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## “THE ASTRAL FIRE OF THE MOST-PURE DIVINE MAGIC”: A PORTRAIT OF THE ÉMIGRÉ POET BORIS POPLAVSKII AS A MAGUS

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### Abstract

The paper focuses on the magical dimension of the poetic work of Boris Poplavskii (1903-1935), an emblematic figure of the “lost generation” of Russian émigrés in Paris. In his youth, Poplavskii was much influenced by anthroposophist and theosophist doctrines, and later manifested a deep interest in occult and magical writings. In this article, I analyze the magic in Poplavskii’s work from a number of perspectives, including those of concrete rituals and techniques (witchcraft, invocation, alchemy, meditation), as well as practical mysticism (Christian and Jewish) and different patterns of “divine-working” (theurgy) which have had an explicit or implicit impact on Poplavskii’s poetic and narrative texts. In particular, I highlight the visual component of various magical practices referenced by Poplavskii.

**Keywords:** *Magic; Magus; Boris Povlavskii; Émigré Poetry*

In February 1934 Boris Poplavskii (1903-1935) – a key figure of the younger generation of Russian émigré writers<sup>1</sup> – made the following entry in his diary:

Oui, je suis un hérésiarque. Да, я вхожу в мир, вернее, сознаюсь в чудовищном учении, перед которым побледнеют гностические

трапезы с поваленным подсвечником, учении о том, что дьявол ближе и дороже Богу, чем человек. (Poplavskii 2009, 3: 381)

(Yes, I am a heresiarch. Yes, I enter the world, or more precisely, I acknowledge that I profess a monstrous teaching which will surpass the Gnostic meals with their overturned candlesticks. This teaching says that the devil is closer and dearer to God than the man.)<sup>2</sup>

One might consider this passage a poor joke or proof of the author's excessive and baseless vanity, were one unaware of the important role that esoterica, in all its diversity and forms, played in Poplavskii's short life. In Istanbul, where his family had defected from Russia in 1920, he had already begun to read mystical and theosophical studies. Poplavskii was deeply interested in Annie Besant's Order of the Star in the East and in 1921 he attended (as a member) the first International Star Congress in Paris, where he shook Krishnamurti's hand and then burst into tears (2009, 3: 154, 162, 168-169, 189-190).<sup>3</sup> He contributed to a modernist review, *Chisla (Numbers)*, in which he chronicled the artistic life, wrote reviews and articles, published his poems and fragments of the novel *Apollon Bezobrazov*<sup>4</sup> (1926-1932), which Iurii Fel'zen defined as an "attempt to achieve a mystical synthesis" (1936: 175). Indeed, as Leonid Livak argues:

The oxymoronic name Apollo the Ugly provides the key to the novel's semantic structure. The narrator's contradictory split personalities are the author's alter egos. Vasilii is a Christian mystic, weak in body and will, tearfully sentimental, and obsessed with "eternal questions". Apollo is an athlete, a boxer, [...] he cultivates intellectual and physical rigor, emotional restraint, and reticence. He is also a student of metaphysics, black magic, alchemy, astrology, and occultism, which give him an anti-Christian aura suggested by the title of the chapter in which the two alter egos meet – "How I Met the Devil". (2001b: 105)

The only book of poetry Poplavskii published during his lifetime, *Flagi (Flags)*, appeared in 1931. He also authored a novel, *Domoi s nebes (Home-ward from Heaven, 1934-1935)*, the complete text of which was published in 1993. He suffered from depression and died in 1935 of an accidental heroin overdose.

One can find in Poplavskii's poems, novels and articles numerous allusions to magic, alchemy, astrology, spiritualism, the Kabbalah, Tarot cards, Gnosticism, theosophy, Martinism, freemasonry, numerology, and yoga. In this regard, Poplavskii appears to continue an occult and esoteric tradition which had made a very deep impression on the minds of the Russian cultural and intellectual elite at the turn of the 20th century (see Glatzer Rosenthal 1997; Bogomolov 1999; Menzel et al. 2012; Mannherz 2012).

Despite the abundance of occult allusions in Poplavskii, Russian émigré literature scholars rarely shine the spotlight on them (Galkina 2010: 34-57; 112-132; Menegaldo 2003). I have already analyzed some of these influences, namely those of the Kabbalah, Swedenborg and the Carmelite mystics, in earlier studies (Tokarev 2011a: 182-230, 2011b, 2013). My emphasis here will be on practices that aim to transform perception, both that of the artist and that of the reader or the viewer. In fact, in Poplavskii's diaries of 1921-1922, that is, those that deal with the very beginning of his life in Paris, the word "magic" is often used in the context of his desire to take up painting. Poplavskii mainly talked of magic with the painters Sergei Sharshun (Serge Charchoune) and Lazar' Volovik (Lazare Volovick), a fact that is unsurprising given that Poplavskii was setting himself up as a novice artist at that time and socialized primarily with colleagues from the painters' guild. It is clear that he understood magic to be not only a collection of certain ritual practices, but also a necessary part of the creative process. Poplavskii was to find a precise formulation for this idea ten years later when, in an article about an exhibition of Russian artists in the review *Chisla*, he referred to the "plastic magic" ("пластическая магия"; 2009, 3: 96) that he found in the paintings of Russian émigré Abram Minchin (Abraham Mintchine). "Plastic magic" is a creative method whereby the artist makes the composition and chooses the paints in such a way that the manner in which he executes the painting expresses his "devotional" ("молитвенное") attitude to the object of representation (Poplavskii writes about this in more detail in his article 'Okolo zhivopisi' ['Near painting', 1931]); the term "plastic magic" also encompasses a way that a painting can act on the viewer, enabling him to feel the same emotions experienced by the artist during this devotional act of painting.

"Plastic magic" seems to be a useful concept for the poetic creative process:

Для меня же это – предаться во власть мистических аналогий, создавать некие "загадочные картины", в которых известное соединение образов и звуков чисто магически вызывало бы в читателе ощущение того, что предстояло мне. (101)

(For me it means giving way to mystical analogies, creating some "mysterious paintings" in which a certain combination of images and sounds would, in a purely magical way, evoke in the reader the sensation of what I had faced.)

Poetic work is thus conceived as a "painting", which for Poplavskii implies a certain mystical insight; the reader is drawn here into a sort of magic ritual, aimed at transferring the mystical knowledge that was "given" to the poet in the form of "sensations".

In this article, I will treat Poplavskii's magic not just as an occult phenomenon, but also as an artistic and poetic one. Our goal is precisely to highlight the visual component of various magical practices referenced by Poplavskii in his mature works, such as the novels *Apollon Bezobrazov* and *Domoi s nebes*, as well as in *Avtomaticheskie stikhi* (*Automatic Verses*, written in the early 1930s). In his first novel, Poplavskii describes a wide range of mystical experiences, from apparitions of incorporeal spirits to morbid hallucinations (both visual and auditory), with the aim of creating a “defamiliarizing” context for the story of a group of Russian émigrés in Paris. The second novel presents a more complex experience of inner transfiguration that implicitly refers back to the emblematic story of Raphael's vision of Mary as it was discussed in Romantic art criticism, specifically in Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder's *Herzensergießungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders* (*Outpourings of an Art-Loving Friar*, 1797) and in Vasilii Zhukovskii's report of his encounter with the *Sistine Madonna* in the Dresden art gallery (1821). Finally, in *Avtomaticheskie stikhi*, a mystical vision seen in a crystal ball is described as part of a “mysterious painting”, a description that both brings to mind Claude Lorrain's landscapes as well as introduces the more general issue of visual perception and its link to memory.

#### *Visions in 'Apollon Bezobrazov'*

In his novel, Poplavskii cites a phrase from a grimoire attributed to Caesar Longinus and published in Frankfurt in 1630<sup>5</sup> under the name *Trinum magicum; Sive Secretorum magicorum opus ... et Tractatus de Proprii cuiusque nati daemonis inquisition* “Nomina barbara nunquam mutaveris sunt enim nomina apud singulos a Deo data, potentiam in Sacris ineffabilem habentia” (“You will never be able to change the barbaric names, but there are names, given by God to all singular creatures, which have an ineffable power in the sacred world”; Poplavskii 2015: 89).

It is quite possible that Poplavskii took this quotation not from the grimoire itself but from Stanislas de Guaita's *Essay of the Damned Sciences* (*Essais de sciences maudites, II. Le serpent de la Genèse, Première septaine, Le Temple de Satan*, 1891), where the French Rosicrucian attributes it to Zoroaster's *Oracles* (de Guaita 1915: 184). In any case, the quotation is far from accidental; it reveals an important stratum of the novel related to the occult. I will rely on John Kopper's summary of the novel's plot, which appeared in his article devoted to Poplavskii's prose:

A vapid, sentimental young Russian living in Paris retells his encounters with the titular hero, a pretentious but troubled gadabout. In time a circle of admirers develops around Bezobrazov. United by their Russian

heritage, exile and a superabundance of free time, Bezobrazov's disciples make their languid progress through two years of common living, first in Paris and then on Lake Garda. One chapter, "The Ball", is devoted entirely to a drunken name-day celebration. A lone temporal analepsis intrudes upon this torpidly paced but straightforward narrative. A waif of mixed Russian and French extraction, Tereza, joins Bezobrazov's group, but not before the narrator has given her a history. Sent to a convent by her family, Tereza has seduced a charismatic but mad priest named Robert. Her entry into Bezobrazov's clique ultimately draws the defrocked Robert in after her. Following an ambiguously described struggle with Bezobrazov in a mountain amphitheater, Robert dies. Tereza retires to join the Carmelites, the order of the visionary saint with whom the novel insistently associates her, Teresa of Ávila. (Kopper 1996: 246-247)

In the novel the Latin book belongs to a Catholic abbot and alchemist, Gildenbrandt Rakrok (Hildenbrandt Racrocque), who provides guidance at a little convent hidden in the Swiss Alps. Under his charge is Vera-Tereza von Blitsenshtif (Blitzenstiff), a pupil at the convent and the novel's sole female character. Vera-Tereza (often simply referred to as Tereza) indeed shares many character traits with the Spanish St. Teresa of Ávila (as well as the French St. Thérèse of Lisieux especially revered by Gippius and Merezhkovskii). She has rather unusual parents – a Russian-German mother from the Ostsee gentry and a half-crazed French father, an aristocrat from Lorraine and the author of a multivolume work on demonology.

Unsurprisingly, the daughter, Vera-Tereza, has a tendency towards seeing visions, talking with stones, falling into an "inexplicable, absent-minded state" ("необъяснимые отсутствия"; 2015: 82), experiencing mystical ecstasy and calling herself a "star of the underworld" ("звезда преисподней"; 75).

After the death of Father Gildenbrandt, his successor, Abbot Robert Lekorniu (Lecornu, from the French word "le cornu" – "horned", but also "odd"), finds notes in the margins of the correspondence between St. Teresa of Ávila and St. John of the Cross left by his predecessor; these notes explain the meaning of Vera-Tereza's visions:

Сегодня она слышала высокую охоту, стеклянный шум, путешествия лунных духов на кощунственное сборище, однако слов разобрать она не могла. Этот ребенок слишком талантлив, чтобы жить долго. [...]

Лавины останавливаются, жители, не известные в крае, указывают дорогу, но не в овраг, как обычно, а подлинно к монастырю, лисицы, невиданные в горах еще дедами, выскакивая из-за кустов, отпугивают от ядовитых ягод, колокола сами приходят в движение, задачи по алгебре сами наутро оказываются решенными. Не-

объяснимые отсутствия, беспричинные слезы, а сколько еще скрывается тщательно медитаций, мгновенно появляющиеся и исчезающие стигматы и вместе с тем голоса высокой охоты, страшные кошмарные вопросы, равнодушные к учению церкви. (2000-2009: 117).

(Today she heard a high-hunting,<sup>6</sup> a crystal sound, and the journey of lunar spirits to a blasphemous Sabbath, but she couldn't make out the words. This child is too talented to live long. [...])

The avalanches are coming to an end, inhabitants unknown to this land point the way, not as usual into a ravine but toward the monastery. Foxes, not seen in the mountains even in the generation of our grandparents, jump out of the bushes and frighten everyone away from the poisonous berries, bells start to toll on their own, and algebra problems turn up the next morning solved. Inexplicable absences and causeless tears, but so many of her meditations are carefully concealed, *stigmata*, *appearing and vanishing in an instant*, but also the voices of *high-hunting*, frightening, blasphemous questions, and indifference to the teachings of the church; 2015: 85-86)

“Высокая охота” (“high-hunting”) is the literal translation into Russian that Poplavskii gives to “haute-chasse”, a term that is commonly used, particularly in the French region of Franche-Comté that borders Switzerland, to refer to a kind of demonic hunting in which the riders and their dogs are carried along their course by a storm (see for example F.W. Heine’s drawing *Wodan’s Wild Hunt*, 1882; see Lecouteux 1999).

“The instantly appearing and disappearing stigmata” are most likely an allusion to St. Catherine of Siena, who received the stigmata on the feast of Pentecost in 1374, six years after her “mystical marriage” with Christ. In 1378, while in a state of ecstasy, she dictated *The Dialogue of Divine Providence*. Ecstatic visions also haunted St. Teresa of Ávila. Merezhkovskii, who quoted St. Teresa liberally in *Ispanskii mistiki* (*Spanish Mystics*), naturally mentioned the most famous of her visions, which by all accounts seems to have caught Poplavskii’s imagination as well. That is what St. Teresa recounts:

I saw an angel close by me, on my left side,<sup>7</sup> in bodily form. [...] I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron’s point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails;<sup>8</sup> when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God. The

pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it, even a large one. (1998: 218-219)

Vera-Tereza, lost in mystical ecstasy, which in the novel is also referred to as “momentary rapture” (“восхищение”; 2015: 82), also sees a fiery angel and feels the same mixture of pain and pleasure:

Все творение, на темном дне которого она так долго-долго угасала, казалось ей вдруг залитым золотым светом, оно было доступно из конца в конец, и она сразу была во всех концах его. Подобно яркой звезде, дышало оно между высшим и низшим мраком, подобно бессмертному ангелу, сердцем которого был Иисус. А ангел этот был весь соткан из миллионов иных ангелов – живых огней, из коих меньшие напоминали золотых бабочек, а большие легко удержали бы землю на своей ладони. (2000-2009: 127-128)

(For a long time Tereza had been wasting away on the dark floor of creation, but now it seemed to be bathed in a golden light. Any point of it could be reached, and she could simultaneously stand in all its corners. Like a bright star, it breathed gloom, a higher and a lower darkness. It was like an immortal angel whose heart was Jesus. But this angel had been woven entirely out of millions of other angels, living fires, whose lesser lights reminded one of golden butterflies, while the larger ones could have easily held the earth in their palms; 2015: 94)

This kind of ecstasy, in which carnal feelings play a significant role, has always aroused the suspicion that it is demonic in nature: if the inquisitors were very much interested in St. Teresa of Ávila’s visions, they might have been even more mistrustful toward Tereza von Blitsenshtif, given her ability to communicate both with the highest solar elements (the fiery angel – a possible allusion to the novel *Ognennyi angel* by Valerii Briusov) and with lower and lunar elemental spirits. Renata, the heroine of the novel, called such spirits the “tiny ones”.

Robert Lekorniu is also tortured by diabolic obsessions; he has erotic dreams about naked nuns and about the Templars’ “god Baphomet with an erect penis, playing the organ in church” (2015: 89; “бог Бафомет с эректильным пенисом, играющий на органе в церкви”). He blasphemes and curses God and his angels, deliberately muddles the services and finally, during the sacrament of communion, shows the parishioners his penis. Against a backdrop of general confusion, the mass ends with Robert having an epileptic seizure and Tereza having hysterical convulsions.

Later, the defrocked Robert practices ecstatic dancing with elements of glossolalia (possibly “inherited” from his literary “tutor” Il’ia Zdanevich; see Grechko 2013; Tokarev 2015):

Долго лежа на острой вершине, Роберт в диком напряжении продолжает танцевать и бормотать. Несколько раз он уже падал в изнеможении, но, полежав, опять вставал и продолжал корчиться. Он будет танцевать, пока не умрет, пока не скажет ему Бог, может ли он наказать Безобразова. (2000-2009: 193)

(*After lying for a long time on the piercing crest, Robert makes a wild effort and continues with his dancing and muttering. He has already fallen several times from exhaustion, but after lying down a while, he gets up again and continues his writhing. He'll dance until he dies, until God tells him whether he can punish Bezobrazov; 2015: 146*)

Robert's dance combines elements of various spiritualist practices, from the rites of Russian sectarians (jumps) and experiments devised by followers of the theory of animal magnetism (laying or passing of hands) to yogic exercises (a transition from *utkatasana* [chair pose, a squatting posture] to *tadasana* [mountain pose, in which the body stretches upwards]). The dance ends, as do the amassed people, with epileptic seizures.

The convulsive, spasmodic movements of Robert, obsessed with the idea of killing Bezobrazov, contrast with Apollon's stony immobility and his meditative fixation on an object; as he himself puts it: the question is not one of "complete motionlessness and non-existence, but another life, similar to the life of flags on towers,<sup>9</sup> where a remote golden process slowly matures and repeats" ("не о полной неподвижности и небытии, а об иной жизни, подобной жизни флагов на башнях, во время которой медленно зреет и повторяется какой-то глубинный и золотой процесс"; 2015: 104). While Robert is trying, through his dance, to make contact with God and receive a reply, Apollon is completely turned in upon himself, prone to silent meditation and to the infinite repetition of the same magic formulas.

For example, he can recite aloud for twelve hours with "implacable persistence and curiosity" ("с неумолимыми настойчивостью и любопытством"; 114) a certain name, probably either one of the 72 kabbalistic names of God, or the name of an angel or a demon whom Apollon summons to appear. With regard to meditative practices, Bezobrazov is able to switch off his consciousness through maximum concentration on an object: for example, he can roll an iron ball in the palm of his hand for a whole week, only occasionally dropping it onto the table, or pour sand, or endlessly listen to water pouring from a tap.

These practices are also presented in Poplavskii's second novel *Domoi s nebes*, which signals a certain evolution in Poplavskii's occult interests: instead of filling his narrative with rather superficial proof of his esoteric erudition, as he did in *Apollon Bezobrazov*, he shifts to a more in-depth study of the experiences he had with meditation during the first half of the 1930s:



*The Experience of Meditation Focused on Achieving Henosi*

Helena Blavatsky claims in *Isis Unveiled* that:

One phase of magical skill is the voluntary and conscious withdrawal of the inner man (astral form) from the outer man (physical body). In the cases of some mediums withdrawal occurs, but it is unconscious and involuntary. With the latter the body is more or less cataleptic at such times; but with the adept the absence of the astral form would not be noticed, for the physical senses are alert, and the individual appears only as though in a fit of abstraction – “a brown study”, as some call it. (1877: 588)

Poplavskii practiced “withdrawal” using a mixed technique that includes elements of Kabbalistic, Hindu and Christian traditions. For Poplavskii, this type of experiment often had a negative outcome in which the attempt to abstract himself from the surrounding reality led, not to the expected enlightenment, but to a total paralysis of the will, to an “abaissement du niveau mental” (“lowering of the level of consciousness” – a notion Jung often referred to) and to terrifying nightmares. Sometimes, however, in the process of meditation, the poet was able to achieve an expansion of consciousness and thus direct contact with the Divine – the final and most important goal of meditation.

In *Domoi s nebes*, the experience of meditation allows the autobiographical character Oleg to behold the abyss, the “without base”, *Ungrund*, which Jacob Boehme interpreted as divine “nothingness” and irrational freedom, whose pure potentiality precedes the actuality of God. One evening, Oleg takes a conscious decision to meditate and adopts the pose of a man hanging upside-down by one foot, depicted on the twelfth arcanum of the Tarot pack. According to Éliphas Lévi:

The man’s arms constitute a triangle with his head, and his entire hieroglyphical shape is that of a reversed triangle surmounted by a cross, an alchemical symbol known to all adepts, and representing the accomplishment of the great work. (1896: 268)

Oleg then, remaining motionless, practices void meditation, which involves ridding the self of all thoughts and desires. Five minutes later, he “wakes up to a conscious Dark Night” (“просыпается к сознательной Темной Ночи”; 2000-2009: 310). Here Oleg appeals to the doctrine of the “Dark Night” of the Spanish mystic of the 16th century, St. John of the Cross, who claimed that the transition from the Night of Sense to the Night of the Spirit is particularly painful:

[...] when this Divine contemplation assails the soul with a certain force, in order to strengthen it and subdue it, it suffers such pain in its weakness that it nearly swoons away. This is especially so at certain times when it is assailed with somewhat greater force; for sense and spirit, as if beneath some immense and dark load, are in such great pain and agony that the soul would find advantage and relief in death. (1994: 67-68)

Oleg's body reacts badly to this sacrifice and his condition is very far from the grace of nirvana. Finally, he, in the sense of a Kantian transcendental subject possessing a "unified objective consciousness", ceases to exist and becomes Nothing:

Самосознание трансцендентального субъекта невозможно, значит, Ничто говорит с Богом... Но почему Бог должен отвечать... Оторвавшись от семьи, народа, истории, Олег стремительно полетел в то чистое отсутствие, из которого Бог пытался вначале сотворить небо и землю, но не смог окончательно преодолеть его в его средоточии, и вот сперва от боли, а потом сатанинским ослепительным мужеством аскезы оно сбросило с себя, проснулось вдруг от всех форм неба и земли... (2000-2009: 311)

(It is impossible for the transcendental subject to be self-conscious, therefore Nothing speaks with God [...] But why should God respond [...] After recovering from family, people, history, Oleg swiftly flew into that pure absence from which God had at first tried to create heaven and earth, but could not ultimately overcome it in its core, and here, first from pain, and then with the satanic dazzling courage from asceticism, it threw itself off, suddenly arising from all the forms of heaven and earth...)

During this stage Oleg actually becomes a part of God, participating in divine creation. In this way, he manages to realize the theurgical ideal of merging the individual ego with the divine will. It is important that Oleg arrives at this goal neither through internal self-improvement and the imitation of Christ (although the book of Thomas à Kempis *The Imitation of Christ* occupies an important place in Poplavskii's library) nor via magic rituals and spells.

Oleg resembles less a magician, subordinating the supernatural to his will, than a theurgist, continuing the work of members of the "Order of The Elus Coën" founded by Martinez de Pasqually. However, he does not perform any actual theurgic operations (such as invoking angelic entities) and in fact "follows his heart", which in the Martinist tradition<sup>10</sup> is interpreted as a means of rejecting wisdom for the sake of prayer and inward contemplation in order to attain reintegration. As Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin emphasizes:

The only initiation I advocate and search for with all the ardor of my soul is the one through which we can enter into the heart of God and make God's heart enter our own, there to make an indissoluble marriage which makes us friend, brother, and spouse of our Divine Repairer. (2002: 24-25)

However, the moment of ecstasy does not last long; the horror of excarnation is so strong that Oleg's personality struggles to the end against its dissolution into nothingness: "And now this Nothingness-Neveryness-Nobody was whining, screaming, moaning and praying God to bring him back to time, history, family, memory, life" ("И вот теперь это Ничто-Никогда-Никто ныло, выло, стонало, молило Бога вернуть его во время, в историю, в семью, в память, в жизнь"; (2000-2009: 312).

The illuminato who has just "mimed" the music of creation finds salvation and solace in a children's prayer, which works a miracle, and Oleg suddenly sees God, first with his inner eye and then, having opened his eyes, on the empty wall:

Наконец он неловко слезает с дивана и на коленях, мокрый, грязный, всклокоченный, дико указывает рукою на какое-то место на стене: "Вот, Ты здесь, Ты здесь. Будь благословен, это я Тебя благословляю. Живи, живи, живи всегда..." (2009, 2: 312)

(Finally he awkwardly gets off the sofa, and, kneeling down, wet, dirty, disheveled, points with a wild look to some place on the wall: "Here, You are here, You are here. Be blessed, it's me who is blessing you. Live, live, live forever...")

Characteristically, Oleg uses the same formula as Raphael did when he saw a vision of the Virgin Mary which appeared to him on the empty canvas. According to Zhukovskii's version of this story in a letter to the Grand Duchess Aleksandra Fedorovna (published as an essay in *Poliarnaia zvezda* in 1824):

Сказывают, что Рафаэль, натянув полотно свое для этой картины, долго не знал, что на нем будет: вдохновение не приходило. Однажды он заснул с мыслию о Мадонне, и верно какой-нибудь ангел разбудил его. Он вскочил: *она здесь*, закричал он, указав на полотно, и начертил первый рисунок. И в самом деле, это не картина, а видение: чем долее глядишь, тем живее уверяешься, что перед тобою что-то неестественное происходит (особливо если смотришь так, что ни рамы, ни других картин не видишь). (1985: 308)

(They say that having stretched the canvas for this painting, Raphael for some time did not know what it would be: inspiration did not come.

One day he fell asleep thinking about the Madonna and truly some kind of angel woke him. He jumped up: she is here! – he cried out, having pointed at the canvas and drew the first sketch. And indeed it is not a painting, but a vision: the longer you look, the more vividly you become convinced, that before you something unworldly is happening [especially if you look in such a way that its frame and other paintings are not visible].<sup>11</sup>

Although the story refers back to Wackenroder's typically romantic understanding of the artist whose inspiration is determined by his direct contact with the Divine (Wackenroder 1971), the Russian poet amends it by adding an important nuance that seems to reference his Orthodox background. Indeed, Raphael, having seen the holy image on the canvas, seizes his brushes and immediately draws the first sketch. In so doing, he materializes the image which is already "imprinted" on the canvas, and thus acts as an icon painter who aims to reproduce not his inner vision of the Deity but rather the Holy Face known also as the Mandylion, that is, the image which has not been made by human hands. However, this method can hardly be called a romantic one. Perhaps this is why Zhukovskii, without noticing any contradiction, immediately shifts from speaking of the mechanic fixation of the image to talking of its reproduction by means of the painter's soul:

Здесь душа живописца, без всяких хитростей искусства, но с удивительною простотою и легкостью передала холстине то чудо, которое во внутренности ее совершилось. (1985: 308)

(Here without the cunning of art, but with astonishing simplicity and ease, the soul of the painter imparted to the canvas that miracle which took place in its core.)<sup>12</sup>

"She is here" as an imprint on the canvas and "She is here" as an inner image coincide in an act of inspired creation. In Wackenroder, Raphael also sees the image of Mary on the canvas, but falls asleep at once and returns to work only in the morning. On this interpretation, Raphael copies not the *Acheiropoieta* Face of the Virgin Mary that is no longer visible the next morning (the painter sees the unfinished picture), but the inner image that is forever engraved in his soul.

It is difficult to agree with Lindsay Ceballos that "both Wackenroder and Zhukovsky considered the *Sistine Madonna* a pure reflection of Raphael's gifts, equating the beauty of the Madonna with the genius of the painter" (2011: 100). Quite the contrary, in fact, both critics put forward a model of representation according to which the painted image refers not to the referent but to a vision of the referent. From this perspective, the "cunning of art" can only be of secondary importance. The weakening of the

referential link also affects the verbal representation of the image-vision (“it is not a painting, but a vision”). In fact, one can hardly find a detailed ekphrasis in the texts by Wackenroder and Zhukovskii: if the German critic limits himself to reproducing the context of the miracle, the Russian poet recreates the emotional impact which the picture produces on the viewer.

Unsurprisingly, Oleg also fails to give a description of the image he has seen on the empty wall. While his meditation can be and actually is verbalized, its culmination, namely the vision of a Deity, rests in the sphere of what Samuel Beckett called the “ill seen, ill said”. The major difference between Oleg’s position and that of the Romantic painter lies in the status of the visionary: indeed, Raphael stays very passive at the moment of the vision’s “descent”, whereas Oleg carries on a long and arduous struggle with some supernatural force which refuses personification (he addresses the Deity as “a pitiful Nothing” which he “adores” and “forgives”). The ordeal of his vision leaves him devastated and exhausted.

Thus, the seemingly romantic atmosphere in this scene of pious meditation proves to be deceptive and should be analyzed from the perspective of the occult rather than that of Christianity.

Significantly, Poplavskii addresses those Christian mystical doctrines which lie on the verge of heresy. For example, the fact that during his meditation Oleg suddenly breaks into floods of tears probably refers to the experience of the French saint, Jean-Marie Vianney (1786-1859, canonized in 1925 by Pope Pius XI), usually called the “saint curé d’Ars” (“holy priest of Ars”).<sup>13</sup> He is credited with a phrase – “Le cœur des saints est liquide” (“The Saints’ heart is liquid”) – which Poplavskii reproduces in a diary entry in 1933 (2009, 3: 433; see Tokarev 2012). In 1929, Vianney was appointed the patron saint of all parish priests of the world.

Speaking in another entry of the “astral fire of the most-pure Divine magic” (“астральный огонь пречистой Божественной магии”; 2009, 3: 356), Poplavskii has in mind precisely this ability of the human heart to soften under the influence of divine love. There is a kind of magical transformation of corporeal substance into spiritual substance. Employing both esoteric and Christian terminology, Poplavskii here demonstrates his penchant for eclectic wording; the Martinist “way of the heart” turns out to be linked with the Catholic doctrine of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which was established towards the end of the 19th century. In 1925 the Russian religious thinker Boris Vysheslavtsev (whose works were familiar to Poplavskii) expressed his affinity with this doctrine in the article ‘Znachenie serdtsa v religii’ (‘The Significance of the Heart in Religion’; 1925: 91-92), and in 1928 the encyclical of Pope Pius XI *Miserentissimus Redemptor*, in which the doctrine was confirmed and expanded upon, was published.

“*Mysterious Paintings*” *Seen in a Crystal Ball*

In ‘*Dnevnik Terezy*’ (‘*Tereza’s Diary*’), included in *Apollon Bezobrazov*, Tereza complains of falling into a state which may be termed a paralysis of the will, a sort of internal block or the type of obsession in whose grip a person feels “bewitched” by something external. She is brought to this state by the waltz from *The Merry Widow* by Franz Lehár, and, significantly, it is this very waltz that Poplavskii refers to in his speculation about the essence of poetry (March 1929). Poplavskii writes of how poetry arises:

Души чувствуют иногда, что вот что-то с ними происходит, что они переживают на углах что-то бесконечно-ценное, но что именно – сказать не могут; причем иногда с силой физического припадка происходят некие состояния особого содержательного волнения, бесконечно-сладостного. И иногда вдруг слагается первая строчка, т. е. с каким-то особенным распеваем сами собой располагаются слова, причем они становятся как бы магическим сигналом к воспоминаниям; как иногда в музыкальной фразе запечатлевается целая какая-нибудь мертвая весна, или, для меня, в запахе мандаринной кожуры – целое Рождество в снегах, в России; или же все мое довоенное детство в вальсе из “Веселой вдовы”. (2009, 3: 420)

(The souls feel sometimes that something is happening with them, that they are feeling something infinitely precious at the corners, but they can’t say precisely what; moreover, sometimes some state of a peculiar substantial and infinitely sweet agitation arises with the force of a physical paroxysm. And sometimes the first line is suddenly composed, that is, the words situate themselves with a peculiar chant, and then they turn out to be a magical signal to recollections; it’s a bit like a whole dead spring being engraved in a musical phrase or, for me, like a whole Christmas in Russia, in the snow – in the scent of a mandarin peel; or like all my pre-war childhood – in the waltz from *The Merry Widow*.)

The scent of mandarins, a waltz or a word are just signals to memories, but they would not be perceived as signals if they were not conditioned by the “substantial agitation” (“содержательное волнение”) that transcends their sensory nature.<sup>14</sup> This agitation is ontologically linked with the super-sensible world, or, as Poplavskii calls it, the world of music.

The “magical evocative power” (“магическая эвокационная сила”) (2009, 3: 420) of music is like a spell, the poet asserts; the state of “substantial agitation” that comes with the “force of the physical paroxysms” is also similar to the state of illumination in which the sorcerer or medium gains contact with the supernatural. It is not by chance that Tereza cannot move or

“shake off” (“стряхнуть”) this state that reminds her of mystical “raptures” and ecstasies.

By using the word “evocative”, Poplavskii is playing with two meanings of this word of French origin: the verb “évoquer” means to “conjure” and to “bring to life in the memory, or imagination”. This is why the narrator in the novel compares listening to the music of bygone days with a spiritualist séance.<sup>15</sup>

Боже мой, как пронзали мне сердце старые довоенные вальсы из немецких опереток, под которые я так тосковал гимназистом на бульварах и катках, совершенно одинокий, слабый, плохо одетый, лишенный знакомых. Вся душа довоенной Европы в последний раз сияла в них вместе с отзвуками Вагнера и Дебюсси и призраками Метерлинка, Дрейфуса, Жореса и Сары Бернар.  
(2000-2009: 171)

(My God how the old, antebellum waltzes from German operettas pierced my heart! I *used to listen* to their strains and to pine when I was a *gymnasium student*, utterly alone on the boulevards and ice-rinks, weak, poorly dressed, and bereft of friends. The entire soul of pre-war Europe shone for the last time in these operettas, with echoes of Wagner and Debussy and the ghosts of Maeterlinck, Dreyfus, Jaurès, and Sarah Bernhardt; 2015: 128)

According to Poplavskii’s conception, “poetry is formed from music, philosophy and painting. That is, from the union of rhythm, symbol and form” (“поэзия создается из музыки, философии и живописи. То есть от соединения ритма, символа и образа”; 2009, 3: 280). Music is responsible for the “substantial agitation”; philosophy for the platonic “idea”, understood as the intelligible eternal essence of things; painting for the visual “materialisation” of the idea. Together these elements create “mysterious paintings”, which the poet, performing here in the role of magus-theurgist, transmits to his reader, who communes with the magic of the words.

Here is an example of one such “mysterious painting” taken from the *Avtomaticheskie stikhi*:

Стеклянный шар, магический кристалл.  
В нем-то и заключен замок, окруженный деревьями  
и весь в вертикальном направлении, со сложной  
системой рвов, яркого песку и флагов.  
В сумраке розовых кустов открывается вход  
в подземелье, где золото шумит на террасе и сотни  
приглашенных любят великанами и бросают  
цветы, которые, вместо того чтобы падать,  
медленно поднимаются на воздух, относимый  
течением.

Ночью все собираются вокруг волшебных фонарей. На белом экране сперва вверх ногами, потом прямо открываются гавани, где освещенные закатным солнцем маленькие люди сидят на обломках римских колонн у зеленоватой и подозрительной воды.

Мы восхищаемся их волосами.

Затем всё общество прогуливается между портовыми сооружениями и, задумавшись, уже никогда не возвращается в замок, где тем временем зажигается электричество, и, пьяное, поет у раскрытых окон. (2009, 1: 393)

(A crystal ball, the magic crystal.

It contains a castle surrounded by trees  
and erected vertically, with a complex  
system of ditches, bright sand and flags.

In the twilight of rose bushes one can see the entry  
to a dungeon where gold is making a noise on the terrace and  
hundreds

of guests admire giants and throw  
flowers which are slowly rising in the air carried away by the  
stream,

instead of falling down.

At night, everybody gathers around the magic lanterns. On  
a white screen come to light, first upside-down then upright,  
some harbors where little people sit in a sunset light  
on the ruins of Roman columns near the greenish and suspicious-  
looking

water.

We admire their hair.

Then the whole gathered mass walks among the buildings  
of the port, and, sunk into deep reflection, never  
comes back to the castle where meanwhile  
the electricity is put on and where everybody is singing,  
drunk, near the open windows.)

The poem is a verbalized series of visual forms, seen with the aid of the oldest magical object, the crystal ball (see Besterman 1924). Had the poet really been looking into a crystal ball, his poem would have been the fruit of a real experience of automatic writing. But the crystal ball is rather a symbolic object, which expresses the fundamental necessity of acquiring a new, alternative vision combining introspection (vision trained on the inner world of the observer) and extrospection (vision trained on the external). Whatever the case, the strange forms he sees in the ball could be either direct visual impressions or images kept in memory or, most likely of all, a blending of



visions of the past and visions of the present. For example, the image of the ghostly castle with moats and flags may be associated with some real castle seen once by the poet and imprinted in his memory.

Images recalled from memory can be just as vivid as the real objects given in immediate perception. This phenomenon can be considered within the framework of the concept of “eidetic images” proposed in the 1920-1930s by the German psychologist Erich Rudolf Jaensch (Jaensch 1930; Haber 1979). In the Soviet Union, the eidetic memory was highly praised by such prominent psychologists as Aleksandr Luriiia, Lev Vygotskii and Pavel Blonskii (see for example Vygotskii 1930: 178-205). Anyone who has an eidetic memory is capable of storing vivid images of objects after they have disappeared from sight, as if continuing to perceive the object in its absence, either with his eyes closed or while looking at some surface (for example, a wall or an empty canvas, as in Oleg’s and Raphael’s experiences, with one subtle difference: both see a vision rather than an afterimage). The physical absence of the object is a prerequisite for this kind of perception. The object may be reproduced directly after its disappearance from the field of vision, or after a few minutes, days or even years. Eidetic memory is particularly pronounced in children and adolescents, but it also occurs occasionally in adults. It seems that Poplavskii had a general predisposition for reproducing eidetic images (see Tokarev 2011a: 25-30).

The images of harbors with greenish water could be interpreted from this point of view. Poplavskii may have “inherited” them from Claude Lorrain, who was famous for his port landscapes. In fact, Poplavskii highly valued Lorrain’s painting;<sup>16</sup> it is therefore not surprising that his friend Nikolai Tatishchev defined Poplavskii’s poetry as follows:

И постепенно хаос начинает проясняться и из кажущегося нагро-  
мождения образов и сновидений вырастает пейзаж, таинственный,  
но отчетливый, как вечерние гавани с кораблями Клода Лоррена.  
(1947: 200)

(And gradually the chaos begins to clear up and a mysterious but  
distinct landscape, like the evening harbors with ships by Claude  
Lorrain, arises from a seeming pile of images and dreams.)

On the other hand, eidetic images are complemented and complicated by the use of images that have not been seen before, but are first received at the time of illumination: for example, the dungeon with the giants; the gold “making a noise” on the terrace (an allusion to the alchemical *chrysopoeia*); flowers rising upward. In the latter case, it should be noted that an inversion of the vectors of movement (this also applies to the inverted image on the screen) is generally very characteristic of magical consciousness.

The images seen in the crystal ball reveal their purely illusory nature (i.e. they could not appear in reality, but only in the magical medium of the crystal) most clearly at the moment when the magic lantern (*Laterna magica*) comes into play, multiplying the illusion.<sup>17</sup> The hundreds of guests invited to the castle become spectators of the “little” people (figures who seem to have been descended from Lorrain’s paintings peopled with demigods, saints and heroes), whose images are projected on a white screen. John Dee, the famous magician of Elizabethan times, used the crystal ball to make contact with angels; the audience in the dungeon also seem to have been initiated into the mysteries (“we admire their hair”, says the poet, pointing out that he is among the initiated). The little people of the magic lantern, for their part, have doubly illusory bodies and resemble angels or, worse, demons adopting the guise of angels (Renata’s “the tiny ones”). However, the last sentence of the poem obscures things further: “then the whole gathered mass walks among the buildings of the port”. That is, those who were watching the magic pictures turn out themselves to be inside these pictures. The initiates, amongst whom is the poet himself, become “little people”.

The poetic art is therefore a kind of magic that helps the poet to regenerate himself in a new form that is, as Jung points out, a physical equivalent of the *substantia coelestis* (“heavenly substance”). While today we would describe the alchemical operation as a symbol, for the alchemist “the procedure he followed was obviously an allegory of his postulated *substantia coelestis* and its chemical equivalent. To that extent the operation was not symbolical for him but purposive and rational” (Jung 1970: 526).

The same goes for the poet working on his opus, which he perceives as an earthly equivalent of the *verbum divinum*. Poplavskii has such an understanding in mind when he writes: “Christ and the Apostles used to resort to magical operations, and not only to the symbolic ones” (“и Христос, и Апостолы прибегали к операциям магического характера, и не только к символическим”; 2009, 3: 290). Faith is therefore far from being a simple “assortment” of symbols, and its magical dimension should not be underestimated. Similarly, the poetic “magic” is by no means a banal metaphor; rather, it implies a real participation in “divine-working”.

It is almost a truism to compare a poet “invoking” poetic spirits with a magus (Kris, Kurz 1979); in the case of Poplavskii, however, esoteric knowledge operated as one of the forces driving poetic creation. If a vague “mysticism” was a characteristic feature of the younger generation of Russian émigré writers in Paris, Poplavskii was uniquely positioned among his confreres not only as a true connoisseur of Christian and Jewish esoterica, but also as an investigator of the limits of consciousness. Many of the poet’s contemporaries were convinced that his “meditations”, “trances” and “prayers” were a mere pose and Poplavskii himself an impostor. When, after Poplavskii’s

death, Andrei Sedykh read some of his newly published diaries, he was quite confused by the sudden realization that Poplavskii's extravagant behavior reflected a real hunger for infinity and beyond (1962: 247-254).

It is symptomatic that Poplavskii often used to reread his own diaries, as if he himself were unsure of the validity of his mystical experience. Several days before his death, he wrote:

Hier grande crise mystique, débutée par une lourde lecture demi-consciente de mes cahiers sacrifiés par le cataclisme qui avance. Somnolence, méditation noire. Suffocation de l'abondance. Monde mystique soudain visible à grand renfort de figures symboliques. Joie énorme de rapport personnel avec Dieu. Larmes. Grand rassemblement des amis astraux. Mon Dieu fais-moi travailler. Grande difficulté de réadaptation à la réalité. (2009, 3: 448)

(Yesterday a big mystic crisis, which began with a heavy semi-conscious reading of my note-books "sacrificed" by the approaching cataclysm. Somnolence, black meditation. Suffocation of abundance. Mystic world suddenly visible, with the help of symbolic figures. Enormous joy of personal relationship with God. Tears. Big meeting of the astral friends. My God make me work. Big difficulty re-adapting to reality.)

Why use a foreign language (French in this case) when speaking about this very peculiar experience, if not for the purpose of adopting a detached view of it? This double distance – both temporal and linguistic – permitted him to present the experience as a real event. The major difficulty arose in the application of these visions, that is, in the poetic work Poplavskii thought of as the "re-adaptation" of the "mystic world" to earthly reality. Often branded as a "Russian surrealist", Poplavskii hardly signed unreservedly to the method of automatic writing; though he wrote poems labeled "automatic" (such as the one quoted above), the label does not amount to a claim that he wrote it in a state of trance or ecstasy. Rather, the poem reflects that very state of "substantial agitation" which goes beyond mystical practice as such and supposes a more complex "work" in which the magic plays an important but not unique role. The poet can resort to magic (understood either as a special technique for manipulating supernatural forces or simply as a form of creative energy, as in music) in order to liberate his consciousness and imagination, but the real poetic work begins when he leaves the beyond and returns "home from heaven".

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NOTES

- 1 On Poplavskii, see in particular Livak (2001a: 118-141; 2003: 45-89); Ponomareff (2006: 73-92); Menegaldo (2007).
- 2 All translations of quotations from Poplavskii are by the author unless otherwise stated.
- 3 For more on the Russian theosophical movement outside Russia, see Carlson (1993: 180-187).
- 4 *Apollo the Ugly* with the stress-on-third-syllable, or *Apollo the Imageless* with the stress-on-second-syllable and in a less common way of pronouncing.
- 5 In fact, the Parisian Sainte-Geneviève library, where Poplavskii was a regular reader, possesses two editions of this book, one published in 1616 and the other in 1630.
- 6 Henceforth, italic text indicates corrections which I have made to Kopper's translations of the novel.
- 7 Merezhkovskii replaces it by "on my right side", as if trying to dispel suspicions concerning the devilish nature of these visions (1998: 55).
- 8 The Roman Catholic Church established a special feast of "transverberatio cordis" on August 27.
- 9 These, along with angels, are the dominant objects in Poplavskii's book of poetry *Flagi*.
- 10 The mystical and contemplative tradition of Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, who became disappointed with the Elus-Coën's use of theurgic ritual. In this tradition emphasis is placed on meditation and inner spiritual alchemy.
- 11 Translation by Lindsay Ceballos (2011: 99).
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 He is mentioned in the novel by Huysmans *Là-Bas* (*Down There, or The Damned*). This novel would have influenced Poplavskii during his work on *Apollon Bezobrazov*.
- 14 Nostalgia can be seen as a form of substantial agitation. In his well-known study of melancholy, Jean Starobinski argues that a melody is able to provoke "a fit of hypermnesia that is the illusion of the quasi-presence of the past, doubled with the painful feeling of separation" (2012: 257).
- 15 According to Vasilii Ianovskii, Poplavskii had intended to attend a séance on the day he died (1993: 30-31).
- 16 See the article 'Molodaia russkaia zhivopis' v Parizhe' ('Young Russian Painting in Paris', 1930) in which Poplavskii mentions the "never ceasing ominous orange sunset of Claude Lorrain" ("непрестанный зловещий оранжевый закат Клода Лоррена"; 2009, 3: 37).
- 17 Bezobrazov hangs a reproduction of one of Lorrain's paintings on the wall. Cf. the magic lantern in Oleg's meditation.

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