

White Night

The Poetry of Vladislav Khodasevich

Russian art, particularly Russian verse, can seem disconcertingly and irreducibly alien. The foundational poet of modern Russia, Aleksandr Pushkin, has almost no practical influence in the West. Westerners concede his enormous reputation in his homeland, and his greatness is indubitable, but his traceable influence on non-Russophonic (or, more precisely, non-Slavic) poetry is negligible. Names honoured in Russia—Kliuev, Annensky, Gippius—mean almost nothing to readers in Berlin, Canberra or Manhattan. And those Russian poets who possess a more enthusiastic audience abroad—particularly Mandelstam—are often contorted by that enthusiasm into identities that Russians themselves struggle to recognise.

Vladislav Khodasevich is different. His virtues are immediately apparent to the Western reader. Vladimir Nabokov esteemed him as “the greatest Russian poet of our time” when Pasternak and Akhmatova were both alive, and Mandelstam’s fate was unknown. (He had, in fact, died in custody). Khodasevich’s verse has the metaphysical power of Eliot’s poetry, yet with a wit, a daring, and a bitterness that Eliot rarely matches. His use of irony was masterly. His formal skills were definitively competent; there was perhaps no greater technical poet, in any language, in the twentieth century. He was also a unique poet, in the precise sense that no one writes as he wrote. Yet Khodasevich has remained largely unknown to anglophone readers. This anonymity may derive partially from the fact that his complex and elegant verse has been bedevilled by English translators who rhyme.

But even Russians themselves have not known what to make of the man, or of his work. Many warily regarded Khodasevich as disturbingly, if brilliantly, distinct. He was a poet apart. He tended to be best appreciated by those individuals, such as Nabokov

and Andrei Belyi, who were themselves sufficiently gifted that to observe their rival's strange talent was more intriguing than threatening. Even the supportive Nabokov, however, displayed uncharacteristic foggy when attempting to elucidate Khodasevich's poetry: "to speak of his *masterstvo*, *Meisterschaft*, 'mastery', i.e. 'technique', would be meaningless in relation to poetry in general, and to his own verse in a sharply specific sense. The notion of 'mastery', which automatically supplies its own quotation marks, turns thereby into an appendage, a shadow demanding logical compensation in the guise of any positive quantity, and this easily brings us to that peculiar, soulful attitude toward poetry which leaves no residue but a damp spot or tear stain".

This tangle of praise is nonetheless clear in its assertion that Khodasevich was a notably distinct and different figure in Russian verse. His poetical otherness left many colleagues antagonistic and uneasy. Nabokov later observed that Khodasevich's poetry, which he declared to be "as complex a marvel as that of Tyutchev or Blok", was suppressed by envious enemies "with the thoroughness of a revengeful racket". Yet with these literary animosities now historical and their participants in coffins, it remains valuable to make Khodasevich's acquaintance. These few observations are offered only to suggest possible avenues of interest, or lines of subsequent inquiry. He is worth that effort. He was a poet of exceptional artistic probity, possessed a formidable lyrical skill, and mastered an often astonishing facility for blending irony and metaphysics without diminishing or degrading either element. He is one of the best Russian poets the West has not yet widely recognised.

Khodasevich was born on 28 May 1886 in Moscow. His youth was troubled by illness. Despite his periodic debilities, he persevered through the gymnasium (a pre-Revolutionary preparatory school) and entered Moscow University. At about this time he began writing his first verses. These early works showed the influence of the Symbolism dominating Russian poetry at the time, as well as the then-formidable influence of the critic Valery Briusov. Although he never wrote poetry prolifically, the quality of his verse attracted the attention and admiration of important cultural figures, most notably Briusov, Belyi and Maxim Gorky. His relocation to Petrograd in 1920 coincided with the two greatest achievements of his life, the poetry collections *The Way of Grain*

(1920) and *The Heavy Lyre* (1922). By 1922 his repugnance for the Bolshevism solidifying in Russia drove him into self-imposed exile. After wandering through numerous European cities for several years, he finally chose to live in Paris, settling there in 1925. From that time until his death (of cancer) in 1939 Khodasevich wrote less poetry, but contributed significantly to émigré literature by his frequent critical reviews and literary essays.

If there is a primary theme in Khodasevich's poetry, it is that of the soul's inability to cohere with the phenomenal world. Many of his verses begin with a small domestic detail—a glance out the window, a packet of matches on the table—and then progress into metaphysical and spiritual speculations, only to conclude by reasserting, with crushing finality, the mundane world from which they began. This may be seen in the poem "Pered zerkalom" ("Before the Mirror"), included in this issue. In factual terms, nothing actually transpires in the verse except that the poet glimpses his reflection in a mirror. Yet because he ineluctably associates himself with the fleeting, two-dimensional image he sees there, he speculates on the transitory nature of all the vanished "I"s he has been in the years past. As he begins to recall the lived experiences of his memory (in the second and third stanzas), each stanza begins with the Russian word "razve", which is something akin to an uncertain or mildly disbelieving hypothetical: "can it be?" The facts here are not precisely in dispute, for the youthful events he recalls were indeed his past. Yet these memories were certainly not the past for the "I" who exists only in the mirror. That image has no past, and is merely a creature of reflected light, but it remains something from which he cannot dissociate his identity. This leaves him, at the end, helplessly identified with a non-existent doppelgänger in a mirror, and he concludes the verse enclosed by that mirror's frame, with no Virgil at his shoulder to guide him out. The mention of Virgil here is not flashy Dantism, but an important philosophical element of the poem: the Dante who loses his way, is chased by a panther, and is guided by Virgil was of course a fictional metaphor for the spiritual experience of the actual man Dante Alighieri. The Dantescan "I", therefore, is a letter on a page that assumes the identity of a man long dead. In the same manner, the three repeated letters "I" that commence Khodasevich's poem, in almost ludicrous repetition, expose the incongruity and fatuity of attempting to identify oneself with letters on a page, or images in

a mirror, or pasts through which one lived. The ink letters “I, I, I”, on the page are no more Khodasevich than is the thing in the mirror, although they are all direct phenomenal reflections of his existence. Thus the simple act of glancing at a mirror, by which we often think we perceive ourselves, offers Khodasevich a terrifying suggestion of his temporal impermanence and existential insubstantiality.

It is important to note here that Khodasevich was no fan of radical instability. He was not an early postmodernist playing lexical games to be applauded for his ingenuity. Words had an intense reality for him, and he felt that poets owed them the debt of totally responsible use. He deplored the deconstructionists of his era, the “zaumnie” (or “transsense”) movement, as people squandering potentially revelatory materials (poetry and words) to make a mockery of literary exploration of spiritual perception. Khodasevich had lexical probity, and wrote with an astonishing honesty and lucidity of a reality that he often detested. Indeed, it is the almost perfect understandability and internal congruity of the world that Khodasevich finds most painful. He frequently depicts his soul as alienated from a material existence that otherwise makes a good deal of internal sense. In his poem “Iskushenie” (“Temptation”) he depicts “harmony’s hungry son” adrift in the world, longing for beauty and art but finding that only trade and profit have potency. He does not assert that there is anything incongruous or unstable in this world; he simply finds that such a world, as it is, repulses him. Yet Khodasevich does not permit himself the tawdry victory of simple denunciation. After deploring the triumph of vulgar trade over transcendent spirituality, the poem concludes with the unanswerable rebuke of Psyche, addressing the poet: “Earthly being, what do you know of the heavenly?” With that simple remark, in what is essentially conversational Russian (“Земное, что о небесном знаешь ты?”), the entire poem alters. What had appeared to be a conventional verse denouncing the mercantilism of the modern world instead asserts the far more alarming notion that our urges towards the ennobling and the transcendental are ignorant gropings towards a realm we cannot understand. Being creatures of earth, we are irreconcilable to the heavenly. We glimpse it partially, through art, but what we see thereby is sufficient only to convince us of our unbridgeable ignorance. We see through the glass darkly, but cannot pass to the other side. The dark glass is all we have.

Khodasevich frequently employs this type of verse, which we may term one of “negative revelation”. Instead of the poet experiencing an epiphany, or undergoing a positive enlightenment, Khodasevich instead experiences revelation as a new insight on the spirit’s limitations. He is perhaps without modern peer in his ability to express with artistic beauty the limitations and failings of his spiritual perception. What makes him doubly effective is his tendency to draw the most profound illustrations of the soul’s impotence from utterly mundane and trivial events. In his harrowing poem “Avtomobil” (“The Automobile”), nothing happens except an automobile passes him with its headlamps lit. He pleasingly imagines the light beams as white wings, but then envisions another automobile, one with black beams sweeping the streets before it, not illuminating but shadowing anyone it passes, taking them from his memory, and expunging them from the world. (One must not dismiss this as merely phantasmagoric imagery, for it is precisely and presciently exact: throughout the 1930s Soviet internal police swept through the night in unmarked black vans, often with unlit headlamps, seizing people who subsequently “never existed”.) Thus Khodasevich is left, at the poem’s end, asserting helplessly that “Here a world stood, simple and whole” (“Здесь мир стоял, простой и целый”), but now that the black beams are eating holes into it he knows that “In the soul and in the world there are absences, as though from dribbled acids” (“В душе и в мире есть пробелы, как бы от пролитых кислот”). The instability of memory, and the coherence of a world dependent upon memory, are all thrown into doubt by the simple passing of a car, which leaves in its wake metaphysical ramifications of the trivial and the banal.

It is in this sense that one should understand Khodasevich’s frequent recourse to irony. Khodasevich is famed in Russia as an ironic poet, yet this may suggest an imprecise identification to English-speaking readers. We are accustomed in English verse to an irony that either softens moral anger or intimates emotional distance. It may be a Swiftian means of clothing savage indignation, or it may be, by contrast, the anæmic irony by which poets diffidently enervate an unadulterated emotion. Yet with Khodasevich irony is not a means of presentation, it is the argument itself. The Russian critic D.S. Mirsky applauded precisely this aspect of Khodasevich’s poetry: “Khodasevich is a mystical spiritualist, but in the expressions of his intuitions he is an ironist.

His poetry is the expression of the ironic and tragic contradiction between the freedom of the immortal soul and its thralldom to matter and necessity". He does not ironise existence, but instead writes heavily ironic poetry because that irony is the only persuasive prism through which to understand an existence pervaded by ironic contradictions.

As David Bethea argues in his monograph *Khodasevich* (1983), his poetical use of irony was "something that grew to be the only genuine way of dealing with a world that gave one personal freedom at the cost of stripping one of homeland and audience at the moment when, mature and confident, one was at the height of one's poetic powers". Perhaps the most famous illustration of this ineluctable irony in existence itself is his poem "Obezyana" ("The Monkey"). Typically, it describes the spiritual experience provoked by a minor event: a passing Serb has stopped at the poet's gate and, when the poet gives the Serb water, the Serb pours a little for his pet monkey. The poet is enchanted by this monkey, particularly when it extends its little paw to him: "I have shaken hands with beautiful women, with poets, with leaders of the nation...but no one has looked into my eyes so wisely and profoundly" ("Я руки жал красавицам, поэтам, вождям народа... никто в мои глаза не заглянул так мудро и глубоко"). The poet feels a sudden sense of community and timelessness, as though through this monkey he were participant in all ages and experiences. Yet as he watches the Serb and the monkey walk away, he devastatingly notes "On that same day the war was declared" ("В тот день была объявлена война"). It is typical of Khodasevich's humorous, despairing irony that he should at last attain a glimpse of transcendent wisdom and spiritual kinship in the eyes of a beggar's monkey on the day the world declares war. The fact that the monkey is led by a Serb is suggestive, as the poem likely refers to the outbreak of the First World War, in which Russia's participation was significantly impelled by pan-Slavic kinship with the Serbian people. Yet the essence of Khodasevich's use of irony in "The Monkey" lies in the fact that at no point does he present this bizarre revelation as incongruous, grotesque, or distasteful. Indeed, by relating the events with a perfect pitch of sincerity and unfeigned respect for the monkey, he up-ends the traditional applications of irony. He is not attempting to right a wrong, or change social perceptions, or distance himself from an experience; he instead writes with exactitude about a world so strange

that amidst wars and upheaval the only existential solidity one finds is in the eyes of another man's monkey. This is not irony as a literary device, it is irony as a comprehensive philosophy of existence.

Although Khodasevich is a poet of exquisite abilities and intellectual profundity, he is also a writer of great humour, as true ironists frequently are. A comparison with Samuel Beckett is not, on the whole, worthwhile; yet they resemble one another in the simple sense that both writers were capable of communicating subtle reflections on self and identity through enormously engaging, often mordant, humour. Mirsky believed that "Wit, in fact, is the principal characteristic of Khodasevich's poetry, and his mystical poems regularly end with a pointed epigram". Mirsky here, as often, downplays the significance of his insight. What is perhaps most appealing in Khodasevich is the almost seamless fusion of both wit and mysticism, which can result in poems that are as metaphysically efficient as the best of John Donne. The best-known example of such a poem, and such a "pointed epigram", is his brief poem of 1922, "Byla po ulitsa polutemno" ("The street was half-lit"). In three couplets Khodasevich describes looking out a window, seeing a suicide fall, and then reflects "Happy is one who falls headfirst/ For him the world is, if for a moment, different" ("Счастлив, кто падает вниз головой: мир для него хоть на миг—а иной"). There is a pleasantly ghoulish humour in admiring the good fortune of one who falls headfirst, yet there is also an unsentimental poignancy behind the epigram. In the last moment of suicide, when one has committed to the act and the ground is rushing up to snap one's spine, one may suddenly perceive the otherwise incomprehensible world in a different way. That is the essence of Khodasevich's poetic: that the soul is trapped in painful phenomenal perceptions, and that perceptions of a different world are confided only to those who commit themselves to a last desperate gamble, or who observe another making that last throw of the dice.

It is telling that Khodasevich should present this suicide not through the eyes of the percipient actor, but through the view of someone observing the death through a window. Here again Khodasevich places his poetical identity in the position of someone engaged in a routine activity (looking out a window), who suddenly sees something that illustrates his inability to perceive the world in a different way. The suicide, of course, changes his

own perspective, both literally by falling upside down, and perhaps figuratively by gaining a new intellectual perception of the world he is about to leave. Yet the poet must content himself with the suggestion of revelation that he obtains through the more extreme action of the suicide. He cannot know whether or not the suicide has learned or perceived anything in his last instant, but he suspects that the dead man glimpsed something, at the last, that the poet can only surmise. The only way to convey that suspicion (and the futility of that suspicion) to others is through the medium of the verse itself.

A final observation: readers of Khodasevich do well to attend closely to the prevalence of optical planes in his poetry. He routinely employs various visual planes—a window, a mirror, a photograph—to suggest both a misleading materiality and the alluring, but unattainable, spiritual importance they may convey. What he sees in the planes is usually a reflection of reality, whether it is the image in a mirror, or the flat dimensions of a picture. Yet these unreal images often seem to him to have greater metaphysical reality than the things themselves possess. His purpose is not to make the tedious observation that an attractive photograph of a woman may be more alluring than the woman herself. Instead, he sees in such reflections of reality the sad inability of the soul to penetrate to the spiritual reality that may lie behind mere perceptions, and truly to communicate with what he hopes, but cannot prove, lies there. This helplessness of the spirit which must content itself with reflections he captures beautifully in his poem of 1923, “Slepoi” (“The Blind Man”): “But in the blind man’s eyes/ All the world is reflected/ A home, a field, a fence, a cow/ Patches of the blue sky/ All, that he does not see”. (“А на бельмах у слепого целый мир отображен: дом, лужок, забор, корова, ключья неба голубого—всё, чего не видит он”).

Brief introductions can serve only as prolegomena to further acquaintance. Khodasevich rewards that effort. While he is classical and deeply imbued with the influence of Pushkin, his concerns are immediately comprehensible to the modern Western reader. He is notable for both the integrity of his irony and the seriousness of his pessimism. He doubts well. In a poetical climate in which irony, doubt, and pessimism are often treated lightly, it is exhilarating to see a master employ them with their just intensity.