BEYOND SYMBOLISM AND SURREALISM

ALEXEI REMIZOV'S SYNTHETIC ART

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INTRODUCTION

Alexei Remizov feared normalcy. He believed that a true artist is able to escape its confines with the help of a metaphorical "ladder." The symbolist poet Alexander Blok's ladder was his ability "to hear the music" of his time; Fyodor Dostoevsky was an epileptic; Edgar Allan Poe and E. T. A. Hoffmann drank.[1] Remizov spent many years searching for a way to evoke the artistic quality ever present in dreams—his own ladder out of normalcy. Sometime in the midtwenties he illustrated this concept in a self-caricature that subse-quently became his signature image: it shows Remizov as a petty demon, climbing a ladder in the midst of horned, winged, and tailed monsters[2] (figure A1). The chapters of this book assess various artistic ladders used by Remizov: subjective games with time and space (chapter 2), synesthesia (chapter 3), supernatural possession (chapters 4 and 5), and, finally, shamanism (chapter 6). These have a number of rungs in common—in particular, the goal of synthesis, or at least that of the interchangeability of word and image—a natural direction for the kind of mythopoetics that comes out of Remizov's stylistic evolution (chapter 1).

Unable to fit his creative élan entirely within the bounds of the visual or literary, Remizov experimented with graphic art, eventually inventing a new genre of handwritten, illustrated albums that mix india-ink and watercolor drawings with collages and texts. While over a period of some fifty years Remizov worked in a variety of visual genres and attained impressive proficiency in many, only the albums allowed him to fulfill his capacity for both drawing and writing.[3] Between 1932 and 1949 he made hundreds of them, mostly for sale.[4] The albums defy the standard classification of works into verbal or visual; their author ceases to be exclusively a writer, but remains more than a graphic artist. And although Remizov called these objects "illustrated albums," most of their images do not illustrate in any conventional sense, entering instead into more complex relationships with the text, at times even supplanting it as the vehicle of the narrative. The albums from the early thirties consist of calligraphic texts and pasted-in india-ink and colored pencil drawings,

many dating from the 1920s. From the midthirties onward Remizov began to incorporate watercolors and paper collages glued from scraps of colored paper and foil, with decorative overdrawing in india ink. The postwar albums' appearance changed considerably, as the text gave way to pictographic drawings that assumed a dual semantic function.

Remizov's later favoring of the visual, expressed by his move toward a virtually complete substitution of image for text in the postwar albums, culminated during his last decade, when he would regularly draw the stories before writing out their texts.[5] Given Remizov's staggering visual output (by 1937, after just five years of album production, he already counted over two thousand drawings), one wonders about the impetus behind such intense involvement with an artistic medium other than his primary one. A contemporary and correspondent, the Russian religious philosopher Ivan Il'in inadvertently offers some clues into the writer's gargantuan graphic efforts. In an insightful essay about Remizov's "creative act," Il'in claims that the author based his literary images on his dreams—whether nocturnal or diurnal.[6] Remizov, in his view, "transposed" these dream images onto the printed page without much critical alteration, showing his "docility" and "acquiescence" to their power, and thus compromising his "authorial will" (306–7). Il'in contrasts this apparent "servility" to imagination (the stuff of content) with the total "masterly" control Remizov exercised over his writing (the stuff of form), as he tirelessly revised his texts with the precision of a "stern jeweler" (320–21). Leaving aside the philosopher's contentious conclusions, I would like to emphasize the rift he so perceptively identifies between Remizov's often fantastical content and his always meticulous writing style. According to Il'in, the only exception to the "*willful formalism*"[7] of Remizov's style is his literary enactment of the holy fool persona (*literaturnoe iurodsvovanie*), a guise the writer assumed willingly and frequently. This element of play and subversion is key in helping us understand why a writer who took his vocation very seriously would expend so much creative energy on another art form. As evidenced from his (in)famous self-presentation as the scribe of the Ape Tsar Asyka, a figment of his creative imagination, Remizov's drawing flourished as a playful function of life-creation (*zhiznetvorchestvo*). Vladislav Khodasevich described *zhiznetvorchestvo* as a byproduct of the symbolists' reluctance to distinguish the boundaries between the events of real life and actual creation, and their search for "the philosopher's stone of art," the "amalgamation of life and creation."[8]

The visual medium offered Remizov a new mode of expression, unburdened by the gravitas of his enviable writer work ethic. Exterior to his will to "sort . . . [and] . . . thread" his words,[9] and his explicit rejection of automatic writing as art,[10] it provided just the right formal outlet for his unrestrained content. When Remizov made his official entrance onto the fine arts scene in Nikolai

FIGURE A1 *The Legend of Solomon and Kitovrast* (*Legenda o Solomone i Kitovraste*), Alexei Remizov, 1937. India ink on paper, 112 x 73 mm. Guerra Collection. Copyright René Guerra.

Kul'bin's 1910 Triangle exhibition, he did so as an amateur, an ingenue, a writer dabbling in visual arts. As such, he was under no obligation to effect professional, "masterly," and "*willful formalism.*" On the contrary, the outsider, neoprimitivist ethos then fashionable in the visual arts tempted the newcomer to surrender his expressive will to a "compliant surfing in the ocean of fantasy and dreaming,"[11] to preserve and to foster his natural artlessness.[12] Remizov's early experiences with drawing charters on behalf of the Ape Tsar Asyka, and with providing childlike illustrations for his texts, gave him a taste of creation free from any presumed demand for technical mastery. In just a few years the hardships of the Revolution and the Civil War would lead Remizov to resort to drawing as the only viable means of uninhibited artistic expression,[13] and by 1928, he would communicate his narrative in visual form prior to writing it out, letting loose his fantastic images before setting his dream into the "verbal icon-cover" (*slovesnaia riza*) cast by a "stern jeweler."[14] When circumstances finally led Remizov to the production of illustrated albums, this practice of drawing as an indispensable initial stage of the creative process gradually solidified into a parallel mode of artistic operation. By the time he arrived at the pictographs of the early 1950s, Remizov's search for the best way to express his dream-infused thoughts was over: he was functioning both as a graphic artist and as a writer. This later period of conscious self-identification as a writer-draftsman (*pisatel'-risoval'shchik*) or writer-artist (*pisatel'-khudozhnik*) is outside the scope of the present investigation. My goal here is to trace and analyze Remizov's discovery of drawing as an art *form* optimally suited to the "stream of images pouring out of the unconscious"[15] that was his *content.* The albums I examine are all from the tumultuous period of Remizov's transition between media, during the second half of the 1930s.

This book is also a case study of a modernist who provided a model of synthetic art without the accompaniment of the almost ubiquitous fanfare of a manifesto or substantial theoretical grounding of any sort. Remizov simply extended his creative means across two art forms without surrendering any of the significance that words had for him. Moved by the "inner necessity" of expression,[16] he added a visual dimension to his work. Recognizing this dimension as an integral part of Remizov's oeuvre allows us to deepen our understanding of his role within Russian modernism. He then emerges not as an eccentric wordsmith who passed on the intricacies of colloquial narrative (*skaz*) to a generation of young Soviet writers, but as a successful heir to the long Russian tradition of attempts to synthesize the verbal and the visual, from the medieval period to futurism. What is more, after the death of Vladimir Mayakovsky in 1930, Remizov was the only remaining Russian artist to persist in the symbolist and futurist quest for synthetism, and in the ambition to dismantle Gutenberg's legacy through alternative, nontypographic methods of

book-making. Gerald Janecek ends his comprehensive study on the innovative printing practices of the Russian avant-garde at 1930, the year of Mayakovksy's death (Janecek 1984, 3). Remizov practiced his unique genre, which combined features of medieval codices, the writer's illustrated manuscript, the graphic novel, and the artist's book (*livre d'artiste*), from the 1930s through the early 1950s. This fact alters our current understanding of the scope of Russian avant-garde book experimentation and defers its end-date by another two decades.

Above and beyond their art-historical significance, his albums are time capsules waiting to be unlocked. The extent of Remizov's ties with major twentieth-century cultural figures is remarkable; with their wealth of references, the albums serve as a primary source, full of new detail about the modernist writer and his acquaintances.[17] Entering the busy St. Petersburg art scene in 1905, Remizov soon found a place among the symbolists, establishing himself at the forefront of literary experimentation.[18] In the next decade he came into close contact with a group of young futurists—David Burliuk, Elena Guro, Vasily Kamensky, Velimir Khlebnikov, and Alexei Kruchonykh—who shared his interest in linguistics and primitive art. During his exile, which began in 1921, he not only remained at the center of the Russian artistic community, but also was able to transcend its necessarily limited boundaries.[19] Plentiful translations of his prose had already prepared his move into the larger, European, aesthetic arena, allowing Remizov to join the *Sturm* circle in Berlin and, later, that of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* in Paris.[20] Among his friends and acquaintances of the émigré years were the existentialist thinker Lev Shestov; the artists Ivan Punin, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, Mikhail Larionov, Vasily Kandinsky, Kurt Schwitters, and Pablo Picasso; and the fellow scribes André Breton, Paul Éluard, and René Char. Because of the impressive chronological and thematic reach of Remizov's art, which spans a period of some fifty years and the space of three countries, his illustrated albums are laden with particulars of considerable interest to students of modernist culture, art historians, and literary scholars. What I offer in this book is only the first of the detailed, genuinely interdisciplinary investigations that the majority of the albums still await.

Why has so much time elapsed since Remizov's death in 1957 without a comprehensive examination of these albums?[21] The most obvious explanation is their inaccessibility. Produced in editions of one, the albums have followed the tendency of old manuscripts to disappear into private hands, with all the consequent difficulties of access.[22] As the original collectors passed away and the albums changed owners, fewer and fewer people were even aware of their existence. When the poet Alexis Rannit and Avril Pyman, a scholar of Russian symbolism who knew Remizov personally, published the first illustrated critical introductions to his graphic work (in 1979 and 1980, respectively),[23]

the albums were unknown even to researchers of Russian book culture.[24] The situation improved somewhat after 1985, when the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College displayed a dozen of Remizov's illustrated albums from the Thomas P. Whitney Collection. The Pushkin House literary institute in St. Petersburg followed suit in 1992, with an anniversary retrospective of his graphics and artifacts.[25] The catalogs that accompanied these two exhibitions included survey articles on Remizov's graphic art written by Greta Slobin and A. M. Gracheva, specialists in his fiction.[26] Thanks to the Amherst catalog, which also contained multiple color reproductions from the 1930s albums, as well as to several pioneering articles tackling Remizov's calligraphic–synesthetic paradigm, by the mid-1990s his graphic work was no longer the best-kept secret in the field.[27] Yet there are still no close readings of his seminal illustrated albums from the 1930s, and, as far as I am aware, Gracheva's essay on Remizov's 1948 album *The Circle of Happiness* (*Krug schast'ia*) is the only in-depth study of the later material.[28]

I believe that the main reason for such a dearth, aside from the remaining difficulties of access, is the intrinsic liminality of the illustrated albums, which lie just beyond the purview of both the history of art and Russian literary studies. Too textually oriented for art historians, Remizov's illustrated albums have been for the most part ignored by literary scholars, who, until recently, have avoided launching themselves into art-historical projects. For the student of literature, Remizov is an important Russian writer whose daring stylistic innovations place him alongside such influential symbolists as Alexander Blok, Fyodor Sologub, and Andrei Bely. Although several Slavists have occupied themselves with related topics such as Remizov's violations of stylistic norms in his books,[29] his self-mythologizing,[30] and even his relationship with the French surrealists,[31] his visual art remains on the periphery of literary scholarship and is cited mainly for illustrative purposes. Yet this very reason for the lack of work on Remizov's visual art—its verbal/visual liminality—suggests a possible approach to it.[32] By accepting his art's liminal character we can examine the albums for what they are—remarkable objects of visual and literary culture that exist on the boundary between eccentric behavior and universal art.

This book has three objectives. First, using the methodology of art history and literary studies, I will introduce Remizov's illustrated albums to an audience that up until now has had very few opportunities to appreciate them. Easily rising above the typical dilettantism of writers who also draw, Remizov invested his albums with a creative intensity usually reserved for the primary means of expression. The albums' impressive pictorial skill makes for memorable aesthetic encounters: the pages of the finest of these albums display coloristic subtlety worthy of medieval miniatures, combined with linear precision in the best tradition of twentieth-century graphics. This view

is supported by the reaction of Remizov's artist-peers, who bought, collected, and published his drawings.[33]

Second, this volume aims to provide a new theoretical framework for evaluating Remizov's writings. By keeping in mind the continuum of his artistic activities, his striving for synthetism, and his intentionally liminal self-identification as a writer-draftsman, we can gain a deeper insight into his fiction—into its germination and evolution. Some of Remiov's texts first appeared as albums, such as *Tales from the Fourth Dimension* (*Récits de la quatrième dimention* [sic]), 1937. Others changed considerably through their presentation in the albums: *Solomoniia,* in three versions, the first from 1934 and two more from 1935; and *Maroun,* 1938. In the case of the writings that also exist in visual versions, only when readers of texts become viewers of images are the contours of the artist's dream reality fully laid bare.

Third, on a more general level, I hope that this case study will advance our understanding of the type of art that emerges out of modernism's propensity for crossing boundaries, relocating centers, and emphasizing the liminal. The illustrated albums reveal a delicate mechanism behind Remizov's characteristically modernist bifurcation, and their study may ultimately suggest new ways to approach works by other artists of this period.

I begin with a biographical introduction (chapter 1) that relates the threshold character of Remizov's illustrated albums to the circumstances of his life. There I examine his lifelong quest to perfect the role of an eccentric, an inhabitant of a peripheral space, and reveal his strategies for situating himself between two art forms in his album work. Remizov's artistic surroundings in Russia and abroad, the early life experiences that led to this dual expression, and the modernist games of his adulthood suggest that the marginal quality of the illustrated albums reflects their maker's own geographical, temporal, and social liminality. The very fact that the genre of the illustrated album came into being while Remizov, a Russian writer, was living in France is symptomatic of the generally transcultural quality in his work.

Chapter 2 takes up the subject of Remizov's formation as an author of the illustrated album whose graphic style developed through his involvement with the art of book-making. When he began to produce the illustrated albums in the early thirties, Remizov did so on the heels of typographic experimentation by symbolist aesthetes and futurist book innovators motivated by a shared anti-Gutenberg sentiment. Remizov, who was well versed in both calligraphy and paleography, used a number of medieval formal elements and practices in order to make his albums comparable to the manuscripts of past centuries. But while this may suggest a strictly bibliophile motivation behind his album-making, the involuted nature of Remizov's albums, and his construction of a mythical

alter ego as a manuscript scribe in his fiction, point to the modernist nature of his project, a project that should rightfully be seen in the context of Russian avant-garde book experimentation.

The metonymical relationship between the arts is the subject of the third chapter, where I show how Remizov carries the synesthetic principle from content to form in the 1938 album *Maroun,* dedicated to the memory of his friend Alexander Blok. This case study demonstrates the possibility of an organic connection between the verbal and visual arts. I argue that by combining different art forms in *Maroun,* Remizov resolved a riddle that occupied his symbolist colleagues a quarter of a century before and was intermittently tackled by futurist poets and artists.

The fourth chapter examines the evolution of Remizov's 1928 tale *Solomoniia,* treated in six conventional print publications and three illustrated albums over a period of more than twenty years. To create the desired focus for each illustrated album, Remizov transformed his mesmerizing tale of phallic possession through variations in the albums' format. For instance, the explicitly erotic tone of a 1935 album version with French text makes it an intentional contribution to the surrealists' investigation of hysteria and libertinism. The following, fifth, chapter explains how Remizov infused the seventeenth-century narrative "The Tale About the Possessed Woman Solomoniia" ("Povest' o besnovatoi zhene Solomonii") with autobiographical detail, making it into his own metafictional "Solomoniia," a text that ponders the balance of guilt and love in his marriage to Serafima Pavlovna Remizova-Dovgello. Establishing the autobiographical core of the story is particularly important because it allows us to reconsider its place among the texts that compose the seminal late cycle "Legends Through the Ages" ("Legendy v vekakh").

Using the example of the 1940 album *Siberian Tale* (*Sibirskii skaz*), the last chapter focuses on Remizov's absorption of the mythopoetics and imagery of shamanism into his life and art. The album exemplifies his archetypal reliance on multiple frames of reference, an extension of the album's formal and contextual liminality. And *Siberian Tale* came into existence against the background of the futurist and surrealist interest in ethnography, its ample use of regional mythologies allows it to escape the restrictive but common contemporaneous fixation on the metaphors of shamanism. This chapter also reconstructs an attempted late-1930s collaboration between Remizov and Kandinsky that was linked to *Siberian Tale* thematically, through shamanism. A different album that resulted from this project, the 1937 *Tales from the Fourth Dimension* mentioned previously, compiles the fifteen Remizov tales inspired by Siberian shamanism that Kandinsky had already illustrated, although never published, in the early 1920s. Characteristically, *Tales* is also based on multiple

frames of reference: the oneiric encoding of the album's ink and watercolor drawings owes as much to surrealist discourse on dream illustration as to Kandinsky's informed adaptation of Siberian folklore. The psychological effect of Remizov's ensuing (and somewhat one-sided) competition with one of the greatest painters of the century cannot be overestimated—it completely changed Remizov's subsequent drawing practice, leading him to acknowledge his own ability as a visual artist.

The conclusion describes the text-to-image dynamic revealed by a chronological overview of the extant albums. This dynamic, I argue, elucidates the role of the 1930s illustrated albums as a threshold in Remizov's oeuvre. To borrow Remizov's own metaphor, my book is intended to serve as a ladder from which we may gain a vantage point on his symbolic crossing of this threshold into the world of genuinely synthetic art.

OVERLEAF: FIGURE A2 Photograph of Remizov with his calligraphic signature from *Maroun,* Alexei Remizov, 1938. Houghton Library, Harvard University.