

In ‘the Paradise of Friends’: Boris Poplavskii’s Novel, *Homeward from Heaven*, in the Light of Alexandre Kojève’s Seminar on Hegel

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THIS article will attempt to elucidate the rather enigmatic concept of the ‘Paradise of friends’ (also referred to as the ‘Kingdom of friends’ or the ‘Republic of the Sun’, or simply the ‘unknown friends’) that appears in several texts written by the Russian émigré poet and novelist Boris Poplavskii just before his unexpected death on 9 October 1935, arguing that this concept should be analysed in connection with Alexandre Kojève’s famous seminar on Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (*The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, 1807).¹

Aleksandr Kozhevnikov (1902–68), a Russian exile who gallicized his name in the late 1930s, delivered his seminar over a period of six years (from 1933 to 1939) at the *École pratique des hautes études* (EPHE) in Paris.² Beginning with the publication in 1947 of Kojève’s *Introduction à*

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¹ On Poplavskii (1903–35), see, inter alia, Elena Menegaldo, *Poeticheskaia vseleennaia Borisa Poplavskogo*, St Petersburg, 2007; Maurizia Calusio, *Il paradiso degli amici: Per un’analisi della poetica di Boris Poplavskij*, Milano, 2009; Dmitrii Tokarev, *‘Mezhdú Indiei i Gegelem’: tvorchestvo Borisa Poplavskogo v komparativnoi perspektive*, Moscow, 2011.

² The School, founded in 1868, has a special administrative and academic status. Until 2010 the humanities were taught in the Sorbonne’s historical edifice, so the school was often regarded as part of France’s oldest university.

la lecture de Hegel (Introduction to the Reading of Hegel (which included both brief summaries of earlier lectures and transcripts of later ones),³ this revolutionary (in all senses) interpretation has remained a focal point not just for Hegel scholars, but also for specialists in social philosophy, psychoanalysis and even literature.⁴

And yet the latter have completely overlooked the fact that Poplavskii, a key figure of the younger generation of the Russian diaspora, attended the seminar in 1934–35 precisely when he was working on his second novel, *Domoi s nebes* (Homeward from Heaven, full text published in 1993). In general, this novel has long been grossly underestimated, especially in contrast to *Apollon Bezobrazov* (1926–32, full text published in 1992), which owes its intrigue to the protagonist's unusual personality⁵ and demonstrates a somewhat tangled structure reflecting the diversity of 'languages' (ranging from romantic and symbolist to surrealist) used in the novel.⁶ In contrast, *Domoi s nebes* was taken by Poplavskii's contemporaries to be a straightforward *roman à clef*, built around the main character Oleg's relationships with two women, Katia and Tania (the latter was a barely camouflaged portrait of Natal'ia Stoliarova, Poplavskii's lover at the time).

Without questioning the obvious autobiographical basis of the novel,⁷ I will try to elucidate some episodes that require analysis from a different, primarily philosophical, perspective. In opposition to those critics and

³ Edited by Raymond Queneau, the experimental writer and devoted seminar attendant.

⁴ Kojève's great personal magnetism also helped create a certain myth around his paradoxical personality. See, for example, Dominique Auffret, *Alexandre Kojève: la philosophie, l'État, la fin de l'histoire*, Paris, 1990; Marco Filoni, *Le philosophe du dimanche. La vie et la pensée d'Alexandre Kojève*, Paris, 2010.

⁵ This enigmatic hero encompasses aspects of both real (in the wide historical range from Empedocles to the émigré poet Aleksandr Ginger) and fictional characters (such as Stavrogin and Kirillov in *Besy* [*Demons*] by Fedor Dostoevskii).

⁶ See, for example, John M. Kopper, 'Surrealism under Fire: the Prose of Boris Poplavskii', *The Russian Review*, 55, 1996, 2, pp. 245–64.

⁷ However, the author insisted, in a diary entry of 1935, that every single character of his novel was his invention, and not 'copied' from life. See Boris Poplavskii, *Sobranie sochinenii*, ed. A. Bogoslovskii, H. Menegaldo, 3 vols, Moscow, 2000–09 (hereafter, SS, further references [volume and pages] will be given in the text), 3, p. 444. This does not mean that the characters have nothing to do with the author; rather, as Poplavskii points out, they are his 'multiple personalities', among which he takes up the position of an impersonal observer. This ambivalent position allows him to write a diary that is *almost* a novel and a novel that is *almost* a diary. See Luigi Magarotto, 'Proza Borisa Poplavskogo mezhdu dnevnikom i romanom', *Russian Literature*, 45, 1999, pp. 415–26; Dimitri Tokarev, "'L'art est une lettre personnelle": le discours autobiographique dans la fiction et les journaux intimes de Boris Poplavskij', *Modernités russes*, 16: *La poétique autobiographique à l'Age d'argent et au-delà*, Lyon, 2016, pp. 185–204.

literary scholars⁸ who continue to classify the novel as a 'human document'⁹ and thus tend to treat it casually, I believe that it presents a complex array of philosophical, occult and religious 'meanings', which are hardly less rich than those in *Apollon Bezobrazov*, though they are more subtle and implicit. Like Bezobrazov, who appears in *Domoi s nebes* episodically, these meanings are, to use Louis Allain's expression, 'invisibly present'.¹⁰

My starting assumption is that *Domoi s nebes* marks a decisive step forward in the spiritual evolution of the key character of both novels. Indeed, virile and brawny Oleg is unambiguously presented as a 'regenerated' version of Vassen'ka, the explicit narrator of the first novel, who has lost much of the physical and spiritual apathy that he had formerly attributed to his Christianity and who has taken a good deal from his antipode, the heathenish Apollon Bezobrazov. While the former makes a striking parallel to the Hegelian Christian who is a bearer of 'unhappy consciousness' (his freedom is real, but real in the Beyond which remains inaccessible), the latter seems generally to embody the 'skeptical–nihilistic' attitude (Kojève would say that he 'denies the value and the being of the World and of other men').¹¹

The obvious presence of the Hegelian paradigm in *Apollon Bezobrazov* is indicative of the fact that Poplavskii was acquainted with the German philosopher's *oeuvre* even before he became Kojève's student. If he had not been, why would he have attended the seminar? As a side note, there is another possible source of Poplavskii's interest in Hegel, namely Jean Wahl's *Le Malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel* (1929).

In any event, the seminar on Hegel seems to have provided Poplavskii with the vivid philosophical context that he had lacked and to have helped him to better formulate, in the final pages of *Domoi s nebes*, the end point of Oleg's spiritual journey. This point is far removed from the starting point, contrary to some scholars' views;¹² indeed, it marks a crucial

⁸ See, for example, N. B. (Nina Berberova), 'Rets.: B. Poplavskii. "V venke iz voska"', *Sovremennye zapiski*, 68, Paris, 1939, pp. 469–70 (p. 469); Anna Dmitrova, 'Motivnaia struktura dilogii Borisa Poplavskogo *Apollon Bezobrazov* i *Domoi s nebes*', unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Rostov-on-Don, 2013.

⁹ See Natal'ia Iakovleva, '*Chelovecheskii dokument: istoriia odnogo poniatiia*', Helsinki, 2012.

¹⁰ Louis Allain, 'Domoi s nebes. O sud'be i proze Borisa Poplavskogo', in Boris Poplavskii, *Domoi s nebes: Romany*, St Petersburg and Düsseldorf, 1993, pp. 3–18 (p. 13).

¹¹ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols, Ithaca, NY and London, 1980, p. 54.

¹² See the commentary by Hélène Menegaldo: 'The circle closes: after passing a certain life cycle, the hero returns to his original state.' *SS*, 2, p. 451; my translation.

moment in his progress toward the idea of active participation (including acceptance of revolution and war) in history. As Kojève argued many times in his seminar,

now, for a Revolution to succeed in overcoming Christianity *really*, the Christian ideal must first be *realized* in the form of a *World*. For, in order that an ideology may be surpassed, ‘overcome’ — by Man, Man must first experience the *realization* of this ideology in the real World in which he lives.¹³

Thus, Oleg ‘overcomes’ two previous attitudes, that of the Sceptic and that of the Christian, and becomes a ‘Man of Reason’. Taking this statement (which in itself calls for further evidence) as our underlying premise, I will limit myself here to recreating the context of this spiritual evolution, namely Poplavskii’s involvement in the seminar and the resulting emergence of the concept of the ‘paradise of friends’.

An investigation of the Kojève-Poplavskii relationship will also allow us to take a new look at the well-known concept of ‘unnoticedness’ (first advanced in Vladimir Varshavskii’s book, *Nezamechennoe pokolenie* [The Unnoticed Generation], 1956), on which many contemporary scholars have drawn in their analytical descriptions of the creative strategies employed by Russian émigré writers of the younger generation.¹⁴ Indeed, the seminar was, it seems, ‘unnoticed’ by Russian émigré intellectuals, and its few Russian participants were, in turn, ‘unnoticed’ by their French neighbours in the lecture halls of the EPHE.¹⁵ In any case, none of Poplavskii’s comrades at the EPHE in 1934–35 (namely, Georges Bataille, Eric Weil, Jacques Lacan, Gaston Fessard, Henri Corbin and Raymond Queneau) never mentioned him. But should we consider this as proof that they failed to note his presence? The answer, as we will see, is not that straightforward.

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¹³ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 57.

¹⁴ See, for example, Irina Kaspe, *Iskusstvo otsutstvovat’: Nezamechennoe pokolenie russkoi literatury*, Moscow, 2005; Iuliia Matveeva, *Samosoznanie pokoleniia v tvorchestve pisatelei-mladoemigrantov*, Ekaterinburg, 2008.

¹⁵ A separate issue is the possible influence of the seminar on the work of these Russian participants. Along with Poplavskii, the seminar was attended by the philosopher Iakov (Jacob) Gordin and the journalist Raisa Tatarinova (Raissa Tarr).

The 'Paradise of friends' is referred to at the very end of both *Domoi s nebes*, completed on 15 September 1935, and the essay, *O substantial'nosti lichnosti* (On the Substantiality of the Personality), written on 5 October. The last words of this essay — 'Paradise and the Kingdom of friends' — seem to be the last words Poplavskii wrote before his sudden disappearance.

Though many considered his death from a heroin overdose to have been an accidental one, the dire financial situation in which Poplavskii found himself and a long period of depression and fatigue also provided evidence in support of the alternative version — that his death was a suicide.¹⁶ The suspicion of suicide lent Poplavskii's image a romantic shade of 'poète maudit' à la Gérard de Nerval, a poet who had deeply influenced his work.

However strange it may sound, this death might be also interpreted in a Hegelian context as a *philosophical* suicide, patterned after a famous prototype — Kirillov's suicide in Dostoevskii's *Besy*. This hypothesis calls for thorough debate, and will be the subject of another study; here, we will merely indicate a possible source for Poplavskii's philosophical vision of suicide, that is Kojève's seminar.

This source can be found in a footnote to lectures six to nine of the academic year 1934–35, which were published under the heading, 'The Dialectics of the Real and the Phenomenological Method in Hegel', as an appendix to the *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. There, Kojève referred to Kirillov's voluntary suicide and linked it to the Hegelian theme of the 'faculty of death' taken as the appearance of 'pure' or absolute freedom:

Kirilov wants to commit suicide solely in order to demonstrate the possibility of doing it 'without any necessity' — that is, *freely*. His suicide is intended to demonstrate the absolute freedom of man — that is, his independence in relation to God.¹⁷

According to Nikolai Tatishchev, who was Poplavskii's closest friend and wrote down their conversations, in the last months of his life the poet experienced a sort of kenosis, a liberation from all desires and temptations. He even ceased to write poems and read books (SS, 3, p. 501). Tatishchev seems to have ignored, however, that his friend continued to write *Domoi s nebes* and philosophical essays, as well as attend Kojève's seminar.

¹⁶ This version was supported by many contemporaries. See, for example, Vladislav Khodasevich, 'O smerti Poplavskogo', *Vozrozhdenie* (Paris), 17 October 1935.

¹⁷ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 248.

Therefore, it is all the more interesting to see that, in a conversation Tatishchev recorded shortly before his friend's disappearance, death is pictured as an environment of the imaginary Republic of the Sun:

The Republic of the Sun. I do not wish to be moral or polite with everyone, nor can I be. Only with those whom I admire. May the Republic of the Sun exist invisibly inside civilizations, whose citizens, joined together solely by admiration alone, freely destroy any evil between them (it is so easy when you are blissful). As for the others (the outer circle), morals do not exist, and everything is allowed.

People bear their death differently, some — as a beautiful hat, sportily and on one side. Some — with a romantic tenderness, as if it were Ophelia. The others (those who are despised) — as a gnawing cancer, a biting crab under their clothes that constantly picks at them and venomously splatters their neighbours.¹⁸ (SS, 3, p. 493)

Poplavskii was particularly interested in the third type, which he associated with Nikolai Stavrogin and 'men of the Stavrogin type', that is, presumably, Kirillov and Ivan Karamazov:

With regard to Europeans like Stavrogin (people like him are few and far between here, and we do not understand them), even if the idea of God turns out to be false, it is still mighty enough to kill them — that is, to kill the man who is not able to survive this falsity. (SS, 3, p. 493)

All three men are obsessed by the thought of death and suicide, but consider death to be a challenge rather than a threat.

Alas, I know the secret of those who do not love anybody. I also know how they compensate for lacking the happiness of loving somebody: with the happiness of not fearing death. (SS, 3, p. 494)

Poplavskii's speculation ends with an invitation to read Friedrich Hölderlin, who became a reference point for the French poetry of that time:¹⁹

¹⁸ All translations of quotations from Poplavskii are mine except those from *Apollon Bezobrazov*.

¹⁹ Isabelle Kalinowski, 'Une histoire de la réception de Hölderlin en France (1925–1967)', unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Paris-Est Créteil Val de Marne (UPEC), 1999.

If you do not understand something — Hölderlin²⁰ will provide an explanation. Read 'The Night Descended'.²¹ Only the Republic of the Sun or the 'paradise of friends' is real, other people do not concern us...

(SS, 3, p. 494)

The citizens of the Republic of the Sun are not afraid of death because it has become, for them, the object of philosophical reflection. Characteristically, they form, in Maurice Blanchot's terminology, a kind of 'unavowable community' which is 'invisible' for those who are not part of it.

It would be tempting, therefore, to analyse this community within the framework of Varshavskii's conception of 'unnoticedness', which ignores any contact between young émigrés and young French people, and emphasizes the cultural isolation of the émigré 'sons' vis-à-vis their elderly Russian confreres.²² Should the 'paradise of friends' be treated as a metaphor for this 'unnoticed' generation, which was defined as such after its key representatives had left (or almost left) the literary scene? Does a generational paradigm seem appropriate in this rather particular case?

The answer is not so obvious, especially if one takes into consideration some parallels which could be drawn between the fictional 'Paradise of friends' and the actual Kojève seminar. While neither is patterned after the other, they do both present a non-hierarchical model of organization that differs from that of the 'unnoticed generation'.

Indeed, the concept of the 'unnoticed generation' cannot exist outside a hierarchical structure, in which the 'younger' generation 'grows' out of the older one while postulating a rejection of the 'elders'. To use a metaphor, the older literary generation continues the 'trunk' of classical Russian literature, while the younger generation forms a 'branch' which 'outgrows' the trunk without ceasing to be part of it. This is what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call in their influential essay, *A Thousand Plateaus*, an 'arborescent' system:

²⁰ Here and in subsequent parts of the text, the italics in the quotations from Poplavskii signal portions of the text written in Latin alphabet or in French.

²¹ This is the first part of the elegy, *Brot und Wein* (*Bread and Wine*, 1800).

²² In the works of contemporary scholars, this mythologizing view of emigration comes in for just criticism. As Leonid Livak emphasizes, 'this mythology supports the image of the émigré intelligentsia held of itself based on the traditional Russian model of artists and intellectuals as prophets and martyrs — a model that makes meaningful involvement with French culture a liability for exiled writers and thinkers who would be forced to abandon their position in the pages of memoir literature as members of a shunned and persecuted order heroically persevering in its cultural mission despite overwhelming odds'. Leonid Livak, *Russian Émigrés in the Intellectual and Literary Life of Interwar France: A Bibliographical Essay*, Toronto, 2010, p. 5.

Arborescent systems are hierarchical systems with centres of significance and subjectification, central automata like organized memories. In the corresponding models, an element only receives information from a higher unit, and only receives a subjective affection along preestablished paths.²³

In his book, Varshavskii depicts the relationships between literary ‘fathers’ and ‘sons’ in a similar way, emphasizing similarities rather than differences in their vision of Russian literature. Thus, even if the ‘young’ writers were, as their elders pretended, isolated from ‘any historical continuity’ and fell prey to ‘foreign influences, surrealism, anti-social tendencies and defeatism’,²⁴ they nevertheless continued the humanistic tradition of Russian culture. To be sure, they were interested in European, namely French, modernist movements but, as Varshavskii argues, they never really thought of completely emancipating themselves from the ‘trunk’.²⁵ According to Varshavskii’s picture, their contacts with French peers were insignificant, if not non-existent. Logically, the hierarchical relations between the ‘older’ and ‘younger’, the ‘classics’ and the ‘newcomers’, excluded horizontal inter-communal relationships, making the young émigrés the unnoticed generation of *Russian literature*.²⁶

Poplavskii — that ‘most émigré of all émigré writers’²⁷ — provided an ideal illustration for the ‘cultural mythology’ that was thus being created. Although he was well noticed during his lifetime (despite Varshavskii’s contention), this was due not to his poetic gifts alone but also to his provocative ‘foreignness’. In his obituary, Gaito Gazdanov, another representative of the ‘unnoticed generation’, gave the following characteristic description of his friend:

Poor Bob! He always seemed like a foreigner — in any environment he found himself in. He always seemed to be returning from a fantastic journey, entering a room or café from an unwritten novel by Edgar Allan Poe.²⁸

²³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, tr. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, MN and London, 1987, p. 16.

²⁴ Vladimir Varshavskii, *Nezamechennoe pokolenie*, Moscow, 2010 (first publication: New York, 1956), p. 177.

²⁵ See Mariia Vasil’eva, ‘Boris Poplavskii kak vizavi Vladimira Varshavskogo’, *Izvestiia Ural’skogo federal’nogo universiteta*, Seriiia 2, Gumanitarnye nauki, 120, 2013, 4, pp. 265–79.

²⁶ In his pioneering study, *How it Was Done in Paris: Russian Émigré Literature and French Modernism* (Madison, WI, 2003), Leonid Livak did not move outside a similar hierarchical structure in which there was someone who ‘influenced’ (Proust, Céline, Gide and the Surrealists) and someone who was influenced (the young émigrés).

²⁷ Varshavskii, *Nezamechennoe pokolenie*, p. 161.

²⁸ Gaito Gazdanov, ‘O Poplavskom’, *Sovremennye zapiski*, 59, 1936, p. 463.

But in this context, being a 'foreigner' did not mean really being French, German or American. Rather, it meant wearing the mask of a 'foreigner' which was also modeled upon some real or fictional characters belonging to the world of literature. To be or, more precisely, to *be viewed as* a Russian Proust (like Gazdanov and Iurii Fel'zen), a Russian Céline (like Vasilii Ianovskii) or a Russian Rimbaud (like Poplavskii) was indeed one creative strategy among young émigré writers who wanted to accentuate their double literary legacy.²⁹ Poplavskii, whose incredible 'multifacetedness' was witnessed by many contemporaries,³⁰ particularly inspired a search for affinities (tenable or imaginary) of that kind. While it was a banality even during his lifetime to compare him with Rimbaud,³¹ other parallels, like those with Poe's characters or with the Baudelairian flâneur,³² seem also to have been justified.

To put it rather paradoxically, Poplavskii's 'foreignness' was conceived in opposition to the 'Russianness' of the 'elders', and not as a fact of his really belonging to French literary and intellectual milieus. Characteristically, Varshavskii states that 'Poplavskii was not acquainted with any contemporary French writers and never entered any French editorial houses or literary salons'. And the critic continues:

All of Poplavskii's mindset was absolutely different in nature from the 'sharp Gallic wit', the entire Cartesian side of the French genius. No, he was not a half-French and not a Parisian poet, but an émigré, Russian Montparnasse poet.³³

²⁹ According to Annick Morard, the French literature 'remplit en effet toutes les conditions pour un ancrage facilité: elle constitue un miroir dans lequel le déraciné se reconnaît, elle propose des valeurs esthétiques qui correspondent à des valeurs morales et, surtout, elle permet de réunir modèles français et idéaux russes sans suivre les chemins tracés par la génération aînée'. Annick Morard, *De l'émigré au déraciné: la 'jeune génération' des écrivains russes entre identité et esthétique (Paris, 1920-1940)*, Lausanne, 2010, p. 154.

³⁰ For example, Georgii Adamovich wrote in his obituary: 'One could never know beforehand what Poplavskii would come up with today, who he would be: a monarchist, communist, mystic, rationalist, Nietzschean, Marxist, Christian, Buddhist or even just a sporty young man, loathing all abstract thinking and believing that one should only eat, drink, sleep and do gymnastics to develop one's muscles'. Georgii Adamovich, 'Pamiati Poplavskogo', *Poslednie novosti*, 17 October 1935.

³¹ See Dimitri Tokarev, 'Les illuminations d'un Rimbaud russe: Boris Poplavsky et son *Journal d'Apollon Bézobrazov*', *Revue de littérature comparée*, 1, 2015, pp. 29-49.

³² See John M. Kopper, 'Funktsiia flanera v romane Borisa Poplavskogo *Apollon Bezobrazov*', *Russkaia literatura*, 1, 2014, pp. 95-101.

³³ Varshavskii, *Nezamechennoe pokolenie*, p. 150. But even at Montparnasse, Russians were after all separated from other inhabitants by the enigmatic 'invisible line of Brünnhilde' (*ibid.*, p. 151).

Varshavskii would probably have been most surprised to learn that Poplavskii had identified himself, in a diary entry dated 1927, precisely with such a Cartesian personage as Paul Valéry's Monsieur Teste.³⁴

Moreover, Poplavskii's presence in Kojève's seminar proves that he was much more extensively integrated into French intellectual circles than many have thought.³⁵ Certainly, Varshavskii and Tatishchev, who also says nothing about the seminar, could have been unaware of it. At the same time, 'circles' of interested people overlapped in various ways. But even if the information concerning the seminar was available, it may have been perceived as insignificant because it did not match the popular contemporary image of a Russian émigré disconnected from foreign milieus.³⁶

It would seem that the 'problem' of Kojève was similar: neither Kojève himself nor his seminar fitted into the conventional scheme that established the ontological 'isolation' of Russian émigrés, particularly young émigrés. But in contrast to Poplavskii, an emblematic émigré figure whose points of contact with the French were (perhaps quite deliberately) not 'noticed' by his Russian confreres, Kojève (despite his contacts with the Eurasians and Nikolai Berdiaev)³⁷ moved too far away from the Russian

³⁴ Boris Poplavskii, 'Dnevnik 1927 goda', ed. Hélène Menegaldo, *Novyi zhurnal*, New York, 263, 2011, p. 77. About Poplavskii and Valéry, see *Dmitrii Tokarev*, "Demon vozmozhnosti": Boris Poplavskii i Pol' Valeri', in *Russkie pisateli v Parizhe: Vzgliad na frantsuzskuiu literaturu: 1920–1940*, ed. J.-Ph. Jaccard, A. Morard, G. Tassis, Moscow, 2007, pp. 366–82.

³⁵ Among other contacts, we can also mention some Dadaist events in which Poplavskii took part (namely, the poetic evening of Sergei Sharshun [Serge Charchoune] *Dada lir kan* [on 21 December 1921], attended by André Breton, Paul Eluard, Philippe Soupault, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, or that of Boris Bozhnev [29 April 1923], with Ribemont-Dessaignes, Soupault, Pierre Reverdy, Tristan Tzara and Antonin Artaud also present). See Leonid Livak, 'L'Émigration russe et les élites culturelles françaises, 1920–1925: Les débuts d'une collaboration', *Cahiers du monde russe*, 48, 2007, 1, pp. 23–43; *Literaturnyi avangard russkogo Parizha: Istoriia. Khronika. Antologiii. Dokumenty*, ed. Leonid Livak and Andrei Ustinov, Moscow, 2014. The poet spoke in debates about Dostoevskii at the Studio franco-russe (18 December 1929) and also attended a session devoted to 'the Orient and the Occident' (27 May 1930). See *Le Studio franco-russe, 1929–1931*, ed. Leonid Livak, Toronto, ON, 2005.

³⁶ Leonid Livak, who did a great deal to dispel the myth about the marginal position occupied by members of the diaspora, argues that the exiles 'authenticated the motifs of suffering, solitude, and despair in their works, conflating and capitalizing on the model of the Russian writer as an ascetic prophet and on the French "modernist" rejection of literary recognition and success'. Livak, *How it Was Done in Paris*, pp. 42–43. Berberova, for instance, says not a single word in her memoirs about the Studio franco-russe, where she delivered a lecture about Russian symbolism on 16 December 1930.

³⁷ Kojève published a provocative article, 'Filosofiiia i V.K.P.' ('Philosophy and All-Union Communist Party'), in the journal *Evraziia* (9 March 1929) to which Karsavin

community to still be seen as a typical *Russian émigré*. Consequently, his seminar, which for all its 'esoterism' could not help but be known in certain narrow intellectual circles, appeared not to be perceived as being delivered by a member of the diaspora.³⁸

This implies that Poplavskii's and Kojève's age did not play a crucial role in the 'drama' of 'unnoticedness'. In fact, their extra-diasporic activities were noticed neither by their elders (which is more or less understandable considering the Russia-oriented interests of the 'fathers') nor by their émigré peers (which indicates a weakness of Varshavskii's conception).³⁹

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As stated above, Poplavskii attended the seminar in 1934–35. By that time he had quite clearly defined his philosophical interests, primary among which were the Stoics, Plato and the Neo-Platonists, Immanuel Kant, Hegel and the German Idealists, Eduard von Hartmann, Henri Bergson, Edmund Husserl, Vladimir Solov'ev and the Russian Christian and Intuitivist philosophers. Allusions to these and many other thinkers punctuate his novels and diary notes. This partial list indicates clearly that the poet was interested mainly in questions of perception of the world and of self-perception, as well as in the relationship between God and Man.

Hegel occupies a key position in this philosophical pantheon, for Poplavskii (via his autobiographical character Oleg) twice uses the philosopher's name to localize his own artistic and philosophical preferences: 'between India and Hegel', that is between East and West, between mysticism and philosophy, between spiritual practices and

responded in the next issue of the journal (6 April 1929).

³⁸ This is demonstrated by a critical lack of references on Kojève and his seminar in the émigré sources. Even his dissertation on Vladimir Solov'ev, written in Germany under the supervision of Karl Jaspers and published in French in 1934–35, did not, as far we know, receive any response among Russian émigré philosophers, which included many enthusiasts of Solov'ev's philosophy (above all Berdiaev). At the same time, Kojève continued to write philosophical texts in Russian up until the early 1940s; thus, an essay of 800 pages entitled *Sofiia, filo-sofiia i fenomeno-logiia* (February 1941) was submitted to the Soviet Embassy in Paris in order to be communicated to 'Stalin and the Russian people'. Another copy was kept among Georges Bataille's papers before being sent to the Bibliothèque nationale de France. What Raymond Aron described as his 'hidden and rationalized' Russian patriotism (Raymond Aron, *Mémoires*, Paris, 2010, p. 139) has recently provoked accusations that he worked for the KGB.

³⁹ It is also telling that Livak completely ignores, in his excellent bibliography, both Alexandre Koyré (see below) and Kojève.

speculative constructions; and ‘between Hegel and Laforgue’,⁴⁰ that is between philosophy and poetry.

In *Domoi s nebes*, a fragment of Apollon Bezobrazov’s diary, written on the margins of Fichte’s *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (*Foundations of the Science of Knowledge*) and dated May 1932, contains an important indication that Apollon attends lectures at the department of theology. This detail appears to be drawn from the context of Poplavskii’s own university studies: in a letter to Iurii Ivask of 19 November 1930, the poet wonders whether the history of religion, which he is studying at university, is his real calling (SS, 3, p. 480). The remark probably refers to the time Poplavskii spent in the Department of Religious Studies at the EPHE. In any case, his name is listed among the enthusiastic members of the seminar, and it is also quite possible that a certain ‘Poplonsky’, who in 1934–35 attended the lectures of the renowned Protestant theologian Maurice Goguel on ‘Early Christianity and the New Testament’, is in fact Poplavskii.⁴¹

Informal auditors at the EPHE were not required to formalize their attendance or sign the register, so it does not seem an unlikely assumption that Poplavskii may also have attended other lectures. Significantly, Poplavskii began to show an active interest in Hegel in 1932,⁴² when Alexandre Koyré⁴³ (Kojève’s teacher and himself a Russian émigré since the 1910s) was lecturing on the early works of Hegel at the EPHE.

⁴⁰ The French Symbolist poet Jules Laforgue.

⁴¹ *École pratique des hautes études. Section des sciences religieuses. Annuaire, 1935–36*, p. 55.

⁴² But in 1930 he had already read the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* and mainly its first part, ‘Science of Logic’. See Anatolii Vishnevskii, *Perekhvachennyye pis’mata. Roman-kollazh*, Moscow, 2008, pp. 202–03.

⁴³ In a diary entry of 22 October 1932, Poplavskii mentions ‘a certain Bulatovich’. This is surely Rostislav Bulatovich (1906, Odessa–1945, Paris), the first husband of Koyré’s sister Juliette and a founding member and secretary of the Masonic lodges Gamaïun, Druz’ia liubomudriia, Lotos, Severnoe siianie. Unsurprisingly, Poplavskii refers immediately to Hegel: ‘Hegel is difficult, but it’s impossible to write better, or more closely’ (SS, 3, p. 295). We should also mention another student of Koyré’s and Kojève’s lectures, Georges Bataille, who was well acquainted with Georgii Ivanov and Irina Odoevtseva from 1926 (see E. D. Galtsova, ‘Na grani siurrealizma. Franko-russkie literaturnyye vstrechi: Zhorzh Bataï, Irina Odoevtseva i Georgii Ivanov’, in *Siurrealizm i avangard*, Moscow, 1999, pp. 105–26). In her memoirs, Odoevtseva describes an episode that occurred in 1928: accompanied by Bataille, she encountered Poplavskii by her apartment; he had been standing outside the door for over half an hour (Irina Odoevtseva, *Na beregakh Nevy. Na beregakh Seny*, Moscow, 2012, p. 752). Theoretically, Bataille may have served as the link between Kojève and Poplavskii.

Kojève's reading of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* is in many ways based on Koyré's ideas. As no French translation existed at that time, and the Russian translation of 1913 could hardly be considered satisfactory, it must have seemed tempting to Poplavskii to hear Kojève's interpretation, which was not only philosophical, but also linguistic.⁴⁴ When Oleg 'cheerfully and gloomily overcomes his Hegel and is snobbish to his neighbours' at the library of Sainte Geneviève (SS, 2, p. 348), we may therefore assume that he is reading precisely *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

* * *

As Poplavskii's diary notes and narratives show, the poet was interested in four main Hegelian themes: 'unhappy consciousness'; the creation of the world; the relation of the soul and body; and social relations. The topic of the 'misfortune of consciousness' may refer both to the seminar and to the above-mentioned book by Jean Wahl (as well as to Berdiaev's review of Wahl's paper).⁴⁵ The problem of the creation of the world, which the poet viewed through the dual prism of Hegelian philosophy and the Kabbala, was related to the occult works in which he was interested during the late 1920s to early 1930s. The issue of the relationship between the soul and body was perhaps stimulated by Hegel's *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* and Ivan Il'in's study of Hegel. And, finally, the social aspect that became the focus of Poplavskii's interest in the mid-1930s was undoubtedly inspired by the seminar (Kojève discussed the master-slave dialectic during the 1933–34 and 1934–35 academic years).

As a detailed analysis of Hegelian motifs in Poplavskii is beyond the scope of the present study, we would like merely to draw attention to the final scene of *Domoi s nebes*, which seems to refer to the seminar. The scene takes place on the Place d'Etoile (since 1970 the Place de Charles de Gaulle) in Paris, where twelve avenues, among them the Champs-Élysées, intersect at the Arc de Triomphe. Oleg likes to meditate under the Arc (perhaps this is an allusion to Napoleon, who is a keystone of the Kojevian interpretation

⁴⁴ Kojève used to translate *The Phenomenology of Spirit* from German to French 'by sight', without using any notes. This manner of translating such a difficult philosophical text constituted a linguistic experiment in itself. See Natal'ia Azarova, 'Deux expériences de traduction philosophique: la *Phénoménologie de l'esprit* de Hegel dans la traduction russe de G. Chpet et dans la traduction française de A. Kojève', *Slavica Occitania*, Toulouse, 26, 2008, pp. 253–69.

⁴⁵ Nikolai Berdiaev, 'Rets.: Jean Wahl. Le malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel', *Put'*, 17, 1929, pp. 104–07.

of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*), ‘competing’ with its immobility and its ‘stone bas reliefs’:

Oleg was sitting on the right of his majestic friend the unknown soldier, and they were both silent, Oleg staring at life, brightly and noisily swimming past, and the soldier having been overturned in a black-winged abyss of calm and eternal justice. (SS, 2, p. 427)

Oleg considers his physical immobility a somewhat paradoxical form of spiritual ‘movement’ or a ‘self-sacrifice’. This ‘self-sacrifice’ is opposed to social and religious ‘activism’. Far from being the absolute peace of nirvana, it involves a certain inner ‘action’ which lies in cultivating a ‘profound and golden process’ that matures in the human consciousness. In the words of Bezobrazov, immobility is a sign of ‘spiritual nobility’:

The preservation of motionlessness, the motionlessness of judges, augury figurines, and statues, was a fashionable form of mysticism in those years, created by Apollon Bezobrazov and adopted by all of us as a means for discovering the world, for perceiving it in a special way.

Apollon Bezobrazov could expand astonishingly well on the subject. He loved the idea of motionlessness and considered it the hallmark of spiritual nobility, not a complete immobility and nothingness, but a different life, like the life of flags on towers, during which some profound and golden process slowly matures and repeats.⁴⁶

The image of a flag fluttering in the wind, extremely significant for Poplavskii’s poetical philosophy (see, for example, his book of poetry, *Flagi* [Flags], the only one published during his lifetime in 1931), is a metaphor for this ‘inner work’, which Paul Valéry captures in the cycle about Monsieur Teste with the word *maturare*, ‘to mature’. It comes as no surprise, then, that in *Domoi s nebes* flags take on a Hegelian dimension:

Once Oleg almost choked from surprise and gratitude when he read in Hegel that the body was the embodied, real, realized soul; not a burden, not a veil, but the perfection and luxury of creation, angry, grinning, trembling like a string, when above it, among the fluttering of flags and the roar of the crowd, the shot of the starter clicks and bangs... (SS, 2, p. 300)⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Boris Poplavsky, *Apollon Bezobrazov*, trans. John Kopper, Bloomington, IN, 2015, p. 104.

⁴⁷ See in Hegel: ‘The Soul, when its corporeity has been moulded and made thoroughly its own, finds itself there a *single* subject; and the corporeity is an externality which stands as a predicate, in being related to which, it is related to itself. This externality, in other

The flag, which is nothing but a surface, seems to Poplavskii an especially helpful image in his speculation about the complex relationship between 'inner' and 'outer'. He develops this idea in his article, 'S tochki zreniia kniazia Myshkina' (From the Viewpoint of Prince Myshkin, 1933), referring once more to Hegel:

This is material and spirit, electric spouses... and so 'people look at the sky and think: God is there, while the angels look at the earth and think: God is there'... But where is he? Not there and not here, but in the meeting of them, at the very surface of reflection, in the corporeal material manifestation of the spirit... Here Kant did not understand, but Hegel did... The essence is not 'beyond things' and not 'beyond reason', but at the very surface, in a joyful, shining, real meeting of the one and the other in the plastic-objective birth of the spirit... (SS, 3, p. 135)⁴⁸

The flag is a plastic-objective expression of the soul, its movements, its 'self-sacrifice'. Oleg's body, which sits immovably under the Arc de Triomphe, essentially acts as an objectified soul, and Oleg himself becomes (or is in the process of becoming), in the unity of his body and soul, a Hegelian philosopher, who is already ceasing to be an unhappy 'Religious Man' and is turning into a 'Man of Reason'. As Kojève puts it, 'ayant nié la transcendance, l'Homme ne fuit plus le Monde, il le supporte'.⁴⁹ While not denying the supernatural or God (as does Hegel-Kojève's Man), Oleg is interested in the worldly, physical and material, even if the earth finally does not accept him. A characteristic dialogue takes place between Oleg and Bezobrazov in the final scene of the novel:

- Well then, did you manage to come home from heaven?
- No, I didn't, Apollon... The earth did not accept me.

words, represents not itself, but the soul, of which it is the *sign*.' G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, tr. William Wallace, Oxford, 1894, p. 211. See also Ivan Il'in: 'Mastering its sensations coming *from* the body, and feelings that draw it to the corporeal, the soul thus masters the body and becomes an *actual* soul. It achieves identity between itself and its "outward form" and subordinates this to itself; the body is elaborated by the soul and appropriated by it; it *depicts the soul* and becomes its sign, its first manifestation, its creation.' Ivan Il'in, *Filosofiiia Gegelia kak uchenie o konkretnosti Boga i cheloveka*, St Petersburg, 1994 (first publication: Moscow, 1918), p. 282.

⁴⁸ Here Poplavskii views Hegel from a Kabbalistic perspective, which I will not analyse in the present article.

⁴⁹ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel. Leçons sur la Phénoménologie de l'esprit professées de 1933 à 1939 à l'École des Hautes Études, réunies et publiées par Raymond Queneau*, Paris, 1947, p. 205. In the absence of the relevant English translation in Allan Bloom's edition of *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, I refer hereafter to the French text.

— So, are you going back to heaven?

— No, Apollon, neither to heaven nor earth, but to great poverty, the complete silence of absolute night... Remember *Saint Jean de la Croix*. In a dark night, oh happiness, oh joy, an unnoticed soul left the house, oh happiness, oh joy, to meet its husband...

— Never mind then... But so we are friends again...

— Yes, Apollon, we are in the paradise of friends again...

(SS, 2, pp. 429–30).

This ‘paradise of friends’ is a sphere which exists between earth and heaven, or rather, apart from both earth and heaven. In his review of Poplavskii’s diaries, Berdiaev pointed out that one should not confuse this transitional sphere with the ‘Mystic Night’ of Saint John of the Cross:

The mystic night of John of the Cross was a path of self-liberation of the spirit, liberation from the power of the world of sensation and the world of reason, but it does not contain a combination of everything, there is no combination of the upper abyss with the lower abyss. Poplavskii does not leave the astral plane, and the spiritual plane in Poplavskii is always mixed with the astral one.⁵⁰

Indeed, after his journey ‘homeward from heaven’, Oleg does not return to the spiritual-astral plane and instead enters a new ‘plane’ of being, which we might associate with the sphere of Hegelian *Vernunft* — Reason. In fact, the path Oleg takes leads him to what Kojève calls a new attitude towards empirical reality:

L’Homme raisonnable ne nie plus la réalité empirique: il l’accepte, s’y intéresse, l’observe (Beobachtung). Plus tard, il modifiera le monde réel (Chap. VI), et c’est par son action transformatrice du Monde qu’il deviendra Geist.⁵¹

In Oleg’s final internal monologue, he moves from observing the world and his own maturation to active participation in history. At the same time, his vocabulary conveys the idea of anonymity (unknown soldier, future souls and times) and incomprehensibility (black book revelations, unprinted apocalypse):

⁵⁰ Nikolai Berdiaev, ‘Po povodu *Dnevnikov* B. Poplavskogo’, *Sovremennye zapiski*, 68, 1939, pp. 441–46 (p. 446).

⁵¹ Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, p. 81.

You, the unknown soldier of Russian mysticism, write your black book revelations, read them again on the typewriter, and, dropping them in a neat bundle, place them before the door on the platform, and may the spring wind carry them away, and perhaps it will carry several pages to future souls and times, but you, the athletic author of the unprinted apocalypse, be glad of your fate. You are one of those who are left aside today, who grow stubbornly like grain under the snow, into the ark of the new world deluge — the world war. The ark that is being built now at Montparnasse; but if the deluge is delayed, you will die, but you will also endure this calmly, just as you endured and accepted the death of your happiness or the unseen death of your works... (SS, 2, p. 428)

Undoubtedly, the Montparnasse ark will not sail without the help of the 'Divinity and its mediums' (SS, 2, p. 428), but this Divinity is an embodiment of the Absolute Spirit rather than of the personified Christian God. One can only come to the *Geist* through the negativity of war and revolution, as Poplavskii affirms in full agreement with Kojève.⁵²

If the Revolution had not taken place, you would now, at the age of thirty-one, be old, dissolute, unloved and written out, and there would be nothing in you that is intense, ascetic, electric, pleasing to God... The spirit, like an electric cloud, would not soar eternally above your desert, above your den in the desert, where the bones separated from the body. (SS, 2, p. 429)

It is worth noting how the final scene is organized: Oleg sits motionless next to the tomb of the unknown soldier, around him (in the literal sense) life rushes past, and above him clouds drift, reminding him of the celestial:

Swiftly rushing by him, spinning like on a merry-go-round, cars went around the Arc de Triomphe, and above them a blinding fleet of clouds drifted, more slowly, brightly and solemnly, and the new young greenery of poplar stretched up towards them, rustling in the spring sun. (SS, 2, p. 427)

The novel has previously mentioned Oleg and his friends taking a car to a restaurant on the Seine at night (not far from Boulogne-sur-Seine, where Kojève lived from 1929 to 1932) and going around the Arc de Triomphe. The

⁵² 'Quand la Nature se transforme-t-elle en Welt (monde historique)? Quand il y a *Lutte*, c'est-à-dire risque voulu de mort, apparition de la Négativité, qui se réalise en tant que *Travail*. L'Histoire est l'histoire des luttes sanglantes pour la reconnaissance (guerres, révolutions) et des travaux qui transforment la Nature.' Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, p. 55.

car is driven by one Lelia Geis, whose surname possibly refers to Kojève's Parisian acquaintance Evgenii Reis, who was also known as the French photographer Eugène Rubin,⁵³ and whose memoirs about Kojève were published in the post-Soviet period.⁵⁴

At the end of the novel Oleg undergoes a transformation from a passenger in the car that circles the Arc to an observer of the people driving past. Symbolically representing the centre of the world, the Arc de Triomphe also actualizes two important names, which are essentially 'torn' from their referents and have moved to the level of concepts: Napoleon and the unknown soldier. As we know, Napoleon became for Kojève the emblematic figure who allowed him to formulate the concept of the end of history. And although Kojève's argument was put forward in his lectures of 1936–37, he clearly formulated the original assumption in 1933–34:

Napoléon achève l'histoire, Hegel en prend conscience, c'est le 'Savoir absolu', qui ne devra plus être modifié ni complété, puisqu'il n'y aura plus rien du nouveau dans le Monde. Ce savoir décrit donc la *totalité* du réel: c'est LA VÉRITÉ, totale et définitive ('éternelle').⁵⁵

Poplavskii's texts do not demonstrate any particular interest in the figure of Napoleon; however, it is hardly a coincidence that Oleg's story (which began in *Apollon Bezobrazov*) culminates in a place where the presence of the emperor is strong, albeit invisible.

As for the unknown soldier, he embodies Poplavskii's key idea — a true poet must remain unknown to contemporaries and write for the future reader. This notion goes back to the well-known aphorism of Alfred de Vigny, dated to 1842: 'A book is a bottle cast into the open sea on which the label reads: catch me if you can.' In 1847 Vigny wrote the long poem, 'La Bouteille à la mer' (published in 1854), which prefigured Poplavskii's poem, 'Rukopis', *naidennaia v butylke* (The Manuscript Found in a Bottle, 1928). In Vigny, the captain embodies the romantic soldier-scholar, the fearless 'hero of knowledge' who believes in the God of ideas:

Le vrai Dieu, le Dieu fort, est le Dieu des idées.
 Sur nos fronts où le germe est jeté par le sort,
 Répandons le Savoir en fécondes ondées;
 Puis, recueillant le fruit tel que de l'âme il sort,

⁵³ Marco Filoni, *Kojève mon ami*, Torino, 2013, p. 3–12.

⁵⁴ Evgenii Reis, *Kozhevnikov, kto Vy?*, Moscow, 2000.

⁵⁵ Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, p. 41.

Tout empreint du parfum des saintes solitudes,
 Jetons l'œuvre à la mer, la mer des multitudes:
 Dieu la prendra du doigt pour la conduire au port.⁵⁶

Vigny does not doubt for a second that God will show the bottle the right path, and will finally bring it into the hands of a person who will be able to 'catch' it and read the text. This is indeed what happens: a fisherman finds the bottle on the shoreline in France, and not daring to open it himself, rushes to the scholars — thus dramatizing Vigny's idea that knowledge must not be left to the mercy of fate. Indeed, the poet does not countenance the possibility of the message being read by the fisherman, or of its washing up, not in France, but in a place where French is not spoken.

Poplavskii's poem, on the contrary, directly states that the manuscript will probably fall into the hands of a foreigner ('read this manuscript in the bottle, foreigner'). While in Vigny the scholar immediately starts to exult in the captain's discovery, in Poplavskii the message becomes a cipher which one needs to be able to read.⁵⁷ Structurally, the message in the bottle is an element of a 'mise en abyme' construction, in which it acts as a 'reduced copy' of the main message, that is of the poetic text itself.

Although Vigny postulated a writer who is necessarily indifferent to the reader, his poem is paradoxically addressed to the 'unknown' young man who sent him a book of 'songs of complaint'. The word 'unknown' ('inconnu') should not confuse us: in fact the addressee is sufficiently obvious — a contemporary disappointed in life, whom the poet advises to follow the example of the fearless captain. The subheading of the poem — 'Advice to an unknown young man' ('Conseil à un jeune homme inconnu') — unambiguously demonstrates its didactic nature.

In Poplavskii, the 'foreigner' will not be able to read the message, but — and this is evidently what the author counts on — he will be able to feel its energy, its rhythm. The incomprehensibility of the message only increases this energy, for a 'black book revelation' written in an incomprehensible language has enormous power, like the 'magic evocative force of music' (SS, 3, p. 420).

⁵⁶ Alfred de Vigny, 'La bouteille à la mer', in Vigny, *Œuvres complètes*, 8 vols, Paris, 1883–85, 1, pp. 256–69 (p. 269).

⁵⁷ See Osip Mandel'shtam's article, 'O sobesednike' ('About an Interlocutor', 1913; reprinted in *O Poezii [About Poetry]* in 1928): 'Like the poem, the letter isn't addressed to anyone in particular. Nevertheless, both have an addressee: the letter's is the person who will accidentally notice the bottle in the sand; the poem's is "a reader in posterity".' Osip Mandelstam, *Selected Essays*, tr. Sydney Monas, Austin, TX, 1977, p. 57.

Oleg's inner monologue, in which he presents himself as the 'unknown soldier of Russian mysticism', is not actually addressed to anyone but himself and the unknown soldier who has no past and lies in an eternal present of 'peace' and 'justice'. The unknown soldier plays the role of the ideal reader, the 'future soul', who does not exist in the historical present. Characteristically, when Poplavskii directly names his 'present' readers, they are writers already deceased, so dialogue with them is possible only after death:

Real readers are as few as real friends. Because every real reader could be a friend, and would want to be. For how often did I dream of being a friend of Tiutchev, Rimbaud or Rozanov. (SS, 3, p. 112)

However, the unknown soldier happens to be attached to a specific locus, which is easily identified as the epicentre of French sacred national geography. The soldier who fell in the Great War is buried under the Arc de Triomphe, which represents not only Napoleon's victory, but the emperor himself as the main figure of the French historical pantheon. Like a message in a bottle, the anonymous soldier carries out the function of a copy of the main message, that is, of Napoleon.

For Oleg, as a Russian émigré, both Napoleon and the unknown soldier are 'foreigners'⁵⁸ to whom he addresses his message. As Poplavskii states,

people do not write for themselves or for the public. People write for friends. Art is a private letter sent randomly to unknown friends, and is like a protest against the separation of lovers in space and time.

(SS, 3, p. 112)⁵⁹

The message sent randomly and filled up with 'private' meanings, written as if in a foreign language, may not receive any reply.⁶⁰ It is typical enough

⁵⁸ In turn, he might be considered as French by 'young foreigners' who are taking photographs of the Arc de Triomphe and the grave. Characteristically, Oleg is noticed by them, but remains unnoticeable, that is unfamiliar and unknown.

⁵⁹ See also the article, 'O misticheskoi atmosfere molodoi literatury v emigratsii' (On the Mystical Atmosphere of Young Literature in Emigration, 1930): 'Art is a private letter sent to an unknown address. A letter which may "be lucky", which may reach a person whom one may love, with whom one may be friends, with whom it would be sweet to die' (SS, 3, p. 45).

⁶⁰ Adamovich used the metaphor of the ocean to define the elusive essence of Poplavskii: 'His soul was drowned with the "waves of music" that Blok liked to talk about. He was undoubtedly intelligent — in each individual conversation. But as a whole his mind was a grain of sand on these "waves", carrying him in an uncertain direction.'

that another émigré poet, Dovid Knut, shares Poplavskii's concern about the possibility of communication in a poem unsurprisingly entitled 'Butylka v okeane' (The Bottle in the Ocean, 1930):

Но донесет ли и — когда, кому,
 В какие, человеческие ль, руки,
 Волна судьбы непрочную бумажку
 С невнятными и стертыми словами
 (И на чужом, быть может, языке!).⁶¹

But will the wave of fate
 bring — someday, to someone,
 to some, possibly human, hands
 a fragile slip of paper
 bearing inarticulate and effaced words
 (and, perhaps, in a foreign language!).⁶²

Irina Kaspe is right to say that the 'young' émigrés used to promote a kind of literature which was not addressed to anyone and was therefore especially 'sober' and 'sincere', as well as capable of becoming a 'message in a bottle' for the future, undoubtedly 'understanding' reader.⁶³ But, paradoxically, in Poplavskii, the most 'typical' representative of the 'unnoticed' generation, this future reader is not constructed as being 'undoubtedly understanding' or even as 'real' in general. On the contrary, Poplavskii's intentions may be formulated as follows: one should write not for oneself and not for the public, but for unknown friends, who in reality *do not exist*. If they were really *existing* readers, they would become the public whose power the writer tries to avoid at all costs.

These 'unknown friends' are Napoleon and the unknown soldier: on the one hand, *they do not and will not exist*, but on the other hand they *did exist*, before having been symbolically represented in history and in space. But people also write for God, whose coming is prepared for by this 'unprinted apocalypse'. According to Poplavskii, God is the most ideal addressee, although any 'correspondence' with him is inevitably one-sided: the divine reader does not report whether the message has reached him.

Georgii Adamovich, 'Pamiaty Poplavskogo', *Poslednie novosti*, 17 October 1935.

⁶¹ Dovid Knut, 'Butylka v okeane', *Chisla*, 2–3, 1930, pp. 19–21 (p. 20).

⁶² I wish to thank Maelynn Liou-Zarnitsyna for this translation in particular and for her invaluable help in general.

⁶³ Kaspe, *Iskusstvo otsutstvovat'*, p. 150.

The question remains: is this God the ‘God of thought’, as in Vigny and Hegel, or is he the Orthodox Christ who, as Poplavskii argues, ‘is pitiful and always in tears’ (SS, 3, p. 84)? The reply is probably to be found in the evolution of Oleg’s attitude towards the Divinity. If in a global sense he shares Poplavskii’s vision of Christianity (one day, when he experiences a miracle of theophany, he can’t hold back his tears), by the end of the novel he becomes firmer (‘I walked and said to myself: “*Sois dur, dur, dur...*”’, SS, 2, p. 426) and feels a compelling need to store up ‘solar energy’ in order to ‘rebuild’ the world after the coming war.

Being addressed to the future, his ‘project’ is reminiscent of that of Antoine Roquentin, the protagonist of Sartre’s novel, *La Nausée* (*Nausea*, 1938), who wanted to write a book *as hard as steel*. In Oleg’s case, this book takes the form of a ‘black book revelation’, or, so to speak, a hermetic message, which one should be able to read as Kojève was able to read *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

* * *

As has already been mentioned, the last essay Poplavskii wrote was ‘O substantial ‘nosti lichnosti’, in which he discussed music, German idealism, Schelling, Hegel and Bergson. Here, the concept of impersonalization is given a primordial place:

The path of the righteous lies in the maximum bringing of oneself, as an external being, into harmony with oneself, as an essence — that is in de facto impersonalization, depersonalization, denial of oneself as a personality, which is realized in the cold impersonal observing position of the scholar. For if personality is a self-conscious absolute, the moment of personality in it is purely serving and insignificant. In its essence, that is in the sense of its substantiality, it is the Absolute. (SS, 3, p. 452)

Who is this scholar, if not Hegel? Passing through denial of the self and through acceptance of his own death, he finally takes a ‘a cold, impersonal observing position’, thus becoming a Wise Man (who ‘looks at things directly’, as Kojève also did).⁶⁴ At least, that is the way Kojève interprets Hegel’s evolution, completing his six-year project of commentary on *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*:

⁶⁴ See Auffret, *Alexandre Kojève*, pp. 356–57.

He speaks of a period of total depression that he lived through between the twenty-fifth and thirtieth years of his life: a 'Hypochondria' that went '*bis zur Erlähmung aller Kräfte*' that was so severe as 'to paralyze all his powers', and that came precisely from the fact that he could not accept the necessary abandonment of *Individuality* — that is, actually, of humanity — which the idea of absolute Knowledge demanded. But, finally, he surmounted this 'Hypochondria'. And becoming a Wise Man by that final acceptance of death, he published a few years later the First Part of the 'System of Science', entitled 'Science of the Phenomenology of the Spirit', in which he definitively reconciles himself with all that is and has been, by declaring that there will never more be anything new on earth.⁶⁵

According to F. R. Devlin, Kojève tried to overcome the closed nature of the Hegelian system in post-war texts, in particular in *Le concept, le temps et le discours*.⁶⁶ We can see a similar movement in the last exchange of *Domoi s nebes*: 'Yes, Apollon, we are in the paradise of friends again.' Does this necessarily mean that Oleg is once more among *old* friends? On the contrary, he refers here to the 'unknown friends' who are citizens of the 'Republic of the Sun' (which is also the 'Paradise and the Kingdom of friends').

Who is allowed to enter this Paradise? Surely Oleg's fictional friend Apollon Bezobrazov, but also the poets Friedrich Hölderlin, Arthur Rimbaud, Fedor Tiutchev, Jules Laforgue, the philosophers Epictetus, Ramon Llull and Vasilii Rozanov, the theosophist Martinez de Pasqually, the Catholic essayists Léon Bloy, Ernest Hello and Charles Péguy (they are all mentioned, except Rozanov and the poets, in Oleg's final monologue). If they are 'unknown', this is only because they form a secret inner circle which brings to mind the 'Friends of St Martin', the admirers of Louis Claude de Saint-Martin, commonly known as an 'unknown philosopher'. Unsurprisingly, in a conversation with Tatishchev, Poplavskii compares the activity of philosophy with joining a Masonic lodge:

In Tolstoi, Boris Drubetskoi entered a Masonic lodge solely to meet certain influential people who were members of it. Don't I do the same thing in studying philosophy? For philosophy for me is the personal life of philosophers. Their dark deeds on the earth and their radiant death.

(SS, 3, p. 492)

⁶⁵ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. 168.

⁶⁶ F. R. Devlin, *Alexandre Kojève and the Outcome of Modern Thought*, Lanham, MD, 2004, p. 151.

What is striking is that to be an 'unknown friend' almost (but not always) means to be already dead. It is indeed near the eternal flame that Oleg meditates on death as 'a black-winged abyss of calm and eternal justice' and where a silent and secret communication with his friend the unknown soldier (and maybe with Napoleon too) seems to be possible. Should we consider this as a mere metaphor or as an obsession with death which could have driven the poet to suicide? The question remains open, though we might cautiously point out once again that in 'O substantial' *nosti lichnosti*', which happens to end with the words 'Paradise and the Kingdom of friends', the poet chose to talk about 'reconciliation with the Absolute' (that is, death) and a 'solar hermitry'.⁶⁷

* * *

At first glance, Alexandre Kojève and his students could not have formed part of this silent and 'unavowable' community. Although being dead was hardly an explicit prerequisite for joining the 'unknown friends', there is another problem that appears to challenge any comparison between the seminar and Poplavskii's 'Paradise'. In fact, while the latter is anything but a hierarchical system, and thus has little to do with Varshavskii's generational model of 'fathers' and 'sons', the seminar presented a monologic and rather peremptory interpretation of *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* with the limited involvement of listeners.

At the same time, the seminar had a rather flexible structure with students (and more informal listeners like Poplavskii) freely going in and out (but with a constant 'core' formed by Bataille, Lacan, Aron, Fessard and Queneau). Besides, Kojève informally communicated with several of his students (Lacan, Robert Marjolin) outside the seminar. Thus, Kojève's personal status inside the seminar was as ambiguous as that of Poplavskii inside his 'Republic' or 'Kingdom' of friends. While the notion of a Kingdom indeed presupposes a centralized structure, with Poplavskii at its core, the notion of a Republic appears to be based on horizontal rather than vertical ties.

The famous 'multifacetedness' of Kojève⁶⁸ (which was comparable to that of Poplavskii) could not but consolidate this ambiguous position,

⁶⁷ See the author's comment on the article: 'I took this "subjective" bush off the table. Sun, hermitry, work, happiness' (SS, 3, p. 450). The sun is connected with fire, including the eternal flame by which Oleg sits.

⁶⁸ See Auffret, *Alexandre Kojève*, p. 356.

giving the seminar a certain uniqueness. The students of the EPHE would probably have shared Evgenii Reis's definition of Kojève as a man *unknown*; in fact, Reis tried, in his memoirs, 'to illuminate your second face — Kozhevnikov, a man unknown to those who see you as a Florentine statue, not suspecting that it has a second face'.⁶⁹

From this perspective, the seminar could be viewed as a kind of 'plateau', that is a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities, a 'multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome'.⁷⁰ As Deleuze and Guattari point out,

the tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb 'to be', but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, 'and... and... and...' This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb 'to be'.⁷¹

If we allow that the Russian émigré community in Paris, on the one hand, and the French intellectual and artistic circles, on the other, could be interpreted as two big rhizomes, then the interaction between them might have occurred on the level of multiple unstable plateaus, such as, for example, the Studio franco-russe,⁷² Kojève's seminar, 'Montparnasse' (whose 'tsarevich' Poplavskii was posthumously declared),⁷³ or the more ghostly 'paradise of friends'.

Significantly, without using Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, Maria Rubins describes the transnational Montparnasse as an example of a rhizomatic structure, in which Russian émigrés were agents of horizontal communication:

This communication led to different hybrid forms of cultural and linguistic interaction. Whether they reflected on the Parisian myth, cinema, or Art Deco style, these migrant writers spoke from the place between cultures, estranging local material by showing it from an extra-local perspective. By the same token, they defamiliarized Russian classical authors by reading them in a 'foreign voice' and recasting canonical texts in new

⁶⁹ Reis, *Kozhevnikov, kto Vy?*, p. 8.

⁷⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 22.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁷² See Dimitri Tokarev, "Lost in Translation": Les problèmes linguistiques et conceptuels aux séances du Studio franco-russe à Paris (1929–1931), *Colloquium Helveticum*, 46, Produktive Fehler, konstruktive Missverständnisse; Erreurs productives, malentendus constructifs, Bielefeld, 2017, pp. 109–30.

⁷³ See Nikolai Otsup, *Dnevnik v stikhakh: 1935–1950*, Paris, 1950, p. 333.

ways. Likewise, they practised a *métissage* of fictional and nonfictional genres, fusing the novel, human document and autofiction, and even of languages, writing in a hybrid Franco-Russian ‘dialect’. Through this exercise of hybridity, younger Russian writers established important points of aesthetic (if not personal) contact with the Western modernists, sharing their ‘poetics of bricolage and translocation, dissonance and defamiliarization’, and defying attempts to construe their narratives mono-nationally and ethnically.⁷⁴

However, Montparnasse was just one of the plateaus that, along with other, perhaps less obvious, plateaus, blurred the line between the Russian diaspora and the French. It might be said that in the last two years of Poplavskii’s life the seminar on Hegel functioned as a kind of concealed plateau, which implicitly ‘fed’ the autobiographical narrative of *Domoi s nebes*. Thus, Kojève’s students could play for Poplavskii the role of those ‘unknown friends’ who formed a temporary zone of ephemeral stability in the constantly shifting configuration of the émigré rhizome. But, as Deleuze and Guattari point out, such a zone cannot be the ‘object of reproduction: neither external reproduction as image-tree nor internal reproduction as tree-structure’. In fact, the rhizome ‘is an antigenealogy. It is a short-term memory, or antimemory’.⁷⁵ It therefore comes as no surprise that Poplavskii never explicitly talked about the seminar. This experience was in a sense relinquished to the sphere of oblivion and of the unspoken. The only remaining traces of it are in written texts which need

⁷⁴ Maria Rubins, *Russian Montparnasse: Transnational Writing in Interwar Paris*, Basingstoke and New York, 2015, p. 8. Rubins has thus radically reassessed Berberova’s statements that ‘Russian Montparnasse’ poets, and Poplavskii in the first place, were ‘stuck’ between two languages and two cultures. For the émigré critic, ‘in Poplavskii’s writings one senses an unsurmountable awkwardness, clumsiness, an unintended but organic paleness of syntax. He read the French writers; they were close to him, and he loved them, learning from them, and, I think, he would have settled into French (as Arthur Adamov did) leaving the Russian language completely — if only he had not fallen silent within a few years’. Nina Berberova, *The Italics are Mine*, New York, 1993, p. 269. If Rubins demonstrates a well-balanced view of this issue, Elisabeth Klosty Beaujour takes these statements too seriously and concludes that French was a dominant language for Poplavskii: ‘in large part, there was no solid psychic ground beneath Poplavskii because he had no dominant language — or, rather, because he *did* have a (technically) dominant language and did not wish to recognize and capitulate to the fact that it was not Russian but French.’ But she then goes on to contradict this hypothesis: ‘That Poplavskii wrote in Russian was the result of a quite deliberately paradoxical choice: how better to be a *poète maudit* (and be one up on Rimbaud) than to write in the *wrong language*!’ Elisabeth Klosty Beaujour, *Alien Tongues: Bilingual Russian Writers of the ‘First’ Emigration*, Ithaca, NY and London, 1989, pp. 141, 142.

⁷⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 21.

to be detected and carefully scrutinized in order to provide a clearer idea of the evolution of Poplavskii's *novels of Wisdom*, in the Kojevian sense of the word.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Kojève gave the heading 'Les romans de la Sagesse' to an article devoted to the novels by Raymond Queneau.