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Galina Rylkova. *The Archaeology of Anxiety: The Russian Silver Age and Its Legacy.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007. ix + 270 pp. $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8229-4316-7; $27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8229-5981-6.

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The Past Is the Present

"Our past is mediated through a set of anxieties regarding its influence in our present and future lives. With writers (and artists in general), such anxieties are inextricable from the creative process, since no writer creates in a vacuum and no writer can be oblivious to the works of his or her predecessors" (p. 14). So writes Galina Rylkova in *The Archaeology of Anxiety*, her study of how Soviet writers portrayed Russia's Silver Age. The "archaeology of anxiety" is a quest to elucidate a dual process: how awareness of the Silver Age past shaped Soviet literature through the 1980s and how the meaning of the Silver Age was, in turn, redefined by the Soviet writers. Embracing the interpretive view that the past is largely a construct of the imagination, Rylkova analyzes texts up to the 1980s and argues convincingly that the making and discussion of the Silver Age myth was linked to dialogue about the Bolshevik Revolution.

The Silver Age is a time loosely understood as the 1890s to 1917, overlapping both a cultural explosion (the rise of modernism in the arts) and the political explosion of the Russian Revolution. Across the decades, these years have become known as a time of genius cut short by the Bolshevik takeover, a "charmed lost period" or a "historical period in cultural evolution on par with … the Enlightenment" (p. 3). Since the late 1980s, literary analysts have developed a renewed interest in this subject and have carried on a debate about what the term "Silver Age" truly meant. Rylkova's work follows the seminal book on this topic, Omry Ronen's *The Fallacy of the Silver Age* (1997), which argues that the term has been used so inconsistently as to be a fallacy. She also references the discussion of the term "Silver Age" in the collection *Cultural Mythologies of Russian Modernism: From the Golden Age to the Silver Age* (1992), edited by Boris Gasparov, Robert Hughes, and Irina Paperno. For her part, Rylkova analyzes literary relationships between Silver Age writers and the Soviet writers who followed them, using Harold Bloom's metaphor of literary children wanting always to topple their forefathers. While she hesitates to accuse the Soviet writers of wanting to dismiss their forebears entirely, she suggests strongly that we should view their works as constantly defined by anxieties about the influence of their predecessors.

To discuss these points, Rylkova arranges Russian literary history across seven chapters of chronological analysis, geared toward an audience highly familiar with the greats of Russia's twentieth-century literature. Each of Rylkova's central chapters analyzes the image of an author who participated in the Silver Age mystique and his or her impact on Russian/Soviet literary culture. For example, the first chapter is devoted to Alexander Blok and the sense among modernists that culture somehow "died" with him in 1921. Using close textual analysis of period writings, Rylkova argues that this worship of Blok (who was second in popularity only to Alexander Pushkin) was, in fact, a wistful look back at a prerevolutionary era, an effort to define a difference between the pre- and post-1917 world. She writes, "The pressing need shared by many in the 1920s and 1930s–to conceptualize the political upheaval that came to be known as the Great October Revolution–called for the reinvention of Blok" (p. 27). In rewriting Blok's life to suit their impressions of the Silver Age, later Soviet writers also remade it. Whereas contemporaries had initially presented it as an essentially Russian cultural triumph, writers of the 1920s and 1930s remade the Silver Age into a foreign cultural experience, a phenomenon somehow separate from Russian culture. Such writers as Anna Akhmatova, Vladimir Nabokov, and Mikhail Kuzmin contributed to this remaking of the Silver Age experience, redefining it in relation to 1917. Rylkova skips no major Soviet author in making her case. Even Boris Pasternak finds a place in her analysis; she comments that his *Doctor Zhivago* (1957) preserves both the Blok legacy and the themes expressed by other Silver Age writers, like Dmitri Merezhkovskii's 1901 novel, *The Romance of Leonardo da Vinci.* Her anal-

ysis peaks with a look at Victor Erofeev's *Russian Beauty* (1982), arguing that Erofeev's writing ridiculed traditional Silver Age motifs, including messianism and sexual conservatism.

The building and subversion of the Silver Age myth through Russian literature brings forward a central point that Rylkova approaches in her conclusion: a discussion of the Silver Age is essentially a discussion of one's views of 1917. Further dialogue on the Silver Age may be in danger, she argues forcefully, simply because post-Soviet Russia is looking to new historical hallmarks than 1917. She writes, "Up till now, the revolution of 1917 has been seen as the main enemy of the Silver Age. However, the Silver Age … might sink into oblivion not because of the revolution but together with the revolution" (p. 209).

This grounding of the Silver Age in responses to 1917 is one of Rylkova's achievements in *The Archaeology of Anxiety*. While providing impressive breadth of insight into the most notable writers of Russia's twentieth century, she quite convincingly makes her point that the Silver Age was under constant redefinition. In addition, she generates discussion of further points, from the impact of communal housing on the creative process, to the validity of including Nabokov as part of a discourse on Soviet literary circles, to Akhmatova's curious obsessive dislike of other writers' spouses and companions. Her work inspires questions as well. Can we see other significant echoes in these works, beyond the Russian Silver Age? Is it truly the Russian Silver Age or a European-wide modernism that is being reflected in these works? In short, should we consider the Silver Age a time unique to Russia, or was the definition of the Silver Age linked firmly to the increasingly democratic European expression of modernity? Since Rylkova reminds us that Erofeev, with his focus on sexual themes, saw himself as the heir of the Silver Age, can we find in this literature a discussion that links politics (pro and con 1917) with attitudes toward gender?

Rylkova's *The Archaeology of Anxiety* is an impressive feat in synthesizing Russian literature over the century from the 1890s to the 1990s. By analyzing the great works of the 1900s, she proves that the literature of the not-so-recent past was formed in dialogue with its own past, making and unmaking a reaction to 1917 as the fable of the brief, dazzling episode known as the Silver Age.

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