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KRUČENYCH, RUSSIA'S GREATEST NON-POET

After Aleksej Eliseevič Kručenyč died on June 17, 1968, a young Russian scholar wrote me: “The last great *zaimnik* is dead” (which was not correct, because Il’ja Zdanevič was – and still is, at this writing – alive). Later I read in a talented “underground” playwright’s *curriculum vitae* that Kručenyč had played a decisive role in his formation and, this young absurd dramatist added with pride, had given him his blessings for a literary career (Puškin did not sound so proud when referring to a similar incident involving Deržavin). Lately, Kručenyč’s operatic libretto, *A Victory Over the Sun* (*Pobeda nad solncem*), appeared in an English translation. At the time of this writing, students at the University of Texas, Austin, are preparing a stage production of this opera.

On the other hand, one of my colleagues, whose knowledge and understanding of Russian literature are second to no one’s, upon learning about this planned collection, said with a grimace, “Is that really necessary?”

Behind this contrast, there is more than just a difference in opinion or taste such as “Lermontov is higher than Puškin” (The “Bunin school”) or “Nekrasov is no poet” (The “Turgenev school”).

During the time of Kručenyč’s literary activities, he was a curious phenomenon. He was studiously ignored and yet famous – famous in the sense that anybody with a modicum of interest in

literature knew his name (let's admit, a memorable one) and had an opinion about him. For the generation which was accustomed to literary rebels and eccentrics, Kručenyč symbolized the worst in futurism. The majority of those for whom the name Kručenyč was a household word, at the same time were (and still are) convinced that he was a pathetic mediocrity, who, it is true, has to be mentioned soon after Majakovskij and Chlebnikov for historical reasons, but whose work was really outside "true literature". It is not an accident that when, in 1915, Maksim Gor'kij surprised literature by recognizing some futurists, but not futurism, he named Severjanin, Majakovskij, Kamenskij and even David Burliuk, but not Kručenyč (and, let us add, not Chlebnikov).

For his contemporaries; Kručenyč was nothing but a whipping boy. Hardly any other Russian poet was so easily dismissed or abused with such vituperation. For comparison, even the much-and-long-maligned Trediakovskij enjoyed, in his early years, success and recognition and posthumously found defenders in such authorities as Novikov and Puškin. It is enough to look through the indexes of the four-volume reference guide on 20-century Russian literary miscellanies (*al'manachi*) to become convinced that only futurists printed Kručenyč. He could not find universal recognition even within his own group, where only Elena Guro seems to have had genuine respect for him. Magazines never accepted Kručenyč's works, the only exception being the post-revolutionary futurist *Lef**; but one gets the impression that even there he was printed *iz milosti*. Literature about Kručenyč amounts to a preface by Pasternak (obviously solicited by Kručenyč), a pamphlet by a fellow *zaumnik* Terent'ev and two editions of a collection of articles, the latter being in the vein of a published parlor game or a parody of a *Festschrift*. The Muratova

* The only other exception seems to be something printed in *Letučaja myš'* in 1913, which I have been unable to get hold of.

bibliographical volume on prerevolutionary Russian literature omits Kručenyč.

Undiscouraged, Kručenyč published no less than 236 "productions" as he eventually began to call his booklets. Where is the enthusiast who will some day, if not collect, then at least have a look at the majority of these publications and describe them for the less fortunate? How many of them were found, after the poet's death, inside his sofa together with other rare manuscripts?

How does one describe Kručenyč? A neoprimitivist, one of the pioneers of the absurd, a *zaumnik*, an originator of "funk"* poetry, a Russian Freudian, a destroyer of taboos, a mixer of genres, a defender of poor poetry – and many other things. Quite a few elements in this melange would attract a reader, a critic or a scholar in our days. To make things look more orderly than they really are, we can say that Kručenyč was active (and important) in at least five fields of literature, and criticism owes him a great debt, having failed, so far, to describe and evaluate his achievements (or possible blunders) in all five of them.

Even those who would refuse to issue Kručenyč a ticket for entry into Russian literature, would probably make an exception for his polemical writings, which are original, vivid and insolent. No other futurist ventured farther than he in polemics with symbolists. On the other hand, one can find in his criticism true insights into the works of others, as, for example, his pointing out that Esenin's poetry shows a veritable obsession with death. By the way, Kručenyč was the only "Hylaeon" who was not totally panegyric towards his confreres and at times violently attacked even Majakovskij and Chlebnikov. On the other hand, no other futurist shows such an unblemished record of loyalty to futurism or such resistance to outside pressures to conform. He died a

* I use the word "funk" in the sense the "funk" artists used it in 1967 (see Peter Selz, "Funk", UC Press, Berkeley, 1967).

non-poet at the time when there were dozens of Majakovskij monuments.

As a theoretician, Kručenyč, again, went farther than the rest and perhaps formulated his ideas more clearly, though some may accuse him of oversimplification or even vulgarization. This part of his oeuvre, more than any other, waits for a scholastic evaluation. Not only do his ideas of *zaum'* have to be investigated, but also such minor obsessions as *svigologija* have to be carefully explored and analyzed, rather than perfunctorily dismissed as seems to be the custom. In fact, Kručenyč's highly interesting theoretical evolution with its many ramifications, especially as expounded in his writings of the 1920's, is still awaiting a simple description.

In this connection, a few words ought to be said about much-abused (and little-studied) *zaum'*. Everybody knows that Kručenyč was one of the creators of the idea of *zaum'*, the author of the classic and habitually misquoted "dyr bul shchyl" (not to mention many other *zaum'* poems) and one of the leaders of the *zaum'* movement. What is written about his *zaum'*, however, is often based on imprecise and incorrect statements of inept critics of his time and, to the best of my knowledge, never on actual knowledge of even a fraction of his poetry. The same can be said about comparisons of his and Chlebnikov's ideas and practices of *zaum'*. It is always ignored that those ideas changed with time. Not unlike the symbolists, who ended by declaring that any great poetry is symbolist, Kručenyč became more and more centrifugal in his interpretations of *zaum'*. In 1925, he considered as *zaum'* the then fashionable usage of dialects in Soviet prose. This is, of course, not the end from which to begin a study of *zaum'*, as some scholars seem to think. Limiting the area and describing and analyzing pure *zaum'* ought to be the way, i.e., the poetical language invented by a poet with the aim that it does not resemble the poet's native tongue in any of its aspects. From here, if at all, one can enlarge. Otherwise, one has to include neologism in

the *zaum'* area — a procedure Chlebnikov would strongly object to, since he devoted two separate chapters to these two forms of lexical experiment (i.e. *zaum'* and neologisms) in his "Our Foundations". In this context, I hope, many will find it interesting to acquaint themselves with Kručenyč's preface to Čačikov's book (included in this collection), in which he demonstrates the art of translating conventional poetry into *zaum'*.

Kručenyč the publisher is another subject worth studying. With the exception of a handful of books published in the 1920's by the All-Russian Union of Poets and by Lef, his publications were published by himself. They resemble some of Remizov's books in their deliberate mixture of genres and hodge-podge composition, but Remizov seldom mixed his own writings with someone else's. As to their appearance, Kručenyč's booklets are not only a reverse of the symbolist deluxe editions. They extend from various exercises in the "hot medium" of a handwritten book, complete with deliberate errors and carelessness, to typographically set ones. Whimsical combination of prints in some of the latter never reaches the level of Zdanevič's tours-de-force, however. Illustrations in Kručenyč's books deserve a special study: they not only merge with text, but sometimes force it into a subordinate position. Among these illustrations, one finds some of the earliest collages — and some of the most original, too (cf., the underwear button on the cover of *Zaumnaja gniga*).

Less known is Kručenyč the prose writer, but he shares this lack of appreciation with other futurists, who never practiced prose to a great extent, but left several striking essays such as Livšic's "Ljudi v pejzaže" and Kušner's *Miting dvorcov*, not to mention such substantial achievements as Guro's lyrical miniatures, Kamenskij's Razin-novel and, to be sure, Chlebnikov's masterpieces in this medium. Among Kručenyč's works, "Putešestvie po vsemu svetu" (*Mirskonca*) and "Iz Sachary v Ameriku" (*Troe*), ought to be included in any anthology of Russian futurist prose (a project which is certainly overdue).

Finally, Kručenyč's other-than-*zaum*' poetry should be studied and, together with that of *zaum*' quality, described, divided into periods and cautiously classified. Cautiously, because even in Kručenyč's early so-called parodistic poetry ("Iz pisem Nataši k Gercenu") the principles seem to be elusive as they well should be with the poet who consciously wrote „poor” poetry and thus anticipated such esthetic ideas of our time as “camp”, “funk” etc.

An effort was made to represent Kručenyč as fully as possible in this collection, but a really well-balanced selection was not possible because some material was either unavailable or not reproducible. Hopefully, though, this book will arouse interest in this fascinating figure of Russian futurism (which may lead to another volume of Kručenyč's works) and induce someone to study him in depth or to start hunting for those still numerous publications of his, which remain beyond the reach of the most diligent students of Russian avantgarde.

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