ARTICLE

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THE POLITICS OF AN ESOTERIC PLOT: MIKHAIL KUZMIN'S DEATH OF NERO

My putniki: dvizhenie - obet nash,
My — deti bozh'i: tvorchestvo — obet nash
Dvizhenie i tvorchestvo — zhizn',
Ona zhe Liubov' zovetsia.
— M. Kuzmin

In 1906 the Russian poet, playwright and critic Mikhail Kuzmin (1872-1936) established himself in the literary world of St. Petersburg with the publication of his novel Wings in the Symbolist journal Vesy (Scales). This work, a joyous affirmation of homosexuality, earned Kuzmin a notoriety which only recently has begun to subside in the Russian scholarly world and accounts in part for the relatively few published critical materials available concerning him.

Another factor contributing to the lack of scholarly attention paid to Kuzmin is his unclassifiability. While critics have associated him with both the Symbolists and the Acmeists (his 1910 article "On Beautiful Clarity" is often seen as an Acmeist manifesto), Kuzmin himself throughout his life objected to the very notion of literary schools, which he felt imposed a certain regimentation on the author and interfered with his creativity. The extraordinary number and variety of texts which the multi-talented Kuzmin produced during his lifetime include poems, novels, critical articles, musical scores and plays.

The revolutionary period found Kuzmin's style undergoing a shift from its earlier "beautiful clarity." Kuzmin's post-revolutionary works, which reflect his interest during the 1920s in German Expressionism and his close ties to members of Leningrad's avant-garde circle the Oberiuty, are characterized by shifting narrative planes and recur-
ring motifs. Characters and events assume differing meanings throughout the text, as the reader is forced to search for clues in stanzas or scenes that at first glance seem completely disconnected.¹

Kuzmin's later works did not find favor in the new Soviet state, and many of his experimental texts were unpublished during his lifetime. At the time of his death in 1936, he was in effect an artistic persona non grata, having been able to publish almost nothing (at least under his own name) since 1926.²

One such experimental work (which remained unpublished until 1977)³ was Kuzmin's play entitled The Death of Nero (Smert' Nerona), composed in 1928-29. The play consists of two interwoven narratives, the first dealing with the life of the first-century Roman Emperor Nero as portrayed by Suetonius in his Twelve Caesars, the second with the story of a twentieth-century Russian poet named Pavel, who is travelling through Italy in 1919. Pavel is writing a play about Emperor Nero. The action alternates almost scene by scene between the tales of these two main characters.

While Pavel is writing about Nero, there are very few references to this circumstance within the text. Rather, in keeping with Kuzmin's art of the period, the two characters are linked only through a complicated web of recurring motifs. Words and phrases find their way from one scene to another, regardless of time period or character. Images also skip centuries with alacrity: Nero and, nearly 2,000 years later, Pavel's wife Mari take the same road out of Rome. These textual similarities are reflected in thematic links between the two characters.

Analysis of this confusing play is complicated by the fact that it is incomplete as it now stands. Its editors observe that the typewritten manuscript from which they published the play was marked by many mistakes. In the case of certain words and phrases, the editors had to

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¹. For an interesting discussion of Kuzmin's relations with the Oberiuty, see George Cheron, "Mixail Kuzmin and the Oberiuty: An Overview," Wiener Slawistischer Almanach, Band 12 (1983), 87-101.


³. It was first published in Malmstad and Markov, eds., Sobrannie stikhov.