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(Review) Olesha's Envy

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American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages

Olesha's Envy: A Critical Companion by Rimgaila Salys

Review by: Andrea Lanoux

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Poetic Pilgrimage. New York, 1976, 81). Only by 1935, when Punin had a “third wife,” Martha Golubeva, (with legal wife Anna Ahrens still living in the apartment and all dining together), did Akhmatova resume crafting poetry. The germ of this silence is in part discernible in the entry of 19 July 1920, when Punin on seeing Akhmatova with second husband Shileyko comments: “I am grateful that she has left the bohemians and Gumilev and that she is not giving readings or publishing poetry now” (68). On the other hand, Krupala rightly underscores later amicable relations between the two. Noting that “Punin has received rather short shrift from Akhmatova scholars,” Krupala berates Lidiia Chukovskaia, perhaps unaware of underlying reasons and facts.

Punin’s writings reveal an introspective youth numbed by his mother’s death in 1904, and whose unusual actions are misunderstood as coldness. His feelings of being orphaned surface painfully at his father’s death in 1920. Seeking himself, he joins students in political protest in 1905 but believes that he has no “strong convictions.” Yet “in a year of political passions, I forgot about my diary” (8).

In the diaries a philosophical bent unfolds—whether on the essence of life, faith (8), amorous interests (“I am stubborn and willful with women,” 16), or intellectual pursuits and the reading of Nietzsche and other philosophers. Typically, in studying astronomy, the diarist is “mainly interested in the biographies of great astronomers and the philosophical implications of this science” (9). His interest in literature is strongly stated, and quotes from poetry appear in the text (9). But he senses in himself “a weakness in creativity” (63—repeated more than once at different intervals) that may explain much in his personality. Even more striking is his preoccupation with greatness, which probably explains the diaries as well as some of his later behavior and friendships. Punin writes, “With boundless joy I plunged into the souls of great people, with a strange pride I found in them features resembling my own, with a mad suffering I acknowledged their preeminence” (10). The diaries may have been therapeutic and ego building: “Here I am more of a man than I am in my life, my articles, or my speeches” (69). His admiration for Germany even as victor can in part be construed as homage to greatness.

Of particular note are the sections on the flood of 1924, Punin’s raging passion to end Akhmatova’s outside friendships, his vivid evening building Tatlin’s Monument to the Third International with other companions, Tatlin’s comments that “all art is artistic” (67), and Leningrad in the Second World War.

The translation is mainly clear and close to the original, yet in some instances the excessive closeness changes the meaning: “Zhmu ruku” at the end of letters means “I shake your hand” (cf. “rukopozhatie”—handshake), not “I squeeze your hand.” This attractive volume with a glossary and index is of interest to the general readership, students, and scholars with little or no Russian. Russian specialists will await the Russian version with the hope, possibly very slim, that the family will expurgate less.

Sonia I. Ketchian, Davis Center for Russian Studies-Harvard University

Rimgaila Salys, ed. *Olesha’s Envy: A Critical Companion*. AATSEEL Critical Companions to Russian Literature. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999. 149 pp., \$17.95 (paper).

Olesha’s masterpiece is the subject of a new critical companion edited by Rimgaila Salys in the series AATSEEL Critical Companions to Russian Literature. Organized in four parts, the companion contains a general introduction to *Envy*, four critical essays, excerpts from primary sources (primarily Olesha’s own comments about the work and articles from the

contemporary press), and an annotated bibliography. Together these offer the student and non-specialist a thorough overview of the work, biographical information about the author, background on the political culture of the 1920s, and insight into some of the critical problems represented in the novel. As one who teaches *Envy* in an undergraduate survey course, I focus my review on the pedagogical value of the companion based on my experiences using it in the classroom, and leave the evaluation of its place in the critical literature to Olesha scholars.

In her introductory article, "Understanding *Envy*," Rimgaila Salys discusses the autobiographical aspects of the novel, its textual history, narrative features, and English translations of the work. She references the many drafts of the novel (including three hundred versions of the first page and more than two thousand pages of drafts of the entire work) written over the course of approximately six months (7). Among the notable fragments excised from the final version is an early plotline about "an American sharpshooter, David Williams, his beautiful wife, Constance, and Clement, a melancholic aristocrat and bad poet" (9). Salys cites some of the "characteristically modernist" aspects of the novel, including the shift in narrative voice between parts one and two, the chronological displacement of events, and alternation between reality, dream, and fantasy (19). Her discussion of the socio-historical context concentrates on the new man, communal kitchens, and the cult of the man-machine; this section is supported by the texts found in "Primary Sources" at the end of the book. One of the most helpful parts of the introduction for teachers is Salys's review of six English translations of *Envy* (in which Clarence Brown's is cited as "by far the best," 30).

Part two of the companion, "Criticism," consists of three previously published articles or excerpts from books, plus a new article by Salys. The first article, Andrew Barratt's "*Envy*, Part I: Kavalero as Myth Maker," examines Kavalero's "attempts to project a number of obsessive myths on his experience" (49), such as the bourgeois dream (or "rags to riches" story), the "evil giant" versus "little man," and the evil giant as savior. According to Barratt, "the gulf between fantasy and reality is both the principle around which part I of *Envy* is organized and an important key to an understanding of Kavalero in particular" (50).

In "The Theme of Sterility in Olesha's *Envy*," William Harkins concentrates on the opposition between masculine and feminine, male and female. In his broadly Freudian interpretation, he argues that "the male characters in *Envy* are all sterile," while "the female characters (Anichka, Ophelia) are castrators" (78). Other "Freudian" themes discussed here include homoeroticism, androgyny, masturbation, childhood fantasy and dreams, various complexes (Oedipus, father, castrating mother), vaginal imagery, and the ever popular phallus. Whereas earlier in the companion Salys explains the complex figure of Ophelia with the matter-of-fact statement, "Ophelia is imagination" (21), here Harkins argues that "Ophelia is an expressionistic embodiment of Ivan's protest against a machine civilization" (75).

Victor Peppard's article, "The Carnival World of *Envy*," offers a convincing Bakhtinian interpretation of the novel, claiming that carnival imagery acts as a unifying force to portray a world "in the process of transformation and change on the threshold between two epochs" (99). Peppard cites instances of laughter, the crowning and uncrowning of a carnival king (Ivan Babichev), mirrors and other instruments of optical distortion, carnival doubles (Kavalero and Ivan, Ophelia and Makarov, Andrei and Anichka), and perpetual drunkenness as evidence. Occasionally Peppard supports his argument (unnecessarily) with drafts that were excised from the final version of the novel. Citing in one case a parade of human emotions, Peppard admonishes Olesha for omitting this scene from the novel with the claim that "it would have brought one of its major motifs to a spectacular climax and raised the novel to greater imaginative heights" (90). In this gesture of eighteenth-century criticism, literally criticizing Olesha's artistic taste, the reader senses Peppard's regret at the exclusion of further support for his interpretation.

In the last article, "Sausage Rococo: The Art of Tiepolo in Olesha's *Envy*," Salys concentrates on Baroque elements in *Envy*, citing features previously discussed by T. S. Berczynski

(such as metaphysical conceits, paronomasia, and rhetorical figures) and adding her own analysis of Baroque ornamentation in descriptions of Valya, Anichka's bed, and Olesha's reference to Giovanni Battista Tiepolo in part I of *Envy*. She concludes that "for Olesha, the baroque and rococo, with their accompanying values, stood opposed to the prevailing proto-socialist realist tendencies in Soviet art that were metonymical to what was occurring in the entire culture" (117).

After incorporating the companion into an undergraduate survey course, I can attest to its value as a teaching tool. Students summarized the main argument of one of the critical articles and then critiqued the argument for in-class presentation. Besides sparking discussion, the assignment allowed non-literature majors to examine the mechanics of literary criticism before writing their own papers. Many students remarked that the assignment helped them to "see new things" in *Envy*. Given a choice of paper topics from three different literary works, over three-quarters of the class chose to write about *Envy*. I attribute this enthusiasm not only to the usual appreciation of this undergraduate favorite, but also to the *Critical Companion*.

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Sonia I. Ketchian. *The Poetic Craft of Bella Akhmadulina*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993. Indexes. vii + 248 pp., \$37.50 (cloth).

The appreciation of Soviet-period literature was all too often informed more by cold-war political considerations than by issues in aesthetics. This is why Evgeny Evtushenko and Andrei Voznesensky are still perhaps better known (outside Russia at any rate) than their less demonstrative contemporary Bella Akhmadulina. Now that the study of Russian culture is returning to the theoretical mainstream and the best writing of the decades before *glasnost* is being gradually revived and reassessed, it is interesting to note that the first, and so far only, book in any language on Akhmadulina largely ignores the inevitable political aspects of her work to deal mainly with the metapoetic theme in her poetry.

The *Poetic Craft of Bella Akhmadulina* focuses principally on Akhmadulina's 1983 collection *Taina*, which contains poems written from approximately 1975 and marks the beginning of what Ketchian calls her subject's "mature, garden period." There are two introductory chapters that discuss the nature of the lyric persona in Akhmadulina's verse and briefly survey the poetry of her early period, but Ketchian devotes the majority of her book to a close reading of *Taina*. This is complemented by reference to the development of themes from this collection in Akhmadulina's later volume *Sad* (1987) and to a lesser extent in the poems of her subsequent "philosophically spiritual period." The "secret" of Akhmadulina's title is the mystery of the creation of poetry from the natural world and the literary tradition. Ketchian pursues the development of this theme through *Taina* from the opening programmatic poem "Est' taina u menia ot chudnogo tsvetn'ia," identifying successive clusters of poems which embody particular symbolic images and influences — the moon, the daytime, space, the flowering of the bird cherry, and the examples of Tsvetaeva and Pushkin. The collection is dominated by the theme of Tarusa, the town south of Moscow on the Oka River which "serves as the site for the speaker's creativity" (51). Ketchian links Tarusa particularly with Tsvetaeva, whose family had close connections with the town, and uses this association as a starting point for an explanation of Tsvetaeva's role in Akhmadulina's work which is both illuminating and compelling. In general Ketchian is an enthusiastic and painstaking reader, stubbornly working to tease out textual obscurities (with plant names, for example, or archaic usages) and to draw out links between individual poems. Her analyses are, moreover, fruitfully informed by interviews with Akhmadulina herself. The commentary format of the book is ideal for use in