

From the Heritage of Pushkin Scholarship

Из наследия пушкиноведения

Alfred Liudvigovich Bem (1886–1945?)

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Alfred Liudvigovich Bem was a prominent Russian literary historian, editor and critic. He was born in 1886 in Kiev to a family of German Russians and studied Russian literature at St. Petersburg University under Professor S.A. Vengerov. He later worked at the University and participated in Vengerov's famous Pushkin Seminar (1908–16) from whose ranks came a whole generation of first-rate Russian literary scholars such as Iu. Tynianov, A.S. Dolinin, V.L. Komarovich. The best studies produced in this Seminar appeared in the collection *Pushkinist* (St. Petersburg, 1914) which opened with Bem's article summarizing the achievements of the Seminar.

Bem wrote predominantly on the problems of intertextuality and literary influence (Pushkin and Goethe, Pushkin and Chateaubriand, Pushkin and Musset, Tiutchev and German literature, Turgenev and Goethe). These studies appeared in the pre-1917 volumes of *Pushkin and ego sovremenniki*. The study of intertextuality became the hallmark of Bem's future scholarship produced in exile.

After his years at Petersburg University, Bem worked in the Manuscript Department of the Russian Academy of Sciences with Vs.I. Sreznevskii and A.A. Shakhmatov and later became its curator. Bem co-edited with Sreznevskii the multivolume collection, *Tolstoi: Pamiatniki tvorchestva i zhizni* (Petrograd: Ogni, 1917–23) as well as *Bibliograficheskii ukazatel' tvorenii L.N. Tolstogo* (Leningrad: AN, 1926) which laid the groundwork for the Jubilee Edition of Tolstoi's *Complete Works* in 90 vols. (Moscow: Gos. Izd-vo, 1928–58.) Bem co-edited with V.N. Beneshevich the bibliographical series *Obozrenie trudov po slavianovedeniiu*.

During the revolution Bem's sympathies were with the Social Democratic Party, but soon after he became disillusioned. In 1920 he left Russia, first for Warsaw, and then for the newly established Czechoslovak Republic, under its first President T.G. Masaryk. In 1922 he began teaching as a lecturer of Russian at Charles University in Prague. The most prominent among his students was the future literary critic and historian, René Wellek.

"Russian Prague" was a culturally and politically flourishing émigré community and Bem was involved in most of its cultural and educational activities, such as the organization of the émigré Writers' Union, the founding of Russian high schools, the Russian Pedagogical Institute, and

the Russian National University. He also edited the journal *Krest'ianskaia Rossiia* and taught Czech students at the university and Russian children in the Sunday church school. (Both the Russian church and the Sunday school were located in the basement of the house known as "professorskii dom" or "bratskaia mogila" in Prague, where Bem and many other prominent Russian scholars lived with their families.)

Bem's main scholarly interests were Pushkin, Dostoevskii, Gogol', Tolstoi, and contemporary poetry. From 1925 to 1938 Bem directed the work of the ongoing Seminar on Dostoevskii at the Russian National University in Prague. Modeled on Vengerov's Pushkin Seminar, it attracted established as well as newer scholars, and Prague soon became the foremost center for Dostoevskii scholarship outside Russia. The main accomplishment of the Seminar was to shift the approach to Dostoevskii's writings from the traditional religious-philosophical one to the study of its intrinsic artistic qualities. At the same time the Seminar encouraged new interdisciplinary methods, most notably psychoanalysis. The Seminar's work resulted in three invaluable collections under Bem's editorship: *O Dostoevskom*, vols. I, II, III (Prague, 1929, 1933, 1936). Volumes I and II included studies by D.I. Chizhevskii, N.E. Osipov, P.M. Bitsilli, I.I. Lapshin, R.V. Pletnev, V.V. Zenkovskii, S.I. Gessen, Iu. Gorak, A. Bem and others. The second volume opened with Bem's programmatic study, "Dostoevskii—genial'nyi chitatel'," which traced literary allusions and "mapped" Dostoevskii's artistic memory. The volume concluded with "Slovar' lichnykh imen u Dostoevskogo." The third volume, subtitled *U istokov tvorchestva Dostoevskogo* (1936), contained exclusively Bem's articles on Dostoevskii and Griboedov, Dostoevskii and Pushkin, Dostoevskii and Gogol', and Dostoevskii and Tolstoi. (The two studies on "Pikovaia Dama" and "Skupoi Rytsar'" in the art of Dostoevskii reprinted in this issue are from this volume.) Here and elsewhere Bem's scholarship exhibits a thorough familiarity with primary sources and takes into account the achievements of contemporary Soviet scholarship (Tomashevskii, Bakhtin, Vinogradov, Grossman, and others). Bem's pioneering venture into a systematic application of Freudian methods to Dostoevskii's texts were collected in the volume, *Dostoevskii: Psikhonanaliticheskie ètiudy* (Berlin/Prague: Petropolis, 1938). In his undogmatic application of extra-literary and multi-disciplinary methods to philology, Bem was always guided by strictly literary criteria.

In response to the growing European interest in Dostoevskii, Bem founded the Dostoevskii Society in Prague. Among its members was the Czech president T.G. Masaryk, an erudite philosopher and connoisseur of Russian literature. The Society published Masaryk's *Studie o F.M. Dostoevskem* (Prague, 1932). On the occasion of Pushkin's centennial Bem, together with R. Jakobson, prepared and annotated the Czech edition of *Vybrane spisy A.S. Pushkina*, 4 vols. (Prague: Melantrich, 1936–37). For

the same occasion he also reworked his previous studies on Pushkin for the popular collection, *O Puškine: Stat' i* (Uzhhorod: Pis'mena, 1937). Next to the classics, Bem's interest included the contemporary poets: Blok, Bal'mont, Gumilev, Pasternak, Mandel'shtam, Khodasevich, Voloshin, Tsvetaeva and Akhmatova. Bem was one of the few émigré critics who closely followed the emerging Soviet literature and contributed numerous reviews of it to *Sovremennye zapiski*, *Poslednie novosti*, *Volia Rossii*, and *Rul'*, whose literary editor he became after Iulii Aihenvaľ's death.

Throughout his life, Bem actively supported and educated the beginning poets of the Russian diaspora. In Prague he founded the poetic circle "Skit poëta" which in its orientation toward classical poetical technique counterbalanced the more permissive Paris school of poetry led by G. Adamovich. "Skit" published four volumes of poetry. Its members included K. Nabokov, V. Lebedev, E. Chegrintseva, A. Golovina, E. Gessen and others, though none of them became a notable poet. During his Prague years Bem was a close friend of Tsvetaeva, Khodasevich, and the Czech poet Otakar Brezina, whose works he translated into Russian. When the Czech universities were closed during World War II, Bem taught at a high school and published a textbook *Russkoe slovo* (Prague: Khutor, 1940).

On 15 May 1945, shortly after the Red Army entered Prague, he was arrested by their military security police *SMERSh* (acronym *smert' shpionam*) and disappeared. The rumors of his suicide seem to me unsubstantiated. Considering his poor health, he either died at the very beginning of his imprisonment or, according to G. Struve (*Russkaia literatura v izgnanii*. Paris: YMCA Press, 1984, p. 184) and several other sources, he was executed in the courtyard of a Prague prison (Na Pankraci). The Prague émigré archives were confiscated and transferred to Moscow. I have heard that the poet Boris Slutskii supervised the transfer. The major part of the archive ended up in *TsGAOR* and *TsGALI*, the rest in *MID* and *GVIA*. What was left I sent in the 1960s to N. Andreev (Cambridge) and to D. Chizhevskii (Heidelberg), and kept a few manuscripts for myself. The part of Bem's correspondence which remained in Prague can be found in "Literarni archiv PNP." It consists of twenty-four boxes of letters from G. Adamovich, P. Bitsilli, D. Chizhevskii, Ivanov-Razumnik, Viach. Ivanov, S. Kartcevskii, W. Lednicki, N. Losskii, V.I. Nemirovich-Danchenko, A. Remizov, V. Sreznevskii, F. Stepun, G. Struve, P. Struve, A. Teskova, Max Vasmer, V. Vishniak, V. Zenkovskii, V. Khodasevich and others.

In the 1970s some of Bem's works began to appear again. "Slovanska knihovna" in Prague published a collection of Bem's studies in Russian (without the author's name) under the title *O Dostoevskem: Sbornik stati a materialu* (Prague, 1972). In 1972 *Uchenye zapiski Gor'kovskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta* reprinted Bem's study "Sumerki gerioia" under the title "Stat'ia A. Bema o traditsiakh Pushkina v tvorchestve

Dostoevskogo" (vol. 132, Gor'kii, 1972). Bem's monograph, *Dostoevskii: Psikhoanaliticheskie ètiudy* was reprinted in the USA (Ann Arbor, Mich: Ardis, 1983), and R.L. Jackson published Bem's important study, "'The Problem of Guilt' in Twentieth Century Interpretations of 'Crime and Punishment'" (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1974). For a brief appraisal of Bem's contribution to the study of Dostoevskii, see V. Seduro, *Dostoevski in Russian Èmigré Criticism* (Belmont, Mass.: Nordland, 1975, pp. 36–45). In the ex-Soviet Union, not counting a handful of specialists, the name of Alfred Bem was virtually forgotten. But the situation is about to change. Recently *Voprosy literatury* (June 1991) published three excerpts from Bem's studies ("Dostoevskii—genial'nyi chitatel'" and "Stsena iz Fausta"—on Pushkin, and "Soblazn prostoty"—about contemporary poetry). The selection was introduced by a well-informed article on Bem by S. Bocharov and I. Surat.

For a bibliography of Bem's pre-revolutionary studies, see *Istoriia russkoi literatury XIX veka*, ed. K.D. Muratova (Moscow/Leningrad: AN SSSR, 1962). A partial bibliography of Bem's works written in exile can be found in *Materialy dlia bibliografii russkikh nauchnykh trudov za rubezhom*, vols. 1, 2 (Belgrade: Russkii nauchnyi institut v Belgrade, 1931, 1941). The most complete bibliography was compiled by M. Bubenikova and L. Vachalovska: *Alfred Ljudvigovic Bem (1886–1945?), Bibliografie* (Prague: NKCR, 1995).

Bem was a man of encyclopedic knowledge of Russian and world literature. His critical approach, which he modestly referred to as "metod melkikh nabliudenii," established in its critical mass an intricate network of unexpected yet undisputed genealogical links among the works of Russian classics and between Russian and European literature. Though not a theoretician per se, Bem closely followed the rise and fall of Russian Formalism and favorably reviewed the achievements of Prague Structuralism. He wrote in five languages, was published in eight, and his bibliography contains over 200 scholarly articles. His works significantly influenced Dostoevskii scholarship in Europe between the two wars.

(I would be grateful to anybody who can share with me any relevant information about my grandfather's fate.)

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The texts reprinted here have been taken from A. Bem, "У истоков творчества Достоевского," which formed vol. 3 of *О Достоевском: Сборник статей*, под ред. А.Л. Бема (Прага: Петрополис, 1936, pp. 37–123). The references have been adjusted for *The Pushkin Review* and in some cases transferred to readily available standard editions.