

# *Sergei Esenin In The Mirror Of American Periodicals, 1922–1925*

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**Abstract** – Despite a vast amount of the studies by American critics, memoirists and scholars devoted to the analysis of Sergei Esenin's works, not all the pieces of the American press on the life and work of the Russian poet have been introduced into scientific use. The article considers materials on Esenin in Yiddish, English and Spanish, published in the United States in 1922–1925. Most often the American press wrote about Esenin in the following periods: during his trip with Isadora Duncan to the United States (October 1922 — February 1923), during their stay in Europe (February — July 1923), just after Esenin's tragic death (December 1925), and after Isadora Duncan's death (September 1927). The article *Some Bolshevistic Troubadours* by a well-known American translator, editor and journalist Nathan Dole is of a special interest, and is introduced into scientific use. Dole included in his review large fragments of Esenin's poems, translated into English and called Esenin's book *Triptych* "a red rhapsody".

**Keywords** – Sergei Esenin, Isadora Duncan, Nathan Haskell Dole, John Clayton, George Seldes, US periodicals, biography, creativity.

## I. INTRODUCTION

S.A. Yesenin, together with his wife, the famous dancer Isadora Duncan, spent about four months in America - on October 1, 1922, the ocean liner "Paris" (the time of the ship's departure from Europe was recently clarified - see: [Skorokhodov 2013]), on board which they traveled, entered American territorial waters, and on February 3, 1923, their journey from New York to Europe began. These months were the period of the most intensive publication of materials with a mention of the poet, who was considered as the young Russian husband of a talented American woman.

Subsequent periods of frequent mentions of Yesenin fall on the time of his stay in Europe in February - July 1923, in the days after his tragic death in December 1925, and are also associated with numerous responses to Duncan's death in September 1927. However, the poet has been written about in the United States in other years as well. A considerable number of studies have appeared that examine the perception of Yesenin by Americans. First of all, it is necessary to mention the work of Gordon McVay "Isadora & Esenin" [McVay 1980], in which a significant layer of periodical materials was introduced into scientific circulation. Recently McVeigh donated his most valuable archive of Russia to the State Museum-Reserve of S.A. Yesenin in the poet's homeland.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

To date, a general description of the materials received has been completed [Ioganson 2017], the archive requires further study. Some materials about Yesenin in English, including those published in the United States, were characterized in the works of O.I. Yushina, including in her dissertation [Yushina 1981]. A short review "Yesenin in English-language literary criticism" was made in 2008 by A.Y. Bolshakova [Bolshakova 2008]. Translations of fragments of publications of American periodicals about Yesenin

were included in the “Chronicle of the life and work of S.A. Yesenin”, they refer both to the time of the poet's life in America and to later years [Chronicle 2008; Chronicle 2010; Chronicle 2013].

A significant layer of materials will be introduced into scientific circulation in the "Supplements" section of the second book of the fifth volume "Chronicles of the life and work of S.A. Yesenin ", the release of which is scheduled for 2018. A characteristic of the reception of Yesenin's life and work in different countries, including the United States, is contained in the monograph by N.I. Shubnikova-Guseva [Shubnikova-Guseva 2012]. The American contexts of Yesenin's creativity are considered in N.A. Eremenko [Eremenko 2015]. Among the recent publications that introduced the materials of the American press of the 1920s into scientific circulation, we note the work of E.Y. Kolomiitseva [Kolomiitseva 2014].

### III. ANALYSIS

The Russian émigré press published in the United States, which wrote about the poet, has been studied much better [Rusское izmirie 1993; Skorokhodov, Kolomiitseva 2015; Skorokhodov, Kolomiitseva 2016] than publications in other languages. The researchers of the English-language American editions who gave estimates of Yesenin's work were named above. However, newspapers published in other languages also wrote about Yesenin. Unfortunately, not all of them have been reviewed. The search work is greatly facilitated by the availability of electronic copies of publications; however, due to the poor preservation of newspapers and magazines, not all scanned texts are correctly recognized. In addition, not all periodicals have yet been digitized and available to researchers.

The following is a description of a number of materials published in the United States on Yesenin, which were previously only briefly mentioned or not at all introduced into scientific circulation. A number of them, translated into Russian, will be cited in the above-mentioned second book of the fifth volume “Chronicles of the life and work of S.A. Yesenin ". For researchers of the life and work of the poet, the most interesting are the critical articles and reviews, the authors of which consider Yesenin in the context of the development of Russian and world literature. Such materials are recorded in the volumes of the Yesenin chronicle.

Among the recently identified American materials of this kind is an article by E. Izvolskaya, first published in French [Kolomiitseva, Skorokhodov 2014]. One of the earliest references to Yesenin in the articles of the English-language American periodicals devoted to the examination of Russian literature is contained in the New York magazine "The Living Age" for March 11, 1922. The section “Life, letters, and the arts” contains the material “A Russian on Russian literature”, which opens with a paragraph mentioning Yesenin and his co-authors from the collection “Scythians” - A.A. Blok and Andrey Bely:

Criticism of the morbidity and gloom of Russian literature has long been familiar in America, nor have the literary developments of the Bolshevik regime — striking as they have been — overcome the critics. The wild mysticism of Byelii and Essenin, the “Scythian” doctrine of Blok, seem to the American mind almost as morbid as the profound gloom of the earlier novelists. Particularly noteworthy is the belated review of Nathan Haskell Dole, published in the New York Times on February 25, 1923, *Some Bolshevistic Troubadours*, a response to those published in 1920–1921. In Berlin, the books of the Scythians publishing house, including Yesenin's *Triptych*, as well as the collection “Towards new distances. Lyrics of gentle accords”. Nathan Dole (1852-1935) - famous American poet, editor, journalist, active member of various creative associations.

He had a wide circle of contacts, including famous writers of his time (and he lived a long, eventful life): Henry W. Longfellow, W. Cullen Bryant, Walt Whitman, William Dean Howells, John G. Whittier, Thomas Wentworth Higgins, Edward Everett et al. Dole's house in Boston, where he lived from 1892 to 1928, has long been a meeting place for musicians and writers. Dole probably attended the performances of A. Duncan at the Boston Symphony Hall in October 1922, which was attended by Yesenin. Information about their meetings and communication has not been revealed. Note that Dole turned to the consideration of books by Russian authors two years after their publication, and precisely at the time when the American press was actively publishing materials about Yesenin: in early February 1923, American newspapers reported on the departure of Duncan and her young husband from America to Europe, and then printed notes related to their family quarrels, and messages about the likely separation of the spouses. It is possible that such an informational background attracted Dole's attention to Yesenin's work. In his rather lengthy review, more than a third of the total volume is devoted to the analysis of Yesenin's texts, although other striking works of the turn of the 1910-1920s are also in the critic's field of view: "Scythians" and "Twelve" by A.A. Blok, "Christ is Risen" by Andrey Bely, "Beloved Songs" by N.A. Klyuev. Dole is widely recognized as a translator from Spanish and French. He also translated Russian writers, including L.N. Tolstoy. So, in 1886 he made the first English translation of Anna Karenina. In the preface to the translation,

Dole claimed to be translating from the Russian original, only occasionally correlating his version with the French translation already available at the time.

However, the first reviewers noted some abbreviations of the text of the novel made by Dole, which, in their opinion, testified to his orientation towards the French source<sup>1</sup>. For us, in this case, it is important that already in the mid-1880s, Dole knew Russian so well that he translated Tolstoy's voluminous novel. Dole's books include *Young Folks History of Russia* (1881), *The Latin Poets* (1905), *The Greek Poets* (1907), *Life of Count Tolstoy* (1911). Dole has worked for such publications as *The Boston Evening Transcript*, *The Portland News*, *The Independent*, *The New York Times*. Dole's review begins with an inaccurate account of the founder E.A. Lyatsky Joint-Stock Publishing Company Ogni, which was later reopened in Stockholm as *Severnye Ogni* publishing house.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

Calling the names of K.D. Balmont, F.K. Sologub and A.A. Blok, Dole notes:

But what makes them particularly interesting is that several of the authors represented have become notorious for their emergence into the arena of futurism. It is much the same as if gentle, pensive painters of the Hudson River school suddenly kicked over the traces and joined the ranks of F.T. Marinetti, or as it quiet Mendelssobnians became imbued with the vibrations of the *Intonarumori* futuristi or Luigi Russolo, Alexander Blok, for instance.

Dole's review contains many verse texts translated into English. So, after the quoted reasoning, he gives a complete translation of Blok's poem "Leave me in my distance ...». Noting: "That, and a vivid picture of soldiers departing for the front and dated September, 1914, will be found in a later collection of Russian poetry entitled " *Russky Parnass*" "rain ...». The reviewer highly appreciates the two poems given, considering them important for understanding Blok's later work:

These two poems, even in the slag-form of a literal translation, mark an advance from the sentimental outpourings of Blok's twenties; but the latest manifestations of his genius — for it was genius — are certain to elicit quite opposite judgments, Ivanof-Razumnik, for instance, in a long and somewhat repetitions introduction to the little volume containing Blok's "Scythians" and "The Twelve" declares that they "will live for decades and decades in Russian literature"...

In the context of the analysis of the works of the literary group "Scythians" formed in 1917 and the collections of the same name, Dole for the first time in his review mentions Yesenin:

Conservatives, on the other hand, do not spare epithets in condemning what seems to them gross vulgarity, outrageous blasphemy. Take the symbolism that characterizes not only these later poems of Blok, but many of the others contained in the volumes above noted; it is the symbolism of the Church, but diverted or perverted entirely from its historic import. It seems singular that these three revolutionary poets, Blok, Byely and Yesenin, should with one accord take the Resurrection of Christ to stand for the restoration of the Russian people after its crucifixion and temporary entombment.

Dole characterizes the figurative system and symbolism of the poem "The Twelve", cites a small quotation and shows that attention to the image of Christ brings together the creative searches of 1917-1918 by Blok, Bely and Yesenin. However, each of these authors has peculiarities in understanding both this image and the ways of development of Christianity in the revolutionary years. The reviewer illustrates the movement of the West to the East with a lengthy quote from Blok's "Scythians", which ends with the last stanza: For the last time - come to your senses, old world! To a fraternal feast of labor and peace, for the last time to a bright fraternal feast, the barbaric lyre is calling!

Then, without any transition, Dole turns to Yesenin, whom he characterizes as Isadora's husband Duncan, who, together with his wife, has just visited America and is now heading to his Inonia. The reviewer notes that Yesenin's poetics is characterized by "pseudo-Christian or parody-Christian (?) Symbolism" ("pseudo-Christian, mock-Christian -? - symbolism"). Dole considers the evolution of Yesenin's creativity in the context of the events taking place in Russia:

It would undoubtedly shock conservatism. But, if one is willing to admit that Russian Communism may be seriously accepted not as a mere belief but as a matter of life and death Orthodox Christianity, especially as developed in Russia, may in the eyes of such persons deserve to be pilloried.

## V. CONCLUSION

Yesenin's references in the articles that appeared in the first days after Duncan's death do not contain significantly new information about the poet, in this regard; we do not consider them in this work. An appeal to the materials of periodicals makes it possible to clarify which aspects of the life and work of the Russian poet were of greater interest to readers. This material is relevant in connection with the preparation of the second book of the fifth volume "Chronicles of the life and work of S.A. Yesenin" - fundamental scientific research, which notes the main references to Yesenin in various publications in Russian and foreign languages.

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