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Review Of "Kompoziiiia "Krysolova" I Mifologizm M. Tsvetaevoi" By T. Suni

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Review

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The beautifully produced book is of great importance not only for Slavists, but for anybody who is interested in twentieth-century literature, and especially in the subject of world-creation through language. Clare Cavanagh provides a unique collection of highly interesting analyses of poems, and very valuable material of different types, connecting Mandelstam's work with European, Russian, Hellenic, Jewish and other traditions. She traces not only the poet's historical development, but also investigates his importance in the later tradition. The book deserves a wide audience as one of the most comprehensive discussions of the cultural and semiotic system known as Modernism.

Erich Poyntner, University of Vienna

Тимо Сунн. *Композиция «Крысолова» и мифологизм М. Цветаевой*. Диссертация на соискание ученой степени доктора философии. Хельсинки: Институт России и Восточной Европы [Helsinki: Venäjän ja Itä-Euroopan Instituutti], 1996. 206 pp. (paper).

Timo Suni's dissertation was published as part of the doctoral degree requirements at the Institute for Russian and East European Studies in Helsinki. As such, the book is naturally more summary than innovative in its contents. Nevertheless, *Композиция «Крысолова» и мифологизм М. Цветаевой* is a substantial and informative work, albeit a brief one, and worthy of scholars' attention. Suni's presentation of the "state of the art" on research into Tsvetaeva's long poem "Krysolov" (1925) nicely integrates the wealth of articles and anthologies that came out in connection with the centennial conferences in 1992, and with that background established he contributes several insightful outlines of the poem's plot and resolution.

Suni performs a primarily semiotic reading, including elements of formalism and structuralism — as the summary in English points out. Sections and subsections are numbered (e.g., 2.4.1); fortunately the author spares us numbered paragraphs, a mannerism that allows constant awareness of the text's organization and easy reference point-by-point but also makes the text difficult to read as any kind of narrative. Suni's skill as a writer and crisp, effective Russian style underline sensitive readings of the poem, as a whole and in fragments. The names Suni cites most often are Lotman and Mints, along with other representatives of the Tartu school and the rich semiotic studies of Tsvetaeva published further west, particularly those by Jerzy Faryno and Svetlana El'nitskaia. Attention to these excellent semiotic studies of Tsvetaeva gains by reference to other approaches — biographical (heavily represented in work on the poet), political and cultural interpretations, and technical studies of her versification. Suni makes as much of Michael Makin's book on *Tsvetaeva and the Poetics of Appropriation* [New York, 1993], and Catherine Ciepiela's articles on "Krysolov," as of the semiotic approach he himself favors. Comfort with scholarship from a variety of styles and disciplines echoes the balanced selection of work from Eastern Europe, Western Europe and North America — just one factor, perhaps, in the high quality of much Finnish Slavists' research.

Suni makes small valuable points throughout the book, uniting ideas from two separate sources or refining and clarifying points in other scholars' work. Readers will probably find the last section, devoted to Tsvetaeva's "siuzhet," the most original and intriguing. Suni's descriptions and diagrams of elements of plot and characterization chosen in binary opposition, and of the progressions between these binaries, are hardly startlingly new, but they set up useful perspectives on this poem and her work in general, while ringing true with accumulated interpretative wisdom and with Tsvetaeva's own declarations about value hierarchies. The end of "Krysolov," for example, where the piper drowns the children of Gammel'n, is presented with respect for the visceral upset it produces in some well-intentioned readers, while demonstrating

that the “tragedy” fits very well (and causes less pain?) within the categories Suni has set up. As befits a dissertation, the scholarly apparatus is extensive: there is an index of names, and a 41-page bibliography quite up-to-date at the time of publication (1996). The technical quality is excellent; I noted only one error — oddly enough, in the text of Tsvetaeva’s poem itself (chapter 1, line 85), which is appended at the end of the volume, based on the Russica edition.

Suni has produced an elegantly written work of general value for Tsvetaeva specialists, scholars of twentieth-century Russian poetry, comparativists who read Russian, and any good academic research library.

Sibelan Forrester, Swarthmore College

Alexander Graf. *Das Selbstmordmotiv in der russischen Prosa des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Heidelberg: Publikationen zur Slavistik. Literaturwissenschaftliche Reihe, Band 5. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996. 227 pp., 44.95 DM (paper).

The first major study of suicide in Russian prose of the twentieth century, *Das Selbstmordmotiv in der russischen Prosa* stakes out a fairly successful approach to a difficult theme. Concentrating on eleven works by major authors, mostly from the first third of the century and not extending beyond the 1970s, Alexander Graf grapples with this broad and diverse topic by confining himself to fictional suicides that evidence a well-developed psychological or philosophical motivation based on existential despair. He briefly cites Karl Jaspers’ discussion of death as an existential problem in relation to “boundary situations” (*Grenzsituationen*) (9), and excludes suicides having ready materialistic or simple emotional explanations, as well as aesthetically derived or symbolic suicides. For each author, Graf opens with a brief biography, walks the reader through the plot of a single novel or story, emphasizing issues of character development, and closes with a few quick references to other works. The book concludes with a promising “typology of the theme of suicide” (190) in Russian prose of the twentieth century. Only at this point do Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Leskov and other nineteenth century authors, who have been lurking in the reader’s mind throughout the book, enter the discussion.

Although the analysis of the central works is fairly in depth, the biographical sketches and quick closing comments on other works feel disconnected and sometimes produce minor incongruities. For example, in the chapter on Valery Briusov’s “Sisters” (*Sestry*), Graf follows the increasingly desperate passion of Nikolai, his wife and her sisters to the bitter end, but his comparison of the conclusion to dystopian themes in Briusov’s “Republic of the Southern Cross” (*Respublika Iuzhnogo Kresta*) and “Earth’s Axis” (*Zemnaia os*) wanders away from the theme of suicide and inexplicably off into history. Graf’s approach works well with Ivan Bunin’s “Mitia’s love” (*Mitina liubov*) and Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Luzhin’s Defense* (*Zashchita Luzhina*), but his distinction between existential and symbolic motivation becomes dangerously categorical with authors such as Sologub, whose stories have strong, overt aesthetic and metaphysical factors influencing their structure. Sologub’s “The Sting of Death” (*Zhalo smerti*) fits Graf’s category perfectly, but his argument for excluding “Beauty” (*Krasota*) is unconvincing. Elena’s suicide in “Beauty” does not stem simply from “typically decadent reasons” (42) as Graf claims, though decadent deification of beauty certainly dominates the metaphysical and philosophical meanings that may be read into the story.

In his concluding chapter, Graf synthesizes a two-part typology of suicide, dealing first with what he sees as the general change in the theme from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. Nineteenth-century suicides were typified by a three-part combination of crime, atonement, and suicide, within a literary atmosphere dominated by criticism of literature as relevant to society. As interest in existential questions grew, the turn of the century saw the