The Poetics of Exile in the Inter-war Novels of Irina Odoevtseva

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Xenia Srebrianski Harwell was born in a displaced persons’ camp in West Germany into a Russian and Lithuanian/German family. After emigrating to the United States she and her parents settled first in Harlem, and eventually in the Bronx, and became part of New York’s large and dynamic Russian émigré community, attending Russian school on Saturdays for twelve years. She studied at Barnard College, the University of Vienna, Vanderbilt University and University of Tennessee-Knoxville. She later worked at the US Consulate in St. Petersburg, Russia. Srebrianski Harwell has taught Russian and German language, literature, and culture at colleges in the South and Midwest of the US. She is the author of The Female Adolescent in Exile in Works by Irina Odoevtseva, Nina Berberova, Irmgard Keun, and Ilse Tielsch, Peter Lang, 2000). As an inveterate wanderer, she has travelled throughout the US, Canada, and Mexico, as well as in the Caribbean, Eastern and Western Europe, Russia, Africa, Mongolia, China, and New Zealand.

In this paper she examines the writings of Irina Odoevtseva, a member of the first wave of Russian émigrés after the revolution, who settled in Paris and, over the next sixty years, wrote novels and poetry in Russian, few of which have been translated. She returned to Russia with celebrity status in 1987 and died in 1990. The three novels discussed here centre on the lives of young Russian women, living in Paris, who negotiate in different ways the gaining of erotic experience and the loss of connection with their Russian cultural origins. The first novel, Angel Smerti (1927, Angel of Death), depicts the inner life of Ljuka, a young girl, whose memories of the violent events surrounding her emigration from Russia come to taint her newly awakening sexuality. The second novel, Izol’da (1929, Isolde), is a psychological thriller involving three young Russians involved in a robbery and murder, which Srebrianski Harwell sees, on a metaphorical level, as a study of the instability of émigré identity. The third novel, Zerkalo (1939, The Mirror), returns to the central character of Angel Smerti, as she abandons her husband to penetrate the brilliance and glamour of the French film-making world. Herself later abandoned, she attaches herself to a Soviet traveller and briefly contemplates the possibility of a return to the Soviet Union, soon realising that such a plan is unrealistic. Odoevtseva prided herself on not living in the past and on adapting to the community she found herself in. The melodramatic
depiction, in these three novels, of the psychic agonies of exiles who fail both to adapt and to maintain a full sense of their Russian identity, suggest unacknowledged exilic anxieties in the author herself.

Irina Odoevtseva was a member of the ‘first wave’ of Russian émigrés, those who left Russia following the revolution and civil war. Born in Riga in 1895 and raised in St Petersburg, she became a student of the poet Nikolaj Gumilev and a member of the acmeist Guild of Poets. In 1922 she published her first collection of poetry, and the following year she settled in Paris, where she was an active member of Russian cultural circles. She published four novels and six collections of poetry, but became best known for her memoirs, Na beregakh Nevy (On the Banks of the Neva, 1967) and Na beregakh Seny (On the Banks of the Seine, 1983). In 1987 she returned to St Petersburg at the invitation of the Writers’ Union and enjoyed celebrity status there until her death in 1990.

The three novels Odoevtseva completed during the interwar period – Angel smerti (Angel of Death, 1927), Izol’da (Isolde, 1929) and Zerkalo (The Mirror, 1939) – are the subject of this paper. At the time of their publication these novels were quite popular, and Angel smerti was translated into English as Out of Childhood (1930) and into German as Ljuka der Backfisch, Roman (1930). However, they have never been republished, and are available in few libraries. Consequently, today they are little known and have been the subject of scant scholarly attention.

Odoevtseva dismissed her novels as “chisto zhenskikh” (Kedrova 1988: 4; ‘purely women’s writing’), that is, dealing with love. It is true that, with young women as central characters, love is an integral part of each plot. However, each work also participates in the discourse about exile, touching on some of the issues facing Russian émigrés in Odoevtseva’s time. Taken together, the novels appear to follow a progression that reflects different stages in the emigration and assimilation process. Mutating family relationships, and the changing mix of the heroines’ love interests, mark the stages of transition. In Angel smerti, published just a few years after Odoevtseva’s departure from Russia, we have a present mother (there are no fathers in these works—they perished in Russia) and a cohesive family. Evening conversation focuses on Russia, and both love interests are Russian. In Izol’da, which was written two years later, we find a vanishing mother who abandons her children. Family life is on the verge of a complete breakdown, and discussions of Russia are avoided. There are two love