

THE REAL PUSHKIN: THE REINVENTION OF RUSSIA'S NATIONAL POET BY THE FUTURISTS

Rann, James. *The Unlikely Futurist: Pushkin and the Invention of Originality in Russian Modernism*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020, 280 pp.

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James Rann's *The Unlikely Futurist* is in itself a cultural artifact of its time. Dedicated to the complicated and controversial relation of the Russian Futurists to Russia's most celebrated national poet Alexander Pushkin, Rann's book is generally about mechanisms of cultural cancellation, reevaluation, and (re)appropriation of the past. Today when more and more artists and other significant figures (contemporary ones and those belonging to former times) are often reassessed in light of emerging moral considerations and ethical norms, it is important to understand why one group of people may want to change dramatically their attitude to their ancestors. The case of the Russian Futurists is a perfect material for such a study, since the group is known for its scandalous behavior, their willingness to break away from the tradition, and their provocative statements about Russia's cultural past. For example, the manifesto "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste" famously proposed to "throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and so on and so forth from the steamship of Modernity" (p. 9). But as is often the case, the slogans are never quite as complex as the mindsets of the people who produce them. Such a performative way of rejecting the past is simultaneously an affirmation of its significance. Using this interesting controversy as a departure point, Rann sets out to explore the ways in which the Russian Futurists used, reused, dismissed and creatively approached Alexander Pushkin's legacy.

Rann's method consists in analyzing the Pushkinian motives and references in the works of three Futurist poets: Velimir Khlebnikov, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Aleksei Kruchenykh. As Rann himself explains, he prefers to focus on individual figures in order to show that the transition "between different temporalities and different artistic paradigms does not happen in abstract terms, but is implicated in the arcs of individual biographies" (p. 146). This approach allows Rann to demonstrate that the Futurists' relation to Pushkin was never as simple and one-sided as some of their public statements may suggest. The truth is that the Futurists never simply "threw away" Pushkin. Instead, they used his work and legacy to reimagine him, to create their own nuanced and complicated version of the poet. As Rann puts it, "the rejection of the past necessitates a reengagement with it" (p. 79).

Before moving on to see how Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky and Kruchenykh did this, Rann takes a moment to apply a set of classical structuralist notions to the general context of Russian modernism and the position that Pushkin had come to occupy in Russian culture at the beginning of the 20th century. Pushkin's figure as a person and as a poet is thus studied in terms of such categories as myth, religion, time, order,



chaos, the sacred and the secular. Rann's use of these familiar concepts is never too formal and is therefore illuminating and not tiring. Besides, they help to understand that Pushkin's public image essentially was (and still is) a mix of mythological fame, godlike worshiping, exaggerated appreciation, and almost religious awe. Writers like Fyodor Dostoevsky contributed their share to the promotion of the Pushkinian myth which eventually led to his involvement into national and state-building discourses. And while Dostoevsky's appreciation of Pushkin might have been genuine, the outcome of this abundant use of the poet in various official contexts is that his image was distorted and he himself was turned into a kind of petrified master signifier, an ideological tool. Part of the Futurists' protest was, therefore, not to dismiss Pushkin himself, but to challenge the public perception of him. To shake off the dust of clichés and unimaginative commonplace admiration from his effigy.

From this perspective, the Futurists' engagement with Pushkin can be seen as part of their own artistic project as well as their anxiety. Almost all Futurists shared an eager striving for a radical utopian renovation of culture. As Rann puts it, "the Futurists bequeathed not just poetry, but also a perspective, a way of looking at the culture that promoted self-confident hostility to convention, sincere passion for novelty, and unwavering faith in the power of art" (p. 244). Interestingly, the same can be said about Pushkin himself, whose poetry and use of the Russian language was perhaps just as innovating as the Futurists' experiments. So, it is not surprising that when the Futurist poets make use of Pushkin they focus on themes and aspects of his oeuvre that highlight their own agenda. For Khlebnikov it was the theme of the prophet, for Mayakovsky — the metaphor of the monument, and for Kruchenykh — language itself.

Rann's method of comparative analysis whereby two objects of study highlight one another provides a deep insight into Russian cultural configuration. It brings out the fact that there is more in common between the Futurists and Pushkin than it might seem at face value. Pushkin's place in Russia is quite interesting, especially if his cultural function is compared to similar positions in other countries. Pushkin's significance corresponds to that of Shakespeare in English culture, but whereas Shakespeare lived before what might be called modernity, Pushkin almost witnessed the beginning of modernism. If he hadn't been killed in a duel in 1837, he might have lived long enough to be a contemporary of Russia's most radical reformer Vladimir Lenin who was born in 1870. It is indeed extraordinary that it took only sixty years to canonize Pushkin and turn him into a national superhero, a lifeless statue petrified by fame. So, as Rann brilliantly shows, it is natural that Mayakovsky, speaking of Pushkin in his "Jubilee Poem", is striving against this mumification of a living person. By doing so, as Rann argues, Mayakovsky distances Pushkin "from appropriation by the state [...] both in order to counteract the deadening effects of canonization and to point to Pushkin's affinities with the Futurists' own rebellious identity" (p. 161). Mayakovsky expresses the same kind of sentiment about Lenin by highlighting his humanity and describing him as a living person. Yet, despite all his efforts, Mayakovsky was appropriated and canonized by the Soviet regime in the similar way Pushkin was, and even Lenin became a silent servant of Stalinism.

The sad similarities between Pushkin and Mayakovsky's biographies — their young tragic deaths and powerful exuberant poetic output — reveal interesting structures and patterns underlying Russian history. Rann identifies one such prin-

ciple in a concluding chapter saying that “as long as there are Pushkins, there will always be Futurists” (p. 254). This intriguing idea refers to the specific configuration of Russian cultural dynamics. For the past three hundred years Russia has been changed and remade at least three times: by the reforms of Peter I, by the Bolshevik Revolution, and by the collapse of the USSR. Each time the country has tried to breed a new consciousness as well as to break away from the preceding tradition. As such Russian culture may be described by a concept proposed by the Czech literary scholar Vladimír Macura as a revivalist type of culture. A characteristic feature of such a configuration is that the development of cultural structures takes place in the form of quick and powerful periods of excessive creative activity followed by phases of stillness and even stagnation. Russian poets, as Rann’s book suggests, have often been put into circumstances where they had to revive or reinvent the tradition hampered and distorted by historical situation (mainly by the actions of the state). Mayakovsky had to reimagine Pushkin just the way we have to reimagine him today, since — as has been stated a number of times now — the official image of Mayakovsky as a strong, self-confident and brave man barely reflects the kind of emotional tumult and anxiety that he had to fight. This is why the the Futurists’ project of exposing “the hollowness of the Pushkinian idol” was continued by underground artists belonging to the movement known as conceptualism that emerged in late 1970’s–early 1990’s (p. 252). As Rann puts it, “the historical avant-garde and the Soviet postmodernisms have a common enemy in unthinking convention and automatized language” (ibid.)

Rann’s effective conclusion, highlighting a transition between Russian modernism and postmodernism, is yet another merit of the book. It provides the reader with a sense of understanding suggesting the ways in which Russian writers of various epochs and styles are connected with each other. The fragmentation of Russian literary and cultural history is perhaps one of the bigger challenges that Russian scholarship has to face. Indeed, there are so many versions of Pushkin that it might be difficult to see the real person behind the mosaic of Pushkinian images. A considerable part of that collage is the version of Pushkin that was created in the émigré circles. For example, Pushkin was a very important author for Vladimir Nabokov, another pinnacle of Russian modernism, although of a completely different brand than Mayakovsky. Yet, the two authors are brought together through their creative engagement with Pushkin’s legacy, and it is thanks to Rann’s study that such unexpected connections can appear to the reader.

