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Vai al contenuto multimediale

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Egon
An Aposematic Man





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... Furthermore, the affliction of a victim of the viper's bite is also mine. For they say, as you know, that anyone who has been so afflicted is unwilling to speak of what sort of thing it is except to those who have themselves been bitten, since they alone will understand and forgive every kind of misbehavior induced by that kind of anxiety. Me too I was bitten by the cruelest bite where I am the most sensitive to the pain it causes: in my heart and soul, or name it as you want. I have been bitten and plagued by philosophical speeches, which grab wilder than a viper when they seize the soul of a worthy youth and make him do and say anything...

PLATO, *Symposium*

Aposematism

And then men will learn
to distrust beauty
as they fear multicolour snakes.
Since the bite of love
is the most bitter venom.

Matteo MONAI, unpublished work

She could remember well when she saw him for the first time.

It was the nineteenth day of November, precisely when she began to attend his lessons. She had missed the previous three or four lessons, because they were held simultaneously with the Russian literature course – the most important (and her favourite) discipline among the mandatory ones – since it was taught by professor Stepanov. She had realised that no notes or audio recordings could replace the direct listening because that experience involved not only the hearing, but also the sight, the ability to grasp his fervent gaze, the plastic and hieratic look on the Russian professor's face, filtered through a Novgorod icon with a permutation of colours, where the blood red background of those imposing images turned into the faded pale blue of the wall near the chair, with a focus on his red and chubby cheeks, spotted by an unkempt and slightly grizzled beard.

Everybody knew that he had a weakness which gave him strength and helped him bear his solitude, the loss of his properties and affection, after the separation from his land, the great Mother Russia.

Stepanov did not believe in generalisations. He tended to avoid any literary commonplace which covered the contradictions of the unique spirit of Mayakovsky with the clear

colours of futurism and kept the internal conflicts, the frustrations and the haughtiness of Tolstoy together under the blanket of grandeur.

After all, anthropology relies on the idea that men are the most able to adapt to the ever-changing living conditions.

However, when animals migrate, they always remain within the limits defined by their conservation instinct... But what about plants? They move only when they are taken away from their habitat, which however can be easily recreated by means of a greenhouse with controlled temperature, light and humidity conditions.

But Stepanov could not endure the separation from the lakes of Petersburg, which elusively greet you as you go the dacha, looking out of the window at a far-away horizon, full of vague promises.

He could not bear being away from the penetrating and friendly mist which watches over your deadened steps as you confidently proceed along ghostly and silent roads... Away from the frothy and lazy Neva, caressed at night by the sinister glow of the overlooking golden dome.

And thus Stepanov, a rebellious and nihilistic soul, replaced adaptability with self-destruction. It was pleasant, after all. An impalpable and constant mist which dampens the grief of an irreparable loss; a state of grace which gives wings to the anthropomorphic oak with comet-like roots painted by Chagall.

When he talked about the Russian authors of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, he acted as if it were a pretext for recalling the memories of his childhood and youth, shrouded in the powerful images put on paper by these great artists.

The icons chosen by Stepanov did not convey either joy or light heartedness, typical of infancy, but delivered the an-

cient discomfort of a hypersensitive soul which had to face of a future that, once filtered through present time, turned that discomfort into an ominous premonition.

Within incoherent and broken thoughts on demon
 My sadness grows.
 [...]

 And I,
 totally bewitched,
 will go along the Neva shore.
 I walk,
 But I am always in the same place,
 I would like to be torn,
 But always in vain¹.

The nightmare that emerged from the water of the Neva took on strange shapes incomprehensible to his young students. After all, referring to Khlebnikov – one of his favourite authors – Stepanov argued that if you wanted to understand the behaviour of the magma flowing out of a volcano crater, you had to explore those abysses, that inner impulse which torments the artist and is suddenly poured out, like a Sibyl's prophecy neglected *in the utmost indifference*.

The artist-priest precisely plays the part of the oracle who acts between men and God.

Whom or what do the “many eyes of Khlebnikov’s Last Supper” hint at? Perhaps at Blok’s twelve apostles, who blasphemously turn the bread and wine of the sacrificial rite into the blood and corpses of the revolutionaries, the

1. See V.V. Majakovskij, *Človek*, in: V.V. Majakovskij, *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij v 13 t.*, AN SSSR. In-t mirovoj lit., im. A.M. Gor’kogo. M.: Gos. izd-vo chudož. lit., 1955-1961. T I. *Stichotvorenija, tragedija, poemy i stat’ja 1912-1917 godov*. Podgot. teksta i primeč. V.A. Katanjana, 1955: 243-272.

wearry workers, the frustrated writers who know nothing of love except for the flame enjoyed by others. Lulled into the false belief of being safe behind their house gates, they will face an imminent tragedy, anticipated by evil winds.

The Neva-river knows many Last Supper eyes.
 Yesterday here the blood of saviours housled
 With the body of north, paving-stone.
 Here's caroled the love of pages ablaze.
 It's with ash of the love that the evening's so black
 Both of workmen and pale librarians.
 Stream is flowing with red
 As the lantern is lit
 On the bridges a little bit tired.
 Crude are chimneys of wind
 And as a destiny guard the grid of gardens is growing.
 [...]²

Professor Stepanov did not hold simple readings or lectures, albeit heartfelt and lively: they rather sounded like a special declamation, marked by the voice tone, the movements of the eyes, the expression of the whole face, the barely controlled agitation of the chest, stuck between the imposing desk and the chair, which, to the eyes of the astonished students, looked like a treadmill driven by the imagination of a smart dreamer.

Thus, while he was talking about Petersburg, Belyj or Dostoevsky, some ghostly silhouettes appeared from the dark streets which “turned the passers-by into shadows”, from the basements of gloomy hovels, inhabited by disquieting char-

2. See V.V. Chlebnikov, *Neizdannye proizvedenija*, (Podgot. N. Chardžiev e T. Gric), Moskva 1940: 183. Translated by Alexandr Zorin. WEB <http://xn----9sdbblerea-ohiofr4b7d.xn--p1ai/works/translations/neva.html>. Accessed 4 January 2018.

acters, generated by the writer's bewilderment.... But that city was just a ghost, whose "existence was only an illusion".

Professor Stepanov was particularly fascinated by two concepts, connected to Cubo-Futurism and Symbolism: the secret and multiple meaning of words – especially of the letters of which they are made – and the eternal feminine, regarded as the ideal of (super)human perfection conveyed by poetry.

He passionately recalled the worship of the eternal feminine from which Blok e Belyj, the two dioscuroi of the Russian symbolism, took inspiration for their poems and life: in fact, according to them, Lyubov' Mendeleeva – the bride of the latter – embodied that ideal love (*ljubov'*) and was worshipped by the both of them, in a world fully detached from reality. Similarly, Stepanov stated that the Mayakovsky Lily-Osip Brik trio should not be considered a *trivial* love – giving special emphasis to the prefix *tri* – but rather as an example of courtly love, which was the highest peak of human feeling in the past.

Walking along the empty and poorly illuminated corridor "in the St Petersburg-style" which led to the professor's office, Diana was utterly amazed by an excited female voice which spoke Russian to... the famous professor, the only one allowed to stay in that room!

A moment later, Lara, the Russian lecturer, exited from the office slamming the door. Everybody thought that she was kind, because she was always ready to help the students, especially those in great difficulty.

Then why did she act like that?

She soon found it out: Stepanov, the professor fascinated by the almost courtly love of Russian poets, broke down. Wine transformed the sacred liquid into the dense black blood typical of the Bolsheviks. Of true love, Stepanov,

a dull bibliophile, knew nothing but what was written in books, however he had lost even those comforting remains still waiting for poor fellows to come back home after a day of forced labour. He should have mistaken the kindness of that woman – his right-hand woman – for something like love. She was standing next to him to show him a notebook; his heavy breath increasingly approaching, dangerously approaching, ready to steal a kiss... but he was brutally rejected, as she said: “Professor, I already have so many problems, I don’t want to make my life even worse”.

The news of that awkward event shook the relatively small department of Slavic studies. And not for *trivial* reasons, but rather because it affected the spiritual and intellectual balance due to the behaviour of the involuntary and charismatic protagonist of that scandal. Some students of that course were certainly much more reckless than the naive professor, however they indulgently avoided any superficial comment on the countless weaknesses of the old professor with a sort of sincere sympathy.

Diana discussed this issue with Sarah, her roommate who stood away from home like her: after some days of cohabitation marked by small daily gestures – a sort of test designed by the older ones – she thought that they were in perfect harmony, moreover Sara proved to be a good interlocutor.

How could Professor Stepanov believe that Lara would be up for it?

Don’t you see that he is a dreamer? When he talks about Blok and Belyj, he seems really convinced Do you really think that Belyj swooned at the thought of meeting Blok’s wife like a teenager!

Well, I do. Russians are not like us. For example, last year, I spent a month at Mrs. Tina’s house, who hosted me with-

in an Italian-Russian agreement, and she treated me like a relative. She accompanied me to the station and did not want me to leave, as if I were her daughter and were going to travel to the other side of the world. Russians puzzle me: I cannot understand them.

In my opinion, Stepanov got a crush far from being just a platonic feeling. Probably, when he was younger (or less old than now, which is the same), he was really a heartbreaker. It is the charm of his role. You can be extremely ugly, but if you are smart and a keen speaker, then you are fascinating. He is very intelligent, but he does not realize that he is old.

What does “old” mean? Think about Laurence Olivier or von Karajan? Men like these are never old and could charm any girl. At least, this is my personal opinion.

Well, we must be careful, because these events are overwhelming. We will get fooled by this culture, this combination of unreal and real things. And that’s when you get trapped. I think that these professors are perfectly aware of their magnetic power and use it when their victim are weak.

Are you talking about you or me? You are more disillusioned than me and able to avoid stupid crushes. Conversely, I am romantic and are more likely to make mistakes, therefore I should pay special attention. However, don’t forget that I have a boyfriend, so I’m on sure ground. Now it’s time to sleep. Goodnight.

Goodnight. Sleep tight and don’t moan in your sleep as you did yesterday.

* * *

Why did Diana moan in her sleep?

There was a pale hand, the hand of a corpse, which moved around her. It might belong either to a man or to a