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1. The first question, and perhaps the most intriguing one, regards Zinaida Gippius's reputation. i.e. Zinaida Gippius is not the first, nor second nor tenth, name that come to mind when speaking of the Russian silver age. It's as if she's been removed, or expelled, to some extent, from the poetical history and canon (as opposed to "big names" such as Tsvetayeva, Blok, Akhmatova, Pasternak, Mandelshtam, and even Merezhkovsky). Would it be accurate to determine that history has done Gippius wrong? And if so, what led, in your opinion, to this continuous overlooking of her artistic achievements & contribution to Russian poetry in general and Russian symbolism in particular?

**Gippius was highly regarded by her contemporaries and has not been forgotten by scholars. In the 1990s, when it became possible to publish anti-Soviet writers in Russia, Gippius was one of the immediate beneficiaries. In 1991 two superb collections of her writings appeared independently of each other, one in Moscow, one in Petersburg, both edited by the foremost scholars of Russian modernism. There have been numerous editions since then, including a 15-volume collection of her works. However, it bears emphasizing that the early twentieth century was an exceptionally rich period of creativity in Russia, and that many other great poets of this time are poorly translated and under-appreciated. Gippius and her husband Dimitri Merezhkovsky were appalled by the Soviet regime, which they fled almost immediately. Their voices were among the most outspoken in the emigration. Such views ensured that they would be written out of all Soviet literary histories. To the extent they were mentioned at all (and sometimes it was impossible to avoid it, since they were extremely influential and acquainted with all the major cultural figures of the period), they were excoriated as “arch-reactionaries.” So in that sense they shared the fate of other talented émigrés. It’s hard to say that Gippius is less known than Vladislav Khodasevich or Georgii Ivanov, fellow first-generation émigré poets who ended up in Paris. That said: there is the additional complication in that Gippius was often (consciously) in the shadow of her husband. Contemporaries referred to them as “the Merezhkovskys,” presuming them to be interchangeable in their views. This was often true, but those who knew them well insisted it was Gippius who had the interesting ideas that Merezhkovsky then popularized. In the emigration Merezhkovsky was genuinely famous, one of the handful of Russian writers who made a name — and a fortune — for himself. But that was not because of his poetry (which was never very good), but rather on the basis of his novels, which were fluidly written, accessible, and easily translated. (His *Leonardo da Vinci* was Freud’s main source for his study of that artist; what this says about Freud and his methods is a subject for another interview!)**

2. Gippius, the 'queen of duality', was a woman of contradictions: Decadent and Sexually promiscuous/ambiguous on the one hand, and an anti-Bolshevik nationalist conservative as well as religious (who also denies anti-Semitism to some extent) but anti-monarchist on the other hand. What is your view on her "duality", how would you explain this phenomena? is it something unique to Gippius or rather a Russian cultural option which is less familiar, or acceptable, to the west? Would you say Gippius's anti-Bolshevik sentiment "helped" her, in the long run, to achieve the unflattering status of a forgotten poet?

**Most definitely Gippius carefully crafted her public persona, and that contributed to the often contradictory perceptions of her that one finds in the memoirs and letters of her contemporaries. Many contemporaries found her perplexing and even annoying. First of all, she dressed provocatively, sometimes in men's clothes, sometimes like a "loose woman." She also behaved oddly, even "scandalously"; for example, she would grimace and smirk at the meetings of the Religious-philosophical Society, where profound theological issues were being discussed and where seriousness of purpose was a prerequisite. All of this certainly had an effect on the way her writings were understood. Her poetry was often labeled "decadent," though a close reading of it shows Gippius to be consistently a religious poet, even if her religiosity is searching and unconventional. In one of her few statements about her own poetry, she defined it as prayer.**

3. In your book *The Development of Russian Verse: Meter and Its Meanings* you regard Gippius as "one of the great experimenters in the history of Russian versification". Now, this is quite an impressive title! How would you define those experiments? what was she after? and more important, how successful were these experiments eventually? You have also mentioned in *The Development of Russian Verse* her attack on free verse. Once again, how would you explain this contradiction: an experimenter who opposes a new form (although eventually she did write some free versed poems)?

**The Symbolist period is generally recognized as the rebirth of Russian verse, a period when poetry once again became the leading genre, as it had been in the age of Pushkin, but not in the age of Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky. (Tolstoy was still alive until 1910, of course, and he loomed large in the Russian cultural consciousness, but he preferred the role of religious thinker to that of writer, rejecting the great novels that had made him famous decades earlier.) Russian Symbolism should not be confused with French Symbolism; it had a strong religious component. Gippius herself was not "schooled" in poetry. In fact, she was barely schooled at all. Her education was haphazard, largely the product of whatever governesses or tutors were available as her family moved peripatetically around Russia. She began writing verse very early and appears to have developed her lyric voice on her own, using her voracious readings in prior Russian nineteenth-century**

poetry as her models. Yet she was remarkably innovative, even in terms of verse technique. The “dol’nik” (a type of loose syllabo-tonic verse, where the stress pattern is largely, but not entirely predictable) is one of the major developments of this period. It is symptomatic that Blok is often credited as the one who brought “dol’nik” into the repertoire of Russian poets, yet it was actually Gippius who did. (Blok took it from her. In fact, his admiration of Gippius’ poetry is something that was consciously elided from Soviet accounts of the period.) She also used unusual rhythmic patterning, for example, displacing the caesura in ways that no earlier poets had done. Such things produce an effect of strangeness that is palpable, even if the average reader could not explain what precisely makes it so. As you mention, Gippius has a poem entitled “Free Verse” that is written in rhymed iambic tetrameter quatrains (the most “traditional” form ever since Pushkin). That poem views free verse as a temptation for “lazy, minor, and simple” poets. This type of attack on free verse is hardly unique to Gippius; most Russian poets of this period — and even later periods — would have agreed. Free verse has only begun to make serious inroads into Russian poetry in the last couple of decades. Poets of the emigration encountered free verse in the West, but it was not congenial to their sense of the poetic.

4. What were Gippius's relations with the European poets (especially the Anglo-Saxon ones)? Beside translating Lord Byron, she also spent time in exile, being in Paris of the modernists, or in Mussolini's Italy while Pound (who also published English translations of her poetry, made by N. Jarintzov, in the *The New Age*) was stationed there. Was she influenced, in her writing, by the European scene? Did she make any attempts to import, or introduce/implement, those influences, those new ideas and trend, into the Russian literature?

Gippius had excellent French, and she was obviously aware of Baudelaire’s poetry, which left an unmistakable mark on her early poetry (for example, her poem “Flowers of Night,” which combines the notion of *Flowers of Evil* with Pushkin’s poem “The Upas Tree”). But I am not aware of her showing particular interest in any of her French contemporaries. By the time she emigrated, she had been publishing her poems for more than two decades, and it would have been odd for a mature poet to shift style at that point in her career. But Gippius was never particularly involved with Western poetry. As a rule, Russian poets — especially Symbolist poets — were enthusiastic translators. One of the things that distinguishes the Russian tradition from Western European ones is how many of the greatest Russian poets were also serious translators. But Gippius is the exception here; I am not aware that she translated any poetry at all. If she did — you say that she translated Byron, but I have never encountered these translations — it was certainly not a significant part of her activity. (The Russian edition called “The Poet’s Library” generally includes a selection of translations at the end of each volume, but the Gippius volume does not have any.) Insofar as she had contacts with European intellectuals, she knew the French. After all, she

**lived in Paris for about three decades. However, she appears to have had almost no contact with English-language poets. I don't believe that she could speak English, though she surely had reading knowledge. In any case, she seems to have had a phobia of getting too close to any foreign language. There is an interesting letter in which she warns her fellow émigré poet Vyacheslav Ivanov not to let his son be educated in French. She argues that if French becomes his primary language, he will lose his Russianness. I suspect that she felt something similar about herself.**

5. One of the most acknowledged poetic achievements of Gippius was the fact that she managed to turn her poetry into a delicate and well-tuned instrument for an accurate expression of her thought. This notion goes hand in hand with the known claim that poetry wise, essence was more important to her than style, and that she dealt with questions of form only because it was important for a flexible and adequate expression of her ideas. On the other hand, in her critical works, she clearly emphasizes/prefers style over essence. What are your thoughts regarding this strange division of literary categories?

**I think for most poets style and essence are inseparable. Valerii Briusov, another Symbolist, sometimes made a point of creating virtuoso poetic effects. He would think about a particular verse form or technique and then create a poem that would incorporate it. But this was foreign to Gippius. She began with the need to express something, and the form and message seem to have come together organically. It is revealing that Gippius shunned fixed forms. For example, the Symbolists loved to write sonnets, to show off how much variety and virtuosity they could bring to this venerable form. But Gippius wrote no sonnets. One of the things that I would suspect makes her difficult to translate is that the subtleties of her style can only be appreciated against the poetic practice of her contemporaries.**

6. In your book *The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Poetry* you mention Vladimir Solovyov's immense influence on Gippius, an influence which eventually gave birth to a new kind of symbolism, a religious one. What were the main elements in this new type of symbolism, was it all about a different, more mystical, content – or did this change also carried with him, or caused, a change of form? What is your personal opinion on Gippius's theological tendencies? Was she a serious theological thinker, or just another Russian mystic?

**Vladimir Solov'ev was a figure of immense authority for all of the Symbolists. He himself was highly skeptical of early Symbolism, though by the time of his death in 1900 he appears to have felt that there was something to it. To a greater or lesser extent, the Symbolists were trying to realize his ideals in their poetry. However, these attempts were not based on a systematic or careful reading of Solov'ev's philosophy. (Blok found his poetry inspirational, but his philosophy boring.) One of the areas where Solov'ev surely influenced Gippius — whether directly or indirectly — is her**

conception of love, which she understood as a desire rather than a fulfillment. The Gippius poem that I discuss in the book you mention describes a love that is unrealizable and therefore pure. It is conceivably a poem about same-sex love (and it is dedicated to Solov'ev's sister Poliksena, herself a poet and a lesbian), but most importantly it is about pure love. It is probably relevant to mention that Gippius and Merezhkovsky, though they lived together for 52 years from the day of their wedding ("never parting for a single day," as Gippius proudly explained), never consummated their marriage. One of Gippius' most memorable poems is untranslatable into English because it depends entirely on her use of grammatical gender. It is a love poem called "You," in which the beloved is addressed repeatedly in two different genders, in the odd-numbered lines as masculine and the even-numbered lines as feminine. In the final stanza things become still more confused as the speaker comes to the fore. That speaker uses verbal forms about himself/herself that are marked alternately as masculine and feminine. The poem is brilliant, but its outspoken androgyny was shocking to contemporaries. Gippius insisted that the poem should — and could — not be understood in any realistic sense, implying that it was directed to a spiritual ideal beyond the categories of gender.

7. Most of Gippius's poetry deals with the dreadful banality of the everyday life. Moreover, it is well known that she was exceptionally sensitive for "stickiness" and platitude of literary expression. Notwithstanding, she was a leading symbolist, and, to be frank, that style of poetic expression often tends to be a bit "sticky" and exaggerate. How, in your opinion, that contrast between content and form is even remotely possible?

Gippius does have dark poems in which life is depicted as a dead-end. As for most Symbolists, poetry for her was generally an attempt to escape from the horrors of quotidian existence to the world of spirit. At times this is expressed as despair, at times as hope, at times as certainty. I would not necessarily agree with the suggestion that she uses "platitude of literary expression," unless you mean that she is precise and writes without a great deal of poetic adornment. As far as "stickiness" — perhaps you have in mind that poem "The Spiders," in which she compares her existence in the world to being confined in a cell with four "adroit, greasy, and filthy" spiders, who spin enormous "gray, soft, and sticky" webs that gradually envelop the speaker. That poem may be a realization of Svidrigailov's famously unsettling image of eternity in *Crime and Punishment* as a bathhouse in the countryside with spiders. But she also has poems where the indignities of worldly existence are overcome.

8. V. Hodasevich, in his critical essay dealing with Gippius's poetry collection "The Shining Ones", wrote about Gippius's inner struggle between her poetic sole and none-poetic mind. What, in your opinion, was the meaning of that division made

by Khodasevich? How was that struggle implemented in her poetry, and which side won the struggle eventually?

**Khodasevich and Gippius knew each other well, but they were not close. Both were great poets and major critics, probably the two most influential critics of the Russian emigration. Khodasevich was fascinated by scholarly developments in the study of verse form, and he was obviously annoyed by the fact that Gippius did not share these interests. Khodasevich's contemporaries (for example, Andrei Belyi) were genuine pioneers in the study of poetry. Gippius, who was a generation older, had pretty much ignored these developments. As a result, Khodasevich felt that Gippius was not qualified to judge poetry (or prose, for that matter). That said, he had to admit that she was a talented poet. The only way he could do so was to argue that she wrote it in spite of herself. When he contrasts her "poetic soul" to her "unpoetic mind," he apparently is recognizing that her poetry is good poetry and lamenting that she herself does not understand what she is doing. He is not criticizing her for lacking poetic feeling, but for being what we might call "intuitive."**

9. One of the most fundamental expressions of the duality ascribed to Gippius was her gender flexibility that was expressed both in writing (the use of masculine form and pseudonyms) and in everyday life (wearing men's clothing). Moreover, some scholars claim that the preliminary nature of her writing was distinctively non feminine. What is your view on this claim? Is there any truth in it or maybe it's only a limited reaction to the gender obscurity? What, if true, was the nature of that literary masculinity, as opposed to a general notion of literary femininity?

**In Russia, until the early twentieth century, there was definitely a notion of "masculine" and "feminine" poetry, the latter being unmistakably pejorative. The early twentieth century saw the appearance of three very great and original female poets: Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, and Gippius. All three of them challenged the gender assumptions of their day. In some sense, Gippius — who was chronologically the first — challenged them the most. In this regard, Gippius is perhaps the most in touch with our own age, where fluid gender categories are becoming the norm. As you note, Gippius wrote her essays under a masculine pseudonym ("Anton krainii" — "Anton the Extreme"), and she used a masculine pronoun in her first-person poetry. (It is difficult to avoid naming the gender of the speaker of a Russian poem, since it is reflected in the morphology of adjectives and past tense verbs.) However, it should be emphasized that Gippius was not questioning gender assumptions simply to be provocative. She felt that gender was a category of division, and that the ideal world would necessarily resolve gender differences through the recovery of the underlying unity of all things. (This yearning for all-unity is yet another connection to the philosophy of Vladimir Solov'ev.)**

10. One of the most important features of the literary climate of the end of 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century in Russia, was the generation of a new type of relationship between prose and poetry when the dominance of prose in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was replaced by the revived poetical blossom, enriched by the discoveries and the impulses of the great Russian novel. What was the contribution of the Russian symbolist movement in general, and Gippius and Merezhkovsky as the main ideologists of Russian symbolism in particular, to that process?

**With few exceptions, the novel was not the major genre of Russian Symbolism. Even the great Symbolist novels (Sologub's *Petty Demon*, Merezhkovsky's famous trilogy) are stylistically very much of a piece with the nineteenth-century tradition. Andrei Belyi is the one obvious exception, since he explicitly applied poetic — even musical — principles to his prose. Except for Bely, though, I don't think we can speak of the Symbolists forging a new type of writing on the borders of poetry and prose. Like Merezhkovsky, Gippius wrote both poetry and prose. However, these were distinct categories for her, and there is no question that Gippius the poet was superior to Gippius the prose writer. The nineteenth-century novelist who most influenced the Symbolists was Dostoevsky, not through his novelistic form, but through his ideas. His depiction of the baseness of the world and his attempts to overcome it through religion — and a very personal religion at that — were congenial to Gippius and most of her fellow Symbolists. One might even say that they were seeking to achieve similar goals with different means.**