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THE ISLANDERS POETRY AND POLEMICS IN PETROGRAD OF THE 1920s

When viewed from the vantage point of the 1920s, the group Islanders (Ostrovitjane) occupies a central place in the evolution of the postrevolutionary poetic avant-garde of Petrograd. Formed in July of 1921 by several promising young poets, the group flourished for a short while before disappearing in the chaotic literary world of Petrograd. Despite the fact that several of the group's members, including Nikolaj Tixonov (1896–1979), Konstantin Vaginov (1899–1934), Vsevolod Roždestvenskij (1895–1977) and Elizaveta Polonskaja (1890–1969), all had significant careers in Soviet literature, the Islanders have been all but forgotten by literary historians of the early years of Soviet poetry. In fact, no references to the group can be found in any of the standard histories or encyclopedias, Soviet or Western, of the period.¹ As part of the rediscovery of the cultural legacy of twentieth-century Russia now occurring in the Soviet Union, a reconsideration of the Islander's history, its reception by contemporary critics, and its role in the literary polemics of the 1920s is surely in order. The present publication represents the first attempt to gather and evaluate all the available information about this little known episode from the literary history of the early 1920s.

Organized in the summer of 1921, the Islanders were a symptom of the general rebirth of literature that followed the massive dislocations of Russian life during the Civil War and War Communism.² 1921 was a year of tragic losses and of hopeful beginnings: the brutal suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion and the beginning of the relative cultural and economic freedom of the NEP; the shocking and demoralizing deaths of Aleksandr Blok and Nikolaj Gumilev and the birth of the first Soviet "thick" journal, *Red Virgin Soil* (Maguire 1968: 3–16). If seven years of savage warfare had left the population exhausted, the new peace created an opportunity for writers to begin assimilating the momentous events they had just lived through. At the same time, the breakup of the pre-revolutionary modernist movement and the emigration of many important figures of the pre-October generation (Struve 1984: 17–18) created a kind of power vacuum in the literary world that young writers rushed to fill. Paradoxically, the disastrous conditions that prevailed in the cultural realm seem to have created an atmosphere that encouraged experimentation and contributed, especially among beginning

writers, to a sense of immense creative possibilities. One of the unforeseen, but predictable, results of this situation was a great increase in factionalism among literary groups competing for the attention of readers and, just as importantly, for the support of the new Bolshevik cultural bureaucracy (Brown 1982; Ermolaev 1963; Eastman 1934). The rise and fall of the Islanders is best seen against this background.

All accounts of the origin of the Islanders agree that the initiative for the group came from three ambitious and unknown young poets: Nikolaj Tixonov, Sergej Kolbas'ev and Konstantin Vaginov. Shortly thereafter, Vsevolod Roždestvenskij (1895–1977), Elizaveta Polonskaja (1890–1969), Nina Berberova (b. 1901), Vera Lur'e (b. 1901), Frederika Nappel'baum (1905–1950), Petr Volkov (1894–1979) and Ksenija Levaševa (dates unknown) also became members of the Islanders. One of the participants, Vera Lur'e, described the group's early days for the readers of the Berlin newspapers *Dni* in 1923:

С гордостью и радостью вспоминаю, как [...] у меня в комнате организовался кружок поэтов, сборник которых был *Островитяне*. Инициативной группой являлся Н. Тихонов, К. Вагинов, и С. Колбасев, поэт-моряк, энергичный, трудолюбивый, живой [...] Целью кружка была подлинная интенсивная работа и желание сгруппировать вокруг себя все мало-мальки деятельные молодые силы Петрограда. Первый номер «Островитян» был напечатан до моего отъезда на пишущей машине: кроме произведений вышеуказанных поэтов и моих, в него вошли еще стихи Волкова (подававшего, кажется, несбывшиеся надежды), Ф. Нappel'баум и приехавшей из Одессы талантливой поэтессы К. Левашевой. Насколько мне известно, «Островитяне» продолжают свое существование [...] Славные это были встречи: у меня на Мойке собирались поздно, часам к одиннадцати, сидели до двух с половиной часов ночи (позже трех часов ходьба по городу не разрешалась), топили печурку сырыми дровами, курили скверные папиросы, пили без конца чай [...] читали свои произведения, говорили о них и о задачах создаваемого журнала. Часто Колбасев рассказывал свои фантастические путешествия и приключения. Если читались стихи, то Вагинова просили последним: у него был всегда столь огромный запас произведений, что мы боялись, как бы после него никому уже не осталось времени читать. Костя, маленький и уютный, садился обычно на полу у чьих-нибудь ног, Колбасев [...] разваливался в кресле: Тихонов был прям, молчалив и сдержан: оживлялся лишь при чтении стихов (Lur'e 1923: 12).

Throughout 1921 and 1922 the group met regularly in various places; at Vera Lur'e's³ apartment on the Mojka, Kolbas'ev's room in the House of the Arts, Tixonov's place on Zverinskaja Street and at the House of Poets on Litejnyj Prospect. In addition to reading and discussing their own works, the Islanders sometimes read critical essays at their meetings. For example, in the autumn of 1922, both Kolbas'ev and Tixonov read critical articles on Gumilev's poetry. Petrograd newspapers from 1922 record that the Islanders frequently read in public, appearing, among other places, at the House of Writers (Dom Literatorov), the Free Philosophical Association (Vol'fila) and the Institute of the Living Word (Institut živogo slova).

The Islanders' first group publication, the collection described above by Lur'e, was a typescript of 16 poems by Frederika Nappel'baum, Ksenija Levaševa, Vera Lur'e, Konstantin Vaginov, Sergej Kolbas'ev, Nikolaj Tixonov and Petr Volkov, dated September, 1921. Since only about twenty copies were ever prepared, it would appear that the collection was never intended for public distribution. The group's emblem, a square sun emitting rays of light over the ocean, drawn by Tixonov, appears for the first time on the title page of this collection.⁴ A second typescript collection of poems, prepared between October and November of 1921, has, unfortunately, disappeared without a trace. It seems reasonable, therefore, to date the group's literary debut to the spring of 1922, when a miscellany entitled, simply, *Islanders* (Book 1), including poems by Vaginov, Kolbas'ev and Tixonov, appeared in an edition of 1000 copies.⁵ Unfortunately, most of these copies never made it into the hands of readers: shortly after publication, a fire in the printer's warehouse destroyed most of the unsold copies.

Despite this run of bad luck, the Islanders persevered in their ambitious plans to provide a publishing outlet for the younger generation of the Petrograd avant-garde. Numerous advertisements for publications by the Islanders testify to these plans in 1921 and 1922. In addition, forthcoming publications by Vaginov (*Peterburgskie noči*, "Monastyr' gospoda našego Apollona"), Volkov (*Kurgany*), Kolbas'ev (*Stixi*), and Tixonov (*Loskutnoe znamja*, *Voennye stixi*, *Bylina*) were all announced in the course of 1921. Unfortunately, because of the technical and financial difficulties of publishing at the time, most of these books never actually appeared in print. And only two other publications – Tixonov's first collection of poems, *The Horde (Orda)* and Kolbas'ev's narrative poem *The Open Sea (Otkrytoe more)*, both published in 1922 – ever appeared under the imprint of the Islanders. That most of the planned publications of the group remained unrealized was certainly a major disappointment for the Islanders. And yet, the three books of the Islanders that did appear in print between 1921 and 1922, most of the critics agreed, represented an event of considerable interest in the literary life of Petrograd.

The actual roots of the Islanders can be traced back to the rivalry of the previous generation between the leading poets of Petrograd, the Acmeist Nikolaj Gumilev and the Symbolist Aleksandr Blok. Several writers have described how, towards the end of 1920, Gumilev and his followers from the Second Guild of Poets took control of the Petrograd Union of Poets from its first chairman Blok (Xodasevič 1982: 171–79; Odoevceva 1967; Pavlovič 1964). Modeled on the Moscow Poets' Union, then dominated by Valerij Brjusov, the Petrograd Union was originally meant to provide material support to the poets of Petrograd: "to ensure the physical continuation of such live poets as were left, not to let them die, and gradually to find means of giving them some material security and obtaining for them at least the most elementary conditions of work (fuel, clothes, paper, food)" (Pyman 1980: 359). While this may have been Blok's understanding of the Union's purpose (Pyman 1980: 361), Gumilev, it seems, had other ideas. More interested than Blok in the perquisites of leadership,⁶ Gumilev and his main followers from the Guild, Georgij Ivanov (1894–1958), Nikolaj Ocuip (1894–1958) and Georgij Adamovič (1894–1972), saw the Poets' Union as an opportunity to insure that the poetry of the younger generation followed the lines then being laid out by the Guild.⁷ Since most of the members of the Union were admirers of Gumilev, "convinced formalists and politically well to the right of their chairman" (Pyman 1980: 362), they were able, after a short but bitter struggle, to vote Blok and his allies out of the leadership of the Union (Pyman 1980: 362–3; Xodasevič 1982: 176–7). The plans of Gumilev and the Guild, however, to dominate Petrograd poetry through the Union of Poets were undone by several unforeseen events, which culminated in Gumilev's arrest and execution in the late summer of 1921, and the consequent emigration of most of his followers from the Guild.

Blok himself was the first to oppose the attempt by Gumilev and the Guild to dominate Petrograd's literary life. In the essay "Bez božestva, bez vdoxnovenija," he brutally attacked Gumilev⁸ for his formalistic and mechanistic conception of poetry as well as his vision of the poet as a craftsman who has mastered the four "laws" of poetry: phonetics, stylistics, compositions and images⁹ ("ejdologija") (Gumilev 1968 a: 4: 187). Written in April of 1921, Blok's essay did not appear in print until 1925, when the disputes of 1920–21 were already ancient history. Indeed, the sudden and untimely deaths of both Blok and Gumilev in August of 1921 transformed what was, essentially, the concluding stage of the conflict between Symbolism and Acmeism into a struggle for influence between the younger generation of Petrograd poets, the followers of Blok and Gumilev.

To contemporary observers, the Islanders were seen as a sort of poetic auxilliary to the predominantly prose writing Serapion Brotherhood. For example, the poet Sergej Nel'dixen, a close associate and sometimes member of the Islanders, wrote that "although the Islanders exist under their own name, they

are closely connected with the Serapian Brotherhood"¹⁰ (Nel'dixen 1922: 3). The Serapions did in fact represent a model literary group for the Islanders: a group of independent writers joined together for mutual support but without a shared aesthetic program. In a poem originally titled "Ostrovitjanam,"¹¹ Tixonov conveys the Islanders' very different styles in a pastiche of characteristic images drawn from works by the four original members (Tixonov, Kolbas'ev, Volkov, Vaginov):

Походом третьим шла орда,
В открытое море якорь острый,
Земля была кривой и пестрой,
К колодцу юноша по степи
Гнал Аполлоновы стада.¹²

But while the instincts of the Islanders were basically individualistic and non-polemical, the truth of the matter is that the Islanders were born out of a struggle with the second Guild of Poets over the direction Petrograd poetry would take in the 1920s. In fact, the Islanders can be seen as the most active of Blok's champions in the struggle against the academic "Guild" style that was Gumilev's legacy to Russian poetry. Unlike many literary groups which appeared in these years with loud theoretical statements or manifestoes and very little else, the Islanders did not even include a foreword to their collection, as if emphasizing the group's focus on artistic practice. Two autobiographical texts of Nikolaj Tixonov from the 1920's, however, include polemical statements by the Islanders. The first, written in 1923 but never published, identifies the Islanders as the sworn enemies of the "academic" tradition represented by the Guild of Poets:

В 1921 г. вместе с поэтами К. Вагиновым, П. Волковым и С. Колбасьевым основал поэтическое содружество «Островитяне», ставившее себе задачу – борьбу с духом академизма и цеха в поэзии, комнатного затворничества. Люди сейчас маленького роста. Танк в тысячу раз больше сердца. Миллионы аршин кожи разорвала колючая проволока. Но и танки, и проволока, и радиотелеграф, и линейная крейсера сделаны руками, из которых ни одна не длиннее винтовки. Нужно видеть не только то, что вокруг нас, но и внутри. Мы хотели только не идти безоружно и ни во что не верить слепо. И потом мы приветствовали систему и рычаги системы. Это не слабость. Есть корабли, построенные в Ливерпуле, которые всегда ходят только по линии Индийского океана, но они строены по закону корабля. Мы знаем, что во всех странах есть сейчас островитяне. И мы помним – из островов растут материи. (Тихонов 1923).

If Tixonov's highly emotional and metaphorical imagery and his attack on the guild spirit in poetry remind one of Blok's attack on Gumilev, this passage actually includes a submerged reference to Gumilev. At the same time, it helps solve the riddle of the group's name, a problem which perplexed many contemporaries.¹³ The phrase "iz ostrovov rastut materiki" was the motto of the short-lived journal *Ostrov*, founded and edited by Gumilev and A.N. Tolstoj in 1909 (Gumilev 1968: 4:531; Luknickaja 1988:37–38). In their choice of a name which concealed a secret reference to Gumilev, the Islanders expressed their ambivalence toward the man and his legacy: loyalty to the man, but hostility towards his poetic legacy as represented by the Guild of Poets. In this sense, the competition between the Islanders and the Guild can be seen as a power struggle between former students and protégés of Gumilev.¹⁴ At the center of the conflict stands Gumilev himself, officially labeled a counter-revolutionary by the regime. One can conjecture that Tixonov, the most politically aware and active polemical opponent of the Guild, understood that the safest way to divert attention from the Islanders' own affiliation with Gumilev was to attack the Guild, which persisted in openly identifying itself with Gumilev. In other words, the Islander's attacks on the Guild can be read as a way of distancing themselves from the dangerous mantle of Gumilev, while secretly remaining faithful to his poetic legacy.

Tixonov continued the attack on the Guild, without however, mentioning it by name, in a second autobiography published in 1926 in the journal *Krasnaja panorama*:

Работа в кружке Островитяне, (к которому позже примыкает и Е. Полонская) дает возможность увидеть путь поэтических направлений и их поединок в настоящем. Некоторые почти уже ясны... Голова не может жить, отделившись от тела. Мир должен быть ощущаем реально, вплотную, как вещь, всем существом поэзии ... Бесплодная смоковница "академизма" с вырождающимися ветвями и корнями еще украшает иные города. Есть еще люди, которые приходят писать на ее коре поклонников ... (Тихонов 1926: 7).

The opposition between an active, vibrant, even violent apprehension of reality and an artificial, dessicated "academic" poetry runs through both of these texts and serves as an obvious reference to the Islander's competition with the Second Guild of Poets. The relationship between poetry and the reality of a revolutionary society is crucial to Tixonov's defense of the Islanders. Tixonov is at great pains to establish both the autonomy of their poetry and its essential congruence with the "down to earth" themes of the revolution: "Слова должны строиться по закону слова, стихи по закону стиха, а не по закону передовицы или экономической статьи ... Самый простой рассказ, который должен быть сейчас рассказан это рассказ о земле и о человеке" (Тихонов 1926: 7). This

passage points to the essential political differences between the Islanders and the Guild poets. While the leading members of the Guild, Ivanov, Adamovič, Oкуп and Odoevceva, all emigrated from Soviet Russia during the course of 1922 and 1923 (Struve 1984: 18), the Islanders were more favorably disposed to the new Soviet power. The political and aesthetic differences between the Guild and the Islanders are foregrounded in the final poem of the Islanders' December, 1921 collection, Tixonov's neo-Nekrasovian ballad "Sami". One can easily imagine the indignant response of the Guild to Tixonov's fairy tale about a poor exploited Indian slave who prays to the "great Sahib" Lenin.

The public polemic between the Islanders and the Guild began with two reviews by Lev Lunc, a leader of the Serapions and a close friend and associate of the Islanders, of works by the Guild and the Islanders. The first to appear was a negative review of the second almanach of the Guild of Poets (Petrograd, 1921) in the journal *Kniznyj ugol*. Lunc delivered a harsh, but convincing criticism of the volume and concluded that, despite the significance of their own works, Gumilev and Mandel'stam had left behind a dead school of epigones (Lunc 1922: 54). In the second article, entitled "New Poets,"¹⁵ Lunc praised several members of the Islanders as "true, serious poets," while dismissing Gumilev's former students from the Guild as unoriginal and talentless imitators, which, interestingly, he considered inevitable given Gumilev's pedagogic system: "Но на «Островитянах» Вагинове и Колбасьева можно остановиться дольше. Они выпустили по отдельной книжке стихов.¹⁶ Обе брошюры – несовершенные, ученические, но в обоих слышится живая поэтичность" (Lunc 1922a: 221). Though critical of some aspects of Vaginov's poetry, Lunc writes that "в каждой строке Вагинова чувствуется сырая, еще не нашедшая себя, но подлинная поэтическая острота" (Lunc 1922a: 222). While Lunc praises Kolbas'ev for the laconism, richness, and simplicity of his technique (Lunc 1922a: 221–22), he especially praises the "contemporary," or revolutionary subject matter of Polonskaja and Tixonov:

Елизавету Полонскую и Николая Тихонова я считаю настоящими большими поэтами. Хотя бы потому, что оба касаются современных тем, смотрят в глаза революции. Таких поэтов, особенно у нас в Петербурге нет [...] Стихи Полонской построены точно из одного камня и в лучшем смысле этого слова однообразны [...] И вот рядом со [ее] *Знаменьями* [Петроград, 1921] Орда Николая Тихонова кажется особенно разнообразной и многоликой. И у Тихонова есть пафос, но поэт никого не обличает и никому не приказывает [...] И он говорит о земле, только о земле. Ничего о небе. И все одинаково хорошо удается Тихонову. Он тоже берет английскую балладу, но перелаживает ее по своему, и звучит она не как перевод, а как новая форма, новая русская героическая бал-

лада [...] А лирика, которая Полонской не дается ни в какой мере, у земного Тихонова звучит восторожено и ново. (Lunc 1922a: 223–225)

The Guild did not long remain in Lunc's debt, responding in the third volume of *Cex poetov* (Petrograd, 1922) with an even harsher attack on Lunc. In a note signed "From the Editors", they criticized not only the Serapions, but also the Sounding Shell (*Zvučšačaja rakovina*), in which Vaginov and Volkov had participated. It was in this note that the Guild made the notorious claim that in Russia "умеют писать стихи сейчас десять — двенадцать человек", primarily, of course, members of the Guild.¹⁷

At this point, Tixonov stepped up the polemic with an attack on the Guild in the newspapers *Žizn' iskusstva*. "Granenye steklyški" begins with an attack on the "dead classicism" of the Guild: "Классическим называют то, чего никто не читает, — сказал Уайльд ... И тень подобного классицизма несомненно лежит на третьем альманахе «Цеха поэтов»" (Tixonov 1922: 2). Tixonov especially criticizes the "Europeanism" of the volume, its orientation on the "intonations of Paris" and its "imaginary antiquity" ("воображаемую античность"). He calls the Guild's classicism "barren and desicated", and states that "no one can satisfy his hunger" with these poems. Finally, he calls into question the supposed stylistic unity of the Guild: "Если Цех объявил в лице своих ответственных представителей руководящими безразличные традиции парижан, то почему в альманахе нашел место футуро-ямажинист Зенкевич, совершенно чужды духу Цеха островитянин Вагинов и стихотворный проповедник Нельдихен?" (Tixonov, 1922: 2). Although Tixonov does not mention it, the third almanach of the Guild included poems by the Islanders P. Volkov, the Serapion Vladimir Pozner and the future Oberiut L. Lipavskij as well. Perhaps sensing their isolation, the Guild was making an effort to widen their circle of contacts and to involve poets of differing aesthetic backgrounds in their activity. On the other hand, where Tixonov sees signs of inner weakness and contradictions, someone more favorably disposed to the Guild might see evidence of development and growth. The Guild seems to have taken this criticism to heart: in 1923, when they reprinted the *Cex poetov* almanachs in Berlin, they excluded the poems of the Islanders Vaginov and Volkov!¹⁸

Tixonov's contempt for the Guild is made crystal clear as he sums up his critique of their poetry.

Цех рассыпал граненые, плоские отшлифованные стихи — стеклышки, которыми ни один живой настоящий человек не прельстится ... Стихи Г. Адамовича, Оцуца и Г. Иванова бесплодны и сухи. Форма у них классическая по-своему, до сих пор в гробах древних находят окаменевшие бобы и хлеб, но

сыт ими никто не будет ... Самодовольное же признание Цеха, что писать стихи «умеют сейчас только они» (10–12 человек) похоже на крик павлина (Тихонов 1922: 2).

The Islanders and the Serapions thus formed a united front in this polemic with the Guild. But if the Islanders made a decisive break with the Guild and the "academic spirit" of their poetry, personal relations between several members of these factions continued for some time. Nevertheless, Vaginov's contributions to the poetic miscellanies published by the Guild-dominated poetic studio of the House of the Arts – *Zvučadžaja rakovina* (1922), *Uškujniki*¹⁹ (1922), and *Gorod* (1923) – did not prevent him from parodying the Guild in a 1922 prose work: "В роще холма Джаникола собралась Аркадия. Шепелявит Георгий Иванов, пророчествует Адамович, играет в футбол Оцуп.²⁰ Истребляют они дурной вкус" (Vaginov 1922: 14).

Despite the poisoned relations between the Islanders and the Guild, Georgij Adamovič, shortly before his emigration from Soviet Russia, published a remarkably objective review of the poetry of the Islanders:

Есть три поэта, обративших на себя внимание лишь в последний год: Полонская, Тихонов и Вагинов. У Полонской едва ли крупное дарование. Но она умна, и за это ей многое простится. Она одна в гражданских темах сумела избежать дурного влияния Верхарна. У нее крепкий, уверенный и опрятный стих. О Николае Тихонове пока много говорить нечего. Его большая даровитость не-сомненна. Но едва ли он поэт, во всяком случае не лирический. В его стихах много беллетристики. Строчки его запоминаются только как находчивые по смыслу сочетания слов. Он наверное, будет популярен, т.к. в нем есть врожденная бодрость и тот душевный оптимизм, который теперь в спросе.²¹ Константин Вагинов – полная противоположность ему. В старину про него сказали бы: «Божьей милостью». Он весь пронизан музыкой. Если Вагинов глубже и шире вздохнет, если он будет больше думать и настойчивее хотеть, если он перестанет кокетничать своей невзрастней, он будет поэтом. Ему надо долго учиться. Но в руках его не труба и не барабан, а настоящая скрипка²² (Adamovič 1923: 4).

With the emigration of the poets of the Second Guild, the aggressive polemical stance of much of the writing surrounding the Islanders was replaced by a more moderate, sympathetic tone. Most of the reviewers of the Islanders' publications agreed that their literary debut illustrated both the creative vitality of the younger generation and the beneficent influence of the revolution in the field of poetry. In language calculated to suggest connections to the Serapion Brotherhood,²³ Vsevolod Roždestvenskij described the Islanders as the "Robinson Crusoes" of a

new world. "«Островитяне» пожелали стать Робинзонами нового клочка земли" (Roždestvenskij 1922: 63). Stranded in a world without literary authority, the Islanders are trailblazing a new poetics: "«Островитяне» не жили еще и года на своем таинственном острове, едва успели обзавестись орудиями самой первобытной культуры, но им уже приятно первыми протаптывать тропинки и укрощать мустангов" (Roždestvenskij 1922: 64). Despite the obvious differences in the styles of Tichonov, Kolbas'ev and Vaginov, Roždestvenskij finds that all three share a common interest in the momentous events of the present: "Они очень непохожи друг на друга, но общий язык у них несомненно есть, хотя бы для рабочей песни, с которой веселее разбивать твердые комья едва пропаханного поля. Что характерно для «Островитян»? Пылкий интерес к пестрой смене событий и то, чем мы увлекались когда-то у Жюль Верна и у Стивенсона: желание из конца в конец пройти «Таинственный остров», построить хижину собственными руками" (Roždestvenskij 1922: 63–64). The Reviewer concludes by arguing a causal relationship between the revolution and the Islanders' poetry: "Мне думается, что «Островитян» роднит крепкое приращение к земле, и это, конечно, от того, что родились они в прекрасное время войны и революции. Да будет им дано чувствовать, как в грубых человеческих руках поэт и бьется горячее тело жизни!" (Roždestvenskij 1922: 64).

Another poet-critic close to the Islanders, David Vygodskij, in an enthusiastic review of the Islanders' first collection, stressed the differences between the four leading Islanders, Tichonov, Kolbas'ev, Vaginov and Volkov: "они – не школа, не партия, связанная какими-либо программами и правилами, ложными или неложными. Четыре «Островитянина» [...] четыре различных устремления, почти противоположных, четыре стороны света. И несколько не похожи они друг на друга в приемах и методах своей работы, своих поэтических настроений" (Vygodskij 1922: 2). For Vygodskij, the crucial contrast is between the dynamic and outward-looking poetry of Tichonov and Kolbas'ev and Vaginov's totally "interior" poetry, based, to an important degree, on sound associations ("Слова сочетаются друг с другом не по слоговой, а по звуковой ассоциации." Vygodskij 1922: 2). Unlike Roždestvenskij, Vygodskij stresses the Islanders' continuity with the prerevolutionary poetic tradition, tracing their various "poetic geneologies" to the leading Symbolist and Acmeist poets of the older generation:

Многоразличны также и традиции их, дрожжи, на которых они поднялись. Если говорить о предшественниках, с которыми связывают их узы родства, то придется назвать и Гумилева, и Ахматову, и Мандельштама, и Есенина, и Кузмина, и Блока, и т.д. (Vygodskij 1922: 2).

In her "S beregov Nevy (Pis'mo iz Petrograda)," the poet Nadežda Pavlovič announced the literary debut of the Islanders to her readers in Moscow. If Lunc saw the Islander's revolutionary pathos as an unusual, if not unique feature in Petrograd poetry ("Таких поэтов, особенно у нас в Петербурге нет ..." Lunc 1922a: 223), Pavlovič characterized the Islanders' poetry as inconceivable anywhere but in Petrograd: "Сейчас в Петербурге появились новые поэты: Тихонов, Вагинов [...] Только тут, где чувствуется рубеж между мирами (Европа – один мир, мы – другой) могли появиться эти Островитяне, как они называли себя" (Pavlovič 1922: 17). In another review of new poets of Petrograd, Pavlovič identified Vaginov as the most talented and interesting of the Islanders and went to great lengths to specify his unique version of the Petersburg tradition:

Наиболее даровит из них К. Вагинов. Это подлинный сын Петербурга, классического Петербурга и умирающего. Как колонны Александровского ампира, хочет прямиться стих его [...] но гиблая трясина колышется под Петровым городом, и она же поет и чавкает стих Вагинова. Его бог – Аполлон, но не тот лучезарный, осенявший античность, его Аполлон гнилой, с узкой грудью, сухой и жестокий, и все же бог, и под развинченностью движений, под дряблой кожей вдруг иногда просквозит извечная прелесть, и задыхающийся стих выпрямляется и звучит ясно и торжественно (Pavlovič 1922a: 30).

Readers in Moscow could also read about the Islanders in several reviews of contemporary poetry by the former Symbolist maître Valerij Brjusov. Although pitiless in his critique of established poets of the older generation who exhibited the slightest reluctance in accepting the revolution, Brjusov did his best to encourage new talent, whether it be works by the Futurists Nikolaj Aseev or Boris Pasternak or the poets of the Proletkult. In an article of 1922, for example, after criticizing several collections by such established poets of the older generation as Sologub and Mandel'stam, Brjusov wrote the following about the Islanders:

После этих и подобных сборников отдыхаешь, хотя бы и на самых несовершенных попытках свернуть в сторону с давно заржавевших рельс. Такой попыткой, – хотя именно "весьма несовершенной", – представляются книги «Островитян», – по-видимому новой группы Петербургских поэтов. Пока «Островитян» объявилось только трое. Двое из них – Николай Тихонов и Сергей Колбасев напечатали по тоненькому сборнику стихов, а все втроем, с участием Константина Вагинова, издали маленький альманах из семнадцати стихотворений. Определенной программы в стихах «Островитян» пока нет: единственное, что их роднит между собой – это

попытки выбиться из шаблона эпигонов символизма (Brjusov 1922: 292–293).

Although he was unable to observe their future development, Brjusov's characterization of the early works of Tikhonov ("Наиболее лиричен из трех «Островитян» Н. Тихонов, но зато он более других опять сбивается к шаблонам." Brjusov 1922:293), Kolbas'ev ("С. Колбасьев стремится к простоте речи, хочет действовать на читателя сжатым реализмом своих картин: но очень часто это приводит автора к самой несомненной прозе." Brjusov 1922: 293) and Vaginov ("К. Вагинов подходит к этой задаче немного через футуризм, беря у футуристов преимущественно приемы образа. Отдельные строки в стихах Вагинова интересны, но образы между собой не согласованы, и стих, несмотря на нарочитые аллитерации, тускл и незвучен." Brjusov 1922: 293) was remarkably accurate.

Brjusov also mentioned the Islanders in a long review article published the same year. After a rather unenthusiastic glance at several new poetic groups, Brjusov singled out the Islanders for comment: "Следует, однако, выделить ... петербургских «Островитян» как Н. Тихонова (*Орда* 1922) и С. Колбасьева (*Открытое море* 1922), в стихах которых есть что-то и от «нового» и оценивать которых по первым опытам еще рано" (Brjusov 1922a: 47). While Brjusov acknowledged that the Islanders had accomplished little of permanent value in their first publications, he expected more of them in the future: "Таким образом общий итог достижений новой группы пока невелик, но ... ut desint vires²⁴ и т.д." (Brjusov 1922: 293).

A different line was taken by Il'ja Ėrenburg, reviewing Tikhonov's collection *Orda* in the Berlin bibliographical monthly *Novaja russkaja kniga*. For Ėrenburg, a partisan of the Muscovite poetic avant-garde, all of Petersburg poetry was slightly suspicious: "Тихонов – главный «Островитянин». Вывеска этого поэтического содружества может легко ввести в обман. Островом «Островитяне», пожалуй, являются только в сомнительном море петербургской поэзии, где давно искоренены приливы и отливы" (Ėrenburg 1922:11). Although Ėrenburg approved of Tikhonov's obvious sympathy with the new age, he made a point of criticizing the poet for his failure to overcome the influence of hermetic Petersburg poets like Mandel'stam and Gumilev:

По существу «Островитяне» петербургские традиции стремятся преодолеть, и Тихонов, в частности, поэт материковый. Никаких изоляций нет и не предвидится. Пафос вполне соответствует эпохе: «Вижу я, что небо небогато, но про землю стоит говорить». Налицо все приметы молодости без художесочия и без архаического озорства. Но жаль, что географическое положение «Острова» ограничивает утварь туземцев. От Мандельштама: «Лишь пламень побуреет». От

Гумилева: «как пленительные полячки». Все из наследства. А между тем недалеко в Москве Маяковский, «Центрифуга», Есенин и др. создали немало вещей, полезных всякому туземцу. (Бренбург 1922:11).

Perhaps the most perceptive attempt to define what was new and valuable in the poetry of the Islanders was Vsevolod Roždestvenskij's lecture "Peterburgskaja škola molodoj ruskoj poezii."²⁵ Roždestvenskij begins by noting that the "synthesis of the themes of Antiquity and Revolution" represents a crucial contribution of the modern Petersburg tradition. He traces the importance of "chronological anachronism" and "compositional complexity" to the "complete freedom from time and space" which the Revolution has inaugurated in Petersburg poetry:

Второе, более значительное, что внесла Революция в сознание петербургских поэтов – это прекрасное, ни с чем не сравнимое чувство полной свободы от времени и пространства, сдвиг из оледеневших рамок осуществленного на буйный ветер мечты, возможность самых смелых сближений и ассоциаций. Времени больше нет, а есть вечность, нет Ингерманландии – есть мир. Отсюда, как следствие, пылкость анахронизма и композиционная усложненность, столь типичные для современного петербургского стиха (Рождественский 1923: 1–2).

And yet, Roždestvenskij continues, the potentially "anarchic" freedom of Revolution is balanced by the traditional "architectural" features of the Petersburg imagination:

И как сдерживающее начало, как ингредиент истинного искусства, без которого симфония обратилась бы в водопад ничем не сопряженных звуков, над этими двумя основными темами стилистическая оправа – скупая твердость линий и трезвость воображения. Конечно, это настоящая поэзия Революции в отличие от стихов только с революционным словарем. (Roždestvenskij 1923:2)

In other words, the source of the Islanders' poetic energy derives from the tension between an imagination set free by revolution and the traditional discipline of the Petersburg tradition. Each in his own way, the Islanders managed to combine a fresh and unstereotyped approach to theme and material with a powerful awareness of the historical context and the poetic tradition in which they were working. The importance of both history and tradition are apparent in the central role played by the theme of antiquity in the works of, especially, Vaginov and Tixonov. Both poets consciously and consistently use anachronism and the juxtaposition of scenes from antiquity and contemporary life in order to project

their poems onto a larger canvas. Striking images of mysterious soldiers in rebellion, images of revolution, abstract and yet, at the same time, clearly based on real impressions of the time, crystalize into the fragments of some future epic in their poems. Unlike many avant-garde poetic groups, the Islanders remained untouched by the prevalent cultural nihilism of the time: indeed, their combination of avantgarde poetic technique with a serious concern for the tradition represents, perhaps, the central contribution of the Islanders to Russian poetry of the period.

These characteristic features of the Islanders' poetry are perhaps best viewed against the background of the poetic legacy of Nikolaj Gumilev. The chief stumbling block between the Guild and the Islanders, as we have seen, resulted from the former's contention that the craft of poetry could be reduced to four universal elements: phonetics, stylistics, composition, and images (Gumilev 1968a: 4: 187). In practice, Gumilev's prescriptive pedagogy resulted in the thematic emasculation and technical repetitiveness which many critics have deplored in the poetry of the younger members of the Guild²⁶ (Čertkov 1982: 214–15). But if the Islanders rejected the restrictive approach to theme and poetic technique exemplified by one version of Gumilev's legacy, their poetry was profoundly influenced by the romantic "Kiplingism" of the author of *Čužoe nebo*. By transferring the strong narrative line, the interest in adventure and violence, and the virile world-view of Gumilev's African poems to the world of the Revolution, Tixonov and Kolbas'ev attempted to develop Gumilev's vision while avoiding his cheap exoticism and ideologically unacceptable colonialism. More than the other Islanders, Tixonov cultivated the "Adamistic" image of the poet-discoverer of a new world and the "materiality" (veščnost') of the Acmeists. The nervous energy and dynamic rhythms of his poems recreate the image of a world of absolute possibility, where the old verities have been swept away and a new life is struggling to be born. Although lacking Tixonov's enthusiasm, Kolbas'ev shares Tixonov's interest in strongly plotted miniature stories in verse. Characterized by a dry, even rhythm, Kolbas'ev's poems, in some ways, reminds one of the poetry of the Guild.

The central theme of Vaginov's poetry, in our view the most interesting of the three main Islanders, is the relationship between art and the artist. His poems are full of archetypal images of the ancient world transposed by a conscious process of anachronism to the present. As has been noted by many critics (Vygodskij 1922; Brjusov 1922), the stream of fantastic images in his poems often seems to be motivated primarily by sound associations. In the lecture referred to above, Vsevolod Roždestvenskij describes Vaginov's early poetry in the following way:

Константин Вагинов – совсем молодое имя, вынесенное на берег невской бурей последних лет. Ничего нет в нем от «стройного Петербурга». Это ночной голос, тревожный и горький. Первая книга *Путешествие в хаос* еще младенчески

беспомощная, липкая композиция заданий, построенная исключительно на звуковом ощущении отдельных слов, но уже исполненная пророчесственного бреда. Вторая — еще не изданная — *Петербургские ночи* — дань глубоко волнующей любви к родному городу, ставшему городом вечности. Его Петербург в динамике, в неведомом плаваньи. Сквозь Вагинова протекает ритмическое ощущение давних и близких культур, но не в остром осознании их творческой воплощенности, а совершенно так же, как в зрачках слепого, отражается мудрый узор созвездий. Вагинов слеп. Ему дано только слышать, порою слабо, порою очень неуверенно, но все-таки слышать. Я думаю, что он ничему не сможет научить, да у него и не надо учиться. Душа его давно переросла тело и мешает ему ходить по земле. Вот почему эти юношеские стихи волнуют такой ветровой шириной и неудобом (Roždestvenskij 1923: 2).

Towards the end of the period described in this article, Vaginov begins to move away from the chaos of images and anachronisms which characterize his early poems. Like Tixonov, Pasternak and Majakovskij, Vaginov will travel a long and complex path through complexity towards the clarity and classical form of his late poems (Čertkov 1982: 227–30). The problem of describing his poetic development in these years, however, goes well beyond the bounds of this article.

While Kolbas'ev, Vaginov, Polonskaja and Tixonov remained friendly and continued to meet informally for several more years, the organized independent activity of the Islanders comes to an end sometime in 1923.²⁷ With the organized in 1924 of the new Union of Poets,²⁸ in which Tixonov, Vaginov and Polonskaja all occupied leading positions, the Islanders join the mainstream of Petrograd poetry. Although the polemic between the Islanders and the Guild of Poets did not, in retrospect, play a significant role in the development of Soviet poetry in the early 1920s, the episode of the Islanders is significant for the light it can shed on the poetic biographies of its two most important poets, Nikolaj Tixonov and Konstantin Vaginov. For this reason alone, the Islanders represent a significant episode in Soviet Russian poetry of the 1920s.

Notes

- ¹ For example, G. Struve, *Russian Literature under Lenin and Stalin, 1917–1953* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971); E. Brown, *Russian Literature Since the Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); *Kratkaja literaturnaja enciklopedija* (Moskva: Sovetskaja enciklopedija, 1962–1978); Wolfgang Kasack, ed. *Dictionary of Russian Literature Since 1917* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Victor

Terras, ed. *Handbook of Russian Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

- 2 For the most complete history of the so-called "cafe period" of Russian poetry during the years of "War Communism", see A. Men'sutin and A. Sinjavskij, *Poezija pervyx let revoliucii, 1917-1920* (Moscow: Nauka, 1964).
- 3 For the fullest account of her life, and all of her Russian poems, see Vera Lur'e, *Stikhotvoreniia* (Berlin: Verlag Arno Spitz, 1987), edited with an introduction by Thomas R. Beyer, Jr.
- 4 The image of the square sun as a symbol of the extraordinary appears in Vaginov's short story *Monastyr' gospoda našego Apollona*. While this story was written for the Islanders, it was published in 1922 in the miscellany *Abraksas* No. 1, pp. 8-15.
- 5 The title page was incorrectly dated December, 1921.
- 6 Ходасевич records Mandel'stam's ironic attitude towards Gumilev and the reconstituted Guild of Poets in his memoir "Gumilev i Сех Poetov": "нет никакого Цеха. Блок, Сологуб и Ахматова отказались вступить. Все придумали гумиллята (так назывались в Петербурге начинающие или незначительные поэты, враждавшие в орбите Гумилева) — а Гумилеву только бы председательствовать. Он же любит играть в солдатики" (Ходасевич 1982: 173). Ходасевич goes on to describe a naive Gumilev manipulated by unscrupulous people who wanted to open a restaurant under the cover of the Union of Poets: this, obviously, cannot be taken completely seriously (Ходасевич 1982: 177-79).
- 7 On Gumilev's formalist principles of "delenie stixov", see Gumilev 1968a.
- 8 Certainly Blok had never forgotten Gumilev's 1913 "obituary" for Symbolism, "Nasledie simvolizma i akmeizma," which begins with the following assertion: "Для внимательного читателя ясно, что символизм закончил свой круг развития и теперь падает" (Gumilev 1968: 4: 171). On the general theme of the relations between Blok and Gumilev, see also Struve 1968: 4: 548-53.
- 9 Having quoted Gumilev's well-known definition of the poet as "тот, кто учтет все законы, управляющие комплексом взятых им слов," Blok writes: "Это жутко" (Blok 1971: 538-39).
- 10 In fact, two members of the Islanders, Nikolaj Tixonov and Elizaveta Polonskaja, were simultaneously members of both groups.
- 11 In the most recent edition of Tixonov's poetry, this poem is published without a title.

- ¹² The references are to Tixonov's collection *Orda* (Petrograd, 1922), Kolbas'ev's narrative poem *Otkrytoe more* (Petrograd, 1922), Volkov's unpublished book of poems *Kurgany*, and Vaginov's short story "Monastyr' gospoda našego Apollona" (1922).
- ¹³ The puzzled reviewer for Petrogradskaja pravda, for example, described the group as poets: "которые почему-то сами себя именуют «Островитянами» (Тихонов и др.). Но у них-то как раз слышатся новые ноты, по крайней мере у Тихонова, молодого, свежего, обещающего. Откуда же экзотическое наименование?" (Anonymous 1922: 2) The negative associations of the name "Ostrovitjane" in Zamyatin's 1918 povest' of the same title, an anti-utopian satire of the repressed English middle class, make it an extremely unlikely source for the group's name.
- ¹⁴ While Volkov and Vaginov had studied in Gumilev's poetry studio, Vaginov had even been accepted into the Second Guild of Poets shortly before Gumilev's death (Čertkov 1982: 214–15). Even Tixonov and Kolbas'ev were for a time considered protégés of Gumilev (Adamovič: 1928: 73).
- ¹⁵ The journal for which the review was written, *Irida*, for reasons we have not been able to ascertain, never appeared in print.
- ¹⁶ Konstantin Vaginov, *Putešestvie v kaos* (Petrograd: Kol'co poetov, 1921) and Sergej Kolbas'ev, *Otkrytoe more* (Petrograd: Ostrovitjane, 1922)
- ¹⁷ *Cex poetov*, № 3, Petrograd, 1922.
- ¹⁸ Both Volkov's narrative poem "Pervoe otrečenie (iz simfonii)" (originally published in the *Al'manax Cexa poetov*. Kn. 2 [Petrograd, Cex poetov, 1921]), Vaginov's lyric "Я снял сапог и променял на звезды," (first published in *Cex poetov*. Kn. 3 [Petrograd, Cex poetov, 1922]) were omitted from the Berlin reprints.
- ¹⁹ For the history of this publication, see Čukovskij 1964: 147–50.
- ²⁰ An allusion to Oкуп's poem "Vojna" from the collection *Grad* (Petrograd, Cex poetov, 1922): "В субботу последний экзамен, завтра – футбольный матч."
- ²¹ A similar point is made in Tizengauzen 1922: 60.
- ²² Years later, in a obituary published in Paris, Georgij Adamovič would affectionately describe Vaginov as the most talented of all of Gumilev's students from the poetry studio:

Стихи Вагинова вызывали в нем (Гумилеве) сдержанное, бессильное раздражение. Они поистине были «ни на что не похожи», но в то же время за их казалось бы нелепой образностью

и фантастическим синтаксисом жила и звенела какая-то мелодия, о которой можно было повторить, что «ей без волнения внимать невозможно». Гумилев это чувствовал. Он понимал, что у других его учеников, только что проде-кламировавших стихи гладкие и безупречные, нет именно того, что есть у Вагинова. Его сердило что он не может Вагинова убедить писать иначе ... А тот улыбался, соглашался, смущался – и на следующий день приносил новое стихо-творение еще безумнее прежних, но еще музыкальнее (Adamovič 1934).

- ²³ In addition, Roždestvenskij may be alluding to the "Adamistic" features of Acmeism, defined by Gumilev as "мужественно твердый и ясный взгляд на жизнь" (Gumilev 1968: 171).
- ²⁴ The Latin reference is to Ovid's third "Epistle from the Pont" ("Epistolae ex Ponto"), the first line of which reads "Ut desint vires, tamen est laudanda voluntas." "Granted [their] strength does not suffice, still the impulse deserves praise."
- ²⁵ Originally read at Puškinskij dom on the 27th of September, 1923.
- ²⁶ It is tempting to read the career of Georgij Ivanov, most of whose best poems were written late in life and in apparent violation of the Guild's rules, as a struggle, albeit unconscious, to overcome the limitations of the Guild approach to poetry. See, for example, I. Agushi, "The Poetry of G. Ivanov," in *Harvard Slavic Studies* 5 (1970), 109–58; V. Markov, "Georgij Ivanov, *Stixi* 1943–1958," in *SEEJ* 17 (1959), 286–87.
- ²⁷ Kolbas'ev had left Petrograd in 1923 to join the Soviet Diplomatic mission to Afghanistan and Volkov abandoned literature at about the same time (Kaverin 1982: 43–46).
- ²⁸ For the announcement of the formation of the "Leningradskoe otdelenie Vse-rossijskogo sojuza poetov," see *Žizn' iskusstva* (Petrograd), No. 19 (1046), 12 May 1925.

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