Master of Palindromes

Remembering and Rereading Michael B. Kreps (1940-1994)

I still look for his name on conference programs—we all have our ways of coming or not coming to terms with death. A Russian émigré poet, Michael B. Kreps was a beloved professor of Russian language and literature at Boston College from 1981 until his death from cancer in 1994. A native of St. Petersburg (Leningrad at the time of his birth), Kreps emigrated to the United States in 1974 and received his doctorate from Berkeley. I first met him in the summer of 1989 in Vermont, where we both taught at the Middlebury Russian School. Ours was a summertime friendship, and this is how I remember him best: suntanned and mustached, jeans and a polo shirt, on a college campus overlooking the meadows strewn with haystacks. Silos crowded our sight; lit by sunset, they looked like gilded onion domes, and Kreps and I both imagined that we were not in Vermont but someplace in a Russian countryside.

Most of my conversations with Michael (Misha) Kreps focused on poetry and poets. Poetry was his life. "Bring me a poem that preoccupies you at the moment," he would say, smiling his hallmark smile, a mixture of gentle irony and bewilderment. "We'll pick the poem apart, reassemble it, discuss it. This is what I like to do for fun." I must confess I only approached Kreps with a poem once, suggesting that we go over a short text by Pavel Vasiliev, a fine Cossack poet executed in 1937. Kreps was not taken with the poem; he found it too overtly political, too lacking of wordplay. Back then, in the summer of 1991, he was completing his Exegi monumentum, his collection of Russian palindromes, Mukhri i sikh um (Flies and Their Intelligence, 1993). During the last two summers of his life, a new topic emerged in our conversations: the relationship between the human body, the female body in particular, as the subject of the lyrical poem, and the form for which the poet opts. Kreps tried to persuade me that Russian classical prosody positioned too many restrictions on certain topics, while free verse American style—not the vers libre of Arthur Rimbaud, but the free verse of Marianne Moore—offered a Russian-American poet new paths to follow. Here's a short poem from his first collection, Interview with the Bird Phoenix (1986), rendered in a literal translation:

**Three Colors**

When a woman lets go
Her multicolored clothing,
Three colors remain:
Scarlet and white.
Scarlet cheeks, lips, nipples,
Scarlet imprints from bands and hooks.
The rest is all white.
The third color
Ever-changing, elusive—
The color of her eyes.

While Kreps published several collections of Russian verse in his lifetime, the palindromes are his crowning achievement. They have virtually no equivalents in Russian, and possibly, in world poetry. Several Russian poets, including the bilingual Vladimir Nabokov, had toyed with this difficult form and wrote palindromic oneliners. Very few composed longer palindromic poems; in this connection the brilliant Constructivist Ilya Selvinsky and the post-Acmeist Arsenii Tarkovskii both come to mind. The Russian Futurist Velimir Khlebnikov devoted a great deal of time to experimenting with palindromes, or pereverti, as he termed them. Khlebnikov's long palindromic poem about the peasant rebel, Razin, was a point of departure for Kreps; like his stellar predecessor, Kreps was fascinated by the notions of reversibility, recurrence, and comprehensibility of time.

Why palindromes? Did his secularized Judaic self manifest itself in these poems that can also be read from right to left like Hebrew verse? I remember stopping by Kreps's summer apartment to find him engrossed in composition; he would sit on his bed, in the company of his lifelong muse, Marina Kreps, and jot down various words and clusters of sounds. The complexity of their design and the subtle elegance and grace of the versification make Kreps's palindromes impossible to translate. Reading them in Russian is a literary fête. Here is one of
Kreps's palindromic sonnets in the original:

Сонет

Сонет — тень ос
и вранов, звонарь в око тиранов. Звонарь — и тонко мороз узором тело колет,
Со-нет, со-да, сад ос, тень ос.
Бы Немо племя Мельпоменов!
О, тело — вопль по воле! То видень мовы во мне див,
а то порывы ропота:
Отколе пело? Кто?
Тень ос сонет?
О тень! Тень? — Нет, не то!

Kreps was modest about his scholarship. I think he generally preferred to steer clear of learned conversations with colleagues, although students were always welcome in his office. Kreps is known for three monographs, Pasternak and Bulgakov as Novelists (1984), On Brodsky's Poetry (1984)—which was the first book about Joseph Brodsky—and Zoshchenko's Technique of Comical (1986). He approached the subjects of his research as both a critic and a creative artist, as a scholar-poet. This is why such aphoristic formulations as “Parrotry and Nightingaleship” (a chapter in his Brodsky book) have their antecedents in Kreps's poetry. The distinction between poet-imitators (parrots) and poets with original voices (nightingales) goes back to the poem “Thus Talk Parrots,” based on a wordplay with names of famous Russian authors:

From the age of twenty-five
A person begins to turn into a parrot
Repeating thoughts, habits, words of others [...].
They usually talk this way:
Pushkin, Peshkov!
Peshkin, Pushkov!
Mandelstam, Pasternak!
Pastershem, Mandelnak!
Fool! Fool!

Michael Kreps admired the Russian émigré Orpheus, Vladislav Khodasevich (1886–1939). Kreps valued Khodasevich's stoicism, his critique of philistinism, the anatomical precision of his descriptions. I remember a rather silly three-way conversation in which a lanky Russian professor with crimson pouted lips, Kreps, and I debated who was a better poet, Marina Tsvetaeva or Vladislav Khodasevich. Kreps certainly favored Khodasevich. “Only a genius could have come up with this,” he said and quoted a short 1922 poem from The European Night, Khodasevich's only collection of poetry published in exile. Here is how it reads in a literal translation:

The street was dusky.
A window banged somewhere under the eaves.
A light flashed by, a curtain soared,
A quick shadow dashed off the wall.
Happy is the one who falls head down:
If only for a moment the world looks different to him.

Much of Kreps's poetry is about the world of mundane living seen upside down, turned on its head.

There is a fatidic parallelism in the lives of the poets Kreps and Khodasevich. After Khodasevich died of cancer in June 1939 at age fifty-three, fellow Russian poet and exile Vladimir Nabokov spoke thusly of the poet’s departure: “Be it [sic] as it may, all is finished now: the bequeathed gold shines on a shelf in full view of the future, whilst the goldminer has left for the region from where, perhaps, a faint something reaches the ears of good poets, penetrating our being with the beyond's fresh breath and conferring upon art that mystery which more than anything characterizes its essence.”

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Agni: the Vedic god of fire and guardian of humankind.

The God of the Sun and Fire:
Excerpt from the First Mandala of the Rig-Veda (circa 1500 B.C.)

Glory to Agni, the high priest of the sacrifice. We approach you, Agni, with reverential homage in our thoughts, daily, both morning and evening. You the radiant, the protector of sacrifices, the constant illuminator, be as a father to us.

—as adapted by James Laughlin