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ScienceDirect

Russian Literature 83–84 (2016) 113–128

Russian Literature

www.elsevier.com/locate/ruslit

VLADISLAV CHODASEVIČ'S *NECROPOLIS*: WRITING LIVES IN THE CITY OF THE DEAD

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Abstract

This article considers the structure of Vladislav Khodasevich's *Necropolis* (*Nekropol'*, 1939) in relation to the volume's critique of Symbolist life-creation (*zhiznetvorchestvo*). *Necropolis* compiles short memoir-portraits of various turn-of-the-century Russian writers. These acerbic pieces variously implicate life-creative behavioral codes in many of these Symbolist writers' tragic fates. I contend that the sequence in which these portraits appear enhances *Necropolis*' critique. The opening trio of portraits (on Nina Petrovskaja, Valerii Briusov, and Andrei Belyi) compel the reader to repeatedly experience the collapse of those writers' love triangle. Khodasevich thus highlights two things: the degree to which individual Symbolist lives are inevitably "tangled" (in Khodasevich's words) with one another; and the life-creative mandate of reliving one-time, kairotic events. I also argue that Khodasevich's portrait of Maksim Gor'kii (the final piece in *Necropolis*) represents a counterpoint to the preceding Symbolist lives. Gor'kii's life is just as "tangled" and artificial; however, he recognizes the falsity of his life-creative biography, and embraces the revisionist "ennobling truth" that Khodasevich offers him. Gor'kii's portrait thus throws *Necropolis*' more famous Symbolist content into relief, and demonstrates Khodasevich's prerogative to write his contemporaries' biographies. Thus, *Necropolis*' critique of life-creation becomes more meaningful when one reads its constituent pieces as a unified whole.

Keywords: *V.F. Khodasevich; 'Necropolis'; Symbolism; Life-Creation*

Vladislav Chodasevič's *Necropolis* (*Nekropol'*, 1939)¹ is often perceived as an illuminating if caustic account of Russian Symbolism and several of the

movement's primary architects. It is also the origin of a seminal definition of Symbolist life-creation (*žiznetvorčestvo*):

Symbolism did not want to be merely an artistic school, a literary movement. It continually strove to become a life-creating method, and in this was its most profound, perhaps unembodiable truth. Its entire history was in essence spent in yearning after that truth. It was a series of attempts, at times truly heroic, to find a fusion of life and art, as it were, the philosopher's stone of art.²

This definition becomes all the richer when we account for *Necropolis*' structure. For a text often treated as a bitter appraisal of Symbolism, the volume's bookends – portraits of Nina Petrovskaja, a minor Symbolist writer, and Maksim Gor'kij, the godfather of Socialist Realism – might seem curious. However, they are essential to Chodasevič's project. When read into the volume's architectural whole, these portraits articulate a richer, more nuanced critique of Symbolist life-creation than Chodasevič's famous definition thereof does in isolation.

I will argue that Chodasevič structures *Necropolis* with two goals in mind: to compel his reader to experience the archetypal Symbolist life in a properly life-creative way; and to present alternative, non-Symbolist variants of life-creation. This approach scrutinizes connections between the opening trio of portraits (dedicated to Petrovskaja, Brjusov, and Belyj, participants in a notorious love triangle)³ and assigns pivotal significance to portraits (of Geršenzon and Gor'kij specifically) that are normally considered anomalous in the collection. I will analyze these portraits, demonstrating their formal and thematic unity, and show how *Necropolis*' structure is essential to Chodasevič's critique of life-creation.

'Necropolis' in the Context of Russian Émigré Life-Writing

David Bethea describes Chodasevič's poetic eye as "stereoscopic", capable of "perceiving two moments of time simultaneously".⁴ This metaphor also obtains when applied to *Necropolis*, and not only because memoir writing is retrospective and stereoscopic by default. Younger than his literary peers, Chodasevič (1886-1939) experienced what he called the Symbolist "atmosphere" just when it was starting to dissipate. His "belatedness"⁵ afforded him a unique perspective on Symbolism – simultaneously an insider's and outsider's one, in which his youthful flirtation with the movement coincided with its decline. Indeed, such belatedness permitted Chodasevič a more stereoscopic perspective on several of Symbolism's major tenets, life-creation among them.

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