INTRODUCTION

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Alexei Mikhailovich Remizov (1877–1957), as an artist, defies classification. Solitary as a hermit crab, yet friendly and familiar as a jester, very small, hunchbacked, and nearsighted, with a broken nose and twinkling eyes, Remizov now consoles his “masters” with tongue-twisters and clowning, now, filled with a sense of bitter compassion, reminds us of the madness of a world where “the rain it raineth every day” . . . and wrinkled “care” comes creeping to finish us off as once she did Goethe’s Faust: bills, rent, electricity, taxes—more unrelenting even than fire, famine, pain, poison, and the general dereliction of revolution.

It is a great good fortune for me that I met him in the flesh at the unsophisticated age of eighteen, and, although I have told the story before, I cannot resist recalling once more his living image for first-time readers of this English version of the story that made his name: “The Little Devil.”¹

My introduction to Remizov happened in 1948. I was in Paris to improve my Berlitz-school Russian by staying with a Russian family, Daniil and Natalya Reznikov and their two schoolboy sons, founders, with their extended family the Andreevs and the Sossinskys,

of the publishers Opleshnik: a project conceived at the end of the occupation specifically as an outlet for Remizov's wonderful stories and drawings; small softcover books, each published in a run of 300 copies, now collectors' items. Natalya Viktorovna, whom I came to call Natasha, took me to an emigré social event, an evening *bénéfice* for the notoriously penniless and helpless, half-blind writer, who was to recite a story of his own and Pushkin's "The Fisherman and the Fish." The Remizov piece was too difficult for me, but Pushkin's ballad of the modest old fisherman, his rapacious wife, and the golden fish with the power to grant wishes I had read before and was able to follow—as one enchanted!

Remizov's voice was at once musical and colloquial, instinctively rhythmical, as, I was to learn later, are the voices of Russian country folk when telling a story—a seamless blend of incantation and earthy chitchat with an accompaniment of first gently rippling, then increasingly threatening sea. Remizov himself—a tiny figure, hunched and sturdy as a gnome with the face of a bespectacled Slavic leprechaun—stood small on the podium, oblivious of his audience, altogether concentrated on his magical recital.

A few days later, Natasha took me to visit at his high-ceilinged three-room flat in the "literary" Rue Boileau. At that time he received friends in his own room: a huge desk, a sofa for guests, one or two chairs, and a narrow bed in the corner under shelves of books with a bed table and reading lamp. The other room, once, presumably, the "Cuckoo's Room" of his fantastic "everyday" memoirs, had belonged to his wife, Seraphima Pavlovna, a specialist in the medieval documents in which he himself found such inspiration, a huge woman with a fiery temperament and the bewildered eyes of a courageous child in a world of subtle undercurrents and double entendres. She

had died during the war, but her space remained, disputed only by the overflow of books and manuscripts. In the third room lived the one they called the Duckling, another penniless and homeless soul, who had been persuaded by well-wishers to live in and care—as well as might be done—for the helpless old writer with his “shorn” eyes and shuffling gait. They shared a bathroom, a separate, old-fashioned lavatory with clanking chain, and a cramped but lofty kitchen.

At his great desk, Remizov wrote, rewrote, and recycled old stories, letters, and dreams, his wife’s letters, and his own memoirs of his childhood among the workers busy about the factory with tall red chimneys and the courtyard onto which his own family flat then gave—after his mother took herself and her four boys back from the house of their haberdasher father to the protection of her own brothers and found shelter in a converted dye works that had been part of their industrial complex. The Naidenovs were wealthy merchants, a class whose importance had grown tremendously with the industrial revolution and whose recently acquired appetite for reading, theater, and art, combined with a taste for patronage, had set them up in rivalry to the Europeanized landed aristocracy of their own country and the wealthy Americans then so prominent on the European cultural scene. In early twentieth-century Russia, however, significant remnants of the class system still held, and the home life of these merchants was deeply traditional, regulated by the fasts and feasts of the church. Their kitchens were open to the curious underclass of pilgrims who wandered from monastery to monastery across the enormous spaces of Russia and as far as Greece and the Holy Land. Their women were well read and outspoken, but the formal choreography of everyday life was still deeply patriarchal. Remizov’s eldest uncle and the head of the family was also head of the Moscow

Stock Exchange, whereas he and his mother were poor relations. She drank and kept to her room, whereas the boys got up to all kinds of pranks but submitted to their uncle's authority. The only escape was the world of imagination:

My wet nurse lived on jam and tea. I always sat with her and listened to her stories about the countryside around Kaluga: there were forests (fairyland for me), fields, beasts; and real-life stories about goings-on in the village got all mixed up with her magic tales. As soon as I learned to write, I would make a list of wishes: what she should bring me from the country; apart from horses, cows, sheep, a goat, and all kinds of birds including a nightingale, my register of goods included a wolf, and a fox, and a bear, and a hare, and . . . a tree spirit together with a house spirit, a harvest spirit, and a meadow spirit. Everything I had ever heard about in those earliest years.²

Little Alexei, in spite of his broken nose and stunted growth, was a bright boy, but easily overlooked. His acute myopia was not discovered until the age of thirteen when, given spectacles, he discovered a sharply defined world, no longer infused with color and aswirl with music. When the drawing master sat him down before a carefully arranged "nature-morte," he now saw cubes and pyramids, whereas before he had perceived "ex-objects," weird, seething forms, monstrous or angelic . . . and much more interesting to draw. Familiar human faces too were often harsher and, to his mind, less appealing than the haloed pancakes with shimmering, blotchy, luminous eyes that he had formerly perceived. Suddenly "I found myself in quite another world."³ Only music remained, the sorrow and the beauty of the church choir in which he regularly sang the alto parts, the

chiming of bells from the great monasteries, proclaiming the sorrows of a fallen world and the great hope of redemption “with which I came into the world, and without which my life is unimaginable.”⁴ When he was fourteen, his voice broke and the music, “his” music, became a memory, only to be recaptured in dreams. Other writers, Remizov would complain, would find inspiration through drugs, drink, the adrenalin of danger, passion, even, like Dostoevsky, epilepsy and high fever. He had only his dreams—and the conductor’s baton given him by a sympathetic choirmaster as a talisman when he lost his voice and knew he would never master an instrument. So, in two of his autobiographical books, he himself figures as a music teacher without an instrument, suspended in midair, “above the earth: what depends on me in all the earth? Nothing.”⁵

On the wall of his room in the flat on the Rue Boileau was a collage of shiny and matte paper inspired by the breaking glass of his windows, shattered by explosive blasts toward the end of the occupation. Suspended between floor and ceiling bobbed a string of strange objects: fish bones, a curious twig, a charred fragment, toys, the indispensable “Feuermännchen” who protected his hearth. As an old man, Remizov conjured stories from these threaded and patched mementos and from elusive dreams, from which he would wake at night to write them down (without his glasses), only to be heartbroken next morning to find his notes unreadable.

This was his world, his place of habitation. But not everyone believed this was truly so. Some saw it as a homemade stage, the artificial background to a self-styled genius who had built a reputation on his own eccentricity and his acquaintance with famous writers, artists, and musicians. No respecter of persons, Remizov often wrote of friends and colleagues with embarrassing intimacy: “Alexei

Mikhailovich, from now on you *never* dream about me,” the emigré poet and critic Vladimir Khodasevich is rumored to have told him. Yet he could not resist the comic detail: Merezhkovsky, remembering Christ suffering “the little children” and taking Baby Natasha gingerly on his knee, suddenly appealing to his wife, “Zina, Zina, she’s making a mess! Quick, take her away!!” or the stately Berdyaev sailing head over heels over the top of the children’s swing in Rozanov’s garden and Andrey Bely “so surprised he swallowed a date.” Only Seraphima Pavlovna, the poet Alexander Blok, and possibly a few others of lesser renown such as his wet nurse seem to have been spared from Remizov’s grotesque misrepresentations.

Yet Remizov never indulged in ill-natured gossip, which he saw as the besetting sin of emigré society, and defended himself vigorously against accusations of intellectual dishonesty such as plagiarism (for his folktales) or caricature (in his dreams and memoirs). “You don’t mean to say you are consulting Alexei Mikhailovich about your dissertation!” exclaimed a genuinely distressed Alexandre Benois in 1953, when I returned to the hospitable Reznikov household to research my PhD thesis on “D. S. Merezhkovsky and the origins of Russian Symbolism” and resumed my visits to the Rue Boileau on a more regular basis. “I really think you should be warned. He—er—makes things up.” “Remizov!” snapped Sergei Konstantinovich Makovsky, the onetime editor of the journal *Apollon*. “Don’t believe a word he says.” By that time my Russian was quite adequate and I could actually help the increasingly blind old man check facts in the encyclopedia or refresh his memory by reading selected books aloud. Once, to our great excitement, I even disinterred a rare copy of Vasily Rozanov’s doctoral dissertation, “On Understanding,” from the Czechoslovak Protestant library on the Ile de la Cité: a great disappointment to both

of us. “Vasily Vasilyevich had not yet found his style,” he said, waking with a start as my struggle to read out a particularly long and involved philosophical passage stuttered to an awkward standstill. “We won’t read any more of that. . . .” So Remizov felt his way, hesitantly and laboriously, through everyday life; but his reminiscences, dreams, the incantatory rhythms of his “music” were bathed in the light of their own truth and not intended to harm.

I think this must always have been so, from the day he discovered his weird genius for the barber’s art, shearing a shaggy kennel dog to look like a poodle in the midst of the Russian winter, and went on to barber the hair and beards of distinguished revolutionaries whose exile he shared in Vologda—exercising a propensity that was later to terrorize literary colleagues in smart St. Petersburg.

Nevertheless, I never heard him attribute discreditable motives to his fellow emigrés or make fun of the grandiose, tragic chaos of his time, when all a person had to hold on to was the spontaneity of children, a moment of empathy, a shared laugh, a tear in the eye for the despair of another human being. “The Russian proverb has it,” he wrote in *Sisters of the Cross*, “that man is a wolf to man. I say—man is a log.” Remizov the artist, however, like Remizov the choirboy, was not “a log”: “I sang for all the sorrows of mankind, for the abandoned, the weary, the ‘doomed,’ for all human misfortune and disaster, for that unanswered why? Why? Why. . . . And in answer I saw how the old priest Alexei Dmitrievich Mozhaitsky suddenly ceased his censuring and his eyes amid the blue clouds of incense filled with tears. . . .”⁶

Although destined to work in the Naidenov bank and moved from grammar school to keep his youngest brother company in the more prosaic Russian equivalent of a “comprehensive” or “vocational”

school, Remizov was accepted into university to study physics and mathematics in 1894. He was well read in Russian—from the seventeenth-century heretic priest and vernacular master Avvakum to Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and on through Russia's great realist prose to Chekhov and Gorky. In philosophy, however, the great discoveries of his contemporaries were Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx. There was just so much a man simply had to know, and the teenager from “beyond the Moscow River” took a trip to Germany, where all kinds of forbidden literature was available, and returned with a stock of “revolutionary” reading in a suitcase with a false bottom. The university was, at the time, a hotbed of disaffection, and in 1896 the nineteen-year-old was arrested when curiosity impelled him to join a student demonstration. The stash of illegal literature found at his digs led not just to expulsion from the university but to administrative exile. In exile, he became further radicalized and was caught distributing some Marxist pamphlets he had managed to bring with him, imprisoned for several months in solitary (according to his own account, in the very cage once used to exhibit the defeated Cossack rebel Emelian Pugachev), then sent on, stumbling in his manacles, with an echelon of hardened revolutionaries and common criminals, to the subpolar settlement of Ust Sysolsk. The sentence was commuted, thanks to the young man's evident physical frailty and the intervention of well-wishers in the capital, to exile in the “Northern Capital” of Vologda.

Like other such centers throughout Russian and Soviet history, Vologda was a “university” in itself: enlightened, articulate company; all the latest journals sent to individual exiles by sympathizers (Remizov himself received *The World of Art* from Diaghilev's cousin, Filosofov, with whom he had a slight acquaintance and who

remained a kind friend all his life). It was possible to enjoy reasonable mobility within the confines of the city, even romance. It was here Alexei Mikhailovich met and married Seraphima Pavlovna, a beautiful, statuesque Social Revolutionary Ukrainian aristocrat with a translator's proficiency in foreign languages and, most important for their lifelong cooperation, a passion for Old Russian culture and paleography. Originally exiled for "terrorism," she now felt, as he did, that violence was not the way to build a happier society, but an easy relationship with the ex-Marxists from Kiev, Berdyaev and Bulgakov, and Lenin's future Commissar for Education, Lunacharsky, put an end to the rumors, rife back in Ust-Sysolsk, that Remizov, an eternal misfit in whatever society, was clearly no proper revolutionary and most probably a stool pigeon. Seraphima devoted herself to religion and study, Remizov to his own world of books and "music," producing his first published literary composition: typically, a stylized yet observation-inspired "Lament of a Young Girl Before Marriage," a folklore form in which the bride-to-be bids farewell to the freedom of her own friends and family and fearfully anticipates subjugation to a new master in a strange household.

Having served their term, the young couple made their way home through various provincial cities, Remizov at one stage providing for them by working as literary advisor to Vsevolod Meyerhold's experimental theater, on tour through the provinces. A daughter was born to them, Natasha, the light of her father's eyes. At last, permission was granted to live once more "in the capitals," and they settled, not in the Golden Moscow of his childhood nor in her Holy Kiev, mother of Russian cities, but in the far more "Europeanized" St. Petersburg, where even the Russian language sounded strangely flat and colorless. Here, however, Berdyaev and Bulgakov gave Remizov a job and

a living wage as caretaker cum administrator of the premises of their journal *Questions of Life*, which they had taken over from the Merezhkovskys' *New Way*. Seraphima Pavlovna was deeply interested and involved in the Merezhkovskys' "New Religious Consciousness" movement, and their friendship with Filosofov provided a link with Remizov, who, in his turn, made the acquaintance of Vasily Rozanov, Alexander Blok, Andrei Bely, Fyodor Sologub, Vyacheslav Ivanov, and Lev Shestov . . . the flower of the first and second generations of Russian Symbolism. Remizov had already approached the Moscow-centered Bryusov, offering one of his early folktale adaptations for Bryusov's journal *The Balance*, only to be told it was "too Russian, like a patch of brocade on our sober gray worsted." Meyerhold was now working for the Symbolist theater of Vera Kommissarzhevskaya, but though Remizov still took a lively interest in Meyerhold's work, his own mystery play was staged at N. N. Evreinov's "Old Time Theater," which shared the modernist enthusiasm for medieval and popular forms of street performance.⁷

Still on the fringes of the literary establishment, his wonderful *Round the Sun*, his first book of folktales, and *Limonarium*, his rendering of the apocryphal acts of popular saints (unforgettably of St. Nicholas the Wonder Worker) were hardly rated as original works. Indeed, Remizov was once, like the protagonist in *Sisters of the Cross*, accused of "plagiarism" in the press, after which he was careful to append reference notes to the folklore collections made by various learned ethnographers who had, throughout the nineteenth century, published painstaking transcriptions of oral recitals of the old tales. Yet Remizov's versions, though careful to preserve the lilt and flavor of the spoken word, convey an undercurrent of contemporary experience and a psychological immediacy not to be found in the

transcripts of academia. It must be said also that *Sisters of the Cross* and other contemporary stories and novellas such as *The Pond*, *The Clock*, and *The Fifth Pestilence*, published during this pre–World War I St. Petersburg period, though clearly by the same hand as the folktales and apocrypha, are indisputably works of experience and imagination. Though a man obsessed with books, Alexei Mikhailovich was never a “bookish” author.

My volume of his folktales, for instance, was quietly appropriated from our Moscow flat by our daughter’s “winter” nanny from the village, Mariya Ivanovna, to read aloud to her friends. “What do you learned people want with tales? We love them. These are good ones, you know. They don’t publish them like this anymore.”

The tale of “The Little Devil,” which gives its title to this book, is a great example of its author’s unique blend of magic and stark, down-to-earth realism. It was published and premiered by the Moscow merchant Ryabushinsky’s newly founded journal *The Golden Fleece* in a promotional competition for the best literary and artistic works on the subject of the devil—and confirmed the opinion of those who considered Remizov an original author of considerable distinction. *Round the Sun*, with its giggles and cuddles and scary monsters “trying hard to make you laugh,” its rainbows and reconciliations wrought by busy angels, the accompanying beat of the drums at the foxes’ ball, and the mischievous choirboy Petya’s relentless, countless “Lord have mercies . . .” was published the following year, 1907, as a separate book. A steady stream of stories, mythical and contemporary, led to a first attempt at a *Collected Works* by one of the various ephemeral Symbolist publishers, then by the more substantial promise of a takeover of this project by Mikhail Tereshechenko’s financially well-established “Sirin”—in which Remizov himself, together

with Alexander Blok, played an active advisory part. Though not yet (or ever until this day) an internationally “famous” author, Remizov had become at least a well-established literary figure. He had suffered a great loss when Seraphima Pavlovna, wounded and mortally offended by her little daughter’s reluctance to rejoin her almost forgotten parents after a long summer in the Ukraine with her Dovgello relatives, made the drastic decision that the child would be happier brought up by them on their country estate—and that contact with her poverty-stricken, city-dwelling parents would only unsettle her. Irrevocable decisions (the break with family, with revolution, with her child, and then with her homeland) seem to have been in her nature, and it was she who finally dynamited the comparatively peaceful flow of her husband’s life and insisted, at the very beginning of the more liberal New Economic Policy period after the revolution, that they leave Russia, first for Berlin and then, with many others, on to Paris.

Remizov, who had reacted to the apocalyptic scale of events in his country with the poetic *Lament for the Destruction of the Russian Land* and the more autobiographical *Russia in Whirlwind* and was, at long last, not only acknowledged by the elite of his own generation but actually gaining influence with some young writers who understood his absorption in the element of “the Russian word” as written, spoken, and sung throughout the centuries, was desolate. Their train for Estonia gathered way slowly as it puffed from the St. Petersburg platform. A soldier saluted them and called “Good-bye!”—not “Till we meet again,” as separating Russians normally take their leave. Alexander Blok died the same day. Remizov reclaimed his Russian citizenship at the end of World War II, but he never went back.

Already, deprived of make-believe play with his own child, Remizov had invented a grown-up game of his own: “The great and free House of Monkeys,” membership of which he bestowed on his friends, together with exquisitely calligraphed charters “personally signed with his own tale” by King Asyka (Alexei Mikhailovich himself). Now, perilously ensconced in temporary Berlin digs with a landlady bent on ridding her respectable premises of these chattering Russians, yesterday’s enemies with no respect for her good china and no contribution to make to the devastated German economy save the organization of transient journals, publishing houses, and debating societies, his life became a dolorous, yet gloriously free and absurd game of survival. Moving from place to place and from country to country—the Remizovs finally relocated to Paris in 1923, where they migrated from flat to flat and spent most summers in cheap lodgings on the shore of the ocean in the utmost west, the coast of Brittany, which provided the setting for many of Remizov’s later folktales—they were not in a position to collate a library, to arrange manuscripts or daily life in orderly fashion. Yet somehow, like a hedgehog accumulating autumn leaves on its prickles, Alexei Mikhailovich continued to construct a wonderfully sustained autobiography of shreds and patches, word play and high poetry, history in the making and incongruous *faits du jour*, a biography that has still to be published—even in Russian—as one book, albeit in several volumes, a story of our times to rank with the recollections of Proust and Joyce.

Having risked a biography of Alexander Blok, whom Remizov (together with Seraphima Pavlovna) thought of as one of the two absolutely truthful people he had ever met, I once conceived the thought of undertaking a life of Alexei Mikhailovich Remizov myself,

but found the very idea practicably unthinkable. He is there for us, waiting to be rediscovered in the epic, horrifying, funny, snapshot fragments of his own work, an epic of the “little man,” struggling through the dusk of a disintegrating Age of Enlightenment—a defenseless human being who still wants to drink tea with his friends, hug children, dream dreams, and sing of hope beyond hope.

Meanwhile, we have here a new translation of his now proven *not* untranslatable stories, beginning with the tale that first made his name, and in a series that includes the diary of his acknowledged predecessor, the indomitable archpriest Avvakum—and that, in itself, is most welcome.

NOTES

1. At the 1985 Amherst College conference it was not my main contribution and so not printed in the proceedings (see “Aleksej Remizov, Approaches to a Protean Writer,” ed. Greta Slobin, *Slavica* 16 [1987]).
2. *Podstrizhennymi glazami* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1961), 31.
3. *Podstrizhennymi glazami*, 70.
4. *Podstrizhennymi glazami*, 35.
5. *Uchitel' muzyki* [The music teacher], ed. Antonina d'Amelia (Paris: La Presse Libre, 1983); *Myshkina dudochka* [The mouse's flute—an interlude] (Paris: Opleshmnik, 1953). The quotation is from page 7 of the latter.
6. *Podstrizhennymi glazami*, 93.
7. Starinnyi Teatr, founded by N. N. Evreinov and Baron N. V. Osten-Driezen in 1907.

THE LITTLE DEVIL AND OTHER STORIES