

# **Melancholic Identities, *Toska* and Reflective Nostalgia**

Case Studies from Russian and Russian-Jewish Culture

edited by  
Sara Dickinson  
Laura Salmon

Firenze University Press  
2015

Melancholic Identities, Toska and Reflective Nostalgia : case Studies from Russian and Russian-Jewish Culture / edited by Sara Dickinson, Laura Salmon.– Firenze : Firenze University Press, 2015.

(Biblioteca di Studi slavistici ; 28)

<http://digital.casalini.it/9788866558224>

ISBN 978-88-6655-822-4 (online)

ISBN 978-88-6655-821-7 (print)

La collana *Biblioteca di Studi Slavistici* è curata dalla redazione di *Studi Slavistici*, rivista di proprietà dell'Associazione Italiana degli Slavisti (<<http://fupress.com/riviste/studi-slavistici/17>>).

Editing e progetto grafico: Alberto Alberti.

Questo volume viene pubblicato nell'ambito di un progetto di Ateneo finanziato dall'Università di Genova.

In copertina: *Disillusione*, Piero Cividalli, Tel Aviv.

#### *Certificazione scientifica delle Opere*

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Università degli Studi di Firenze

Firenze University Press

Borgo Albizi, 28, 50122 Firenze, Italy

[www.fupress.com](http://www.fupress.com)

*Printed in Italy*

## INDICE

S. Dickinson	Preface	7
L. Salmon	Chronotopes of Affectivity in Literature. On Melancholy, Estrangement, and Reflective Nostalgia	11
S. Dickinson	Aleksandra Xvostova, Nikolaj Karamzin and the Gendering of <i>Toska</i>	31
L. Quercioli Mincer	Nostalgia and Creatuality in H. Leivick's <i>The Golem</i>	57
M.A. Curletto	Regret for the Time of Heroes and Existential <i>Toska</i> in Vladimir Vysockij	75
L. Salmon	Melancholic Humor, Skepticism and Reflective Nostalgia. Igor' Guberman's Poetics of Paradox	107
I. Marchesini	The Presence of Absence. Longing and Nostalgia in Post-Soviet Art and Literature	149
	Bibliography	167



## Preface

*Sara Dickinson (University of Genoa)*

This book examines several aspects of the feeling that we often refer to as ‘nostalgia’ as it is manifested in Russian culture or, more precisely, on the margins of Russian culture. The writers and artists considered in this volume all operate on the periphery of a dominant imperial, Soviet, or Post-Soviet cultural system, from which vantage point they look ‘inward’ towards a central core with various degrees of longing. In their artistic production, these authors contend with a form of nostalgia that is not simply produced by the passage of time (as in maturation, aging, regret for a bygone childhood), but also by the recognition of and meditation on their own marginal status – the result of factors ranging from gender, ethnicity, and religion, to politics, imprisonment, emigration or other varieties of existential isolation. Indeed, the works analyzed herein were born of musings on the experience of social or psychological marginalization: for these authors, sentiments of longing give rise to reflection as well as to concrete texts that grapple with or embody the resulting feeling of nostalgia in various ways. The overlapping fields of artistic production considered here – prose, poetry, drama, music, visual art – illustrate this sentiment’s generative power.

The nostalgia that interests us may also be described with the Russian word *toska*, which describes a state of ‘anguish’ or ‘longing’ that can exist without any precise object and that we take as a synonym for “reflective nostalgia”, as outlined by Svetlana Boym (2001: 49 ff.). Boym distinguishes between a “restorative” (conservative, nationalist, ideological) nostalgia that is directed towards an idealized and even imaginary past, and a more “reflective” longing for something elusive and ineffable to which full or direct access is impossible. As this volume illustrates, the process of thinking deeply not only about the past, but also about one’s own sense of nostalgia or state of historical alienation engenders rich insights about the nature of existence and identity. While the continued contemplation of one’s own existential alienation serves to renew and nourish sentiments of melancholy and anguish, it is also true that marginality has often been accepted and even embraced as the essential condition of identities felt to be liminal or divided.

The introductory chapter by Laura Salmon (*Chronotopes of Affectivity in Literature. On Melancholy, Estrangement, and Reflective Nostalgia*) outlines in greater detail the relationship between reflective and restorative nostalgia to-

gether with other key terms that underlie our study. Specifically, Salmon provides justification for the linkage of reflective nostalgia, *toska*, and *melanxolija* to the Russian case studies and related problems of Russian identity discussed in this volume. Drawing from the field of cognitive sciences, she defines ‘feelings’ as ‘secondary emotions’ or ‘cultural constructs’ that result from our reflections on emotion, from our conscious awareness and processing of brute emotional impulses. That feelings can be chronic, i.e. repeated and characteristic of a given individual, and also shared, or common to multiple individuals, means that they are important for the establishment of both personal and group identity, be it national, ethnic, religious, political, or other. Salmon also provocatively superimposes Yuri Slezkine’s contrast between dominant “Apollonian” cultures and marginalized “Mercurian” cultures (Slezkine 2004) onto Boym’s distinction between “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgias. Nostalgia for Boym (2001: XVI) is “the symptom of our age” as is the pervasive influence of Mercurian culture for Slezkine. The liminal condition epitomized by the Jew’s role in Western society, in other words, entails a forceful apprehension of marginal status that is ultimately ‘reflective’ and thus ‘flexible’, subjective, ironic, and non-ideological. Mercurians, like reflective nostalgics, are both aware of their difference and celebrate it; indeed, Salmon argues, in such cases, an ongoing and self-conscious state of melancholic reflection constitutes one’s essence.

In the second chapter, *Aleksandra Xvostova, Nikolaj Karamzin and the Gendering of Toska*, I address the emergence and evolution of *toska* in eighteenth-century letters, long before the lexeme *nostal’gija* was literary currency. The history of *toska* reveals the gradual association of that sentiment with notions of femininity over the course of the century: male writers tended to associate *toska* with female literary personages and, during the sentimentalist era, with women writers. Indeed, struggles over the ‘ownership’ of this emotion and the right to express it helped to define a Russian tradition of women’s writing as well as the contrasting position of the male literary establishment. Aleksandra Xvostova’s emphatic declamation of *toska* in the mid 1790s, following in the wake of earlier reiterations of the sentiment by poet Ekaterina Urusova, attracted both the interest of readers and the misgivings of writers such as Nikolaj Karamzin, whose promulgation of fashionable “feminization” aimed to appropriate women’s expression of emotion rather than encourage it. A short-lived cult of literary *melanxolija* fomented by Karamzin and Vasilij Žukovskij at the beginning of the 1800s – and sustained by the social conservatism of that era – undid many of the previous era’s gains by wresting despondent sentiment away from women writers.

Laura Quercioli Mincer’s chapter, *Nostalgia and Creativity in H. Leivick’s The Golem*, describes the role of nostalgic longing in the life and work of the renowned Yiddish writer. Leivick’s drama *The Golem* develops out of a discomfiting notion found in Jewish tradition that God is absent or indifferent and from man’s resulting yearning for a different relationship with a deity who would be more accessible and responsive. Leivick’s nostalgic inclinations were also shaped by his passage through a period of revolutionary fervor, his conse-

quent arrest (in the tsarist era), incarceration, and later emigration, as well as by childhood experiences of alienation and anguish – moments teased out of his biography by Quercioli Mincer and seen to echo in his *magnum opus*. A conviction that return into the embrace of one's creator or parent is impossible – since it will invariably be either refused or ineffectual – underlies the Golem's pathos and tragedy. Ostracized from human society by virtue of his essential otherness, this homunculus represents his human creator's own inadmissible feelings of hatred and violence and thus embodies the reflection and refraction of man's sins onto the surrounding world. The Golem's sense of eternal and irrevocable estrangement from his own existence renders him a personification of nostalgia itself.

In the subsequent chapter, *Regret for the Time of Heroes and Existential Toska in Vladimir Vysockij*, Mario Alessandro Curletto addresses the problem of nostalgia in the work of the famous Russian singer-songwriter. Vysockij's determined search for heroes, a thread running through several of his songs, leads him to idealize environments in which heroic feats may still be performed. He is drawn to contexts that are characterized by their sharp contrast from the unmitigated grayness of daily life, including settings of extreme climate and geography (the mountains, the tundra, the steppe) and past eras, most notably World War II. Heroic feats are gestures of simple selflessness, of putting others first, of forgiving comrades for their very human errors, and performing actions designed to benefit a greater cause. Vysockij's songs also point to the impermanence of heroic gestures, which necessarily conclude with a return to bleak quotidian reality and with the reinstatement of longing for another, subsequent opportunity to soar above it. Heroism, for Vysockij, is also a means of overcoming social alienation or distance to achieve moments of communion and shared understanding with other members of the human race. Performance offered him an opportunity to consummate a bond with the community as well; it also furnished an alluring and longed for escape from daily routine, a temporary cure for the nostalgia that beset his existence, and through music he offered the same experience of respite to his Soviet listeners.

Laura Salmon's second chapter, entitled *Melancholic Humor, Skepticism and Reflective Nostalgia. Igor' Guberman's Poetics of Paradox*, explores the 'gariki' produced in thousands by émigré poet Igor' Guberman. Constituting a genre invented by Guberman himself, the *gariki* consist of rhymed quatrains that tackle issues ranging widely from prison, drinking, and sex to the contradictory nature of God. When Guberman addresses feelings, *toska* is the primary exemplar: his brief texts illustrate the existential condition of marginality felt by a Russian Jew from the now nonexistent Soviet Union living as an émigré in Israel. Guberman writes with poignancy, skepticism, and humor, confirming a sense of identity that retains its drollness despite being irrevocably fractured and consequently imbued with melancholic feeling. Salmon situates the *gariki* within the larger historical context of Russian Jewish identity and a tradition of writing and reflecting upon the paradox of eternal non-belonging. Guberman's verses elaborate an awareness of his own liminal condition from the perspective of a philosophical skepticism, leading him to acknowledge – with wry melancholy – the paradoxical nature of human life.

Irina Marchesini's *The Presence of Absence. Longing and Nostalgia in Post-Soviet Art and Literature* plumbs the relationship between post-Soviet identity and memories of the pre-Soviet past addressed in the work of several contemporary artists and writers. The specific works that she examines testify to complex and ambivalent feelings of regret for the 'traumatic' loss of the Soviet Union, understood not simply as a political entity, but also – and primarily – as an affective, personal, and domestic reality, the background for daily life and familial routines. Marchesini discusses how the installations of Il'ja Kabakov, Sergej Volkov, and Evgenij Fiks offer up to viewers concrete objects from the Soviet era in order both to suggest the long-lost past and to provoke specific modes of relating to and even interacting with memories of that time. The exhibited objects call forth a nostalgic response from viewers by jogging their recollection of intimate spaces from the past that were imbued with political images and concepts; these installations also encourage viewers to reflect upon the character of their own nostalgic feelings. A similar process of recalling and reacting to Soviet-era memories may be found in the autobiographical writings of Andrej Astvacaturov, where the summoning of an absent past is again mediated through material objects, their anachronistic presence enabling a multi-layered perception of bygone and present epochs. In Astvacaturov as well, distinctions between temporal eras and between private and communal spheres are blurred to provide a foundation for post-Soviet identity.

We are grateful to the University of Genoa for a grant that made possible the writing and publication of this volume. We would also like to express our deep gratitude to Antonio Prete, Laura Olson Osterman, Ruth Curd Dickinson, and members of the "Studi Slavistici" Board (Firenze University Press), particularly Nicoletta Marcialis, Giovanna Brogi Bercoff, and Alberto Alberti, for valuable help in the conceptualization of our overall project during the initial stages and for subsequent improvements to the finished product. For specific advice on the individual chapters that follow, we extend warm thanks to:

Maria Cristina Bragone (*University of Pavia*), Angela Brintlinger (*Ohio State University*), Elena Buvina (*University of Genoa*), Julie Cassiday (*Williams College*), Antonio Civardi (*University of Genoa*), Amanda Ewington (*Davidson College*), Silvano Facioni (*University of Cosenza*), Lucyna Gebert (*University of Rome 'La Sapienza'*), Gitta Hammarberg (*Macalester College*), Gabriella Imposti (*University of Bologna*), Nina Issaeva (*Bologna*), Dov-Ber Kerler (*Indiana University*), Ljubov' Kixnej (*University of Moscow*), Ekaterina Klimakova (*University of Novosibirsk*), Andrej Krylov (*Moscow*), Lion Nadel' (*Tel Aviv*), Simon Neuberger (*University of Trier*), Anatolij Olejnikov (*Novosibirsk*), Bartosz Osiewicz (*University of Poznań*), Cecilia Pozzi (*University of Genoa*), Claudia Rosenzweig (*University of Bar Ilan*), Giampaolo Sasso (*Milan*), Sergej Šaulov (*University of Ufa*), Andrej Semin (*Moscow*), Andrej Skobelev (*University of Voronež*), Galina Špilevaja (*University of Voronež*), Aleksandr Sverdlin (*Tel Aviv*), Oleg Vasin (*Moscow*), Giuseppe Veltri (*University of Hamburg*), Marlena Zimna (*Koszalin*).