

REVIEW ARTICLE/КРИТИЧЕСКИЙ ОБЗОР

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"МОЯ БИОГРАФИЯ НИКОМУ НЕ НУЖНА":
BEHIND FEDOR SOLOGUB'S LITERARY MASK

Fedor Sologub. *Neizdannyi Fedor Sologub*. Edited by M. M. Pavlova and A. V. Lavrov. Moscow: Новое литературное обозрение, 1997. 576 pp.

Моя биография никому не нужна. Биография писателя должна идти только после основательного вымания критики и публики к сочинениям. Пока этого нет.
Fedor Sologub — 1909 (244)

In 1997 two events brought attention to the otherwise inconspicuous Sologub archive in St. Petersburg's *Pushkinskii dom*. The first was the purchase of a large collection of materials pertaining to Anna Akhmatova, among which were several Sologub manuscripts. The second was the long-awaited publication of *Neizdannyi Fedor Sologub*. In Russia this anthology of previously unpublished materials from the Sologub archive (3,000 copies printed) has been received warmly by critics and, to the surprise of many, by the general public, as evidenced by the book's brisk sales. Perhaps Sologub's works are at last attracting the attention they deserve.

The story of this collection's appearance could have come straight from Sologub's pen. It was accepted for publication in 1991 by a provincial publishing house that, not fully understanding the small scale of its potential audience, hoped to package it for a mass audience and reap great profits from the sales (pending lawsuits prevent naming this publisher). This difference in vision resulted in numerous squabbles between the editors and publishers, and for three years the book lay untouched and unpublished. Finally, the editors asked for the return of the manuscript, for which the publishers demanded a large sum of money. Quick action by a person close to this project rescued the manuscript, which was immediately whisked away to the offices of *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*. The prospect of a Communist victory in the 1996 election again delayed publication, and *Neizdannyi Fedor Sologub* appeared only in April 1997. The chaos surrounding this collection took its toll; the

third round of corrections, prepared by the editors and sent to the first publisher, were never brought into the manuscript. In the rush to finally publish this book this oversight was not noticed until after publication. The resulting problems, however, are minor and do not greatly affect the high quality of the book.

Neizdannyi Fedor Sologub consists of three sections. The first contains previously unpublished works by Sologub. The second includes reminiscences of Sologub, a biographical sketch by him, and letters between Sologub and his wife, Anastasia Chebotarevskaia, and Sologub and Evgenii Zamiatin. The third section contains the first half of a biographic description of the contents of Sologub's large personal library. A more detailed characterization of the three sections follows.

Section I.

In the 1920s Sologub gathered over 2,500 poems for a *Poimoe sobranie stikhov* he hoped to publish. His requests for publication were rejected by Soviet authorities, but the poems, carefully organized in folders, remained in his archive. The first section of *Neizdannyi Fedor Sologub* introduces 305 of them, 122 of which date from before 1900. Several of these early poems complement the traditional view of Sologub as the model Decadent who hated this life and loved sweet Death, for example this poem from 1894:

С тех пор, как тебя полюбил я,
Другое я все ненавижу, -
С тех пор, как тебя полюбил я,
Тебя только слышу и вижу,
И сам на себя я дивлюсь, -
Как раньше не мог я заметить,
Что всюду, о смерть, т'я владеешь,
А жизни нигде нам не встретить. (64)

These poems also tempt the reader with images and themes that deserve further research, for example the sado-masochism that reverberates throughout several of them.¹ One poem bluntly states that:

1. The study of sado-masochism in Sologub's life and works has been begun by Pavlova in her article "Iz tvorcheskoi predyustorii Melkogo besa" (Algeologicheskii roman Fedora Sologuba), in N. Bogomolov, ed. *Antinir' russkoi kultury* (Moscow: Nauchno-izdatel'skii tsentr "Ladomir," 1996), pp. 328-54. The poems in *Neizdannyi Fedor Sologub* support and add to her conclusions.

Страдание иногда полезно
Для тела, как и для души,
И, кто признал закон жезельный,
Тому и розги хороши. (33)

Most often, the sado-masochistic elements are found in poems that the reader is tempted to assume are autobiographical. The narrator of one poem (#35) is whipped on his mother's orders while his students look on. In poem #51 a young boy obediently removes his clothes so that the narrator, his teacher, can whip him for receiving a bad grade. In another (#103) the narrator is the king of an imaginary land who has young boys and girls (and himself!) whipped and takes pleasure in the pain. At times this pain can be the path to a higher religious consciousness. In poem #29 the narrator expresses a desire to suffer *in imitatio Christi*, while in another (#45) the cross he bears cuts painfully into his shoulders. It seems just as likely, however, that for the narrator suffering was inseparable from the sexual act. One poem (#82) begins "Vol'na moia lubov'," and the flagellated naked bodies in the poems mentioned above reappear in poems detailing the narrator's sexual fantasies. In another poem he is sitting in a bathhouse, and his boredom drives him to exclaim:

Вот стыда бы голых баб,
Чтобы все их обнимали,
И старик бы не был слаб
И забыл бы все печали,
Чтоб нагая и нагой
Телом к телу прижималась,
Под веселого игрой
Чтоб скамейки сотрясались. (26)

In a later poem (#23) the narrator imagines himself the young lover of an old man's young wife sneaking in to be with his mistress.

Almost all of the remaining poems of *Neizdannyi Fedor Sologub* date from after 1918 and are different in tone and theme than the early poems. In them two themes predominate: Sologub's grief at the loss of his wife (she committed suicide on September 23, 1921), and his refusal to accept the new Soviet order in Russia.

After Chebotarevskaia's death, Sologub's poetic persona becomes quiet and introspective. As in his early days, he sings the praises of the nominal world and denounces the deceptive nature of this world, but he is no longer the angry Decadent of well-known poems such as "Chertovy kacheii" (1907).

Instead he is biding his time, waiting for death to carry him away from this world of pain to reunion with his loved one. This resigned tone pervades most of the later poems of this collection.

Sologub's most obviously anti-Soviet work in this book is a cycle of fables he wrote in 1925-1926, which reveal the humor and irony for which he is known. In "Pioneer-predsedatel" a young boy comes home and informs his mother that he was selected chairman of a party meeting. She cannot understand why her son was chosen; he is neither the smartest nor the strongest. Then the son reveals that he was chosen because he is the most obedient (*poslušnyi*). In these fables Sologub makes fun of all aspects of the Soviet government (including the renaming of streets), but reserves special irony for the betrayal of the high ideals of the revolution that he and many others who initially supported the revolution felt. In "Kon', Loshaki i Shalun" the horse (*kon'*) is a model horse, and its rider takes good care of it. The nags (*loshaki*) become envious, accuse the horse of "horism" (*konizm*) and have him exiled to distant pastures. Sologub wryly explicates the fable:

Корооче говора,

Вот какова мораль у этих басен:

Когда даешь уроки Октябрю,

То будь в отъезде согласен. (172)

Pavlova writes that the first section contains more of Sologub's later poems in order to bring to the reader works from a relatively unstudied period of his career. There is much, however, among all of these 305 poems that will be of interest to anyone studying Sologub.

This selection of poems is followed by perhaps the most unusual portion of the collection, Sologub's "Aforizmy" and "Dostoinstvo i mera veshchei" (1896-1906). As Pavlova points out, these "philosophical texts" show the distinct influence of Friedrich Nietzsche, with whom Sologub (like many of his generation) was familiar. Sologub's aphorisms cover the entire range of his worldview:

05. Презирая людей.

29. Всего приятнее — сочетание стыда и боли.

57. Кто сказал «Сотворим человека по нашему подобию»? Бог Сатане, или Сатана Богу?

88. Царствуют мертвые.

"Dostoinstvo i mera veshchei," a discourse about the nature of the world, morality, and human nature, is similar to the aphorisms in form, yet reads like one continuous text, as thoughts flow from one numbered entry to the

next. These two works present few new ideas to those familiar with Sologub's theoretical works, but they do make interesting and entertaining reading.

The final work in the first section of *Neizdannyi Fedor Sologub* is the one act *Otravlennyi sad*, a reworking into dramatic form of Sologub's eponymous story (1908) of the youth who willingly dies for his love for the woman whose kisses are as poisonous as the flowers in her garden. Preparing this work for the stage, Sologub eliminated all of the secondary characters and greatly condensed the plot, omitting all but the philosophical essence of the story.

Little study has been devoted to Sologub's transformations of prose works into dramatic form. The Sologub archive contains many such unpublished works; two examples are the drama *Uzor iz roka*, created from the story "Baryshnia Liza," and *Zaklinal'nitsa zmei*, from the novel of the same name, both of which Sologub also reworked into movie scenarios. *Otravlennyi sad* is only the second of these plays to be published (the five-act version of *Melki besy*, edited by Stanley Rabinowitz, appeared in 1988). An entire volume could be (and should be) devoted to those remaining in the archive.

Section II.

Sologub was stubbornly reticent about his personal life, insisting that people wishing to know more about him should read all of his works. As a result, little has been published about his biography. The second section of *Neizdannyi Fedor Sologub* presents the reader with information about Sologub's life from a variety of sources. It concentrates on Sologub's early years and the last decade of his life, the two periods for which information has been particularly sparse.

Much of the material in this section is by Sologub himself. First is a "Kanva k biografii," written in a telegraphic style covering the first half of the writer's life. Two main themes repeat throughout this work: the horrors of provincial life (Sologub taught outside St. Petersburg for ten years) and the frequent beatings he endured at home and at school. In her introduction to the "Kanva," Pavlova points out that the reader must approach Sologub's words critically, since school records indicate that Fedor Teternikov was rarely punished. Sologub also writes that he was punished for drunkenness after graduation, yet at least one classmate recalled that Sologub did not drink and remained aloof from his peers (258). The "Kanva" is an essential document for any scholar studying Sologub and his works from a psychoanalytical point of view.

The remaining works by Sologub concern his wife, Anastasiia Chebotarevskina. She was roundly criticized in literary circles for supposedly "ruining" Sologub, for transforming him from Russia's "Bard of Death" into a

24. Новым Пушкиным будет только такой поэт, который беззащитно и нагло обворует всех своих современников и претеч.

These are followed by Smirenski's recollections of Sologub's last years. He describes Sologub's activities at the Writers' Union, his daily routine, the room he lived in, and conversations he and Sologub had about literature.

The second section of *Neizdannyi Fedor Sologub* is rounded out by the existing correspondence between Sologub and Evgenii Zamiatin. In these eight letters Zamiatin requests poems from Sologub for various works and Sologub asks Zamiatin to visit him to discuss the formation of committees in the Writers' Union. In their introduction to these letters, Galushkin and Liubimova describe the high esteem in which Zamiatin held Sologub's works and mention that many contemporaries discerned significant similarities between the works of these two authors, although little of this comes out in the short, formal letters. Those studying Sologub's influence on Zamiatin will be more interested in the introductory article than the letters it prefaces.

Section III.

The third and final section of this collection is devoted to a partial description of Sologub's personal library, made possible by the fact that Sologub kept detailed lists of the works that entered his collection. The first published list begins with books that were given to Sologub, and reproduces the inscriptions written by the authors to Sologub (1892-1907). Next on the list are books that Sologub himself added to his library over this time period. Beginning in 1908 books are listed by the month they entered his library, and inscriptions are included where applicable. This list continues only through March 1912. The second bibliography published here, a listing of collections of poetry in Sologub's library, is also incomplete, covering only the letters A through K. The editor of this section promises a continuation of this valuable project in the next installment of publications from the Sologub archive.

These bibliographic descriptions show the wide range of Sologub's interests. Sologub was well-read in foreign literature: his library contained works by Dickens, Zola, Wells, Wedekind, Przybyszewski, and Wilde (to name only some of the better-known authors). Books on every imaginable topic were in Sologub's library: history, mythology, philosophy, religion (especially Eastern), mathematics, medicine, and even one volume (#398) on breast-feeding. This section will be invaluable to those studying intertextuality in Sologub's works.

Neizdannyi Fedor Sologub is not without some shortcomings. As a collection of documentary texts, it lacks thematic unity (although this is scarcely surprising in a collection intended mostly for researchers). The materials thus appear to be a random selection, and nowhere do the editors explain why they

chose these materials and not others. In addition to the two primary editors, M. M. Pavlova and A. V. Lavrov, several other scholars also worked on sections of the collection, with the result that there is some repetition in the supporting essays and notes. In spite of these very small flaws, the book is a pleasure to read and use. The text is nicely complemented by photographs and thorough indices. The notes and articles are well-researched and informative. Not only do they present abundant information about Sologub, but they also introduce the reader to several of his lesser-known associates, many of them virtually unknown to scholars.

The importance of this text lies in its presentation of previously unknown archival material, the range of this material, and its broad chronological scope. Sologub is too infrequently discussed outside the context of his early, decadent years and/or the novel *Melkii bes*. This research collection serves to remind scholars that Sologub was a rich and creative writer who continued to write in many different genres long after the publication of his famous major novel.

Neizdannyi Fedor Sologub is only the first in a series, Pavlova asserts in her introduction. Sologub scholars look forward to the volumes to come.

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