ÉMIGRÉ POETRY IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERNISM AND THE AVANT-GARDE

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Russian literature in the 1920s was divided into two groups: the works written in Russia and those written abroad. In the period between the wars émigré literature was written in several European centres of Russian emigration, the most important and best-known of which is Paris. Prague, however, was also significant. In 1922, a group of young poets formed the literary club *Skít*. Although it remained in existence until the beginning of the Second World War, the bulk of significant work produced through *Skít* was published in the late 1920s and early 1930s. At that time the young authors could be readily published in the pages of the Prague magazine *Воля России*, and three of them, Vjacheslav Lebedev (Вячеслав Лебедев), Alla Golovina (Алла Головина) and Emilia Chegrintseva (Эмилия Чегринцева), independently published personal collections of their works.

The question rises as to whether young Russian émigré poets in Prague in the 1920s and the early 1930s centred themselves within the context of contemporary literary currents. There is no doubt that placing this group within literary context is complicated by a number of factors. One of the most important of these is the writers' isolation from their homeland, which is stressed, for example, by Karel Krejčí who spoke of the violent separation of the two parts of the literary organism: the creators and the audience (Krejčí, 2001, p. 52). Other important factors include the separation of writers from the literary process in their country, and also isolation, caused by linguistic and cultural barriers, from creative circles in their new land. Vjacheslav Lebedev, the most significant young writer to come out of this group, wrote in 1930:

Мы уже двенадцать лет вне нормальной литературной жизни. За это время и в Европе, и в России несколько художественных направлений сменило друг друга, гонимые священной жадной все вперед, все дальше к недостижимой цели. ... Искусство всегда шло вровень с жизнью, даже опережая, предвосхищая ее. И вдруг – катастрофа. Ощупью, в потемках, жизнь пробралась вперед. Мы отстали на двенадцать лет – на двенадцать веков (Лебедев, 1930, p. 57).

Despite Lebedev's professed pessimism, however, it is clear that his work is closely aligned with contemporary literary currents.

The period of modernism and avant-garde marks the advent of new conceptions of time and space in everyday life, philosophy, and art. Lebedev often uses the term *современность*. In an article, *Поэзия и современность*, published in 1931 he writes:

Человеческие чувства, вечные...Писать о них было бы напрасным повторением – и не лучшим – пройденного, если бы на помощь не приходила Современность. Проявление старых чувств в новых условиях, при новых обстоятельствах жизни – вот тот спасительный путь несчетного количества возможных комбинаций из очень скромного числа основных элементов, который только и дает возможности литературе существовать до бесконечности, вернее – до конца жизни. И потому, отрицать современность – это значит отрицать жизнь (Лебедев, 1931, р. 319).

The term *современность* evokes a number of questions. In one sense, it signifies the contemporary perception of environment in the changing world after the Great War. Further, it asks in which way poetry should reflect the contemporary scene. The third and most fundamental question is... what is contemporary poetry? Did poetry by Russian émigrés in Prague during the twenties and thirties reflect trends elsewhere?

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, different methods of describing time were formulated into theory, not only in philosophy, as exemplified by Bergson, but also in literature, as in Proust. Lebedev makes his own concept of time quite clear. Cycle is the basis of his approach. History manifests itself in repetition, in both great historical cycles and in the cycle of a single human life – both endlessly replicated. To illustrate, in *Стихи о современности*, he presents real pictures of different events and periods and with them constructs a universal model of prophet/revolutionary centered in his time. ...а вечный Робеспьер/ уже повел на плаху королеву[...]На площадь из ворот монастыря/Стремительно прошел Савонарола[...](Лебедев, 1929a, pp. 29-30).

Lebedev often presents life as a journey. In some cases this is presented as the émigré's journey, but on a more general level, it can be read as a model for the eternal human striving for liberation from the corporeal world, which he represents as Christian salvation. During this earthly journey however, he sees isolated moments when eternity manifests itself in everyday life. These can take form in the experience of love, in the experience of faith, or in the experience of creative inspiration. For example, in *Литературный чай*, he

vividly depicts a lively scene at a tea dance in a café. He then introduces the spirit of Alexander Blok, who becomes more real for the lyrical hero than his actual surroundings (Лебедев, 1929а, pp.33-34).

In his poetic texts, as well as in his articles, Lebedev clearly answers the question as to what extent should everyday life be represented in poetry.

Поэзия, расслаивая жизнь на высокую и низкую категорию и протежирующая одной за счет другой, ведет нечестивую игру (Лебедев, 1931, p. 320).

He refuses to divide the external world and poetic motifs into ‘high’ and ‘low’, or, suitable and unsuitable for poetry. Therefore, his works are full of references to contemporary life - films, cars, skyscrapers and zeppelins. Celebrities of the day appear regularly in his poems, including Lindberg, Amundsen, Edison, and Nobile. They can all be put into one category – those who enlarge space. However, these references to contemporary life should not be taken on a superficial level, as colourful elements in the poet’s text. It is necessary to see them within the greater context to understand the significance of their presence.

The space Lebedev constructs in his texts can be seen as a parallel to his understanding of time. While in the case of time the basis is cycle, in the case of space he uses simultaneity. The space surrounding the individual is ever increasing. In Lebedev’s texts this is shown in the constant awareness of simultaneous existences, various individual fates, and reports of events in different places. Steven Kern discusses simultaneity and sees it as one of the key terms that characterize the civilization and culture of modernism. He writes:

Instantaneous electronic communication, which made simultaneity a reality, affected the sense of the present, speed, form and distance. [...] Several poets wrote “simultaneous” poetry as a response to the simultaneity of experience made possible by electronic communication (Kern, 2000, p.6).

For Lebedev, electronic communication is one of the most significant attributes of his time. He sees it as a means of communication: *И S.O.S. принял на телеграфе,/В наушниках, - в пространствах был мороз,/ -Ты, не доплыв, сошла на пристань в Яффе/И шла в тени сквозь душный воздух роз* (Лебедев, 1932, p. 112) and as a visual medium: *В тумане вечера штили далеких готик/Сквозь сеть антен прозрачны и легки* (Лебедев, 1929а, p. 32).

There is one important thing that electronic communication and new means of transport such as zeppelins and aeroplanes have in common – their medium is the air. This is stressed in Lebedev’s texts for example *Романс из*

радио-паласа. Here two motifs dominate, air and cold. Both connect closely with the themes of parting and the triumph over distance. In *Романс из радио-паласа*, these motifs are developed in a series of images:

Контора аэролинии, полюс[...]Пробили, замерзая, часы расставания[...]Ледяная экспедиция Нобиле[...]Над платформами и баулами/Близорукий трепет зари (Лебедев, 1929b, p. 35). The imagery of this poem is very rich, particularly since it concentrates on different kinds of movement. All the movement, however, evokes the image of waves: *Океанские зыбкие ночи[...]предрассветный тансинг/Курит трубку меж трав и листьев[...]возница махает сомбреро/Вслед плывущему зеппелину[...]ковбой швыряя лассо/И ругаясь, идут на пари[...]С громом лопнул Полярный Круг* (Лебедев, 1929b, p. 35). *Романс из радио-паласа* is not the only text in which Lebedev evokes the image of air as one of the basic elements. Not only do machines and people move through the air, but often it is the air itself that moves, as wind. Again, it is wind juxtaposed with radio antennae, zeppelins, and aeroplanes: *Ветер – над аэродромом* (Лебедев, 1929c, p. 37), *В сети антен бьет прибой вневременного гуда./Вихри хрипят* (Лебедев, 1933, p. 8).

To return to the parallel in his approach to time and space, in *Стихи о современности*, Lebedev melds various historical events in order to create a universal model of an event, and in texts where space is dominant, different environments are melded. Of course, these connections are not casual. They always start from a central core, develop in a series of rich images, and then return once again to the core. The core can be loneliness (*Дождь на Фридрихштрассе*), leave-taking (*Романс из радио-паласа*), and hope (*Ночной прилив*). At the same time these texts overcome distance and delineate the borders of space.

Another important aspect of Lebedev's depiction of space is the view from above, which broadens perspective. Kern states that in the culture of modernism "...another spiritual high came from looking down [...] the new sense of upwardness created by the airplane" (Kern, 2000, p. 245). In Lebedev's poem *Выше небоскребов*, this possibility of looking at the world from 'above the skyscrapers' means a step into a new dimension. This hearkens back to his juxtaposition of eternal moments with the everyday world

Как жаль, что в Европе нет небоскребов,
Чтобы моя душа
Могла развеяться, как флаг созидания,
На самой верхней балке конструкции
Приветствуя поступь надзвездных судеб
Идущих облачно над тобой [...]
Ведь ты, как Адам на рассвете рая

должна назвать миллионы вещей,
Чтоб они жили в прозрачной вечности,[...] (Лебедев, 1933, p.7)

It could seem that Lebedev's poems get their dynamism from connecting static images, which can be true to a certain extent. Nevertheless, he does not neglect the signal importance of speed in the era in which he lived. Speed is also one of the most important motifs in futuristic poetry. Alfred Bem, for example, names Majakovsky and Pasternak as significant influences on Russian émigré writers in Prague (Бем, 1996, p. 248), and Lebedev himself considered them two of the greatest representatives of modern Russian literature. A legitimate question, therefore, would be whether Lebedev used speed as a motif in his poetry.

In *Ночная скорость*, speed is rendered into several concrete images; the speed of a car, the rushing of wind, and even moving light. Speed is presented in contrast to static motifs such as museum, constellations, peace, and death. The central image of this poem expresses the eternal human condition; the longing to rise – both physically and spiritually: *По грудь в облаках/И по пояс в земле низин* (Лебедев, 1932, p. 116).

To conclude, although Vjacheslav Lebedev did express a sense of isolation when he wrote that the Russian émigré poets in Prague had been held back for what seemed like twelve centuries, he himself was clearly a poet whose work reflected current literary trends both in Russia and abroad. His work presented a complex model of the world and a complex poetic system.

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