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RUSSIAN MODERNISM IN THE MEMORIES OF THE SURVIVORS: THE DUVAKIN INTERVIEWS, 1967—1974, By Norbert Francis, Published by: University of Toronto Press, by Slav N. Gratchev, Margarita Marinova and Irina Evdokimova, Year of Publishing: 2021. Subject Area: 20th Century Russian Literature, Book Type: Interview. Total Number of Pages: 234. ISBN: 978-1-4875-2725-9, hardback, \$77.17.

Memories of the Survivors is the third volume of a series based on the interviews conducted by Professor Victor Duvakin beginning in 1967,¹ a historic oral-history of Russian/Soviet art and culture in large part because it departed from the procedures of official documentation. Readers new to the events and lives of the leading figures will find a background study of the period, beginning with the years immediately prior to the 1917 Revolution, useful for integrating all the interview information. The conversations delve largely into the personal travail and intimate detail of the surviving protagonists and their colleagues who fell victim too early. Throughout the five dialogues, we get the opportunity to consider the day-to-day peculiarities of prominent writers as individuals, imperfect in some ways more and in some ways less than we ourselves are imperfect. The copious footnotes serve as an indispensable guide, also good for organizing follow-up research.

The feeling of frustration prompted by an incompleteness in a number of the most compelling testimonies should be tempered by keeping in mind that the *tape-recorded* sessions were conducted long after the Khrushchev thaw, during the long Brezhnev winter (1964—1982). The personal anecdotes are, nevertheless, of great value, even as we take note time and again of when both interlocutors appear to sidestep the sensitive topics (sometimes “sensitive” is an understatement). At points in the conversations we get the sensation that the actual words pronounced were for the record (again, on tape); that is, questions and responses did not just involve simple self-editing of omission but also of deliberate commission. As in the famous interview of Victor Shklovsky by Serena Vitale in 1978, the criticism would not be fair, not even coherent.

Dialogue 1 with Victor Arlov begins with the life and works of Sergei Yesenin, continuing in Dialogue 2 to discuss the Moscow theatre of the 1920s and 30s with a focus on Vsevolod Meyerhold. The most interesting contrast to Yesenin, whose work after his death circulated in *Samizdat* for many years, was the official glorification of Mayakovsky. According to Arlov, while the suppression of the

former contributed to its popularity, the latter suffered until more recently the perception of “state-owned poet” (p. 35), parenthetically, an assessment also offered once by Pasternak. Regarding Meyerhold, the even more interesting passage here is the disagreement between Arlov and Duvakin on the reception to the last plays of Mayakovsky produced in 1929, the celebrated *Bedbug* and *Bathhouse*. This review will not spoil the culminating discussion of Dialogue 2; suffice it to say that these dramatic productions came at one of critical turning points of early Soviet culture. The coming decade witnessed the bizarre arrest and execution of Meyerhold and the violent murder of his wife, among that of many tens of thousands equally impossible to explain.

A recurring observation across the dialogues calls attention to the special qualities of poetic language, in particular as it is revealed in performance, in the recital by the poet. The idea comes forward more prominently in Dialogue 3, with Vladimir and Ariadna Sosinsky, their interview turning on remembrances of Marina Tsvetaeva. The reader will find it hard to put down or turn away from their account of some of the very complicated details of her and her family’s tragic ordeal. A welcome interlude is the section on *How Tsvetaeva read poetry*, how she: “...used to chant, and pause after each stanza, closing her eyes. Most of the time she recited from memory and kept swaying slightly...” (p. 110—111). In her own memoir, following the section titled *Intoxiqués, Parenthesis about a species of hearing* is reminiscent of a comment once made by Nadezhda Mandelstam (1970). It was about the mainly below-awareness process of the composing of verse contour and rhythmic pattern, consisting in “a ringing in the ears...whispering, then the inner music.” (p. 186)

Tsvetaeva herself recalls:

This hearing is not allegorical, though not physical either. So far it is from being physical that you don’t actually hear any words at all, or if you do you don’t understand them, like someone half-asleep. The physical hearing either sleeps or fails to carry, replaced by another hearing.

I hear, not words, but a kind of soundless tune inside my head, a kind of aural line, from a hint to a command...it is a whole distinct world...But I am convinced that here too, as in everything, there is a law. In the meanwhile, it is authentic hearing without ears, one more proof that:

There *is* – far away. (1982, pp. 177—178).

In Dialogue 4, Roman Jakobson doesn’t mention it but this observation, made by a number of active poets of the time, was a recurring theme both in his own memoir and in ongoing theoretical work (Jakobson, 1992). It was one of the objects of study on the defining properties of literary language, a study that he and his colleagues could not complete during the short period of sustained research (perhaps ten or fifteen years ending in the mid-1920s). The research was about the sound patterns in poetry-specific parallelism, within the different domains of verbal art (i.e. in the

special kinds of repetition that distinguish them from prose and prosaic conversation, etc.).

Apropos to this topic, in Dialogue 4, there appears a discernment that this reader was unaware of Jakobson ever making, that “the Futurist artists...were split into two groups”: the one gravitating around the journals *LEF* and *Novy LEF*, with its opponents loosely associated with the tendency (such as it could be described) of Velimir Khlebnikov and Kazimir Malevich. Jakobson carefully avoids mentioning with which tendency he himself identified. We might venture to characterize the division as the one that marked the entire epoch: to what degree would art and literature be permitted to continue charting the autonomous course they had set into motion during the years prior to 1918? This question, in fact, appears as one of the important threads in Dmitry Sporov’s Introduction to the present volume.

In the final Dialogue 5 we return to the principal informants. Maybe because the topic—Boris Pasternak—was in recent memory, and more immediately toxic, the Sosinskys appeared to tread even more lightly. Readers can judge for themselves if they go beyond simple self-editing of omission. The exchanges, nevertheless, are fascinating, attaining the status of a true historical document. The same applies to the entire three-volume set.

Note

1. Philologist Victor Duvakin (1909-1982), following his dismissal from teaching appointment at Moscow State University, undertook the project of creating a phonoral history of 20th Century Russian literature and literary studies. The first two published volumes, bilingual editions based on a transcription of the audiotapes, comprise the interviews with Mikhail Bakhtin (S. Gratchev, M. Marinova, Bucknell University Press, 2019) and dialogues with Victor Shklovsky (S. Gratchev and I. Evdokimova, Lexington Books, 2019).

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