A review of

Fantasies of Time and Death: Dunsany, Eddison, Tolkien

Joseph Young

Critic Brian Attebery has written of the 'new coherence'[1] that Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* provided to the modern fantasy genre, claiming it provided a model against which future essays in the craft can be and are judged. This is a credible point. In her new book, however, Anna Vaninskaya observes a key thematic carry-over between Tolkien's legendarium and those of two critically neglected authors who beat him into print by healthy margins. 'Cosmogony and eschatology,' she writes in her introduction, 'how it all began and how it is all going to end, and the nature of mortal existence in the interim between creation and apocalypse, is ultimately what the fantasies of Dunsany, Eddison and Tolkien are all about.' (6) The introduction furthers the point by briefly observing this theme in three more pre-Tolkienian fantasists (William Morris, George MacDonald and Hope Mirrlees). Vaninskaya does a convincing job of observing a strong thematic coherence in the pre-Tolkienian genre, positioning Tolkien as less of an innovator than a particularly robust link in a chain.

Having said this, Vaninskaya begins what may be her weakest chapter, that on Lord Dunsany. She observes that Dunsany's preference for short forms produced a corpus of discrete examinations of a few key motifs rather than (as in Tolkien) a single continuous thesis on them. That is a relevant point, though Vaninskaya seemingly does little to organise these individual thematic sorties into a rhetorical campaign. She identifies five such motifs – the extinction of humanity, gods in exile *et al*. – as dominating Dunsany's *Fifty-One Tales*. The reader might expect a subchapter on how Dunsany develops each of these motifs across his oeuvre. What follows instead is an elongated discussion of Dunsany's influences and precursors on the theme (Swinburne, Shakespeare, Tennyson). *The Gods of Pegana* and *Time and the Gods* are briefly examined, though only as the chapter progresses does any concerted focus on how Dunsany instantiates Vaniskaya's theme really emerge. Of his works only *The King of Elf-Land's Daughter*, *The Blessing of Pan* and *The Charwoman's Shadow* are given sustained individual attention, resolving into cohesive case studies of the putative

subject matter. All, it is worth noting, are among Dunsany's full-length novels. Of Dunsany's aggregate oeuvre, Vaninskaya concedes she can make few solid conclusions (59). Whether her theme is best handled in larger literary works, or her methodology works best in relation to such texts, is an interesting question.

Whichever of these two points is cause and whichever is effect, the later chapters of the book are considerably more successful in drawing conclusions about Eddison and Tolkien, who both did their best work in longer forms. If Vaninskaya's decision to treat Eddison's Zimiamvia trilogy as a unit is mildly frustrating (all her page references are to the 1992 omnibus edition), her focus on this work is commendable and the results are well-informed and intriguing. The key marker of strong Eddisonian criticism, I think, is the ability to see his ornate prose style as a part of his heartfelt polemical message, rather than as a barrier thereto. L. Sprague de Camp, in his woefully misapprehended 1976 profile,[2] failed in this; Jon Garrad, in his 2015 comparison of 'ERE' to modernism,[3] succeeded, and got some fine work done as a result. Vaninskaya should be bracketed with Garrad. Her work on such matters as Eddison's use of bubbles as a visual and compositional motif, his repeated yet subtle references to Rupert's drops (toughened glass beads created by dripping molten glass into cold water) and his discussion of Vandermast's House of Peace – one of several devices he uses to telescope or compress time – are impressive, and all are presented convincingly as instances of the core theme. Her observation that the central tension of Eddison's trilogy is epistemological rather than ontological – that this is a story about two interrelated groups of characters *working things out* – is particularly strong. The chapter has the same overall feel that its subject text, read carefully, has; it is a solid, cohesive examination of an important, undersubscribed subject.

Things continue to improve in the final chapter, which presents the tension between the human and Elvish perception of time as Tolkien's key authorial concern. This is hardly innovative, though Vaninskaya handles the issue very well. She hits upon the key matter of why themes of time and death loom so large in fantasies of artistic ambition fairly early in her composition; 'the tragedy of being a man' – which Tolkien identifies in '*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics' – 'necessitated as its foil the tragedy of being an Elf' (156). Fantasy can do things other prose literature cannot, among them presenting points of contrast to the human condition. Vaninskaya observes that Tolkien essentially reverses the intuitive implications of mortality and immortality; his Elves, being eternally linked to their world, lack the freedom to make something of themselves – and their world – that his Men have. This is an interesting insight and one on which she expands at some length in the copious remainder of her chapter. The end result is less of an impassive discussion of a theme than a celebration of it and the authors and literature that concern themselves with it.

Indeed – and at the risk of contravening C.S. Lewis ('We don't need the critics to enjoy Chaucer, we need Chaucer to enjoy the critics') – it could be said that the key strength of this book is that it leaves the reader keen to revisit all three subject authors and reconsider

their works in light of the author's numerous interesting points. Vaninskaya's work on Dunsany may be the least good material here but it is by no means poor, and the Eddison and Tolkien chapters are highly commendable. This is an important study of two critically undersubscribed authors and an impressive look at a third who benefits from reconsideration in relation to them. It is not the last word on any of its subject texts, but it serves as a robust contribution to a weighty, potentially inexhaustible debate.

Author: Anna Vaninskaya.
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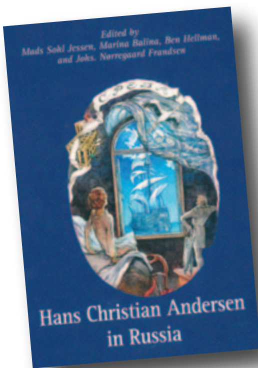
Notes

1. Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1992), 14.
2. L. Sprague de Camp, *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers* (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1976).
3. Jon Garrad, 'The Conquerer Worm; Eddison, Modernism and the War to End all Wars', in Janet Brennan Croft (ed.), *Baptism of Fire: The Birth of the Modern British Fantastic in World War I* (Altadena, CA: Mythopoeic Press, 2015).



A review of

Hans Christian Andersen in Russia

B.C. Kennedy

In the summer of 1857 – the same year as his translation of 'The Emperor's New Clothes' – Leo Tolstoy undertook a European tour. His travel reading included Hans Christian Andersen's *The Improvisatore* but it was Andersen's fairy tales that Tolstoy admired, writing in his diary, 'Andersen is excellent' (124). This anecdote illuminates the longstanding canonical status Andersen has for his Russian readers, but this status is owed specifically to his fairy tales; an assertion that the multinational scholars involved in this collected volume make in their introduction. For nearly two centuries, they argue,

Andersen's fairy tales have become 'an organic part of the cultural memory of generations of readers, his texts constituting a particular cultural code that is actualized in various artistic fields'.

The volume is divided into three parts, beginning with 'Andersen and Russia in His Time', focusing on how Russia was conceptualised by Andersen and by Danish culture at large. Mads Sohl Jessen demonstrates how Andersen's view of Russia changed from a negative one to an avid appreciation of Russian literature from the 1830s onwards. Johs. Nørregaard Frandsen emphasises the crucial role played by Denmark's Princess Dagmar's marriage to the future Emperor Alexander III (1866) in forging stronger Danish-Russian cultural bonds at a time when Russia was beginning to be integrated into Western European capitalism. Certainly, by the 1890s Andersen had become a universally recognised classic in Russia: in 1894 Peter Emanuel Hansen and his wife, Anna, translated Andersen's fairy tales and selected other writings, which became the canonical Russian translation of the Danish storyteller in the 20th century, through the Soviet period and beyond.

The second and third parts of this volume demonstrate the overarching chronological framework from the earliest Russian references to Andersen in the 1840s to his pervasive presence in the Russian digital sphere of today. Part Two, 'Andersen in Russia's Cultural Contexts', is divided into three subsections, with the first examining Andersen's place in pre-revolutionary Russian literature and criticism. Inna Sergienko's paper demonstrates that a positive re-evaluation of Andersen's works from the 1880s onwards changed the initial critical response. This was, she argues, due to the increasing availability of suitable translations and changing attitudes toward the fairy tale as a genre. Ben Hellman's investigation of the relationship between three major Russian writers of the 19th century and Andersen concludes this section.

In '"Creative Affinities": Andersen in Silver Age Poetry and Prose', the extraordinary influence Andersen played for a number of major Russian Silver Age poets is addressed.[1] Oleg Lekmanov demonstrates how Acmeists such as Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandelstam and Nikolai Gumilev were primarily interested in the material world of Andersen's stories of animated toy figures and preoccupied with deeply imaginative readings of Andersen. This was in sharp contrast to the younger Symbolist writers who were captivated by how the 'deceptive simplicity of Andersen's tales masked the mystical, almost ineffable Mystery of childhood and childlike purity' (138).

While Karin Grezl offers readers a compelling narrative of how the poet Maria Tsevetaeva modelled aspects of her life and the imaginative landscape of her poetry after Andersen, Peter Alberg Jensen traces the presence of 'The Snow Queen' in Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, arguing that the fairy tale contributes a paradigmatic and symbolic key to the novel.

In 'Andersen's Transformational Legacy in the Soviet Union', Vladimir Orlov explores Stravinsky's and Prokofiev's use of Andersen's fairy tales to express their own aesthetic visions. This is followed by Boris Wolfson's study of the playwright and author Evgeny Schwartz, who adapted three of Andersen's tales into successful plays for children. Wolfson

highlights Schwartz's radical innovative departure from the original tales and argues that Schwartz's dramatic versions possessed a 'cultural authority that rivalled, if not supplanted, the popularity of the Andersen texts' in a time of Stalinist repression and persecution (246). Marina Balina addresses the 'thaw'[2] in Soviet cultural life and how the writer Konstantin Georgievich Paustovsky uses Andersen's fairy tales as an emblem of imaginative freedom (256). Ilya Kukulin's essay of late Soviet culture provides an engaging discussion of numerous artists and writers in the 1950s, '60s and '70s who used Andersen's stories as a foundation for formulating new artistic visions.

In Part III Helena Goscilo's comparison of 20th-century film adaptions of the Danish 'Little Mermaid' to the Russian *rusalka* unwittingly emphasises a problematic element in Andersen's text, namely the sexualised imagery of the little mermaid and her sisters. Yuri Leving focuses on how artists sought to distance themselves from official Soviet socialist-realist doctrine. In his view, Andersen's importance to Russian illustrators lies in 'the liberating vision his tales afforded their art form' (116). Andrei Rogatchevski argues that 'The Snow Queen' resonates particularly in Russian due to the 'mirroring of Russia's self-identification with the North' (16). Helena Goscilo's second contribution assesses Soviet and post-soviet Russian graphic art inspired by 'The Little Mermaid', while the final collaborative essay analyses how Andersen's fairy tales permeate the commercial, digital and primary-educational culture of present-day Russia.

Given the preponderance of Russian fairy and folk tales such as those of Alexander Afanasyev, the popularity and enduring legacy of Andersen's fairy tales is not fully explained in this collection, but it does explore how the perception of Russian 'Anderseniana' – the extensive and multi-stranded legacy specifically of Andersen's fairy tales – functions in Russian cultural memory. However, what is precisely meant by a cultural code that emerges from Anderseniana is not made clear in this book. There are some editorial issues present but they are minor, and overall, this is a fascinating and wide-ranging read for those interested in why Andersen remains one of the top three authors in demand in Russia today.

Editors: Mads Sohl Jessen, Marina Balina, Ben Hellman and Johs. Nørregaard Frandsen.
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1. The Silver Age of Russian poetry is an artistic period that dates from the very late 19th century and ends in the 1920s. It implies a wide range of poets, genres and literary styles. There is even a broader notion of the Silver Age of Russian culture that includes avant-garde art, theatre, cinema, photography and sculpture – which very frequently were created in artistic groups that consisted of people from different spheres.
2. The liberalisation that commenced in Soviet Russia the year of Stalin's death is referred to as 'the Thaw'.