
NEWS OF THE PROFESSION

MIKHAIL PAVLOVICH ALEKSEEV, 1896–1981

International literary scholarship suffered the loss of a widely known and deeply revered colleague with the death in Leningrad on September 19, 1981 of Academician Mikhail Pavlovich Alekseev, who was generally recognized as the most eminent living Russian specialist on comparative literature. Born on May 24, 1896 (Old Style) in Kiev into a family of highly cultivated Russian intellectuals, Alekseev studied from 1907 to 1914 simultaneously at a private preparatory school in Kiev and at the Kiev School of Music and Drama. After some hesitation between careers in music and literature, he entered the faculty of historical philology at Kiev University in 1914. Upon graduation in 1918 he taught for a while in Kiev and then spent the years 1920–24 in graduate work at the University of Odessa, specializing in English literature. After further teaching from 1927 to 1932 at the University of Irkutsk, he was invited to Leningrad University, and he remained in Leningrad for the rest of his life. For many years he headed the program of English literature at the university, and for some thirty years he was a professor in the department of general literature. At the same time, he was an active staff member of the Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkinskii Dom), where he served from 1950 to 1963 as associate director. Following the evacuation of Leningrad University to Saratov for the duration of World War II, Alekseev returned to Leningrad after the war and served twice as dean of the philological faculty. Through his initiative at that time the faculty was enlarged by the creation of new Slavic, Spanish, and Scandinavian sections. In 1946 he became a Corresponding Member of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, and in 1958 he was elected a full Academician. At the time of his death he was chairman of both the Soviet and the International Committees of Slavists.

With his growing international prominence as a literary scholar, numerous honors came to Alekseev from abroad, including membership in the Serbian, British, and Spanish academies and honorary membership in the Modern Language Association of America. He received honorary doctorates from Oxford, the Sorbonne, Bordeaux, Budapest, Poznań, and Rostock.

Although he began his career as a specialist in English literature, Alekseev ranged over the whole of Western culture. "It is becoming ever clearer," he wrote in 1946, "that national literatures do not exist in complete isolation from one another: they are mutually linked either by common origins, or by similarities in their evolution, or by the existence of direct connections and mutual influences among them." The study of these literary relations in their broadest sense was the dominant theme of all his long and distinguished scholarly career. Among the more than fifty works he published on English literature were numerous comparative studies. A long-awaited twelve-hundred-page volume of *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* entitled *Russko-angliiskie literaturnye sviazi. XVIII vek — pervaiia polovina XIX veka*, edited by Alekseev and containing a wealth of English literary documents discovered in Soviet archives, was in press at the time of his death.

In Russian literature, Alekseev's name is especially prominent in scholarship on Pushkin and Turgenev. As editor in chief he was the guiding spirit behind the monumental thirty-volume Academy of Sciences edition of Turgenev's complete works and letters (1960–68). Among his many works on the reception of Russian literature in the West, one of the most important is his 1948 study of "I. S. Turgenev — propagandist russkoi literatury na zapade."

Alekseev was perfectly at home in French literature and published many works on Russian-French literary relations. His *Ocherki istorii ispano-russkikh literaturnykh otnoshenii XVI–XIX vv.* (1964) is a landmark in the history of Russian-Spanish literary relations and was published in a Spanish version in Madrid in 1975. In the New World, his

interests ranged from Cooper, Longfellow, and Mark Twain in the United States to the poets Tomás Antônio Gonzaga and Olavo Bilac in Brazil, in both of whose works he found a link with the poetry of Pushkin.

Along with his distinction as a scholar, Mikhail Pavlovich's human warmth and generosity of spirit will long be remembered by grateful students now scattered all over the world and by literary scholars at home and abroad whose work he encouraged in innumerable ways. His own truly encyclopedic knowledge and the breadth of his literary interests recall a two-line verse whose origin is lost in the mists of early academic folklore:

Whenever I set out on some unbeaten track,
I always meet old Plato coming back.

Many of us who treasure the memory of our friendship with Mikhail Pavlovich have had the same experience: just as we set out to explore some new area of literature, we would meet Mikhail Pavlovich coming back — but we would also meet with his warm encouragement to push our own explorations still farther than his own.

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