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INTRODUCTION TO KONSTANTIN AZADOVSKI'S "RUSSIA'S SILVER AGE IN TODAY'S RUSSIA"

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Article abstract

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INTRODUCTION TO KONSTANTIN AZADOVSKI'S « RUSSIA'S SILVER AGE IN TODAY'S RUSSIA »

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the Third International Conference on Humanistic Discourse, this text introduces Konstantin Azadovski's « Russia's Silver Age in Today's Russia » and reports on the central concerns that emerged in its discussion.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans le cadre du troisième congrès international sur le discours humaniste, le texte propose une introduction à « Russia's Silver Age in Today's Russia » de Konstantin Azadovski et rapporte les principaux enjeux qui ont été l'objet de discussions.

IN MEMORIAM

Murray Krieger died on August 5, 2000. He was a long-time professor in literary theory at the University of California, Irvine. He founded the UC Humanities Research Institute. Some of his publications among the most recent are *Ekphrasis*: *The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (1992) and *The Institution of Theory* (1994). He was a supporter of e-publication as can be seen from his decision of publishing in *Surfaces* excerpts of the discussions held at the Conferences on Humanistic Discourse which he organized. *Surfaces* is proud to publish excerpts from the Third International Conference on Humanistic Discourse.

Murray Krieger est mort le 5 août 2000. Il était de longue date professeur de théorie littéraire à l'Université de Californie, Irvine. Il a fondé l'Institut de recherche sur les humanités de l'Université de Californie. Notons quelques titres parmi ces publications récentes : *Ekphrasis*: *The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (1992) et *The Institution of Theory* (1994). Il était aussi un tenant de la publication électronique comme en témoigne sa décision de publier dans *Surfaces* des extraits des débats du congrès sur le discours humaniste dont il assurait l'organisation. *Surfaces* est fière de publier ici des extraits du troisième congrès sur la question organisé par M. Krieger.

In this session we cross over from theoretical questions about discourse to questions about cultural history. Professor Azadovski's paper led me to recall the official Soviet group we had at Irvine in the Spring of 1989 at a conference run by Hillis and me on problems of censorship in the Soviet Union and the United States in light of the changes brought by perestoika. The group was very official, consisting of the head of the Gorki Institute in Moscow, the head of the Pushkin Institute in (then) Leningrad, and the editor of a major literary journal (Problems of Literature) as a representative of the Soviet Writers' Union. It was an authorized Party group seeking to continue doing its business in spite of perestroika.

I remember that our visitors complained about what they viewed as the universal and overdone resurrection in Russia just about any writings by those authors who were previously excluded, repressed, jailed, or executed. It seemed wrong to them to revere all of them,

regardless of differences in quality or to their breadth of appeal under the current cultural circumstances. The Americans at our conference, sensitive to the retrograde tendencies in our Soviet colleagues, resented their grudging response to their culture's attempt to provide an especially warm reception to those had been excluded for so long. But, in view of Professor Azadovski's paper, I must now wonder if there was not some small truth in their complaints.

This leads me to the paper, which deals with the "Silver Age" in Russia today. That phrase refers, he tells us, to writings from about 1890 to the Revolution in 1917. These works displayed characteristics that had their special relevance to that cultural period in Russia and, to some extent, to its parallels elsewhere in Western Europe. Indeed, Professor Azadovski has suggested to me that the Silver is the age of "classical Russian modernism." Like many other representations of high modernist contemporaries in several literatures, these are, according to Professor Azadovski, characterized by "elitism and aesthetic refinement."

He furnishes us a brief historical summary of the place of those writings after the Revolution: from the 1920's to the 1950's they remained even more "elite" and inaccessible to most Russian readers because of their exclusion and the threat of punishment attached to reading them. In the later 1950's the Krushchev "thaw" was only superficial and changed matters with respect to these writings hardly at all.

It is in 1987-1988 that things really opened up for these works. The floodgates open and in pour all the Silver Age writings without discrimination, as noted by our Soviet guests in the 1989. As a consequence, according to Professor Azadovski, what had been elite texts are transformed into texts for texts for the masses, produced in great numbers in cheaper and cheaper editions. Elite culture becomes mass culture. What had been an artificially induced disruption and exclusion for these texts now is changed, by another outside intrusion, into an artificially induced avalanche. Professor Azadovski is clearly concerned about the problems for current Russian culture as a result of this strange turn in the fortunes of Silver Age writings, which has superimposed on one cultural and political moment the long-absent works created by and responding to another cultural and political moment.

I have framed a number of questions, theoretical and historical, that are meant to frame our discussion around the issues that seem to me to be raised by the paper.

1. How can the elite become the mass? The same restrictiveness of appeal as was common in European art and literature of high modernism characterized Silver Age writings. The incompatibility between writings and readers should only have been enormously increased by the gap produced by time and political orthodoxy.

2. Even apart from the elitist characters of the works themselves, how can works from the first two decades of the century speak to the last decade as if, because they had not been permitted to be known before, they constituted a literature of that decade? Thus they present themselves, not as a part of a distant literary history, but as – in effect – contemporary documents, which they can<u>not</u> be.

3. Is the present to be a culture without its own literature? In other words, what is the unintended repressive effect on what, under normal circumstances, would be our contemporary Russian literature? How much is today's Russian literature thus out of synchronic accord with the rest of Europe's and America's contemporary literature? How outdated for the rest of us is this belated modernism, which is put on everyone's table as if its anachronisms are still relevant, as if there is no postmodernist literature?

4. Under such bizarre conditions, how can we define what belongs to literary history, and what is the relation of literary history to current literary productivity?

5. What light can this development cast on the generic problem of cultural time lag and the gaps imposed on a culture by politica dictates?

6. Do we have here another question of the translation between two incompatible cultures, even if they are in the same language but separated by periods as constituted by the succession of changing political dogmas?

7. If so, should we not relate this to the problems we dealt with in some East Asian cultures last year, as we observed them fighting to find – or to create –a newly relevant language in its post-colonialist

moment? In Russia, of course, we are dealing with a colonialism that was imposed from within.

Roundtable Discussion

Summary

Hazard Adams
Konstantin Azadowski
Jacques Derrida
Andreas Kablitz
Murray Krieger
J. Hillis Miller
Ludwig Pfeiffer
Pauline Yu

Professor Azadovski enlarged upon his brief paper, reflecting upon the nature of the audience for the reborn "Silver Age" writings. He spoke of the enormous attractions, after 1987, of the forbidden fruit of the writings that had been banned for many many decades. For so long discredited with the help of political muscle, these works were now bolstered by a nostalgia that recalled the secret fascination of the forbidden and the hidden, which had lain there, unread, as dreams beneath the repressive reality that was life in the Soviet Union. Now they were suddenly available, and were leapt upon indiscriminately with an over-extravagant enthusiasm that still kept them more dream than reality.

Professor Derrida intervened to ask, in response to some of the questions raised in the introductory remarks, above, whether we should not erase the question that had been raised about anachronism in a culture. Is there, he asked, any culture in whose formation anachronism does not function as a central ingredient? He did not mean to reduce the significance of the special sort of anachronism produced by Soviet culture and its collapse, or to acknowledge its differences from the sort of anachronisms found in every culture. But he wanted to emphasize the generic function of anachronistic recall as a feature of all cultures, however exaggerated it may be in this case.

Professor Derrida also wondered about the extent to which there is a tradition of poetry reading in Russia far stronger than what we know of in the West. And, if it is so strong, what is the part this tradition plays in the

extraordinary restoration of these works to contemporaneity in Russian culture?

Professor Azadovski acknowledged that Russia has indeed for a long time had that poetry-reading tradition but that it has always been restricted to the a narrow circle of "intelligentsia" in Moscow and Petersburg. Because of the purges and other restrictive activities of the seven decades of Soviet rule, the circle of those for whom poetry is a necessary part of their life has been further narrowed to an extremely limited group, a group that knows one another. Most Russians are out of it, so that the abyss between the elite and the rest of the culture is greater than ever. It is in this context that he argued in the paper that the recent flood of Silver Age mass publications makes so little sense. Apparently the appearance of the writings of the repressed authors were being bought because the dream of the value of what was being repressed was felt even by the illiterates who had felt deprived. But these large numbers do not alter the fact that only a very small number, reduced to the hundreds, may still be thought of as seriously literate intellectuals.

Professor Azadovski also raised the point that there was still a hangover from the very old quarrel among Russian intellectuals between the "Westerners" and the "Slavophiles." It is a new version of an identity crisis: who are we? And the recent election demonstrated the continuing existence of the "West vs. Asia" dispute.

Professor Kablitz, responding to the question of the timeliness of Silver Age writings in the current literary situation and to the larger question of anachronism raised by Professor Derrida, proposed the age-old notion of a "classical" literature that was "eternal." These would be works that are part of history but also are "out of time" in that they remain always relevant and readable. Perhaps the Russian predicament offers this special gift of urging us to reconsider such a "classical" function for our best literature.

Professor Miller urged a comparison with the educational predicament in South Africa, where there must be an attempt to create a canon of South African writers in English. Again, with the recent end of Apartheid, as the literary works emerge, one must discover who were the great writers during the lengthy years in which they were underground or imprisoned. It is from these that university courses must be organized.

Professor Azadovski insisted that, in the case of Russia and the Silver Age, these works and authors are and have been well known because of the narrow circle of the intelligentsia that he described earlier. And they continue to function for this group even in the current moment, so long after they were written. Thus Silver Age writers like Mandelstam give us what we need to help us resist what is happening today, for example, in Chechnya.

Professor Pfeiffer asked, more generally, how does a culture assimilate its spiritual heritage? And he referred to Gadamer's proposal of a minimal solution: just to go on reading and interpreting regardless of the pressures of the outside "reality." But political pressures often preclude even such minimal possibilities.

Professor Adams returned to the concern in the Azadovski paper to the "loss of religious and social pathos" in Russian culture, so that, outside the intelligentsia, literature is serving only as information, education, or entertainment. And he asked whether this is not simply Professor Azadovski's way of lamenting the loss of the "elite" for the "mass."

Without concern for the political sound of what he was saying, Professor Azadovski essentially agreed, acknowledging that he does indeed regret the loss of religious and social pathos and sees it as the loss of an elite culture that has been replaced the culture of Ortega y Gasset's masses.

Professor Yu commented on certain parallel elements in the situation in the People's Republic of China. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, a poetry journal appeared. It contained a poem by Mao but also a defense of classical Chinese poetry. This was followed by many journals of poetry old and new. These do function within a political context and yet, though themselves anti-ideological, they do go on. For China is a culture in which poetry has always had a major role.

Professor Derrida generalized our discussion in a way that furnished our conclusion.

What is at stake in these issues is the fate of literary institutions and careers? What sort of definition do we want to propose for that word "classical"? To what extent was Russian language and culture destroyed by the Soviets? Or rather preserved to re-emerge intact, but for another audience no longer prepared for it? How do we reconstitute such a culture? There are recognized dangers in seeking, uncritically, to import solutions from

the West, whether we call them postmodern or post-classical. Our answers can serve both the "academy" and the "university." But, Professor Derrida warned, we must beware of serving only the first, which is restricted to the "narrow circle" referred to by Professor Azadovski, instead of the broader cultural body represented in the second.
