KUZMIN, Mikhail Alekseevich (КУЗМИН, Михаил Алексеевич) (1872-1936)

Best known as one of Russian modernism's finest poets, although he was also a composer and wrote important works of prose, drama and criticism. Kuzmin was born in Yaroslavl in 1872. He moved with his family to St. Petersburg in 1884 and later studied composition at the Conservatory. He experienced a series of personal and artistic crises in the 1890s, not least as he came to terms with his homosexuality. A trip to Italy in 1895 and entry into Petersburg artistic circles helped him develop an artistic vision that would integrate an open treatment of male same-sex love into a radiant spiritual vision. Kuzmin first gained public attention with his gay *roman-à-thèse Wings* (*Kryl'ia*) (1906). But within Petersburg's elite artistic circles it was his *Alexandrian Songs* (*Aleksandriiskie pesni*) (1906), originally performed at the piano, that established him as an artist. He is a master of poetic form and draws from many epochs and styles. His art depicts the sensuous and fleeting as key components of spiritual experience and growth. Kuzmin remained in Russia until his death in 1936, writing and translating, although from 1929 until his death he was no longer able to publish original verse.

**Timeline of Life and Works**

1872: born in Yaroslavl

1884: family moves to St. Petersburg

1895: travels in Italy

1904: writing first published in the miscellany *The Green Collection of Verse and Prose* (*Zelenyi sbornik stikhov i prozy*)

1906: first visits Viacheslav Ivanov's "Tower" salon; publishes cycle *Alexandrian Songs* (*Aleksandriiskie pesni*) and also first novel *Wings* (*Kryl'ia*) in journal *Libra* (*Vesy*)

1907: meets Victor Naumov, who inspires his angel-warrior Guide figure

1908: publishes first volume of verse, *Nets* (*Seti*)

1910: publishes "On Beautiful Clarity" (*O prekrasnoi iasnosti*) in *Apollo* (*Apollon*) journal; publishes two collections of stories; begins a relationship with Vsevolod Kniazev, a relationship Anna Akhmatova will infamously portray in *Poem without a Hero* (*Poema bez geroiia*) (1940-65)

1912: publishes a volume of verse, *Autumnal Lakes* (*Osennie ozera*) and his play "Venetian Madcaps" (*Venetsianskie bezumtsy*)

1913: meets Yury Yurkun, with whom he has a long-term, if not always stable, relationship; they live together from about 1917 until the end of Kuzmin's life

1914: publishes third volume of verse, *Clay Doves* (*Glinianye golubki*)

1915: publishes novel *Travelers by Land and Sea* (*Plavaiushchie-puteshchestvuiushchie*)

1916: publishes volume of stories, *Entracte in the Ravine* (*Antrakt v ovrage*)

1918: publishes a volume of verse, *Guide* (*Vozhatyi*), and a volume of stories, *Virginal Victor* (*Devstvennyi Viktor*)

1919: publishes novel *The Wonderful Life of Joseph Balsamo, Count Cagliostro* (*Chudesnaia zhizn' Iosifa Bal'zamo, grafa Kaliostro*)

1920: publishes a brief, illustrated volume of erotic verse, *Veiled Pictures* (*Zanaveshennyi kartinki*)

1921: publishes his play "Mary's Tuesday" (*Vtornik Meri*) and two volumes of verse, *Echo* (*Ekho*) and *Otherworldly Evenings*  (*Nezdeshnie vechera*)

1923: publishes collected critical writings, *Conditionalities: Articles on Art* (*Uslovnosti: Stat'i ob iskusstve*) and a volume of verse, *Paraboles* (*Paraboly*)

1924: Kuzmin is publicly denounced in the journal *The Life of Art* (*Zhizn' isskustva*)

1929: publishes a volume of verse, *The Trout Breaks the Ice* (*Forel' razbivaet led*), which includes his eponymous masterful long poem

1936: dies in Leningrad, buried in the Volkovo Cemetery

Mikhail Alekseevich Kuzmin was born October 5, 1872 (Old Style) in Yaroslavl to provincial nobility and began his education in Saratov. His family moved to Petersburg in 1884. Kuzmin studied at the Conservatory there under Rimsky-Korsakov, but he abandoned the course. Profoundly religious by nature, Kuzmin underwent a crisis in early adulthood as he struggled to reconcile his homosexuality with Church teachings. A two-month trip with a lover he calls "Prince George" to Italy in 1895, and religious figures he met there, helped him begin to integrate the life of the flesh with the life of the spirit. His gay *roman-à-thèse* *Wings* (*Kryl'ia*) (1906), which brought him attention for its open treatment of male same-sex love, exemplifies how he incorporates homosexuality and love of the material world into a radiant spiritual vision.

Kuzmin is best known for his poetry, but he also wrote novels, stories, drama and criticism. He was associated with the World of Art (*Mir Iskusstva*)—a group of artists known for their exhibitions of Western and Russian art and their productions of the Ballets Russes. He published with the Acmeists, and their work shares some features, including an emphasis on concrete, sensuous detail, an almost classical sense of formal balance and a preference for clarity. Many have seen his essay "On Beautiful Clarity" (*O prekrasnoi iasnosti*) (1909) as a literary manifesto expressing an Acmeist position. In fact Kuzmin wrote the piece about prose, and it fails to explain some of his more hermetic verse. In some ways he aligns more closely with the Russian Symbolists, who sought to envision other worlds beyond that of the everyday.

Portrait of Kuzmin by Konstantin

Somov, 1906.

Ultimately, though, his art stands distinct from any defined movement. Few can parallel his mastery of verse forms. Many have described Kuzmin's works as stylizations—adaptations of conventional forms rather than mimetic representations of contemporary settings. Some of his works can be partially described in these terms, such as his *Alexandrian Songs* (*Aleksandriiskie pesni*) (1906), a cycle he performed at the piano, securing his place amongst Petersburg artists. These songs evoke Alexandrian culture of the early centuries A. D., with its syncretic embrace of paganism and Christianity, and they seem to imitate ancient song forms. Their emphasis, however, on sensuous detail and relatively individuated narratives of love move them beyond stylization. This cycle exemplifies Kuzmin's reconciliation of historical memory with present experience as well as of spirit and flesh, and his validation of human love and sexuality as the individual's primary path to spiritual ascent. He is often considered a poet of the carefree life, but his art engages profound human concerns. The ongoing spiritual journey is a central theme for him, evident in his use of diverse religious symbols and in the angelic warrior-guide figure he frequently depicts. His final major work, a long poem *The Trout Breaks the Ice* (*Forel' razbivaet led*) (1929), demonstrates both his continued experimentation with poetic form and his continued faith in art and love as means of personal redemption. He died in 1936.

Мы знаем,

что все—превратно,

что уходит от нас безвозвратно.

Мы знаем,

что милое тело

дано для того, чтоб потом истлело.

Вот что мы знаем,

вот что мы любим,

за то, что хрупко

трижды целуем!

We know

that everything’s changeful,

that it leaves us and doesn’t come back.

We know

that the dear body

is given so it might then decay.

That’s what we know,

that’s what we love;

because it’s fragile

let’s kiss it thrice over!

(excerpt of “*Kruzhites’, kruzhites’ . . .*” from the *Alexandrian Songs* cycle)

**References and Further Reading**

There is still relatively little critical work on Mikhail Kuzmin, although in the last two decades numerous collections of his poetry and prose have been published.

**Biography**

John E. Malmstad and Nikolay Bogomolov, *Mikhail Kuzmin: A Life in Art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999. The authoritative English-language biography of Kuzmin.

Nikolai Bogomolov and John Malmstad, *Mikhail Kuzmin. Iskusstvo, zhizn', epokha*. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1996. The authoritative Russian-language biography.

**Selection of Critical Works**

N. A. Bogomolov, *Mikhail Kuzmin. Stat'i i materialy*. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1999. Articles by the foremost Russian scholar of Kuzmin's life and works.

John E. Malmstad, ed. *Studies in the Life and Works of Mixail Kuzmin*. Vienna: 1989. A landmark edited volume of Russian, English-language and French scholarship on Kuzmin.

L. G. Panova, *Russkii Egipet: Aleksandriiskaia poetika Mikhaila Kuzmina*. Moscow: Volodei, 2006. Offers a focused examination of Egyptian themes in the works of Kuzmin, as a lens for his central concerns.

Lada Panova and Sarah Pratt, eds. *The Many Facets of Mikhail Kuzminf: A Miscellany*. Bloomington, IA: Slavica, 2011. A collection of new research on Kuzmin in English and Russian.

**Major Editions and Diaries**

*Sobranie stikhov* (Collected Verse), 3 vols. Ed. Karl Eimermacher et al. Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1977-1978.

*Proza* (Prose), 12 vols. Ed. Vladimir Markov et al. Oakland, CA: Berkeley Slavic Specialities, 1984-2000.

*Teatr* (Theater), 4 vols. Ed. A. G. Timofeev, Vladimir Markov, George Cheron. Oakland, CA: Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1994.

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*Dnevnik 1934 goda* (Diary). Ed. G. Morev. St Petersburg: Ivan Limbakha, 1998.

**Other resources**

*The Kuzmin Collection*. Editor and translator John Barnstead. 14 January 1999. Dalhousie University Electronic Text Centre. <http://etc.dal.ca/kuzmin/index\_std.html>.

*Mikhail Kuzmin*. \_\_<http://kuzmin.vpeterburge.ru>

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