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THE UNUSUAL CASE OF FR. SERGEI KRUGLOV: POET, PRIEST, AND POSTMODERNIST IN POST-SOVIET SIBERIA

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Abstract

The article explores the writing of Fr. Sergei Kruglov (b. 1966), a prominent practitioner of innovative Russian poetry, highlighting a complex evolution he underwent after embracing the Orthodox faith and becoming a priest, while continuing the experimental poetics that characterized his earlier work. Kruglov's writing, frequently in an ekphrastic mode, reflects his background as a resident of a small and remote Siberian city; at the same time, it is suffused with dense cultural allusions and dialogue with Western literature, especially of the Baroque and Modernist eras. Kruglov's writing is discussed in the theoretical contexts of postmodernist discourses on contemporary poetry and religion and socio-political contexts of contemporary Russia.

Keywords: *Sergei Kruglov; Russian Poetry; Postmodernism; Intertextuality; Russian Orthodox Christianity*

In 2007, one of the leading Western Marxist literary scholars, Terry Eagleton, published a book boldly titled *How to Read a Poem*. In it, he laments the

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decline in skills of poetry analysis, offers an engaging guide for nurturing those skills, and simultaneously challenges the “tenacious myth” that contemporary theory is to blame for “having sabotaged literary criticism”. Moreover, in his explication of strategies for close readings of poetry, Eagleton is emphatic about identifying himself as a “politically minded literary theorist” (2007: 1, 8). Many a poet and critic have sought to challenge the doxa about the decline and increasing irrelevance of poetry, and contemporary poetry in particular. In the context of American literature, the bold and ironic 1991 poem by Bob Perelman, titled ‘The Marginalization of Poetry’, and his later book of criticism for which it provided the title, offer a particularly telling example in this respect (1991; 1996). In the context of comparative study of diverse global poetic practices, including contemporary Russian poetry, Jacob Edmond provided an impassioned and astute counterargument to those who dismiss the relevance of contemporary poetry and poetics in the face of economic, geopolitical, and social changes in his study *A Common Strangeness* (2012).

Moreover, it can plausibly be argued that innovative scholarship on poetry is on an upsurge. In his contribution to the influential volume *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, Jonathan Culler sounded an alarm, noting that “recent criticism [...] neglected lyric poetry in favor of narrative, or philosophical prose” (1985: 41). Yet more recently, poetry was chosen as the thematic focus of the 2006 convention of the Modern Language Association of America, the world’s largest annual conference focused on literary scholarship; the association’s journal, the *PMLA*, featured in its January 2008 issue a special cluster of articles focused on “the new lyric studies”.

Within such theoretically minded scholarship on poetry, however, focus on contemporary authors remains relatively rare.¹ The breadth and volume of cultural production has been increasing especially rapidly in recent decades, and it would be easy to find it disorienting. Therefore, for scholarship on contemporary culture – with poetry being no exception to this – a strategy of particular importance is that of cognitive mapping.² This entails, on the one hand, making sense of the diverse terrain of poetic practices and constructing a roadmap to navigate through it, and on the other, a heightened awareness of the cultural location and significance of a particular person and his/her creative project. Scholars of contemporary Russian literature are fortunate to have an excellent resource that focuses precisely on this task, *Novaia literaturaia karta Rossii*.³ In the spirit of that endeavor, this article seeks to elucidate and contextualize the construction and performance of the lyric self of one of the most unusual and provocative figures in contemporary Russian poetry, Sergei Kruglov (b. 1966) – an innovative author with a complex post-modernist poetics, stemming from active heterogeneous dialogue with authors past and present, an outspoken public intellectual based in a small city in Siberia, and, since 1998, a Russian Orthodox priest.

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