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Sibelan E.S. Forrester

Swarthmore College, sforres1@swarthmore.edu

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Author(s): Sibelan Forrester

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Sons, Lovers, and the Laius Complex in Russian Modernist Poetry

Sibelan Forrester

Detei ot Prekrasnoi Damy imet' nikomu ne dano . . .
(It is given to no one to have children by the Beautiful Lady . . .)

—Mariia Shkapskaia

Psychosocial tensions between authors of different generations have occupied a significant part of literary scholarship for the past hundred years. The Russian formalists made the evolution of literary status through generational turnover an explicit scholarly concern; Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* is a profoundly influential application of similar ideas to the Anglo-American poetic tradition.¹ Recent feminist criticism addresses the roles of gender in describing poetic creativity and relationships, but also the economy of discourse in which common narratives of romantic or family relationships become overdetermining ways to imagine the interactions among writers, texts, and traditions.² The following two articles by Jenifer Presto and Stuart Goldberg engage these bodies of scholarship. Offering specific textual evidence and close reading, they also address the whole complex of Russian literature and culture, with implications for the way we as readers choose or inherit approaches and interpretations.

The distinction between filiation and affiliation arose productively in scholarship on modernist authors, though traditional use in manuscript studies of the term *filiation* (to refer to ancestry in textual transmission) set a precedent for the idea that textual bodies generate textual offspring. Edward Said offers an influential formulation of the modernist rejection of filiation, cited by Presto and used to good effect by scholars such as David Bethea (on Joseph Brodsky) and Clare Cavanagh (on Osip Mandel'shtam). Emmanuel Lévinas, on the other hand, reads filiation through eros as an enlightening and powerful source of relationship with the fu-

Epigraph taken from Mariia Shkapskaia, *Stikhi* (London, 1979), 99.

1. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford, 1973).

2. Among substantial works of feminist scholarship on Russian literature, see Adele Marie Barker and Jehanne M Gheith, eds., *A History of Women's Writing in Russia* (Cambridge, Eng., 2002); Catriona Kelly, *A History of Russian Women's Writing, 1820–1992* (Oxford, 1994); Marina Ledkovskaia-Astman, Charlotte Rosenthal, and Mary Fleming Zirin, eds., *Dictionary of Russian Women Writers* (Westport, Conn., 1994); Rosalind J. Marsh, ed., *Gender and Russian Literature: New Perspectives* (Cambridge, Eng., 1996); Christine D. Tomei, ed., *Russian Women Writers* (New York, 1999).

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ture.³ The interpretation of the term reflects what its subject wishes to achieve: to identify productively with an Other, as in Lévinas, or to set up a poetically generative Self unhampered by biographical accidents of heredity or culture. If filiation traps the individual in a rut of accepted plot options and duties, then free choice of literary ancestors and associates is a liberating gesture. What happens, though, to the physical residue, in the interstices of figurative and biological relationships? Russian modernists indeed sought models outside the family: political associations, craft guilds, armies, companies of heroes (the Argonauts), esoteric or occult systems (publishers or journals named for signs of the Zodiac).

A second important theme in both articles is the anticarnal orientation of Russian symbolism. For Aleksandr Blok, Presto shows, this emerges in anxious and even filicidal comments in his diary; Goldberg demonstrates that Mandel'shtam finds a similarly "fruitless" message in Blok's published poetry.⁴ In the most everyday sense, a child stubbornly resists becoming Word: an infant is uncommunicative yet loud (disrupting sleep and work), and even in an economically privileged household the child diverts resources from the adults and introduces difficulties whose end is not in sight. Meanwhile, the father is no longer the center of the universe, and any encounter with the Eternal Feminine threatens to shift the focus from *the father* to the child. Metaphysically, given the Gnostic elements in the theories of Nikolai Fedorov and Vladimir Solov'ev, having offspring creates more death, fractioning the essential Good of the universe still further instead of reviving the Fathers. Blok's resistance to conception can be read as both principled and selfish, as the common symbolist refusal to relinquish the position of child leaves the parents stuck taking care of the poet. The impressive number of Russian modernists without children, or with only one, underlines how far that generation had moved from Lev Tolstoi or Aleksandr Pushkin. In a specifically Russian context, the son who refuses to mature into a father gets to retain the position of Superfluous Man, able to refrain from investing his power in action or responsibility. He can remain fascinated with self, blame others for problems,⁵ indulge in utopian dreams, and then perhaps move into ambiguous support of the Bolsheviks, as the Superfluous Man's complaint sets him up to follow any claim to realize the longed-for utopia.

Laius, who responded to the oracle's pronouncement by abandoning his infant son Oedipus, illustrates the crucial distinction between birth control (or just saying no) and infanticide. Blok is right, given the values of Russian culture, to see children as a creative hindrance. Once you have

3. Lévinas is cited at length in D. C. Teel, "Excessive Children: Textual Filiation and the Command of the Other," in Kiyoshi Tsuchiya, ed., *Dissent and Marginality: Essays on the Border of Literature and Religion* (New York, 1997), 126–50.

4. A symbolist's diary, of course, might not be as private as we expect today: the veneration of Golden Age and realist writers taught Silver Age authors that a certain level of fame would eventually expose their most private papers to the public. In addition to the usual functions, Blok's diary could let him plant his "most private" thoughts and concerns for future readers, confident that they would eventually be found and published unless he later chose to destroy them.

5. To quote Fedor Dostoevskii's Underground Man, "They won't let me be good!"

a child, you are trapped: if you neglect or harm the child, you will be judged most harshly by both literature and society. As Presto points out, Boris Pasternak's Knauer loses not only his family happiness but also access to his art (he leaves his job playing the organ and is not reinstated later). Marina Tsvetaeva, an unusually fecund modernist who gave birth to three children, has been roundly condemned for not averting the death of her daughter Irina in 1920, and perhaps even more for not dissolving into self-reproach afterwards.⁶ Shkapskaia is unique in the Silver Age for writing poetry that describes the speaker's regret after an abortion, which she considers birth control pushed to the point of infanticide.⁷

The female role in procreation appears to offer the modernists a more productive and less threatening rhetorical position than the male.⁸ Akhmatova makes full use of the powerful Russian myth of maternity in her later work,⁹ but Shkapskaia, Tsvetaeva, and even Pasternak are able in the 1910s and early 1920s to translate Mother or Mother-of-God into Mother-of-Poems. If a poet-mother is read as Madonna, magnifying vessel of God's will, or even as an Aristotelian field for the father's seed,¹⁰ then she is devoting her gifts to some greater cause than mere talent or desire to write, and the heterosexual romance and the high status of motherhood in Russia combine to support creative activity rather than Gilbert-and-Gubarian "anxiety of authorship."¹¹ Tsvetaeva, unlike Blok, can write that her own child will eclipse her as a poet, though her equanimity may rely on the expectation of early death that marks her youthful poetry.¹²

6. Presto notes David M. Bethea's judgment of Marina Tsvetaeva in *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile* (Princeton, 1994), as well as Alyssa Dinega's thoughtful revisitation of the issue in *A Russian Psyche: The Poetic Mind of Marina Tsvetaeva* (Madison, 2001). The weight of this issue for many commentators underlines the power of gendered assumptions in evaluating a writer's biography.

7. "Da, govoriat, chto eto nuzhno bylo" (Yes, they say that it was necessary), "Ne snis' mne tak chasto" (Don't come so often into my dreams), and "Uzhe nesterpimo dyshit" (Azrail already breathes unbearably), Shkapskaia, *Stikhi*, 67 and 100.

8. Many female modernists, especially symbolists, did not choose to have children. Susan Rubin Suleiman summarizes "the motherhood myth," the idea that a woman may have either children or creative work, since they satisfy the same urges and consume the same energies, but cannot expect both. Suleiman, "Writing and Motherhood," in Shirley Nelson Garner, Clair Kahane, and Madelon Sprengnether, eds., *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (Ithaca, 1985), 358.

9. Anna Akhmatova's son with Nikolai Gumilev, Lev, was raised mainly by his paternal grandparents.

10. Page du Bois's *Sowing the Body: Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Women* (Chicago, 1988) outlines Aristotle's position in a reading that bears on Russian symbolists as well (especially Viacheslav Ivanov), given their attention to classical culture.

11. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, 1980), especially introduction and chapter 1. The "Woman Writer" in their title is Anglo-American, but the book's arguments also illuminate Russian women's writing in the nineteenth century.

12. "Alia" (1913) and "Ty budesh' nevinnoi, tonkoi" (You'll be innocent and slender, 1914), in Marina Tsvetaeva, *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh* (Moscow, 1997), vol. 1, bk. 1, 189–90 and 203.

Silver Age poets scattered in the wake of 1917 in ways that now obscure how many chose to forego children and how many simply did not live long enough to have any. It is nonetheless clear in many illuminating readings of their lives and work how much their real children were themselves.

Jenifer Presto reads a 1913 diary entry, where Blok calls the acmeists burdened (*obremenennye*) with progeny, as the older poet's attempt to reject his older-poet status. Blok is not the only poet to note the incongruity of some acmeist theoretical pronouncements,¹³ but his wish to remain as young as a beginning poet is both impossible in the real world (unless one is Mikhail Lermontov, or better Ivan Konevskoi, who simply do not exist as older poets) and yet a definite position in the verbal universe. Blok's focus on his own ancestry is prefigured in his name and patronymic, Aleksandr Aleksandrovich, which offer the poet his father's fate as the most immediate model for his own, forming a closed circle. Presto traces the poet's struggle to avoid confining domesticity and the role of real or literary paterfamilias. Blok's morbid concern with poetic as well as biological progeny could be termed a *Laius* complex. Blok's version of the Eternal Feminine is a Muse who soon splits into the classic Madonna/whore opposition: if conception must be immaculate, then sexual relations are literally obscene, happening off the stage of domestic life, in the arms of prostitutes. As Presto shows, Blok feels much more comfortable imagining himself as *molodaia mat'* (a new mother) to a successful cycle of verses—male appropriation of “female” discursive or emotional space is no novelty in the history of Russian poetry.¹⁴

Stuart Goldberg reassembles the context of Mandel'shtam's 1912 poem “Pust' v dushnoi komnate” (Let, in the stuffy room) at first publication. A central subtext is Blok's famous “Shagi komandora” (Steps of the commendatore), and the poem develops a subtle critique of Blok, Mandel'shtam's older brother if not father in poetry. Goldberg asserts that this richly subtextual poem is central to Mandel'shtam's path, imagining Blok as an invalid and thus rendering him harmless. Blok's irritation at the acmeists suggests that seeing himself ventriloquized by Mandel'shtam felt worse than being explicitly murdered in another younger writer's poetry. Tsvetaeva's cycle “Stikhi k Bloku” (Poems to Blok, 1916) employs such fulsome tones of adoration that no one could be offended when she takes him at his self-creating word and imagines him a dead angel, touching but no longer dangerous. In the same poetically formative year, Tsvetaeva does the same thing to Akhmatova and to Mandel'shtam himself.¹⁵

Presto and Goldberg, read together, suggest that Blok rightly considered the acmeists a threat and preferred the futurists: the latter tacitly de-

13. In a 1913 review, Sofiia Parnok objects to the pretensions of highly cultured acmeists to be human beings in an original state of nature, noting, as did Blok, their inability to lay down cultural baggage. Parnok (as “Andrei Polianin”), “V poiskakh puti iskusstva,” *Severnye zapiski*, 1913, nos. 5–6: 227–32, esp. 228.

14. See Luc Beaudoin, *Resetting the Margins: Russian Romantic Verse Tales and the Idealized Woman* (New York, 1997).

15. Tsvetaeva, “Akhmatovoi” and “Gibel' ot zhenshchiny: Vot znak,” both in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, bk. 1, 303–10 and 258.

pended in their *épatage* on the immediate background of Russian verse, where Blok was a major player. The acmeists, on the other hand, sought ancestors elsewhere, choosing Théophile Gautier or François Villon and at least pretending to skip over Blok. The aging (at 33!) symbolist was a victim of his own success in advancing a poetic movement that encouraged a crop of whippersnappers to challenge his status. Perhaps inevitably, he saw developments in terms of his own role and identity, and for his poetry and image, especially among female readers, that narcissistic posture made artistic sense.¹⁶ By displacing Blok or putting him on sick leave, Mandel'shtam can have his cake and eat it too, sitting in the poet's privileged place even as he knows the favorite son's likely fate. The slightly later "Na rozval'niakh, nalozhennykh solomoi" (On a sledge spread with straw, 1916) already turns to the flickering hypostases of Tsarevich Dmitrii and Peter the Great's son Aleksei, whose violent deaths lacked the joy of resurrection and ongoing life despite their fame. Mandel'shtam's interactions with Blok show the importance of family planning—that is, of selecting one's ancestors with care.

16. Blok's status as a symbolist poster boy is legendary, and his reputation still flourishes. For a recent example, see Ian Frazier, "Letter from St. Petersburg: Invented City, Peter the Great's Vision, Three Hundred Years Later," *The New Yorker*, 28 July 2003, 40: "the Symbolist poet Alexander Blok, whose women fans were so crazy about him that they used to kiss the handle of his front door."