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0521418968 - Nikolai Zabolotsky: Play for Mortal Stakes

Darra Goldstein

Excerpt

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Introduction

The lives of Russian poets are like the lives of saints, legendary but unenviable. Too many gifted voices have been silenced; too many altered through censorship, criticism, and imprisonment. Faced with this historical injustice, scholars have set out to resurrect work which might otherwise have been lost, and now a number of poets have a broader readership than they enjoyed in their lifetimes. Some have been hailed as martyrs, others cast as prophets. Yet one of the great literary figures of this century, Nikolai Zabolotsky, is still hardly known beyond the circles of the Russian intelligentsia.

If the most important reason for our interest in poets is the quality of their work, then in Zabolotsky's case there exists a secondary reason for our concern: in certain ways, he embodies the conflicts of twentieth-century Russian society. Zabolotsky's poetry suggests the deep ambiguity of his age. Straddling as it does the worlds of both Russian and Soviet experience, his art resists easy classification. Zabolotsky was both the last link in the Russian Futurist tradition¹ and the first significant poet to come of age in the Soviet period.

Zabolotsky never fitted easily into any literary grouping. In the cultural circles of Petrograd, he appeared as a parvenu, a country boy who might well have languished in the provinces had the Revolution not occurred. Zabolotsky was grateful for all the Revolution had provided him. Even so, he never performed the rôle of political mouthpiece, unlike others similarly obliged. Nor did he turn dissident when the same mechanism that once had buoyed him sought to drown him. Less for reasons of calculation than because of his nature,

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Zabolotsky pursued poetry according to his own, highly personal lights.

Zabolotsky's name should be familiar for his ordeals alone. Instead, his reputation has suffered because he lacked the historical good fortune to die young. Though Zabolotsky did die prematurely, at age fifty-five, his death was caused neither by his own hand nor at the hands of the security organs. Rather he died of a heart attack, and this prosaic demise did nothing to enhance his reputation as a poet either in the West or in the Soviet Union. No matter that he had been officially castigated for his poem on collectivization, "The Triumph of Agriculture." No matter that he had spent eight years in labor camps and exile. The fact remains that Zabolotsky ended his life as a poet in good standing with the State, a fact that left him vulnerable to attack from another quarter – those readers who judge the merit of a poet not by his verse, but solely the circumstances of his life. This is a tradition of sorts in Russian literature; we seek, for example, to recreate and savor the brief romantic lives of the nineteenth-century poets Aleksandr Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov, who may loom larger in our imaginations for their tragic deaths in duels than they would had they died in their sleep. Writing of the nineteenth-century poet Dmitri Venevitinov, the critic Yury Tynyanov commented that "Venevitinov, a complex and curious poet, died at twenty-two, and ever since, he has been remembered for one thing only – that he died at twenty-two."² Far too often it is the voice of the martyr, not that of the poet, that speaks, and so the poet comes to be revered for his biography, not for his verse. This has been the unfortunate case even with such dazzling poets as Osip Mandelstam, Marina Tsvetaeva, Anna Akhmatova, and Boris Pasternak.³

Particularly in the case of Zabolotsky, the apparently simple facts of the poet's life do not begin to reveal the complexity of experience. The truth of Zabolotsky's art, as of his biography, lies behind his publicly perceived personae. We must then ask, can a modern Russian poet who has not been martyred hope to be known purely for his or her verse? Can the poet's voice ever be heard over the din of such times?

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Largely because Zabolotsky chose to conceal his fundamental self, he suffers from detractors on both the right and the left, both here and in his native land. Some critics chastise him for accepting honors from a government that persecuted his peers; others quibble not with his status at the end of his life but with the unconventional poetry of his youth. Either way, the essential poet is lost, even as the critics bolster their arguments by citing his work. Such polemic arises, in part, from the admittedly striking difference in style and tone between Zabolotsky's early and late verse. Critics persistently have felt the need to place themselves in one camp or another, favoring either the young or the mature Zabolotsky, and they seem reluctant to accept the evidence of a highly complex poet whose work does not yield to ready labelling. Because Zabolotsky's verse comprises no single lyric voice, it defies easy characterization. Indeed, the lofty, philosophical lyrics of his declining years may seem to contradict his early, modernist experiments.

Zabolotsky's work may be divided into three distinct periods: the daring experiments of his early work (1926–28); the visionary poems of his middle period (1929–1938); and the more conventionally philosophic verse of his post-imprisonment years (1946–1958). The relationships between these phases of his career are intricate but not obvious. Zabolotsky's 1929 volume of verse, *Stolbtsy* (*Scrolls*), a series of urban grotesques reflecting life in Leningrad of the NEP era, typifies his early phase. But after a period of transition, the later Zabolotsky abandoned the city for meditations upon the natural world and man's rôle in it. If Zabolotsky's early poems are Gogolian in sentiment, then his later verses recall a contemplative Tyutchev or Boratynsky. Precisely this discrepancy between the stages of Zabolotsky's career has led critics to speak of "the two Zabolotskys,"⁴ labelling him both a "modernist" and a "classicist," a "progressive" and a "conservative." The assumption is that, like two opposing ideologies, Zabolotsky's poetic periods can never be reconciled. And because the gap between Zabolotsky's middle and late periods

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indicates the eight years he spent in labor camp and exile, critics of all stripes have found useful ammunition in this biographical fact. At least one staunch Soviet scholar has concluded that Zabolotsky's years in the labor camps helped him to overcome the errors of his youthful ways,⁵ while Western researchers have tended to concentrate almost exclusively on Zabolotsky's early verse, contending that his internment forced him subsequently to compromise by resorting to more traditional verse. Neither view, however, satisfactorily explains Zabolotsky's stance or his place in Russian literature. While the historical events occurring during Zabolotsky's lifetime should not be excluded from consideration – after all, the Revolution provided opportunity for Zabolotsky, and his era shaped his poetic vision – the hard evidence of his poetry shows that despite the personal upheavals and the external changes in his verse, Zabolotsky's artistic consciousness remained consistent throughout his life.

There exist not two Zabolotskys, but one. Rather than simply attributing Zabolotsky's abandonment of modernism for classicism to the shock of years spent in the labor camps, we may perceive the development of Zabolotsky's poetry as a natural progression, the result of internal experience rather than external pressure. Zabolotsky's evolution as a poet was intrinsic, and even in his most mature poems one can still discern the whimsical futurist, just as the brooding classicist is already hovering over his early grotesques. The changes in Zabolotsky's verse signal his vitality as an artist, and if, as Tsvetaeva has written, the only way finally to comprehend a poet is to take his or her work in its entirety, for "creative work is continuity and gradualness,"⁶ then certainly Zabolotsky, perhaps more than others, needs to be read *in toto*. When Zabolotsky's *œuvre* is taken as a whole, the forms he chose to work in recede in importance as the overall integrity of his poetic vision becomes clear.

The poems Zabolotsky wrote in his middle or transitional period are especially useful for illuminating the entire body of his work. In particular, his three long dramatic poems of the thirties serve as a microcosm of his poetic world, encompassing

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the problems that interested him throughout his career. These poems, “*Torzhestvo zemledelii*” (“The Triumph of Agriculture,” 1929–1930), “*Bezumniy volk*” (“The Mad Wolf,” 1931), and “*Derev’ia*” (“The Trees,” 1933), demonstrate how Zabolotsky’s developing philosophy of man’s rôle in nature begins to enrich lyrics still marked by striking verbal experimentation. Ideas and styles clash head-on as a thematic battle is waged between the civilization imposed by man and the natural cycles of the universe. In a different sense, though, these poems represent a battleground where Zabolotsky’s own poetic struggles were waged; and they must be recognized as the turning-point between his early and later verses, the point where the “progressive” and the “conservative” meet. These poems provide a necessary link between all of Zabolotsky’s works, testifying to the existence of a single – though evolving – poetic consciousness.

What are the attributes of this consciousness? More than his contemporaries, Zabolotsky aimed at creating not simply a body of poems, but rather an entire poetic universe. While a single consciousness prevails in his poetry, it consists of many voices. The poet’s desire to perceive the world so intensely as to encompass it, in all of its varied manifestations, gives his verse an extraordinary vigor. Zabolotsky attempts to express the nature of the entire universe, to show the vital connections among all things, those both seen and merely felt. In effect, Zabolotsky seeks to map the universe, and his verse becomes a writing of the world, its poetic representation. In this way his vision constitutes a kind of cosmography.

Zabolotsky was fascinated by the variety of the universe, and he sought to merge his own consciousness with creation by putting all that he perceived into his verse. Thus his cosmography embraces many different eras and traditions, ranging from Antiquity into the future, from Russian folklore to Eastern religious beliefs. Zabolotsky perceived the matrix of the universe as protean, and the world he creates is fluid, in continual motion, as expressed by his metaphor of metamorphosis. This unified view of existence reflects not only the poet’s own cosmic orientation, but also the tendency of his age.

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In the wake of Einstein's discoveries, scientists were rethinking their conceptions of the universe; and the avant-garde artists in Russia, to whose ideas Zabolotsky's are linked, were quick to respond with their own creative imaginings. Like other visionaries, Zabolotsky looked beyond his own narrow ken as a provincial Russian to try to embrace the totality of experience.

In doing so, Zabolotsky drew from sources as diverse as literature and science, history and art. His poetry is informed by an awareness of varying modes of thought and expression. In this respect Zabolotsky's long poems take on particular importance, for their very form indicates the poet's attempt to find a vehicle large enough to encompass his new cosmography, one that would allow for its heterogeneity and complexity. Filtered through Zabolotsky's artistic consciousness, different eras and ideas reverberate throughout his verse. Here the attentive reader will find philosophers (Grigory Skovoroda and Nikolai Fyodorov), scientists (Konstantin Tsiolkovsky and Vladimir Vernadsky), poets (Gavriil Derzhavin, Aleksandr Pushkin, and Velimir Khlebnikov), and painters (Pavel Filonov and Kazimir Malevich), whose plangent voices ultimately come together to form, in Zabolotsky's words, "a single harmonious chorus." Yet the multi-voiced chorus echoing throughout Zabolotsky's poetry in no way diminishes the power of the poet's own voice, which remains distinct.

To explore the formation and evolution of the poet's voice, this book takes as its model Zabolotsky's own plastic approach. Thus, textual analysis is not the sole criterion for determining the characteristics of Zabolotsky's verse. Instead, the many sources that inspired Zabolotsky will be explored in order to demonstrate just how far Zabolotsky's ambitions extend. This book offers an open approach to Zabolotsky's texts, one which will reveal the comprehensive nature of the poet's vision without losing sight of the principal consciousness at the heart of all his work.

Finally, the extraordinary circumstances of Zabolotsky's life – his singular experience as a poet who actually survived the labor camps to make a comeback in a hostile environment –

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compel us to place this analysis against the background of his biography, without distracting us from the primary pursuit of his poetry. His biography reveals both the intellectual and emotional encounters that he syncretized in his verse. Zabolotsky's poetic universe embraces numerous systems of thought, like planets revolving around a sun that represents the core of his poetic vision. The many satellites of his system can help us to understand not only the poet, but also the epoch in which he lived.

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CHAPTER I

Emergence

Motion and moment always in process of renewal.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

When Nikolai Zabolotsky arrived in Petrograd in August, 1921, he found the city in a state of famine, just barely alive. Severe cold and the deprivations of the Civil War years had taken their toll, and the streets were deserted. Attrition from disease, starvation and exhaustion added to the wartime casualties.¹ Yet in this austere environment of privation and despair, beauty could be discerned, a certain purity of thought attained. The habitual eye was challenged by the city's desolation. The air itself seemed rarefied: objects stood out vividly and sharply defined. No blurred edges softened the scene. The city was stark, and its starkness freed the imagination from the confines of accustomed perception. Commonplace objects suddenly appeared as things in themselves, no longer defined primarily by their use or by the observer's expectations. These new perceptions, fresh and original, seemed full of sudden beauty and, potentially, truth.² But they also carried the risk of delusion. The Petrograd atmosphere was ripe for hallucination, but, as demonstrated by Zabolotsky's first volume of verse, *Stolbtsy* (*Scrolls*, 1929), "hallucinations"³ (like dreams) may reveal underlying truths.

When Zabolotsky arrived in Petrograd, his individual idiom was just beginning to develop. He had been drawn to the city because of its close ties with Russian literature: the urban grotesques of Dostoyevsky, Bely, and especially Gogol moved him and contributed to his own, later forms of grotesque. Petrograd's image as a center of science attracted him, too;

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innovations in science often seemed to spur innovations in artistic life. Petrograd commanded Zabolotsky's attention, engaging his talent as never before, and Zabolotsky adopted this city of heightened sensations as his own.

Like the great Futurist poets Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky before him, Zabolotsky came to urban life unschooled in cosmopolitan ways and distant from the cultural traditions of the Acmeists or Symbolists. He had only just begun to read Blok, Balmont, and Akhmatova and was provoked by the literary debates of the previous decade, when the Acmeists, with their demand for a new poetic realism expressed in concrete images and well-defined lines, opposed the dominant Symbolist aesthetic of the word as a vessel of mystical experience. On Petrograd's half-deserted streets, Zabolotsky felt the surge of literary activity around him. Numerous groups were springing up throughout the city, each claiming ascendancy over the rest in representing true revolutionary literature. Serious discussions were held on the importance of literature in the new society.⁴ The intensity of the Petrograd intellectual life, heightened by the harsh living conditions, exhilarated Zabolotsky and impelled him to devote himself once and for all to poetry, relinquishing earlier impulses toward a career in science. In the barrenness of a student dormitory, Zabolotsky began to write in earnest, "imitating now Mayakovsky, now Blok, now Yesenin."⁵ Outside the dormitory walls lay the great city of Petrograd which had become "so fantastic, so gruesomely unreal . . . that the borderline between the real and the unreal seemed to be obliterated . . . life had indeed become 'stranger than fiction.'"⁶ It was this fantastic world which Zabolotsky had to experience before he could find his own poetic voice. And perhaps only as a provincial outsider, a newcomer to the city, could Zabolotsky see the reality behind the majestic mask of Petrograd.

EARLY YEARS

Nikolai Alekseyevich Zabolotsky was born on a farm outside the city of Kazan on May 7, 1903 (April 24, old style), the first

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1 Zabolotsky with his parents, Lidiya Andreyevna and Aleksei Agafonovich, 1904

of six children. His mother, Lidiya Andreyevna Dyakonova, a former schoolteacher, harbored revolutionary sympathies and was frustrated by her lot as mother and housewife in a tiny provincial town, “fated to die a slow spiritual death.”⁷ She