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STUDIES IN SLAVIC LITERATURE AND POETICS

LITERARY TRADITION AND PRACTICE  
IN RUSSIAN CULTURE

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**Six Easy Pieces  
on  
Grammar of Poetry, Grammar of Love**

The existence of intimate ties linking creativity, language, and sex is now widely accepted. In the Russian literary tradition, an early plea for a poetic language of love came from Pushkin, who complained that 'as yet, ladies' love has not expressed itself in Russian' (*Eugene Onegin*, III, 26.11-12) and set out to forge a vocabulary and grammar of erotic discourse.<sup>1</sup> In Russian scholarship, it was Roman Jakobson who both introduced the concept of the poetry of grammar and tested it against an erotic classic (Pushkin's 'No, I Do Not Treasure the Riotous Raptures...').<sup>2</sup>

What follows is an attempt to apply a similar approach to the techniques evolved by three Russian poets who, postdating Pushkin by a century (and Bunin's 'A Grammar of Love' [1915], by less than a decade), took the medium to new expressive levels. The six poems under analysis were written within years of one another some seven decades ago now, but their verbal *ars amatoria*, pressed in the service of meta-artistic themes, has yet to receive due scholarly attention. In my brief notes I lay no claim to plumbing the poems' psychoanalytic depths. I concentrate, instead, on their directly observable and probably intentional effects. These effects belong to that stratum of poetic meaning, hidden just beneath the linguistic surface, which I believe to be a rich and most legitimate area of our professional expertise.

1. *Gumilev, 'The Sixth Sense'*

Шестое чувство

Прекрасно в нас влюбленное вино  
И добрый хлеб, что в печь для нас садится,  
И женщина, которою дано,  
Сперва измучившись, нам насладиться.

Но что нам делать с розовой зарей [...]  
Что делать нам с бессмертными стихами?

Ни съесть, ни выпить, ни поцеловать.  
 Мгновение бежит неудержимо.  
 И мы ломаем руки, но опять  
 Осуждены идти все мимо, мимо.

Как мальчик, игры позабыв свои,  
 Следит порой за девичьим купаньем  
 И, ничего не зная о любви,  
 Все ж мучится таинственным желаньем;

Как некогда в разросшихся хвощах  
 Ревела от сознания бессилья  
 Тварь скользкая, почуя на плечах  
 Еще не появившиеся крылья—

Так век за веком—скоро ли, Господь?—  
 Под скальпелем природы и искусства  
 Кричит наш дух, изнемогает плоть,  
 Рождая орган для шестого чувства.

(1921; Gumilev 1988: 329-30)

(‘The Sixth Sense’. Beautiful is the wine that is in love with us, and the goodly bread that goes into the oven for our sake, and the woman whom we are given [the opportunity; whom it is given to us] to enjoy, after having been tormented first. // But what are we to do with the rose-coloured dawn [or sunset] [...], what are we to do with immortal verses? // You can’t eat, or drink, or kiss them. The moment flies unchecked, and we wring our hands, but still [time and again] are condemned to pass by. // Just as a boy, having forgotten his games, sometimes watches the girls bathing and, knowing nothing of love, is yet tormented by a mysterious desire; // just as once upon a time the slippery creature howled from a sense of impotence in the overgrown thickets of shave-grass, feeling on its back [shoulders] the still unformed [unemerged] wings,— // so century after century—how soon, O Lord?—under the scalpel of nature and art our spirit cries out, the flesh grows faint [exhausted], giving birth to an [the] organ of [for] the sixth sense.<sup>3</sup>)

Gumilev's poem is part rhetorical treatise on the need for the sixth— aesthetic—sense, part improvised quasi-history of the evolution of the appropriate organ. The master metaphor of the last two stanzas projects the slow-motion picture of the organ's imminent birth onto the entire span of natural and cultural history. The process takes aeons; but, having begun in the past and stretching into the future, it is at the same time experienced by the speaker in a sort of continuous present. Foregrounding the motifs of 'time's flow' and 'unconsummated task', the poem breeds various grammatical patterns of 'delayed closure'.

The game starts in the first stanza. The word order in the first line is inverted (deviating from the unmarked sequence Subject–Predicate–Objects) in several ways. The sentence opens with the predicate (*prekrasno*, 'beautiful is'), whereas the subject (*vino*, 'the wine') comes last, after a participial construction, which, too, is scrambled (*v nas vliublennoe*, lit. 'of us enamoured', rather than *vliublennoe v nas*). But all this takes place comfortably within a rather short simple sentence whose end coincides with the verse boundary. The second line, while introducing hypotaxis (it is a complex sentence), displays only a slight inversion in moving the main verb of the relative clause to the very end (the neutral order would have been *saditsia dlia nas v pech'*); but this, again, passes virtually unnoticed within the limited space of just one verse line. It is the third term of the comparison—'the woman'—that creates, building on the two less pronounced precedents, an impressive icon of 'delayed consummation'. The sentence length now doubles; the complexity practically triples, as the relative clause ('whom... we are given...') includes a gerund phrase ('first having been tormented') and an infinitive construction ('given... to enjoy'); finally, the climactic verb *nasladit'sia*, 'to enjoy', is split off from the words that govern and are governed by it (*kotoroyu dano...*) and is relegated to the very end of the sentence (and stanza). The impersonal and agentless syntax, permeating the stanza ('enamoured', 'goes into', 'it is given', 'having been tormented'), further suffuses the 'delays' with an aura of wistful unfeasibility.

These elaborate syntactic effects echo and iconicize the unambiguously erotic images they accompany. The opening line, with its first touch of word-order tension, features Wine, which easily connotes Eros (the argument is, indeed, premised on the 'wine, women, and song' topos) and is accordingly 'enamoured of us'. The second line, less taut syntactically, continues with Bread, a rather practical food item and thus an apparent retreat from eroticism; but on a subliminal level,

the grammatically masculine bread's (*khleb*) penetration into the feminine oven (*pech'*) may be not all that innocent; moreover, 'bread' connotes (Christ's) 'flesh' (especially in the context of 'wine', alluding to communion) as well as harks back to the folkloric symbolism of the Slavic *korovay* cake—an important part of the wedding ritual, rich in sexual, in particular phallic, overtones.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the most tortuous and drawn-out third sentence treats directly of the tantalizingly postponed possession of a woman. Clearly opposed to 'us' as another object of consumption, this 'woman' also establishes the poem's phallogocentric perspective.

The theme of 'unconsummated desire' develops further in stanzas II and III; particularly noteworthy is the hand-wringing, which, while in itself quite conventional as a gesture of despair, forms here an early foreshadowing of the wings about to sprout several stanzas later. In stanza IV, the theme of 'non-consummation' produces a vignette of the virginal voyeur unaware of the nature of his desire. This stanza begins the second half of the (of course!) six-stanza poem, which consists of one long sentence - a period with two anaphoric *Kak...* ('As...') terms culminating in a *Tak...* ('So...') closure. The suspense effect in this part of the poem depends on the period's overall pattern of deferred sentence completion, its sheer length, and its syntactic complexity (in particular, the generous use of subordinate clauses and gerund phrases), rather than on word order, which is, on the whole, regular. There is, however, an interesting inversion in the concluding stanza: the subjects, 'spirit' and 'flesh', do not appear until the third line and that only after their respective predicates. Furthermore, the 'delay' effect is reinforced by the interpolation of an 'impatient' apostrophe: 'how soon, O Lord?'. The apostrophe—unique in the entire poem, directed at no lesser an addressee than God himself, stressing the theme of 'time' in general and its unfinishedness at the present moment—marks the poem's culmination.

At the end of the stanza (and poem), unmarked word order is restored, as the main verbs precede the final gerund phrase. But this very stabilization reconfirms, rather than subverts, the open-endedness of the closure. Were the gerund phrase ('giving birth to an organ...') to come before the main verbs, the postponed syntactic closure, once achieved, would carry a greater sense of finality. As it is, the consummation seems less hard-earned and complete, presenting the birth of the mysterious organ as still in progress.

The strained syntax mirrors rather suggestive references to the nascent entity. In terms of 'the evolution of species', the missing member is discovered somewhere halfway between the reptiles and the archaeopteryx. But figuratively, this winged serpent reads, especially in the immediate vicinity of the words 'organ' and 'flesh' and in the broader context of the poem's erotic tensions, as a phallic image.<sup>5</sup>

Gumilev's text, then, is not simply metaliterary. It can be called 'metapoetic' in the literal Greek sense of 'meta-creative', narrating as it does the generation of the archetypal generative device—the phallus. Nor is the poem exclusively phallicentric. The very image of 'birth', which has been appropriated as a metaphor for 'male creativity' since Plato, implies a female subject. In fact, the new organ is being born by the androgynous man-and-wife union of the masculine 'spirit', *dukh*, and feminine 'flesh', *plot*, and delivered by the mixed-gender team of feminine Nature (*priroda*) and neuter Art (*iskusstvo*). Moreover, the use of the scalpel, though naturalized by the mythological concept of creation as the chiseling out of a Priapic deity, cannot help but suggest a Caesarean. On the other hand, if the surgical chiseling is visualized as literally performed on the sprouting organ, the image acquires sado-masochistic overtones, which are, after all, in line with the 'pleasurably enduring' aspect of 'delayed consummation'.

2. Pasternak, 'Here Passed [a] Riddle's Mysterious Nail...'

Здесь прошелся загадки таинственный ноготь.  
—Поздно, выплюсь, чем свет перечту и пойму.  
А пока не разбудят, любимую трогать  
Так, как мне, не дано никому.

Как я трогал тебя! Даже губ моих медью  
Трогал так, как трагедией трогают зал.  
Поцелуй был, как лето. Он медлил и медлил,  
Лишь потом раздражалась гроза.

Пил, как птицы. Тянул до потери сознания.  
Звезды долго горлом текут в пищевод,  
Соловьи же заводят глаза с содроганьем,  
Осушая по капле ночной небосвод.

(1918; Pasternak 1989: 225)

(A riddle's mysterious nail has passed here.—It is late, I'll sleep [on it], at first light I'll reread and understand [this]. But until they wake me up, nobody is given [a chance] to touch [one's] beloved, as I [do].// How I used to touch you! Even with my lips' copper [brass] I touched you the way they touch [move] a hall with [a] tragedy. The kiss was like summer. It lingered and lingered, only later did the storm burst out [discharge itself].// [I] drank [you? the kiss?] as birds [do]. [I] drew [it] out until the loss of consciousness. The stars take a long time flowing through the throat into the oesophagus, while the nightingales roll their eyes with a tremor [convulsions], draining the nocturnal firmament drop by drop.<sup>6</sup>)

Like Gumilev's 'The Sixth Sense', this concluding piece of *Themes and Variations* also blends the themes of poetry- and love-making. In fact, it echoes Gumilev's discontinuous construction 'dano, "is given", + Infinitive' in referring to sex (cf. *liubimuyu trogat' / tak, kak mne, ne dano nikomu with zhenshchina, kotoroyu dano [...] nam nasladit'sia*). It also shares with 'The Sixth Sense' the motif of 'erotic deferral'.

The first postponement takes place as the speaker puts off his reading for the sake of dreaming of having touched his beloved. The touching, in turn, observes the erotic discipline of 'lingering' before the 'stormy discharge'. The motif of 'lingering' underlies also the typically Pasternakian *double-entendre* on the word *tianul*, used here to mean both 'drawing a long sip [of stars]' and 'holding out as long as possible'—indeed, 'until the loss of consciousness'—in the course of 'convulsions'.

An erotic reading of this and the poem's other skilful ambiguities is prompted by the constant presence of the 'amorous' *seme* throughout the text: 'beloved', 'to touch', 'the copper of my lips', 'kiss', etc. Purportedly, the depicted scene is merely one of absorbed kissing, but much more seems to be going on—imagined, that is. In particular, the 'convulsions, or tremor' (*sodrogan'e*), innocently naturalized here as the trembling of nightingales as they deliver their warble, may also hark back to the Pushkinian 'moment of the final convulsions' (*mig poslednikh sodroganiy*), impatiently rushed by the speaker's frenzied lover in the openly erotic 'No, I Do Not Treasure...' (1830-1832?).<sup>7</sup> (An erotic/creative *sodrogan'[e] srashchenno[e]*, 'merged convulsions', in

the context of 'a song', appears in another *My Sister—Life* poem: 'Definition of the Soul'.)

For all its consistent hammering home, the amatory seme is blended with the literary. The reading that has been put off in the first stanza promptly finds its way back into the second—on the figurative level, which is doubly appropriate, as the speaker is dreaming. The underlying Dantesque Paolo-and-Francesca hypogram ('reading together resulting in sex—and punishment') is implemented through the master paronomasia of 'touching with tragedy': *TROGal tak, kak TRAGediey TROGaiut zal*. In this context, even the suggestively hard 'copper' (*med*) of the speaker's lips deploys its secondary—'artistic'—meaning: 'brass', as in 'brass instruments'. Pasternak may be relying on a precedent in Blok, in whose 'Ravenna' poem (1909), *Lish med' torzhestvennoy latyni / Poyot na plitakh, kak truba* ('Only the stately copper [bronze, brass] of Latin, / sings on the tombstones like a trumpet'; incidentally, later on in the poem it is none other than 'Dante with his aquiline profile' who is called on to keep up the 'singing').<sup>8</sup> The subliminal presence of 'trumpets' (*trub*) is reinforced by their rhyming with *gub*, 'lips'.

Despite the powerful and disciplined masculinity displayed by the speaker, he comes across as profoundly androgynous. This is hardly surprising in light of Pasternak's 'ecstatically self-sacrificial worldview' in general<sup>9</sup> and, in particular, of the fact that the speaker is, most likely, in bed, alone, and dreams of perfect lovemaking—both circumstances conducive to fusing two amorous bodies into one. The conflation is achieved by the use of ambiguously impersonal figurative predicates that fit either partner, such as the 'bursting-out of the storm' and the 'nightingales' convulsion(s).

Especially ambiguous in this respect is the nightingale image. *Solovey*, 'nightingale', is a masculine noun and, as a singing bird, it is naturally associated with the lyric's male subject—a reciter of 'tragedies' and in all likelihood an *alias* of Pasternak himself. Indeed, the equation 'speaker = nightingale' is all but explicitly stated in the text: 'I drank you the way birds do [...] The nightingales [...] drain the nocturnal firmament drop by drop'. Yet, this very activity of 'convulsively taking in the starry downpour' suggests the female, rather than male, role in sexual intercourse. As a result, the already ambiguous predicate *tianul* ('drank slowly or protracted'?), but so far a masculine one (on the grammatical level and in the 'kissing' plot), accumulates even more indeterminacy as its 'feminine' overtones are contextually amplified.



This role reversal, or rather role conflation, gets further support from an unexpected but likely intertextual quarter. The crucial image of 'touching physically and aesthetically at the same time' may go back to Khlebnikov's 'Slums' ('Trushchoby'; 1910).<sup>10</sup> The poem features a stag who, turning into a lion (i. e. from hunted game into hunter), 'demonstrates the [deadly] art of touching' (*Lev pokazal iskusstvo trogat*). The Pasternak-Khlebnikov link is signalled by the use of practically the same rhyme to *TROGAT*: Khlebnikov's hunter faces the stag-into-lion's threatening 'claw'—*KOGOT*; Pasternak's persona is baffled by the '[enigma's mysterious] nail'—*zagadki tainstvennyi NOGOT*. Moreover, Khlebnikov's stag starts out carrying the 'word [Logos] of love in his antlers' (*V rogakh glagol liubvi neset*) and displays feminine features: 'In vain with the charm [elegance] of your movements and the beauty of your somewhat maidenly face you tried to escape defeats' (*Naprasno prelest'yu dvizheniy / I krasotoy nemnogo dev'ego litsa / Izbegnut' ty stremilsia porazheniy*). Reinforcing the connection between the two poems, the 'copper', *med*' (of the Pasternak persona's phallic lips), too, is anticipated in 'Slums'—as the material of which the hunter's clearly phallic arrow is made: 'The arrow's copper has perched on the haunch [!]' (*Strely vsporkhnula med' na liazhku*). Finally, in the same *Themes and Variations* book that ends with 'Here Passed...'., there is a poem ('I Could Forget Them...?'), where the persona invites his beloved to lash/scar him (*Rubtsuy!*) and claims he recognizes her, a lionness, by her claws (*Po kogtiam uznayu tebia, l'vitsa*).<sup>11</sup>

The net result is that the speaker of 'Here Passed...'. boasts every possible role—of a powerful male lover, orgasmic female beloved, hunter, game, reader, actor, singer, source and receptacle of storms and stars—in complete erotic union with Nature, Culture, Self, and Other.

### 3. Pasternak, 'The Attempt To Separate [My] Soul...'

[...] Как ночь, уставшую сиять,  
 Как то, что в астме—кисея,  
 Как то, что даже антресоль  
 При виде плеч твоих трясло. [...]

Как в неге прояснялась мысль!  
 Безукоризненно. Как стон.  
 Как пеной, в полночь, с трех сторон  
 Внезапно озаренный мыс.

(1922; Pasternak 1989: 155)

([...] I love the names of the places where we used to meet...]  
 like the night that has grown tired of shining, like the fact that  
 the gauze is suffering from asthma, like the fact that even the  
 mezzanine would be [subjected to] shaking at the sight of your  
 shoulders. // [...] How thought would clarify in rapture!  
 Impeccably. Like a moan. Like a cape, suddenly illumined  
 with foam at midnight on all three sides.<sup>12)</sup>

Although Pasternak's relationship with the real-life prototype of *My Sister—Life*'s heroine appears to have been strictly platonic, some of the poems read as explicitly or implicitly erotic. One such text is 'The Attempt To Separate...'

In stanza III, the sight of the beloved makes even the mezzanine vibrate (*triaslo*), apparently in lust. The final stanza (which conjures a love tryst at dawn) features 'rapture, or voluptuous languor' (*nega*), a 'moan, or groan' (*ston*), and finally, a 'cape suddenly illumined with foam at midnight, on all three sides'. The provocatively phallic image of the masculine *mys*, 'cape', penetrating at night the feminine *pena*, 'foam', crowns this love lyric, in a sublimation of the speaker's trauma of parting.<sup>13</sup>

A pent-up sexual tension has actually been accumulating in the quasi-plot of *My Sister—Life*<sup>14</sup> for quite a while even prior to 'The Attempt'. Thus, the preceding poem ('Wild Was Your Welcome...') contains the sentence *Ni za kem / Ne rvalsia s takoy tugoy*, '[I] have never rushed after anybody with such yearning'. There, the cryptic last word—the Old Russian, *tuga*, 'sadness, yearning, sorrow'—connotes, by virtue of its homonymy (or rather, etymological kinship) with the adjective *tugoy*, 'tight, taut', a certain hard tenseness. In fact, if construed in this latter way, the sentence becomes lexically clearer, but syntactically elliptical: 'I have never rushed after anybody with such a tight one'. The unnamed entity would be grammatically feminine, implying *strast'*, 'passion', *toska*, 'loneliness, yearning', or some such feminine noun. But its 'tightness', as well as the very fact of ellipsis, would suggest an

unmentionable object, probably—at the price of yet another gender ambiguity—the male organ.

As a matter of fact, the ending of 'The Attempt' itself is not all that unambiguously phallic. To begin with, the cape does not so much actively 'penetrate' the foam but gets passively 'illuminated' by it. The 'illumination' (naturalized by the moonlit foam rushing onto the cape surrounded by the water) refers back to the stanza's first line: it provides a visual reification of the largely disembodied, albeit flawless 'clarification of thought in rapture'. What's more, the 'thought', *mysl'*, which rhymes with the 'cape', *mys*, is feminine in Russian, so that the conceit as a whole becomes androgynous and is thus not unlike the previous case ('Here Passed...'). Similarly, the tenor of the speaker's discourse is both physical and spiritual: in addition to the 'thought', there is the parting's sounding 'like the complaint of a [violinist's] bow' (*zhaloba smychka*) in the opening stanza (not cited above). And finally, 'The Attempt', too, features a lonely speaker who, reminiscing about the cumulative past ecstasies—phallic/androgynous, active/ passive, physical/spiritual, cultural/natural—is able to transcend reality.

4. Pasternak, 'Again Chopin Seeks No Advantage...'

Опять Шопен не ищет выгод,  
Но, окрыляясь на лету,  
Один прокладывает выход  
Из веритья в правоту [...]

Тогда, насквозь проколобродив  
Штыками белых пирамид,  
В шатрах каштановых напротив  
Из окон музыка гремит.

Гремит Шопен, из окон грянув.  
А снизу, под его эффект,  
Пряма подсвечники каштанов,  
На звезды смотрит прошлый век [...]

Итак, опять из-под акаций  
Под экипажи парижан? [...]

Опять трубить, и гнать, и звякать,  
И, мякоть в кровь поря,—опять  
Рождать рыданье, но не плакать,  
Не умирать, не умирать? [...]

В конце ж, как женщина, отпрянув  
И чудом сдерживая прыть  
Впотьмах приставших горлопанов,  
Распяьем фортепьян застыть?

[...] Разбить о плиты общежитий  
Плиту крылатой правоты.

[...] Всем девятнадцатым столетьем  
Упасть на старый тротуар.

(1931; Pasternak 1989: 406-7)

(Again Chopin seeks no advantage, but, sprouting wings in [his] flight, alone breaks through from likelihood to truth [being right].// [...] // Then, having been wandered through by the bayonets of the white pyramids [of the chestnut blossom], the music, in chestnut tents across, thunders out of windows. // Chopin thunders, bursting forth from the windows, while, from below, straightening the candlesticks of the chestnuts, the past century stares at the stars. // [...] // And so, out again, from under acacias [into a position] under Parisians' carriages? [...] // Again to blare, and rush, and tinkle, And gutting the flesh [of the fingertips] into blood,—to generate sobbing, but not to weep, not to die, not to die? // [...] // And in the end, like a woman at dark, miraculously holding off a gang of loud-mouthed harassers, to stiffen into a piano's crucifix?// [...] To smash against the slabs of the hostels [i.e. of their courtyards] a slab of winged truth [rightness]. // [...] With all the nineteenth century to fall upon the old pavement.<sup>15</sup>)

The third-person lyrical hero of this poem (from *Second Birth*) is the Romantic artist with whom Pasternak strongly identified—and whose music as well as personality readily lend themselves to an androgynous

reading. Although 'Again Chopin...' is not a love lyric, its portrayal of creativity repeatedly resorts to erotic imagery.

In accordance with Pasternak's overall poetics of 'self-sacrificial, "defeatist", ecstasy'<sup>16</sup> (and his androgynous concept of art, as established in the preceding analyses), the image of Chopin combines masculinity and femininity. On the one hand, the poem begins with the musician 'sprouting wings [!]'<sup>16a</sup> in his flight' to 'break through into' a feminine 'rightfulness, or truth' (*v pravotu*); it also likens music to the pointedly erect 'bayonets' = 'white pyramids' = 'straightened up chandeliers' of chestnut blossom.

On the other hand, the poem has Chopin moving 'out from UNDER the acacias [to end up] UNDER Parisians' carriages'<sup>17</sup> and eventually 'falling upon the old pavement' (probably the way music pours onto a flower bed in another Pasternak poem) to 'smash [...] the slab of his winged truth (*pravota*)'<sup>18</sup>—in a fitting closure of the frame (which opened with the same 'wing' and 'truth' motifs). The feminine/sadomasochistic orchestration of 'sacrificial ecstasy' reaches its climax in stanza X: Chopin and his piano (actually smashed by the rioting mob; see Note 12), are compared to a woman warding off rapists—and simultaneously to a crucifix. As a result, all four scenes (art, rape, destructive violence, crucifixion) are equated and fused together.

For balance, two stanzas earlier, Chopin's pianistic performance is given an aura of a male, rather than sacrificially female, sexual role; but that role, too, is then suffused with a good measure of shared suffering. On the literal, naturalizing, level, 'to tinkle [...] and, gutting the flesh [of his fingertips] into blood [...], to generate sobbing, but not to weep, not to die', means, approximately: 'to play without sparing oneself, to maintain artistic discipline while eliciting a passionate response from the audience and thus to attain eternal greatness.' Implicit in these images—and subliminally energizing them—is, however, an erotic subplot: the flesh (*plot*), grammatically feminine but referentially ambiguous—at once male (finger-like, phallic) and female (slashed, bleeding, vulval)—is being gutted in the process of the artist-piano and artist-audience intercourse that must give birth (!) to an orgasmic reaction while withholding the ejaculation in order to prolong the life of the performance.

## 5. Pasternak, 'Sparrow Hills'

## Воробьевы горы

Грудь под поцелуи, как под рукомойник!  
Ведь не век, не сряду, лето бьет ключом [...]

Я слышал про старость. Страшны прорицанья!  
Рук к звездам не вскинет ни один бурун.

Говорят—не веришь. На лугах лица нет,  
У прудов нет сердца, бога нет в бору.

Расколышь же душу! Всю сегодня выпень.  
Это полдень мира. Где глаза твои?  
Видишь, в высях мысли сбились в белый кипень  
Дятлов, туч и шишек, жара и хвои.

[...] Разбежится просек, по траве скользя.

[...] Просит роща верить: мир всегда таков.  
Так задуман чашей, так внушен поляне,  
Так на нас, на ситцы пролит с облаков.

(1922; Pasternak 1989: 142)

('Sparrow Hills'. [Place your] breast under [my] kisses, as under the washstand [spigot]! For it isn't forever, on and on, that the summer spurts, like a fountain [...] // I have heard [tell] about old age. Terrible prophecies! Not one breaker will raise its arms [hands] up to the stars. [What] they say—you can't believe. There's no face on the meadows, the ponds have no heart, there's no god in the pine forest. // So set your soul aquiver! Let it brim over with foam today! This is the noon of the world. Where are your eyes? See, in the heights the thoughts have churned themselves up and together into a white froth of woodpeckers, clouds and [pine] cones, heat and [pine] needles. // [...] The [strip-like] clearing will gain running speed, sliding through the grass. // [...] the grove implores [us] to believe that the world is always like this: thus [such] has it

has been thought up [intended, designed] by the thicket, thus [hypnotically] suggested to the glade, thus spilled over from the clouds onto us, onto [our] calico cottons.)

This is a straightforward love lyric, opening as it does with the call on the beloved to submit her breast to the torrent of the speaker's kisses. Erotic and existential themes—love, youth, ageing, union with God's world—occupy centre stage, while the problems of creativity, so important in the preceding texts, are hardly touched upon.

Prominent in the poem is water imagery: a wash-stand, summer's fountain, breakers, ponds, frothing soul, boiling thoughts, downpour from the clouds. The narrative proceeds along two main paths. On the meditative level, the speaker moves from the ecstasy of kissing to apprehensive thoughts about old age, to a *carpe diem* attitude, and then to a religious-philosophical acceptance of the eternal world order as represented by the fleeting moment. On a more mundane plane, the speaker and his beloved take a Sunday walk away from the city and ever deeper into the park—closer to nature's groves, glades, and clouds. 'Water' motifs accompany most stages of these twin processes, imbuing them with erotic energy.

The first stanza opens with a downward stream of kisses pouring as if from a *rukomoynik*, which is masculine and most probably features some sort of tap or stopcock.<sup>19</sup> The image is developed in the next line, where the jetting changes its direction (from downward to upward) but remains vertical and grammatically masculine (*kliuch*).

In stanza II, the imagined onset of 'old age', which is to render the world 'faceless', 'heartless', and 'godless', has a similar negative effect in store for the speaker himself: 'No breaker will raise its arms (*ruk*) to the stars'. The 'breaker', *burun*, is again masculine, the *ruki* link it to the *rukomoynik*, while its failed vertical movement opposes it to both previous spouters in an ominously suggestive image of 'senile loss of erection'.

Stanza III returns to the present moment, which the speaker invites his beloved to seize by setting her soul 'a-quiver' and 'foaming over'. Then the lovers' gaze travels to the heights, where their thoughts churn up more white froth. The erotic connotations of all this foaming are much the same as in 'The Attempt', as is the association of the implied sex act with 'thought processes' (see 'thought', *mysl*, clarified by pleasure), except that 'horizontal penetration' (of the foam by the cape) is now replaced with 'vertical tumescence'.

In fact, horizontal movement does materialize in 'Sparrow Hills' too. In the next stanza the grammatically masculine *prosek*, 'a strip-like clearing, lit. "a trans-section"', rushes through the feminine *trava*, 'grass'. The erotic connotations of this image (and the entire stanza) are, however, less urgent, and the absence of vertical movement coincides with a pause in the use of water imagery.

Both return in the concluding stanza, but with a radical difference that makes for an unexpected but appropriate closure. Until now, the vertical spouting has been performed by the lovers—one or both, with or without success, aimed upward or downward, at each other or at nature—stars, heights, clouds, etc. Now this pattern is dialectically reversed: the pouring is directed by an unspecified higher agency downward, from the clouds onto 'us' the lovers and, by extension, all of us mortals. The power of ejaculation is thus taken away from individual lovers and invested in an impersonal world force. (In a partial foreshadowing, 'the summer spurting up like a fountain' in stanza I had no personal source or addressee.) Thus, youth's sexual exuberance, the fear of senile impotence, and the orgasmic epicureanism of life's 'noon-time'—all 'godless' in one sense or another—find themselves sublated by a faith in the omnipotent providential eros that rains on the lovers, validating their existence.

5. *Mayakovsky, 'Tamara and the Demon'*

Тамара и Демон

От этого Терка  
в поэтах  
истерика.  
Я Терек не видел.  
Большая потеряйка.  
Из омнибуса  
вразвалку  
сошел,  
поплевывал  
в Терек с берега,  
совал ему  
в пену  
палку.  
Чего же хорошего?



Полный развал!  
 Шумит,  
 как Есенин в участке [...]  
 И пусть,  
 озверев от помарок,  
 про это  
 пишет себе Пастернак,  
 А мы...  
 соглашайся, Тамара! [...]  
 Сам Демон слетел,  
 подслушал, и сник,  
 И скрылся,  
 смердя  
 впустую.  
 К нам Лермонтов сходит,  
 презрев времена.  
 Сияет—  
 “Счастливая парочка!”  
 Люблю я гостей.  
 Бутылку вина!  
 Налей гусару, Тамарочка!

(1924; Mayakovsky 1963: 370-4)

('Tamara and the Demon'. All sorts of poets are in hysterics over this Terek. I haven't seen the Terek. Some loss! [I] got out of the bus, waddling, did some spitting into the Terek from the bank, shoved my stick into its foam [gave it some poking with my stick]. What's so great about it? A total breakdown! [It is] noisy, just like Esenin [detained] at the police station [...] And let Pasternak write away about all this, going crazy because of the blots [he makes] [...] The Demon himself, came flying down, eavesdropped, and drooped [lost heart], and disappeared, farting in vain. Lermontov comes down to us, scorning the ages. [He] is shining [beaming]—'A happy couple!' I love guests. A bottle of wine [please]! Pour some for the hussar, Tammie [old girl].<sup>20</sup>)

The poem openly targets Mayakovsky's dead and living rivals: Lermontov, the author of the original 'Demon'; Pasternak, whose *My*

*Sister—Life* is dedicated to Lermontov and opens with ‘In the Memory of the Demon’; Esenin; *et al.* In vying for the love of Queen Tamara, Mayakovsky’s persona successfully defeats all the rest, including the People’s Commissar for Education, A.V. Lunacharsky, and P.S. Kogan, the President of the State Academy for the Art Sciences. The poem ends, as is usual in Mayakovsky, with his persona lording it over<sup>21</sup> the entire Romantic cast: the Heroine (Tamara), the Rival (the Demon), and the Poet (Lermontov). As the rejected Demon leaves in humiliation, Lermontov arrives from the other world to congratulate the happy couple, while the smug speaker orders Tamara to wait on ‘the hussar’ in a characteristic gesture of male bonding.

Such is the ending, but the put-down game has been on from the start. Mayakovsky’s first butt is the river Terek, poeticized by generations of Russian lyricists. Taking a poke at the river—an element of setting, after all,—is a good warm-up for the ensuing defamation of the main characters. The Terek qualifies for this personal touch in its capacity as a major Romantic topos; and in general, rivers do lend themselves to poetic personification. Mayakovsky’s speaker avails himself of that possibility by describing his motions as *soval EMU v penu palku*, i.e., ‘gave HIM a couple of shoves in the foam with my stick’ (rather than ... *v EGO penu*, ‘shoved the stick a couple of times into ITS foam’), in a subtle grammatical tour de force that foregrounds the indirect object (the Terek) and suggests its animacy.

In fact, subjecting his characters, whether fictional or real, but certainly human, to verbal abuse, spitting, and physical violence is a favorite strategy of the Mayakovsky persona.<sup>22</sup> Here it further qualifies the Terek as a character in the poem. Moreover, the river is clearly scapegoated for the speaker’s hard feelings vis-à-vis his fellow poets, whose ‘hysterical’ admiration of the river he cannot stand. Whether a fit of anxiety of influence (directed at the poets) or one of jealous rage (directed at the Terek), the persona’s reaction is violent. He arrives on the scene, swaggering with macho self-assurance (*vrazvalku*), and takes action.

The presence of the stick, *palka*, is naturalized by its probable function as a walking aid and by its actual use in the fragment for a sort of kids’ play. But in the context of spitting, of the poem’s defiant tone, and Mayakovsky’s overall aggressiveness, the stick is easily construed as a weapon—a club with which to beat up the rival poets and the object of their hysterical love. (After all, didn’t Xerxes have the Hellespontes flailed?!)

But the poem's tenor is not merely combative; it is also amorous—in a crude Mayakovskian sort of way. 'Violence' plus 'sex' add up to 'rape', and that is basically what the poem (not unlike much of Mayakovsky's love poetry) is about. In a foreshadowing of what's in store for Tamara, the poem begins with a symbolic seduction/rape of the Terek, whom the persona comes to see carrying—in accordance with Nietzsche's famous advice on how to handle women—a stick. Discussing Pasternak's 'The Attempt', we have noted the sexual connotations of hard oblong objects entering the foam. Mayakovsky's version of such a penetration is pointedly active, vigorous, and—iterative: *sovat*, 'thrust, or shoved', is an imperfective form, which here, especially paired with the iterative *poplevyval*,<sup>23</sup> signifies repeated motion. Furthermore, among the meanings of the Russian *palka* there is the colloquial/vulgar one: 'a dick [penis]; a fuck [act of screwing]'. In its turn, the verb *sovat* 'to thrust, or shove', not only admits of a 'phallically penetrative' reading on general semantic grounds, but is actually used as a substandard euphemism for male possession (e.g. *On ey zasunul*, lit. 'He put [it] in to her').

A question arises at this point regarding the gender of the object of possession. As a river (*reka*), the Terek—and certainly its *pena*, 'foam',—can claim femininity in Russian. But grammatically, the Terek itself is masculine, as are, in every sense, Mayakovsky's assorted rivals, beginning with the 'poets' in the very first line. Or are they? Their 'hysterics' show them to be unmanly, effeminate, and thus clearly less male than the macho speaker. In this, they are similar to the half-masculine half-feminine Terek—the object of the speaker's energetic 'stick-play'.

To sum up, the poet's idiosyncratic obsession with violence, misogyny, and megalomania transforms radically the motif cluster of love- and poetry-making, gender ambiguity, and nature-culture mediation, common to the texts we discussed earlier. Reified in the opening sequence of 'Tamara and the Demon' we find Mayakovsky's customary 'up-yours' attitude—a symbolic homosexual rape of nature and fellow poets.

## Notes

- 1 See Vol'pert 1968:102–24, with special reference to Pushkin's reception of B. Constant's 'Adolphe'.
- 2 See Jakobson 1985 [1961], 1976.
- 3 I use and on occasion emend Obolensky's translation (1976: 299–300).
- 4 On *korovay* see Ivanov and Toporov 1974: 243–58.
- 5 I refrain from discussing the archetypal motif of the 'winged phallus', suggested to me by Mikhail Yampolsky's work in progress on the topic.
- 6 The literal translation is mine—A. Zh.
- 7 On the poetry of grammar in that lyric see Jakobson 1976: 14–26.
- 8 On 'Ravenna' see Etkind 1978:18–32.
- 9 See Zholkovsky 1991.
- 10 See Khlebnikov 1986: 63–4.
- 11 On the relevance of 'Slums' to the Pasternakian androgynously self-sacrificial 'stag motif' see Zholkovsky 1991: 62–64.
- 12 In my translation and discussion of this as well as the other poem from *My Sister—Life* ('Sparrow Hills') I have used the very helpful monograph by O'Connor (1988).
- 13 Capes illumined by ecstatic foam etc., as well as the rhyme *mysy*, 'capes'—*mystli*, 'thoughts' appear also in the cycle 'A Theme With Variations' (in the book *Themes and Variations*), rife with erotic imagery. See especially 'Theme', which, moreover, involves as its major subtext Pushkin's 1826 erotic fragment (probably related to his unfinished play *The Mermaid*) 'How Happy I Am, When I Can Relinquish...' (Zholkovsky 1984: 211–14).
- 14 The narrative structure of the book is discussed by O'Connor (1988).
- 15 The translation (emended where necessary) has been borrowed, along with some observations and factual information, from Pomorska's analysis of the poem (1975: 33–38).
- 16 See Zholkovsky 1991.
- 16a Gumilev's 'The Sixth Sense', relevant to this and other of Pasternak's poems, is mentioned in *Safe Conduct* (1989, v. 4: 150) as a congenial portrayal of Pasternak's own perception as a ten-year-old of nature and women.
- 17 The passage 'carries a [...] biographical reference: Chopin's real accident in Paris' (Pomorska 1975: 37).
- 18 'The [...] downfall [...] echoes a real event, the destruction of Chopin's grand piano, which was thrown down from the window of his apartment in Warsaw during the uprising of 1831' (Pomorska 1975: 38).
- 19 The phallic connotations of *kran*, 'tap, faucet, spigot, stopcock (!), cock (!!!)', have a poetic tradition going at least as far back as Pushkin. See the

provocative passage in a draft version of 'Count Nulin': *Vertitsia Nulin—greshnyi zhar / Ego sil'ney, sil'ney ob"emlet, / On ves' kipit, kak samovar, / Poka ne otvernula krana / Khoziayka nezhoiui rukoy* ('Nulin keeps [tossing and] turning [in bed]—a sinful fever consumes him ever stronger and stronger, he is all boiling like a samovar, until the lady [of the house] turns the tap on with her tender hand'; Pushkin 1948: 170). The image of *kran*, 'tap', does appear in Pasternak, e.g. in 'Poetry' (1922), where poetry's jet is encouraged to stream even into the empty bucket of truism (1989: 220).

- 20 My translation—A. Zh.
- 21 On Mayakovsky's poetics of megalomania and violence see Zholkovsky 1986.
- 22 See Zholkovsky 1986.
- 23 Incidentally, 'spitting', as a rule strictly aggressive in Mayakovsky (see Zholkovsky 1986: 271-72), in this context lends itself to an interpretation as a sort of *verbum seducendi*.

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