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THE “RUSSIAN CRAZE” AND THE SILVER AGE: MISSED CONNECTIONS IN THE ANGLOPHONE CANON OF RUSSIAN LITERATURE

Hilah Kohen

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The canon of Russian literature that is widely read in English only began to form in the first three decades of the twentieth century. This thesis asks why renowned Russian writers contemporary to that period such as Marina Tsvetaeva and Maxim Gorky were excluded from that canon, which instead promoted older writers like Lev Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky. Contemporary writers, unlike their predecessors, could actively establish social networks that included figures like Virginia Woolf or H. G. Wells who had the ability to introduce Russian literature to a sustained Anglophone readership. This thesis analyzes the missed connections in those networks and traces deeper thematic relationships between early twentieth-century Russophone and Anglophone texts.

The first chapter of this thesis turns to the history of Zinaida Gippius's non-reception in English as a case study. I find that Gippius generated an extensive network in the Russophone world largely via social provocation, a strategy that limited her reception in English because it deterred potential translators. This chapter calls for renewed Anglophone attention to Gippius's writings, which confront issues like wartime violence and gender expression with remarkable creativity. In a second chapter, this thesis analyzes textual and social relationships between Marina Tsvetaeva and Virginia Woolf. Although Tsvetaeva's narrative poem *Tsar-Devitsa* (*The Tsar-Maiden*) expresses androgyny using specific aspects of the Russian language—a combination that fascinated Woolf in her novel *Orlando*—the two writers never encountered each other's work. As in Gippius's case, a blend of broad political forces and small-scale social coincidences kept Tsvetaeva's writing from reaching a substantial Anglophone audience during her lifetime.

Both chapters illuminate a broader Anglophone misconception that contemporary Russia is primarily a political, not a cultural, entity. The conclusion to this thesis examines how that misconception continues to prevent American audiences from engaging with outstanding Russophone writers of the present day.