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Death and Resurrection of Mikhail Kuzmin

SOBRANIE STIKHOV, 3 vols. By *Mikhail Kuzmin*. Edited by *John E. Malmstad* and *Vladimir Markov*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1977–78. Vol. 1: DOREVOLIUTSIONNYE KNIGI STIKHOV. 643 pp. DM 98. Vol. 2: POSLE-REVOLIUTSIONNYE KNIGI STIKHOV. 598 pp. DM 98. Vol. 3: NESOBRANNOE I NEOPUBLIKOVANNOE. PRILOZHENIIA. PRIMECHANIIA. STAT'I O KUZMINE. 761 pp. Plates. DM 160.

The last volume of poetry that Mikhail Kuzmin (1872–1936) was able to publish during his lifetime was *The Trout Breaks Through the Ice* (*Forel' razbivaet led*). A sequence of narrative and lyric poems, couched in the strikingly original surrealist and visionary mode characteristic of this poet's later work, the book appeared in Leningrad in 1929. Where Kuzmin's first two major collections, *Nets* (*Seti*), 1908, and *Autumnal Lakes* (*Osennie ozera*), 1912, were acclaimed and eulogized by many of the leading poets and critics of the time, *The Trout Breaks Through the Ice*, except for two contemptuous brief notices, was passed over in silence by the Soviet press.

Still, the book had its admirers among the more discerning members of the Soviet literary community. Among them was Lidia Chukovskaia, who confided to Anna Akhmatova in 1940 that she began to understand and to love Kuzmin only after *The Trout Breaks Through the Ice*.¹ Akhmatova, whose own early poetry betrayed Kuzmin's strong influence, and who, in 1912, had asked Kuzmin to write a foreword to her first collection of verse, *Evening*, inscribing the copy she gave to him "To my wonderful teacher," had, it turned out, not yet read her erstwhile teacher's last book. Chukovskaia lent it to her and one month later recorded Akhmatova's judgment. Apart from a few individual poems which she liked, Akhmatova thought the entire book derived from German expressionist cinema and therefore lacking in originality. She found what she called the book's "obscenity" (*nepristoimost'*) most depressing: "Kuzmin has always been homosexual in his poetry, but here he exceeds all boundaries. Before, one could not do this: Viacheslav Ivanov might wince. But in the twenties, there was no longer anyone to be wary of [*uzhe ne na kogo bylo ogliadyvat'sia*]. Perhaps Villon was able to manage this sort of thing, but as for Mikhail Alekseevich—no. It is utterly disgusting."²

For a person familiar with Kuzmin's literary career and with Russian cultural history of this century in general, the statement is astounding. Male homosexual love, it is true, has always been a major (but by no means the only) theme in Kuzmin's poetry. Before he made his name as a poet, he acquired con-

1. Lidia Chukovskaia. *Zapiski ob Anne Akhmatovoi* (Paris, 1976), p. 149.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

siderable notoriety for his autobiographical *roman à thèse*, *Wings* (*Kryl'ia*). Initially published in 1906 in a special issue of *Vesy*, one of the most prestigious literary journals of the day, and later as a separate volume that became a best seller, *Wings* sought to demonstrate that for people who are homosexually inclined it is better to accept their orientation, making it a part of a productive and satisfying life, than to reject and fight it. This presupposition also underlies much of Kuzmin's poetry. In this sense, his last collection, which so shocked Akhmatova, did not "exceed" any boundaries that had not already been crossed in all his other writings, beginning with the earliest. Nor is the treatment of the homosexual theme in *The Trout Breaks Through the Ice* and Kuzmin's other collections any more or less explicit than it is, for example, in the "Calamus" section of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (a book which Akhmatova much admired in Kornei Chukovskii's translation) or in the cycles "Parallèlement" and "Hombrés" of Paul Verlaine (surely it was Verlaine whom Akhmatova must have compared with Kuzmin, since Villon did not write on homosexual themes). Furthermore, graphic descriptions of male homosexuality are to be found in the poetry of Kuzmin's contemporary, Nikolai Kliuev, a poet who lost his freedom and eventually his life because of a poem he wrote in defense of Akhmatova (a line from which appears as an epigraph in her *Poem Without a Hero*) and of whom she has written with warmth in her memoir of Osip Mandelstam.

Could Akhmatova have really forgotten the liberalized air of that last pre-revolutionary decade, when all sorts of previously unmentionable themes—social, religious, political, and sexual—had become acceptable for literary treatment? The content of Kuzmin's love lyrics did not prevent poets as diverse as Annenskii, Blok, Khlebnikov, and Tsvetaeva from regarding him as one of the greatest poets of their time. The only major poet of that period who chose to make an issue in print of Kuzmin's homosexuality was Gumilev, who in 1912, in his review of *Autumnal Lakes* (written while he was still married to Akhmatova), complimented Kuzmin on being what in the parlance of the 1970s would have been called "a spokesman for Russia's gay community."³

As for Viacheslav Ivanov—whose collection *Cor Ardens*, published one year before Kuzmin's *Nets*, contained a whole section ("Eros") inspired by Ivanov's own homosexual experiences—he was surely the least likely person to have acted as Kuzmin's censor. Akhmatova may not have known Viacheslav Ivanov's journal for 1906, where Kuzmin is described as a pioneer of the future age of sexual tolerance,⁴ but she must have been aware that Kuzmin had shared a residence for a number of years with Ivanov and, until her untimely death, with Ivanov's wife Lidia Zinov'eva-Annibal, a fiction writer who specialized in the theme of lesbian love.

3. "Kuzmin occupies one of the most important places among the contemporary Russian poets. Very few are able to achieve such astounding harmoniousness of the whole [combined] with such free variety of the component parts. Furthermore, being a spokesman for the views and emotions of a whole array of people, united by a common culture, who have quite justly risen to the crest of life's wave, Kuzmin is a poet with organic roots [*pochvennyi poet*] . . ." (N. Gumilev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 4 [Washington, D.C., 1968], p. 307; originally in *Apollon*, 1912, no. 8).

4. Viacheslav Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2 (Brussels, 1974), p. 750. Kuzmin appears in this diary under the name of "Antinous."

Akhmatova's statement on Kuzmin recorded by Chukovskaia, on which I have dwelt at such length, is important in two ways. It is a key to the genesis of Akhmatova's own much admired, but often misunderstood, poetic masterpiece *Poem Without a Hero*, which is in essence her response to Kuzmin's *The Trout Breaks Through the Ice* and possibly also to his earlier novel *Travelers by Land and Sea* (*Plavaiushchie-puteshestvuiushchie*, 1915).⁵ It is also indicative, in general, of the extent to which Kuzmin's role in prerevolutionary cultural life and the reception of his work by his contemporaries have been forgotten and his writings unread in postrevolutionary times.

In his essay on Kuzmin's poetry included in the edition under review, Vladimir Markov makes abundantly clear that everything printed about Kuzmin in literary histories, encyclopedias, and textbooks, from the 1930s to this day, is misleading, wrong, or incomplete. Kuzmin is often listed as an Acmeist poet, which he never was. His best or most important works are usually said to be the verse cycles "Alexandrian Songs" and "Chimes of Love" ("Kuranty liubvi") and the essay "On Beautiful Clarity," which, in terms of his overall achievement, is comparable to saying that Tolstoy's most important works are *Childhood* and "Sevastopol Stories." A wide-ranging poet whose output encompasses important historical, metaphysical, and mystical themes, as well as erotic, humorous, and light verse, Kuzmin is invariably dismissed as a frivolous hedonist who was able to write only of trivia and trifles.⁶ His three major collections of verse that were published in the 1920s constitute about one-half of his total poetic output by volume and represent some of his most serious and original work. Until now, however, they have remained unnoticed by literary scholars and historians.

Coming as it does after some four decades of critical and popular neglect of Kuzmin, the new edition of his complete poetry prepared by John E. Malmstad and Vladimir Markov produces the impression of a wide gate suddenly flung open onto a whole new country, partly forgotten and partly unexplored. A slow and careful reading of the seven major collections⁷ leaves one astounded at the scope and variety of this supposedly "graceful minor poet" (Renato Poggioli's term for Kuzmin). The unprecedented precision and intimacy with which Kuzmin's poetry of 1906–8 reflected life, its insistence on the concrete beauty of our world and the joys of here and now, which so struck his contemporaries, began alternating already in the later sections of *Nets* with mystical insights derived from Kuzmin's study of gnosticism as well as from his Old Believer heritage. This alternation continued in his later work and its persistence makes mincemeat out of all critical attempts to fit Kuzmin into either the Acmeist or the Symbolist mold. Alexander Blok was neither whimsical nor paradoxical when he saw the roots of Kuzmin's art in "the awakening of the Russian Schism, in the dark

5. See R. D. Timenchik, V. N. Toporov, and T. V. Tsiv'ian, "Akhmatova i Kuzmin," *Russian Literature*, July 1978, pp. 213–305, for a detailed examination of the literary relationship between these two poets.

6. A typical example of this kind of uninformed treatment of Kuzmin is found in Renato Poggioli, *The Poets of Russia 1890–1930* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960).

7. Kuzmin's major collections are *Nets*, *Autumnal Lakes*, *Clay Doves* (*Glinianyegolubki*, ca. 1915), *The Guide* (*Vozhatyi*, 1918), *Otherworldly Evenings* (*Nezdeshnievechera*, 1923), *Parabolas* (*Paraboly*, 1923), and *The Trout Breaks Through the Ice*. The edition under review also contains six lesser collections of verse published by Kuzmin, his verse play for puppets *Vtornik Meri* (*Tuesday at Mary's*, 1921), and volume 3 contains a large number of previously uncollected or unpublished poems.

religious forebodings of fifteenth-century Russia, in the memory of the trans-Volga *startsyy* who would come out of obscure marsh bogs into squat, smoke-filled peasant huts.”⁸

An aspect of Kuzmin not found in other poets of his time is his habit of organizing his lyric poetry into cycles with easily discernible plots, which results in a hybrid genre that combines the features of the traditional lyric with those of a narrative *poema*. This is the form in which much of his autobiographical poetry is couched. It culminates in the remarkable novellas in verse of *The Trout Breaks Through the Ice*, which belong among the finest examples of Russian twentieth-century narrative poetry. Kuzmin is a master of a variety of larger narrative verse structures, such as the remarkably beautiful *poema* “The Cavalier” (“Vsadnik”) (included in *Autumnal Lakes*), which was surely the point of departure of Marina Tsvetaeva’s epic poems “On a Red Steed” and “Tsar Maiden”; the extended ode in free verse, “The Hostile Sea” (“Vrazhdebnoe more”), written in 1917, and dedicated to Vladimir Mayakovsky, which mingled Homeric themes with the mood of Russian revolution; or the visionary and surrealistic longer poems of the last two collections.

The Malmstad-Markov three-volume edition shows us the full stature of the poet Kuzmin, with all his stylistic and metrical virtuosity, verbal elegance, cultural range, and spiritual depth. But the two editors have done a great deal more than assemble the corpus of Kuzmin’s poetry. John E. Malmstad’s “Mikhail Kuzmin: A Chronicle of His Life and Times” occupies three hundred twelve pages in the third volume. It is not an introductory essay, but rather a substantial, full-scale, critical biography which also happens to be one of the very finest biographies of a twentieth-century Russian poet that we have. Kuzmin was a central figure in the literary life of his day as well as a friend or associate of many important writers and poets. He was also deeply involved in the worlds of music, art, and the theater. Among the dramatis personae of his biography were his school friend Georgii Chicherin (the future famous diplomat), Blok and Diaghilev, Meyerhold and Kommissarzhevskaja, and the painters Sapunov and Sudeikin. It was an exciting and eventful life, and John E. Malmstad reconstructs it with sympathy and erudition. Its bilingual format (the numerous citations of Russian texts are left untranslated) limits the number of potential readers of this excellent biography. It would be a shame if it were not eventually published as a separate book and thus made available to the general reading public.

Every bit as impressive is Vladimir Markov’s one-hundred-four-page critical appreciation of Kuzmin’s poetry, “Poeziia Mikhaila Kuzmina” (also in the third volume). Markov has set himself the difficult and usually thankless task of demonstrating that a literary figure, whom most critics have come to regard as peripheral or minor, is actually an unfairly neglected major poet. His assertion and demonstration of the value of Kuzmin’s poetry is a model of lucid and logical literary argument. The two editors provided the entire corpus with detailed annotations, which display an admirable command of the diverse cultural spheres reflected in Kuzmin’s poetry.

At a ceremony in honor of Kuzmin’s birthday in 1920, the speakers included, *inter alios*, Alexander Blok, Nikolai Gumilev, Boris Eikhenbaum, and

8. Aleksandr Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 5 (Moscow-Leningrad, 1962), p. 183.

Viktor Shklovskii. In his speech, Blok expressed a wish that conditions be created in the future where a literary artist as unique as Kuzmin would have the right "to remain himself."⁹ We know that things did not turn out as Blok had wished, and that, after Soviet culture took the form it did, the mere fact of Kuzmin's sexual orientation contributed to reducing an admired poet to a pariah and a nonperson, so that even a poet of Akhmatova's stature and independence was able to turn against him with puritanical vindictiveness and depict him in *Poem Without a Hero* as an evil demon responsible for bringing on cultural decline.¹⁰ The new publication of his complete poetry, combined with the important critical contributions by John E. Malmstad and Vladimir Markov, should help restore Kuzmin to his rightful place among the foremost Russian poets of this century.

9. *Ibid.*, vol. 6, p. 440.

10. The authors of an otherwise fine and informative study, "Akhmatova i Kuzmin" (see note 5 above), jeopardize their scholarly probity by their occasional moralizing attempts to justify Akhmatova's later aversion to Kuzmin by referring to the latter's supposed mysogyny and amorality. Their strictures, when placed next to John E. Malmstad's informed and sympathetic biography, make instructive reading.