

Lekmanov, Oleg; Sverdlov, Mikhail and Simanovskii, Il'ia. *Venedikt Erofeev: postoronii*. Izdatel'stvo AST, Moscow, 2018. 464 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Selected bibliography. Index. R719.00.

THIS is an exceptional book, a writer's biography which could never have been expected to be written. Erofeev was, as the title of this study suggests, an outsider — he did not belong to any establishment and was officially recognized as 'disabled' on the grounds of his alcoholism.

In the early 1970s a 'poem in prose' called *Moskva–Petushki* spread throughout metropolitan samizdat. The book describes a train journey by an alcoholic Venichka Erofeev — the hero's name replicates that of his author — from Moscow to the small town of Petushki. Consumption of alcohol on the way takes Rabelaisian proportions. Venichka's journey plays out on two levels: physical, from a morning hangover to delirium tremens, and metaphysical, from a dubious resurrection to a horrifying vision of mystical crucifixion. Erofeev's grotesque masterpiece, with its breathtaking mastery of the Russian

language, sharp satire and brilliant humour ending in nightmarish tragedy, left its readers shaken, perplexed and fascinated. When in 1989 the 'poem' was finally published in Russia, its author immediately became a recognized classic, the most loved and admired writer of his time and generation. For Erofeev, however, fame was to be short lived: he died the following year at the age of 52.

After his death came a flood of memoirs, witness accounts, stories and anecdotes, some based on factual knowledge but many clearly products of wild imagination. His circle encompassed learned intellectuals and poets, but also the alcoholics and drunkards with whom he consumed immeasurable amounts of spirits, lived and worked at various periods of his life. To add to the confusion, Erofeev loved mystifications, inventing stories about himself and often distorting real events in order to give them more colour. In the absence of many written documents (Erofeev, defying the Soviet regime, often lived without any official papers), his real-life story became an enigma, wrapped in mystery and driving researchers to despair. His death from throat cancer strangely and disturbingly mirrored the last nightmare of his hero — death at the end of the journey by four apocalyptic assassins: 'They stuck their awl deep into my throat. I did not know pain like that was possible in the world... And since then I have not regained consciousness, and never will.'

It is this fact which clearly inspired the unique structure of his biography by the three authors of this book. It consists of eight chapters, seven of which have two parts: biography, related to certain periods of Erofeev's life, and an interlude with concise but thorough analysis of the relevant chapters of the 'poem' in which the fictional hero — the alter ego of his creator — follows various stages of his chosen road to physical destruction and mystical perdition.

No less extraordinary were the methods of research for this work: the authors interviewed over seventy people who interacted with Erofeev at different stages of his life — a gigantic task, considering the specifics and the variety of the interviewees' social and educational backgrounds. Clearly, in each case a special set of questions had to be developed, and private and personal circumstances taken into consideration in order to obtain the fullest and most truthful answers. The second stage was to compare these accounts, painstakingly deciphering, putting together and corroborating the stories using accessible documents and materials.

The first chapter focuses on Erofeev's childhood, based on interviews with his four siblings: the youngest in the family, he was born in a small village beyond the Polar circle. His father was sent to the Gulag for sixteen years, and his mother, being unable to feed a big family, had to send the two younger children, Boris and Venedikt, to a state institution. A prodigal child with a photographic memory and gifted with phenomenal musicality, Erofeev read avidly and listened to classical music on the radio. He acquired unusual knowledge, but at the same time contracted the habit of excessive drinking.

Gaining a place at the prestigious Moscow State University to study classics, he was — as is related in the second chapter — subsequently expelled. Erofeev always said that the reason was his non-attendance at compulsory military training, but as the three authors discovered by interviewing various Moscow intellectuals, he in fact ignored the entire formal process, not attending lectures and seminars, and not appearing at exams. The following chapters describe his uncompleted studies in other high schools, various odd jobs, his marriages and his sojourns in hospitals, where doctors unsuccessfully tried to cure their extraordinary patient of alcoholism.

The tale concludes with an account of Erofeev's last years, his late writing, huge fame, adoration and admiration by the public and his friends, conversion to Catholicism and his horrible illness. Throat cancer might have not killed him if he had been allowed to travel to France for a life-saving operation and treatment, but the Soviet authorities denied him travel documents under the absurd pretext that twenty-three years earlier there had been some interruptions in his working life. He lost his voice, being able to speak only with the help of a mechanical French device. Venedikt Erofeev's life ended on 1 October 1990.

As a result of their research, Lekmanov, Sverdlov and Simanovskii have managed to produce a unique biography — the life story and world-view of Russia's last tragic genius of the twentieth century. This biography illustrates not only Erofeev's extraordinary talent and personality, but also gives an enormously valuable account of life in the late Soviet Union. Modestly priced (at just over £8), this book is a delight to read and an essential resource for everyone who has an interest in Russian life and culture. It deserves a place in all research libraries.

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