



Параболы
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In Honor of John E. Malmstad

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John Malmstad (a.k.a. Dzhon Mal'mstad) is one of few American-born Slavists whose work is widely known both in Russia and the West. As translator, editor, commentator, and interpreter, he has fundamentally influenced our understanding of Russian Silver-Age culture, be it poetry, the novel, visual art, or ballet. Moreover, he has done this for a range of audiences, from the intellectually adventurous English-speaking reader (or viewer) to the most informed specialist.

In thinking about John's scholarship, I am reminded of a comment by Mikhail Gershenzon that John once brought to my attention.¹ Born about three decades after Pushkin's death, Gershenzon felt that his was the last generation with a "living" relationship to the age of Pushkin. That is to say: while he and his contemporaries had not met the leading figures, they knew people who had known them. After Gershenzon's age cohort passed from the scene, all knowledge about Pushkin's day would come from books, and a certain natural familiarity with the era would inevitably be lost. Gershenzon treasured eyewitness accounts, even if they concerned only trifles, but he also recognized that historical distance could in some ways compensate for its absence. For Gershenzon, of course, the excitement of working on Pushkin's age lay not simply in meeting people who had actually seen Pushkin or known his longer-lived friends, but in the discovery of unknown documents that clarified the period in a way that many of the participants themselves had not been aware.

This same combination of (relative) historical proximity and the rich possibility of subsequent contextualization may explain John's fascination with and devotion to the culture of Russia's Silver Age. Some of that inquisitive-

1 In "Stat'ia dlia odnodnevnoi gazety 'Pushkin'", published in M.O. Gershenzon. *Stat'i o Pushkine* (Leningrad, 1926), pp. 111–112.

ness was surely fostered by his teacher and dissertation advisor Nina Berberova. It was furthered by the opportunity, still rare in those years, to spend a year researching his dissertation in Leningrad. There he not only had the good fortune of being assigned Dmitri Maksimov as his official advisor; he also spent time with less official survivors of that earlier era, such as Nadezhda Mandel'shtam.² Some years later, while preparing his pioneering edition and biography of Kuzmin, John interviewed numerous émigrés who remembered the man and the period, including the aged Igor' Stravinsky (who recalled Kuzmin as a superlative pianist). In connection with his studies of Russian Symbolism, John became a close friend of Viacheslav Ivanov's children; Ivanov's daughter even entrusted him with the task of editing her memoirs, a crucial – and, thanks to John's loving attention, carefully annotated – scholarly resource.³

As a graduate student, I recall being amazed by the detail with which John could reconstruct the context of individual poems. It was not simply the ability to retain the names and biographies of the first-, second- and even third-rate poets of the era. It had more to do with the knowledge of who had spoken with whom, who would have known what, and which events transpired on which day. I had the impression that, should a time machine miraculously transport him to pre-revolutionary Petersburg, John would dust off his pants, straighten his tie, and head straight off to Ivanov's tower apartment (assuming, of course, that it was a Wednesday and that the hour was sufficiently late). In the classroom, this detailed cultural knowledge was complemented by meticulous close readings of individual poems, which were always at the center of his seminars and which again call to mind Gershenzon, in particular his advocacy of "slow reading".⁴

2 See his memoirs on the subject: John Malmstad, "Remembering 'Mrs. M.'", *Slavic Review*. Vol. 61, no. 4 (October 2002), pp. 489–494.

3 Lidia Ivanova. *Vospominaniia. Kinga ob ottse* (Paris, 1990). The book was republished in a much larger print run in Moscow in 1992.

4 What Gershenzon says about his readings of Pushkin should be applied to John's work on the lyric poetry of Gershenzon's age: "И то новое, о чем я дальше хочу рассказать, узнал я путем *медленного чтения*, вглядываясь в стих, часто даже в отдельное слово. В Пушкине есть места, 'куда еще не ступала нога человеческая', места трудно доступные и неведомые. Виною в том не его темнота, а всеобщий навык читать 'поверхам', поверхностно."

The use of dedications in lyric poetry has long bewildered me; one senses that there is a rich but lost history that would allow us to understand why certain poems were dedicated to certain people. The memoir literature occasionally throws light on such questions, but more often than not they remain unexplained, creating for today's reader a frustrating sense of interpretive incompleteness. I remember John leading a class on Annensky (one of his favorite poets, about whom he should publish more!), and discussing the poem "Moia toska". While I was struggling just to make sense of the most basic questions, John felt completely at home with the poem, elucidating numerous fine points. He concluded his virtuoso analysis by noting the dedication to Kuzmin and then considering the types of discussions that Kuzmin and Annensky must have been engaged in. Yes, this was speculation, but speculation of the most informed and informative kind.

In the first decades of his career, John focused on poets whom the Soviet literary establishment considered marginal or even unmentionable. It is a tribute to the care and accuracy he lavished on these tasks that, when these writers suddenly became publishable (even fashionable!), his work was republished. At times new archival discoveries were incorporated, but his initial publications needed no reconceptualization; they were always sound and often remained authoritative. Indeed, it was impossible to write on these poets without first taking account of what John had already done. Looking at this same phenomenon another way, we should think how incomplete our knowledge of Belyi, Ivanov, Khodasevich, and Kuzmin would be if we lacked John's contributions.

At Columbia and then at Harvard (where he succeeded Kiril Taranovski as the authority on verse, albeit with a very different personal style and scholarly approach), John has left an indelible mark on the study of Russian poetry and on the Silver Age in general. His unexpectedly popular and now legendary undergraduate lecture course "Revolution and Reaction: The Rise and Fall of the Russian Avant-Garde" proved that this material could communicate to students of all subjects, assuming on their part only intellectual curiosity and diligence.

Но кто отважится пойти пешком, тот проникнет всюду и во всяком случае увидит много любопытного". From "Chtenie Pushkina", in *Stat'i o Pushkine*, p. 17.

His graduate seminars were a model of careful preparation. Decades later, I return to those notes with awe and gratitude.

It is a pleasure to join friends and colleagues in a collection of essays that celebrates John's achievements and anticipates many more.