

John A. Barnstead

Review Article

Russian Poetry: The Oxen Chew

A History of Russian Poetry. By Evelyn Bristol. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991. Pp. ix, 354. \$39.95 US.

"Audacity" is the first word which comes to mind when contemplating a book on this subject in English. Given the impossibility of demonstrating the power of Russian poetry by example to the Russianless (for, despite nearly two hundred years of effort, no Russian poet has ever been adequately translated, the closest approaches being the bilingual—Nabokov, Brodsky—and the bicephalous—Robert Lowell/Olga Carlisle), the complexity of describing its prosody (Barry Scherr's *Russian Poetry: Meter, Rhythm, and Rhyme* is an excellent recent attempt), and the difficulty, therefore, of knowing for whom to write (undergraduates? graduate students? scholars? "poetry lovers"?), such a book will be at best a thankless task. Experts will be annoyed by the inevitable goring of pet oxen. General readers, faced with groups of metred sentences indented at both ends purporting to convey some essence of a poem, will wonder mildly what all the fuss is about. How could anyone be imprisoned or killed for *that*? The approaching *fin de siècle*, however, is a powerful stimulus to the grand synthesis, and surely our culture, self-centred enough to permit a book dedicated solely to American and British poets to bear the title *A History of Modern Poetry*, needs what Evelyn Bristol's synthesis may suggest.

Bristol is concerned, first of all, to display the continuity of Russian poetry, to integrate figures neglected by Soviet scholarship for political or ideological reasons into its great conversation. The book attempts to encompass the entire range of poetry from its Byzantine and folklore roots until 1970. There is a postscript covering more recent developments through 1988. This basic aim is in direct opposition to that of such thinkers as Florovsky, who have viewed the development of Russian culture as the continual effort to recover from repeated catastrophic incursions from without, and somehow to integrate the resulting chaos. It is an aim which by the end of the book remains to be fulfilled.

What tasks ought to be performed by a history of a national poetry, beyond providing thumbnail sketches of poets' biographies, summaries of their characteristic themes, illustrative excerpts from their work? Ought not such a history to display those qualities of the national traditions which make a unique contribution to world culture, and to describe the development of that contribution in the larger context of poetry as a whole?

Like any specialist, I turn first to the poet I know best to see how he has fared. The result is not reassuring. Mikhail Kuzmin's birth date has gone uncorrected; it is 1872 [not 1875!], a fact known for twenty years now and pointed out in two of the works on him cited in the bibliography. He has been assigned a new talent: he never "illustrated his own lyrics" (220)—the only drawing he ever published was an undistinguished doodle of the devil in response to a newspaper questionnaire. His oeuvre has been distorted: if "Kuzmin's dramas are comedies" (221) what is his play *The Death of Nero*? If "Kuzmin's prose is addressed to a small, artistically knowledgeable audience," how does one account for the more than seventy short stories published in various Russian equivalents of *The Saturday Evening Post*? *Parabolas*, arguably one of his best collections, is not even mentioned. Worst of all, he has been given only two pages, on a par with Evgenii Evtushenko, a far less significant figure! Of course, it is not entirely fair to consider the thread of a single poet in such a large tapestry. It is not possible for one person to be equally at home in the work of every poet, and no doubt all specialists will have a similar reaction to the treatment accorded their special poet. Kuzmin's case, however, is emblematic of more than a general cursoriness, a too-facile reliance on received opinion and occasionally on outdated materials. What

is lacking is a reasoned analysis of the role of the individual poet in making the whole poetic tradition, and an explicit conception of the nature of poetry itself.

Because it does not fit traditional poetics, Bristol views the medieval epic *Tale of Igor's Campaign* as a kind of prose with a heightened consciousness. Since the ties with early Russian poetry were really only established with its rediscovery in the late eighteenth century, and then were largely thematic or image-borrowing, minimal space is devoted to this period. The chapters dedicated to poetry through the end of the eighteenth century are reliable if somewhat staid; it is too bad that recent revisionary work on Trediakovsky by Irina Reyfman was not drawn upon. This is poetry distant enough from modern sensibility to afford some kind of consensus reading.

The nineteenth century is more problematic. The proportions disturb: Pushkin receives little more space than Tiutchev or Fet, and while we are told that he is Russia's greatest writer, the reasons given for this conclusion amount to little more than his versatility, elusiveness, inscrutability, and survival of critical scrutiny. Bristol wrote the section on the period 1895-1925 for the recent *Cambridge History of Russian Literature*, and this period is the strongest portion of the present book: the discussion of Aleksandr Blok is especially illuminating and the best in the book. The twentieth century as a whole fares better than the rest, although coverage does become sketchier, and less attention is paid to secondary poets.

Comparisons with poets likely to be more familiar to the English-speaking audience are largely confined to questions of influence. Indications of the often colorful contacts between English-speaking poets and their Russian colleagues are almost entirely absent. No one who has waded through the hundreds of utterly conventional and superficial pictures of America produced by modern Russian poets, for example, or listened to hours of equally jaundiced émigré conversation at smoke-wreathed kitchen tables, could restrain a sympathetic smile for Frank O'Hara's "Answer to Voznesensky and Evtushenko":

We are tired of your tiresome imitations of Mayakovsky
we are tired

of your dreary tourist ideas of our Negro selves
our selves are in far worse condition than the obviousness
of your color sense

your general sense of Poughkeepsie is
 a gaucherie no American poet would be guilty of in Tiflis . . .
 how many
 of our loves have you illuminated with
 your heart your breath
 as we poets of America have loved you
 your countrymen, our countrymen, our lives, your lives, and
 the dreary expanses of your translations
 your idiotic manifestos.

One misses the well-turned anecdotes and personal quirks which make Mirsky's history of Russian literature a pleasure to read to this day, despite its factual inaccuracies and old-fashioned approach. What a story he would have made of Robert Frost's encounter with Anna Akhmatova.

The decision to provide metrical translations was an unfortunate one. It would have been better to choose to print the Russian texts with a plain prose English version following, or at least to select a paraphrase with some claim to being a poem in English. Compare Bristol's translation of the first stanza of Mandelstam's "Tristia" with the prose of the Obolensky anthology or Joseph Brodsky's poetic version:

Bristol: I've had to learn the science of departures
 Through loose-haired grieving that is done at night.
 The oxen chew and waiting lasts forever—
 Until the city vigils' final hour.
 And I respect that cockerel night's whole ritual,
 When eyes that have been crying look afar,
 And lift the sorrows of the road as burden,
 When women's sobs are mixed with muse's songs.

Obolensky: I have studied the science of parting in the laments of
 the night, when a woman's hair flows loose. The oxen
 chew, and expectation lingers—the last hour of the town's
 vigil; and I revere the rites of that night when the cock was
 crowing, and when eyes red with crying, lifting their load
 of itinerant sorrow, gazed into the distance, and a woman's
 weeping mingled with the Muses singing.

Brodsky: I've mastered the great craft of separation
 amidst the bare unbraided pleas of night,
 those lingerings while oxen chew their ration,

the watchful town's last eyelid's shutting tight.
 And I revere that midnight rooster's descant
 when shouldering the wayfarer's sack of wrong
 eyes stained with tears were peering at the distance
 and women's wailings were the Muses' song.

Bristol reduces Mandelstam's muses to a single representative for no apparent reason. The fifth line does not scan; repeated use of relative clauses to pad out lines weakens the effect of the whole.

The poets of the most recent generation are barely mentioned. Chukhontsev receives a scant paragraph on the next to last page; his contemporaries Shkliarevskii, Kuznetsov, and Leonovich are not included at all. The omission of even younger poets, such as Aleksei Korolev (b. 1944), Oleg Khlebnikov (b. 1956), or Aleksei Parshchikov, Iliia Kutik, and Olga Sedakova, is more understandable, since they had by the mid 1980s only begun to publish in book form. Still, the image remains of a book conservative in its structure and timid in its evaluations, rarely departing from received opinion and seldom discovering new talents or reclassifying old ones. Perhaps the dynamic impressionism of Renato Poggioli in his *Poets of Russia* was too careless, but it caught the joy and the exaltation, as well as the despair of Russian poetry, which elude more academic prose.

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