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The Archaeology of Anxiety: The Russian Silver Age and Its Legacy. Pitt Series in Russian and East European Studies by Galina Rylkova

Review by: Alexandra Smith

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Rylkova, Galina. *The Archaeology of Anxiety: The Russian Silver Age and Its Legacy*. Pitt Series in Russian and East European Studies. University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA, 2007. x + 270 pp. Appendix. Notes. Index. \$27.95 (paperback).

RYLKOVA's ambitious attempt to analyse the Silver Age legacy and its prominence in Russian literature and mass media has resulted in a significant new study. Its main goal appears to be twofold: to explore the role of cultural memory in the preservation of the modernist tradition and to scrutinize the evolution of the concept 'Silver Age'. Many beholders saw the Silver Age as a period that stretched from 1890 to 1917. Yet Rylkova's study demonstrates convincingly that the death of Aleksandr Blok in 1921 triggered the rediscovery of the Silver Age. In psychoanalytical manner, Rylkova links this process to the anxieties that Russian intellectuals experienced throughout the twentieth century. Drawing on William Bouwsma's theoretical approaches to the formation of modern culture, Rylkova states that 'the Silver Age was created as a result of the collective appropriation of the historical experience' (p. 7).

While Rylkova engages with Ronen's study highlighting some inconsistencies of the application of the term the Silver Age to Russian cultural developments, she also offers a conceptual framework that links the use of the term to various cultural and political contexts. Rylkova proposes to apply Harold Bloom's model of literary influence to the creative responses to the Silver Age with caution, taking into account 'the piety and the suspicion that its image has encouraged' (p. 20). By identifying the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution in 1937 as a point of no return to the pre-Revolutionary past, Rylkova aptly argues that 'in Pierre Nora's terms, it was around this time that the Silver Age had stopped being taken for granted and was beginning to be perceived as a *lieu de memoire*' (p. 62). It is a pity that references to Nora's notion of 'memory sites' are not juxtaposed to Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities' that appeared around the same time as Nora's notion of memory. Both conceptual models could have been linked to the formation of Russian national identity and the manifestations of the crisis of the imperial sublime embedded in the writings of the Silver Age authors. Nora's vision of a history manifested in multiple voices and its perpetual recycling seems to inform Rylkova's entire study. It is a pity though that Rylkova's discussion of the sites significant to the collective memory does not include a survey of monuments, museums, editorial policies and anniversaries of the major representatives of the Silver Age.

Although Rylkova's analysis of the responses to the legacy of the Silver Age covers a wide range of authors, it tends to be organized around discussion of the role of Blok, Akhmatova and Kuzmin in the formation of the collective memory linked to the Silver Age. The book contains nine chapters: chapter one outlines Rylkova's main theoretical approaches to the topic; chapter two discusses Blok's death and various Blok-inspired soul-searching activities undertaken by friends, Soviet readers and scholars; chapter three talks about several makers and undertakers of the Silver Age including Aleksei Tolstoi, Khodasevich, Lidiia Ginzburg and Mochulskii; chapter four offers an insightful analysis of Akhmatova's self-representation as the major upholder of the

modernist tradition; chapter five focuses on Kuzmin's influence on Nabokov; chapter six investigates Pasternak's carefully moulded image of the Silver Age interwoven into *Doctor Zhivago*; chapter seven assesses the last decade of Akhmatova's life in the context of the Thaw period cultural developments; chapter eight unfolds the numerous allusions to the Silver Age found in Erofeev's *Russian Beauty*; the concluding chapter deals with the reassessment of the Silver Age in late Soviet and post-Soviet periods and observes that it is losing its function as a realm of memory. Rylkova argues that for many years this realm of memory was important for the generation of the 1960s. Its role in the resurrection of the Silver Age was immense but today this generation of the 1960s is also admired and mythologized. Rylkova suggests that the success of this generation might overshadow a Silver Age that therefore 'might sink into oblivion' together with the revolution of 1917 (p. 209). Given the patchy reception of the modernist tradition in the Soviet Union and the enormous influx of modernist texts and ideas in the 1990s, one might expect the opposite to happen. It is not a light task to digest and assess so quickly all the aesthetic and philosophical ideas that entered post-Soviet culture during another re-entry of the Silver Age. If anything, the rigorous and critical reassessment of the Silver Age is still pending.

Nevertheless, this thought-provoking and richly documented study fulfils many purposes: it probes its readers to reassess the spatial and temporal boundaries associated with the Silver Age and its legacy; it uncovers various mechanisms of the preservation of the modernist tradition in Russia and in Russian émigré circles; it identifies some important cultural figures who shaped the reception of the Silver Age in late Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Some readers might wish to see a more consistent application of the theoretical approaches to the assessment of the canon formation, others might desire to visualize the Silver Age legacy in the context of a creative dialogue between modernist and postmodernist traditions. In this respect, a review of Viktor Krivulin's role in shaping and reshaping the image of the Silver Age might have benefited this study.

In light of the fact that it is difficult to cover such a monumental topic within 270 pages, the book contains some eyebrow-raising omissions and in places appears to be in need of more rigorous research. For example, while Nikolai Otsup is briefly mentioned in relation to Blok, his far more important book on Gumilev and his own poetic renderings of Gumilev's ideas are not surveyed. And there is no explanation of the fact that Georgii Ivanov's criticism of Nabokov's works in 1930 was an act of revenge because in 1929 Nabokov severely criticized Irina Odoevtseva's novel *Izolda* — many contemporaries saw Ivanov's accusations that Nabokov was 'an imposter, a cook's son, a black sheep, a low scoundrel' as a counter-attacking gesture in defence of his wife. It is also not exactly clear why Odoevtseva's memoirs were not critically examined in Rylkova's study, given the fact that Odoevtseva's return to Russia in 1987 triggered a new wave of interest in the Silver Age: Odoevtseva was praised by contemporaries as the last surviving representative of the period. In 1988 and in 1989 the Soviet publishing house 'Khudozhestvennaia literatura' published 500,000 copies of her books *On the banks of Neva* and *On the Banks of the Seine, 1978–1983*. But the above-mentioned flaws do not

diminish the weight of detailed information on many individuals associated with the Silver Age provided by this highly engaging study that will be welcomed by cultural historians and literary specialists involved in twentieth-century studies.

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Marchenko, Tat'iana. *Russkie pisateli i Nobelevskaia premiia (1901–1955)*. Bausteine zur Slavischen Philologie und Kulturgeschichte. Neue Folge, Reihe A: 55. Böhlau, Cologne, Weimar and Vienna, 2007. 626 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. €69.90.

ALL literary prizes generate controversy, from which their reputation and integrity sometimes suffer but from which literature always gains, if only because more people than otherwise read the laureates and, where there is a 'short list' (this term has now entered the Russian language), the runners-up as well. In the eyes of many observers, the Nobel Prize for Literature got off to an almost incredibly bad start by refusing to honour Lev Tolstoi, even though they had ten opportunities to do so (with only one exception, in 1931, this award has always been granted to living writers — p. 374). In fact, as Tat'iana Marchenko indicates on pp. 107–08 and 484, it was clear that Tolstoi would have refused the award if it had been offered to him, and this could well have damaged the reputation of this Prize even more seriously. So far as I know, no writer, after being approached, has declined the honour, although it is tempting to think that after 1965 Nabokov might have done so, not wanting to join a club that had Sholokhov as one of its members. (One thinks of another Russian laureate, Brodskii, who angrily resigned from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1987 after it enrolled Evtushenko as an honorary member.) The list of great modern writers who never became Nobel laureates is impressive — Strindberg, Ibsen, Valéry, Joyce, Malraux, Moravia, Pound, Brecht and Wells, for instance — but in retrospect the five core judges and the thirteen auxiliaries have done a remarkably good job, especially when assessing writers whom most or all of them could read only in translation. (So far as one can tell from this weighty monograph — it is entirely in Russian, not German — not a single judge in the period covered had a reading knowledge of Russian, a very different situation from, say, the judges of the Booker Prizes for works written in English and Russian.)

It is rather depressing, nonetheless, to read that on occasion irrelevant matters — politics (pp. 66–68, 384), the different financial situations of the leading contestants (p. 329 — who needed the money more?) and the reluctance to award the Prize within a fairly short period of time to two or more authors from the same country or writing in the same language (p. 53) — did play a role in coming to a decision. Marchenko even suggests (pp. 60 and 221) that Thomas Hardy (d. 1928) may have been passed over because of the award to Yeats in 1923 and to Shaw in 1926. However, Alfred Nobel himself, and not the judges, is responsible for much of the misunderstanding that his Prize