Post-Orientalism in the Poetry of Modern St. Petersburg Scholars

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Abstract

To mark its one hundred and fiftieth anniversary in 2005 the Oriental Department of St. Petersburg State University published a slim volume of verse, About East, about Love, by staff, graduates and students. Since then three more have been added. Including contributions from past orientalists, the series was given the collective Arabic name al-Manakh, (Bivouac). The main feature that connects all the contributors is their passion for distant travels. Escaping categorisation according to official Soviet ideology or to the kind of Orientalism theorised by Edward Said, the poems often make ambiguous reference for what can be for Russians unstable notions of ‘East and West’. A common pre-occupation has been a trans-linguistic approach or crossing boundaries between languages and in the quest for understanding cultural diversity make strange and exotic things become friendly and familiar.

Keywords: Orientalism, Post-Orientalism, translingualism, interculturality

In 2005, the St. Petersburg State University celebrated the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of its Oriental Department, Vostochniy Fakultet – the title officially translates into English as Faculty of Asian and African Studies to avoid the politically incorrect adjective ‘Oriental’. Indeed, the Faculty of Oriental Languages was inaugurated on August
27, 1855, according to the Imperial edict signed by Nicolas I on October 22, 1854, though Arabic and Persian have been taught in Petersburg since 1818. Disbanded in 1919, after the Bolshevik’s coup-d’état, the Department was reestablished in 1944. However, the tradition of Oriental Studies in Russia laid by Osip Senkovsky, Aleksandr Kazem-Bek, Baron Victor Rosen, Valentin Zhukovsky, Vasiliy Barthold, Ignatiy Kratchkovsky, to name the most well-known, was kept despite all the trials and tribulations (Rodionov 2004; 2011; 2012; Tolz 2011). The Department’s Library was established in 1819 due to donations from the Chamber of Curiosities/ Kunstkamera and by the Asian Museum to the Imperial University of Saint-Petersburg. Among 285,000 items, there are 50,000 manuscripts and xylographs. Nowadays, the Oriental Department ranks one of the world’s major centres for the study and teaching of languages, cultures, religions and history of Asia and Africa. The number of Asian and African languages taught there is among the highest in the world – over one hundred Asian and African languages and dialects, not to mention basic European languages. The Department cooperates with the important science and research centres in Russia, Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America, e.g. Japan, China, South Korea, Mongolia, Oman, Egypt, Sudan, Germany, Switzerland, Finland, Spain, Great Britain, the USA.

Contrary to the Edward Said’s concept, the term orientalist still retains its academic notion for the staff, graduates, and students of the Oriental Department in St. Petersburg. Small wonder that a slim volume of their verse About East, about Love (2005), to mark the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Oriental Department, bears a subtitle ‘Verse of the vostochniks’ [those who studied at the Department]1 and orientalists’. Gathered together under one cover due to their professional affiliation, are forty-three authors arranged in alphabetical order, belonging to different generations and representing dissimilar world visions and artistic tastes. But it seems that this poetry collection has proved to be something more than an ordinary in-house jubilee edition. Indeed, under pressure of governmental censorship in the Soviet Union to write poetry meant to preserve personal freedom according to a popular Russian maxim ‘A poet in Russia is more than just a poet’. Informal poetry never intended to be published in the Soviet period, known only to a narrow circle of friends and relatives, has ventured out of doors for the first time and stimulated a favourable response (Issue II, p. 5; Golubeva 2009, pp. 7-8; Zinovieva 2009, p. 247), and in two years, a new issue (2007) has been compiled and published with a laconic subtitle: Poetry of Orientalists. Its title “Svoye Chuzhoye” which can be roughly translated by a pair of opposites as ‘Native-Alien’ alludes to an interplay of meanings: every scholar of a foreign culture has voluntarily chosen to live in more than one cultural
and linguistic world; willy-nilly, he is involved in the exploration of the unfamiliar (chuzhoe) and the estrangement of the habitual (svoye). All thirty-one participants were divided chronologically into three groups: – Past Perfect, Present Continuous, and Future Indefinite. A democratic roll-call from A to Z was replaced by the hierarchy of precedence and seniority. The perfect Past comprises poetry of our predecessors: Assyriologist Voldemar Shileiko (1891-1930), the second husband of the great Russian poet Anna Akhmatova; Arabist Vasily Eberman (1899-1937); and two Sinologists: Boris Vasiliev (1899-1937) and Aleksey Shhtukin (1904-1963). The lasting Present harbours generations of acting scholars and academic staff; and the indefinite Future lodges younger students.

The third issue (2009) entitled Three Seasons preserved the subtitle and the tripartite division of the second one. Additional verses of Boris Vasiliev were published in the first part as well as those of the polyglot-linguist Eugeny Polivanov (1891-1938), an expert in Persian culture Yuri Marr (1893-1935), and a graduate of the chair of African studies Igor Grigoriev (1945-?) who had lost contact with the Department for many years. It makes four authors plus sixteen in the middle part, and seven in the last part, altogether twenty-seven contributors. The fourth issue (2013) bears the name al-Manakh, which in Bedouin Arabic means a bivouac; this title has spread to the previous issues which are now known as al-Manakh issues one to four. The first part of al-Manakh no. 4, Archive, presents four contributors, among them an expert in Persian culture Serguey Zhukovsky (1883-1966), as well as thirty authors in the last part arranged in the alphabetical order of their first names. The subtitle of al-Manakh 4 was extended to ‘Poetry and Prose of the Orientalists’.

Collectively these four issues of al-Manakh allow us to set forth some considerations. Since the author of this essay is a co-editor and a participant in all the four issues, I act as ichthyologist and fish in one person, to borrow an expression from Viktor Shklovsky, a leader of Russian Formalist school, who, in 1917, served as an assistant Commissar of the Russian Provisional Government during the Persian Campaign.

The main feature that connects all the contributors to the St. Petersburg ‘poetry of orientalists’, notwithstanding their creativity and poetical technique, is their passion for distant travels. This might be considered a typical feature of the Oriental romanticism displayed by European poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Tartakovskiy 1975; Vostovhniye Motivy 1985), travellers and artists castigated by Edward Said. Frankly speaking, some of my colleagues never read Said, or only read him belately because he admits that he ‘had to focus rigorously upon the British-French and later the American materials’ and left out Russia along with Germany and Italy (Said 1979, p. 17); as a result Russian scholars and professors never took his criticism personally.
Their collective memory keeps alive the Byronic tunes of Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837) (Chelyshev 1999), for example ‘Talisman’:

In the delightful hour of evening twilight,  
where the Mussulman spends his days  
reveling in the pleasures of the harem,  
there an enchantress, caressing me,  
handed me a talisman’ (Obolensky 1965, p. 95)

Or the Byronic motives of the politically incorrect (Layton 1997, pp. 87-8) lines from Cossack Lullaby by Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841): ‘[…] [T]he wicked Chechen creeps up the river bank, / and sharpens his dagger’ (Obolensky 1965, p. 161). The senior professors and scholars, at least most of them, feel inspired by political émigré Ivan Bunin’s (1870-1953)† Near Eastern verse, such as Lucifer –

The Lebanon, this is Paradise.  
The dawn is ablaze with crimson.  
The snow on the mountains is like silk. From the caves  
the flocks come wandering down the slopes. The meadows are covered with a sea of mist.  
O world of Abel! Days of pure, childish faith!  
From behind the bare ridges of the Anti-Lebanon  
Lucifer shimmers as it dies away (Obolensky, p. 248).

The lust of wandering is voiced by Alexandr Blok (1880-1921): ‘You have only to find by chance a speck of dust from a distant land on your penknife, and once again the world will appear strange and wrapped in a coloured haze’ (Obolensky, p. 284). In the same vein, the feeling of going across all possible geographic and cultural borders is expressed in a famous poem of Nikolay Gumiliev (executed by the Bolsheviks in 1921) ‘The [St.Petersburg] Tram that Lost its Way’:

[…] We had already skirted the wall,  
dashed through a palm-grove,  
and clattered over three ridges  
across the Neva, the Nile, and the Seine.  
[…] Where am I? In reply my heart beats so languidly and apprehensively:
“Do you see the station where you can
buy a ticket for the India of the Spirit?” (Obolensky, p. 301).

The last expression has become proverbial, and rare copies of *The Penguin Book of Russian Verse* secretly taken in through the Iron Curtain were passed from hand to hand.

One can find a Kiplingian cadence in Gumiliev’s verse, for example ‘The Captains’ – ‘They are surely no cowards, the men who are endowed with such hands / and with a keen, confident eye / that can suddenly hurl a frigate / against enemy feluccas’ (Obolensky: 294). Compare it with Kipling’s notorious ‘The White Man’s Burden’: ‘Send forth the best ye breed’ (Kipling 1983, pp. 76-78). Brilliantly translated into Russian by the members of the Gumiliev circle, Kipling became one of the most popular and influential foreign poets in Russia despite a stigma of being ‘a watchdog of the British imperialism’. In the late Soviet Union and early Russian Federation, his poems and short stories were published several times, occasionally in English with Russian translation (e.g. Kipling 1983; Kipling 1994). Particularly oft-cited and extensively discussed is the beginning of ‘The Ballad of East and West’. Those who concentrate on the first two lines, interpret it as a statement of fundamental incompatibility between the two cultures: geographical borders equated with cultural boundaries. Those who make an effort to read on, realize that Kipling denies a predestined and clear-cut East-West frontier: ‘But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth, / When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!’

For a Russian audience, the ambivalent cohesion of East and West is symbolized by the Imperial Russian-Byzantine double-head eagle. Osip Mandelstam (died 1938 in a Soviet concentration camp) formulated it in ‘Hagia Sophia’: ‘Hagia Sophia – the Lord ordained that nations and emperors should halt here! For, in the words of an eye-witness, your dome, as on a chain, is suspended from the heavens. [...] But what was in the mind of your bountiful builder when, exalted in soul and thought, he disposed the apses and the exedrae, pointed them west and east?’ (Obolensky 1965, p. 351). The orientalist Voldemar Shileiko expressed this idea as the unity of Qur’an and the Bible: ‘Qur’an has been spreading like the wings of an eagle [...] and a trembling bird in a stubborn effort / hid itself in the grass from the fearsome heavens / where the eagle’s wings are spreading like the Book’ (Issue II, p. 15).

However, the unity of East and West demonstrates its fragility to the point of forming a pair of opposites. Thus, in response to a Russian religious philosopher Vladimir Soloviev’s (1853-1900) question, ‘What East do you [Russia] believe you belong to –
either the East of [king] Xerxes or that of Christ?’, an expert in Old Persian language Ivan Steblin-Kamensky composed a quatrain: ‘According to the ideas of Marx, / you, Russia, has become the East of Xerxes, / and with the bloodlust of a snow leopard, / you tear into pieces your own heart’ (Issue II, p. 75).

Another common feature shared by most of the al-Manakh contributors is a translinguistic approach or crossing boundaries between languages. Assyriologist Vladimir Emelyanov expresses his personal experience in eight lines:

Italian speech is as sweet as grapes,
German breathes with cold Nordic godlessness,
French breaks rapids like a reckless river,
and English blazes with frozen passion.
Arabic smells of pensive grass under the dry wind,
of desert revelation and of a sea bed which despises fords,
and Russian speech reveals the simple-heartedness of the first people, unembraceable space and the fragility of young freedom’ (Issue I, p. 51).

For our authors, macaronisms are not a sign of foppishness, but a natural way of expression, thus an expert in Persian culture Zarine Djandosova offers us a mixed drink of French, English, Russian, Chinese, Kazakh, and Italian spirits: ‘Et je pleure, and I drink wine, / and afterwards in a midnight letter / I write – Ni-hao, ainalai [Hi, my love (Chinese, Kazakh). – MR] /, besame, besame, besame’. (Issue I, p. 32). In this quest for understanding cultural diversity, strange and exotic things become friendly and familiar, as Arabist Mikhail Suvorov points out in his verse ‘Late Yemeni Literati’: ‘Thoughtful Dammadj, sad-faced Abd-al-Wali, / frantic Badhib, meticulous Basadiq -- / I bet you never heard names more bizarre. / But it is you, and I have long been accustomed to it’ (Issue I, p. 150). Igor Kotin, a specialist in Indian diaspora and a poet of rhymed Russian travelogues, cityscapes and other vistas he called vedute, translates English verse of Daljit Nagra, who, in-between two cultural worlds, Britain and Punjab, summons a Kiplingian character: ‘Should I foot it featly as a Punjab in Punglish / Sold on an island wrecked by the British […] / Should I read for you straight or Gunga Din this gig (Issue IV, p. 223; Nagra 2007, p. 6).

The most reckless of St. Petersburg scholars, including myself, have ventured to compose poetry in foreign languages, Eastern and Western, ignoring the failures suffered by great poets such as Alexandr Pushkin in his poetical experiments in French or Rainer
Maria Rilke, in Russian. In a self-made English verse, Arabist Aleksandr Matveev melancholy pictures a distant Nordic town he has been dreaming about in Yemen: ‘The town is sinking into dark / oblivion and eternal night. / Alas! Let’s go! A gloomy path / follows the slopes that go up / to catch last dusky light and reach/ the pass to Happy Sadness beach / at whitish snow-frozen bay / of calmness – hopeless silver-grey’ (Issue III, p. 134). His colleague Mikhail Rodionov pictures cultural duality in the following English lines: ‘Sick and tired of Russian nation, / Hadhramaut is my destination. / At the South Arabian shore / I shall see my Far North no more. / So no tears, no fears, no doubt. / Out, out to Hadhramaut! / When get tired of Arab nation, / old Saint Pete is my destination. / At a bay of the Baltic Sea / I will say to the Arabs merci. / So no tears, no fears, no doubt. / Out, out of Hadhramaut! / Oh, small doubt, I’ll really win/ when I’m out and when I’m in. / Thus I finish with what I start – / in or out? Or still apart?’ (Issue III, pp. 57-8).

A new number of al-Manakh under preparation is subtitled ‘A Future in the Past’. Actually, the post-oriental’s prospects look rather gloomy. The cult of ratio has faded away with the last echo of the Enlightenment, the romantic battle between the sacred and profane has ended with a draw, both antagonists got exhausted and indistinguishable to the naked eye. Under the bridges of interculturality explosives of bigotry are laid. The imagined Oriental paradise has gone, but contrary to Ivan Bunin cited above (‘Lucifer shimmers as it dies away’), personification of evil is full of hellish vigour. Really, how can scholars and professors of oriental studies in a city nicknamed Northern Palmyra, quietly compose poetry after the destruction of the world heritage sites of Nimrud, Nineveh, Hatra and with the sinister menace to Palmyra? Let me finish with English lines of my own: ‘A ring of gold on my finger, / a drop of blood on my lips, / the only thing I can figure / is Six, Six, and a Six betwixt. / I wonder where I shall wander. / My quest to the west turns east. / Lo! under the trees and yonder / – the Beast Number, a beast number, a number of beasts’ (Issue II, p. 87). Nevertheless, in spite of all sinister omens, we should keep trying to do our best according to the favorite French proverb of Leo Tolstoy – ‘Fais ce que tu dois, et advienne qui pourra’.

Notes

1 All translations are by MR, except those by Obolensky.

2 The first Russian writer to win the Nobel Prize for literature.
Bibliography


Notes on contributor

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