**OLESHA, YURI (ОЛЕША, ЮРИЙ 1899-1960)**

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Major figure in Soviet Russian modernism, known for his meticulous craftsmanship, original imagery, and unexpected perspective. He enjoyed great success as a journalist in the 1920s and with the publication of his two best-known works, *Envy* (1927) and *Three Fat Men* (1928), but subsequently fell out of favor with the official literary establishment. Though a member of the Soviet Writers Union, he did not write according to their expectations and was not published for many years. He died in Moscow in 1960.

**Timeline of Life and Most Famous Works**

1899: born in Elisavetgrad (Kirovograd), Ukraine

1902: family moves to Odessa

1915: first published poem appears in newspaper

1922: moves to Moscow

1922-32: writes for *Gudok* (The Whistle)

1924: first verse collection published

1927: *Zavist’* (*Envy*) appears in journal *Krasnaia nov’* (*Red Virgin Soil*)

1928: *Tri tolstiaka* (*Three Fat Men*) published

1930-31: works on play *Spisok Blagodeianii* (*A List of Blessings*) with V. Meyerhold

1934: speech at Writers’ Congress

1936: works on film *Strogii iunosha* (*A Stern Youth*) with A. Rom

1956: first republication of his works since 1935

1960: dies in Moscow

1965: publication of *Ni dnia bez strochki: iz zapisnykh knizhek* (*No Day Without a Line: From the Notebooks*)

1967: television broadcast of *Zavist’* (*Envy*)

Yuri Karlovich Olesha was born in Elisavetgrad, but grew up in Odessa, and belongs to a richly talented group of writers hailing from that city at the beginning of the twentieth century. Though his family was of Belorussian nobility, they were not wealthy. Olesha joined a poetry circle, and was closely associated with the local writers Valentin Kataev, Eduard Bagritsky, and Ilya Ilf. His first publications were poems, including two collections in the 1920s. He supported the Bolshevik revolution, and from 1922-1932 wrote for the railroad workers journal *Gudok* (The Whistle), where he acquired a following for his satirical columns written under the pen name Zubilo (Chisel). His novella-length proletarian fairytale *Tri Tolstiaka* (*Three Fat Men,* 1924, published 1928) was written in this vein.

Olesha’s greatest success came at the end of the relatively liberal NEP period with the appearance of *Envy* (*Zavist’*). It was written in six months in early 1927, though Olesha had been planning the novel for about five years. In his own estimation, he wrote between two and three hundred drafts of the famous opening passage, which brought his trademark skills of keen observation and original imagery into brilliant focus. As a landmark of modernism, the novel is notable for its ocular effects, using windows, mirrors, binoculars, scaffolds and fences to achieve perspectives akin to those of CONSTRUCTIVIST Alexander RODCHENKO. These visual dynamics shape subjectivity (at one point a double of the main character emerges from a mirror, at an uncertain angle), and the new Soviet reality is continually refracted by a furtive imagination. Though the new man prevails, he is appealing only as a grotesque figure in the consciousness of the “people of the past.” The latter, though weak and ineffectual, are poetically productive. There are a number of references to Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground,* including the novel’s division into two parts—a series of autobiographical "Notes," followed by a third-person narrative that sustains the phantasms of the first section.

Initially the novel received high praise in the official Soviet press for exposing counter-revolutionary tendencies, and was dramatised and staged in 1929. Over time an increasingly negative reading of *Envy* emerged, and soon the work that had made Olesha famous was unprintable. Nor did he feel capable of writing in the new socialist realist style. In a widely known speech at Writers Congress of 1934 Olesha professed his desire to be a Soviet writer in spite of his contradictory aesthetic orientation. He could get no books published between 1935 and 1956, and for many years dwelled in the basement buffet at the House of Writers, begging drinks and once famously requesting an advance on the funds for his funeral.

Olesha’s short stories from the 1920s are close in spirit and content to his novel, while those from the 1930s trace his hesitant attempts to change course. *Three Fat Men* has enjoyed enduring success and been filmed in animation and live action. Another film based on an Olesha screenplay, the 1936 *Strogii iunosha* (*A Stern Youth*),was shelved, but preserved, and is now appreciated as a rare survivor of Soviet modernism in the mid-1930s. Olesha did return to literature with a late collection of memoirs and ruminations, published after his death under the resolute title *Ni dnia bez strochki* (*No Day Without a Line*)(1965).

**References and Further Reading**

**Works by Yuri Olesha**

*Zavist’ (Envy)* [1927]

*Izbrannoe* (*Selected Works*) [1935]

*Izbrannye sochineniia* (*Selected Works*) [1956]

*Ni dnia bez strochki: iz zapisnykh knizhek* (*No Day Without a Line: From the Notebooks*) [1965]

*Povesti i rasskazy* (*Novellas and Stories*) [1965]

*P’esi, stat’i o dramaturge i teatre* (*Plays, Articles on Drama and Theatre*) [1966]

*Kniga proshchaniia* (*A Book of Partings*) [1999]

**Works about Olesha**

BEAUJOUR, E. (1970) *The Invisible Land: A Study of the Artistic Imagination of Jurii Olesha.* Columbia University Press. The first and still the most complete treatment of Olesha’s work in English, focusing on close reading and analysis of themes within the full range of his writing.

HEIL, J. (1989) *No List of Political Assets: The Collaboration of Yuri Olesha and Abram Rom on Strogii iunosha.* Munich: Stagner. A brief study of the making and reception of the film. Based on archival research, it includes a very useful bibliography.

PEPPARD, V. (1989) *The Poetics of Yury Olesha.* University of Florida Press. A Bakhtin-influenced monograph focusing on Carnival and dialogical elements. Also considers *No Day Without a Line* as a metaliterary work.

SALYS, R. (1999) *Olesha’s Envy: A Critical Companion.* Northwestern University Press. A critical introduction to the novel, including essays by four scholars, background on the writing and reception of the novel, and an extensive bibliography.

**Footage**

Fragment from *Strogii Iunosha (A Stern Youth)* [1936]

Animated film *Tri tolstiaka* (*Three Fat Men*) [1963]

Fragment from *Zavist’ (Envy)* [1967]

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