

Leonid Livak

**A JOURNEY TO THE SOUTH: THE ART OF OBLIVION IN  
GAITO GAZDANOV'S NOVEL *VECHER U KLER***

Nous ne vivons qu'avec ce que nous n'aimons pas, que nous n'avons fait vivre avec nous que pour tuer l'insupportable amour, qu'il s'agisse d'une femme, d'un pays, ou encore d'une femme enfermant un pays.

Marcel Proust, *La Prisonnière*

The Russian émigré writer Georgii Gazdanov (1903-1971) started publishing as „Gaito Gazdanov“ in 1926. *An Evening at Claire's* (*Večer u Kler*, 1930) was his first literary success. Steeped in the semantics of memory, the novel was perceived as akin to Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. The novel begins in Paris, where a young émigré Nikolai Sosedov finally possesses his first love, the French woman Claire, after ten years of separation. As Claire falls asleep, Nikolai starts remembering his life from childhood to the moment he left Russia. He was 14 when he met Claire in Kislovodsk. When Claire left for France, Nikolai joined the White army, embarking on the journey for which Claire was his guiding star. Hence the epigraph from *Eugene Onegin*: „Вся жизнь моя была залогом / Свиданья верного с тобой.“

Émigré critics saw Proust's influence in the novel's „retrospective“ journey into the past; in its unusually long periods; in its lack of dramatic action; in the amassment of apparently superfluous details; and in the narrator's concentration on his inner life.<sup>1</sup> By his later admission, Gazdanov had not read Proust before writing his novel, although at the time of its publication he accepted the fashionable label of a *prustianets*. But „reading“ is an ambiguous term when it concerns a work that is a cultural institution. In the 1920s, *La Recherche* was so frequently discussed that the connection between the two novels could not be „only a coincidence in time,“ as Laslo Dienes has argued.<sup>2</sup> In French and émigré literary environments, one could familiarize oneself with the subject matter, analytical method, philosophy and motives of *La Recherche* by heeding the critical debates

<sup>1</sup> Cf. G. Khokhlov, „Gaito Gazdanov, 'Večer u Kler',“ *Russkii magazin*, 1, 1930, 26; M. Osorgin, „Večer u Kler,“ *Poslednie novosti*, 3242, 1930, 3; N. Otsup, „Gaito Gazdanov. Večer u Kler,“ *Chisla*, 1, 1930, 232-233.

<sup>2</sup> *Russian Literature in Exile: The Life and Work of Gaito Gazdanov*, Munich 1982, 70.

surrounding it. Contemporary critical discourse on *La Recherche* accounts for the angle from which Gazdanov viewed linguistic and thematic „Proustianism.“

In this article I will argue that *An Evening at Claire's* is artistically and philosophically inseparable from the French literature of the 1920s. But at the same time, this generic link predetermined the novel's ultimately anti-Proustian ethos, contrary to the initial classification of Gazdanov's text as „neo-Proustian.“

## 1. The Prodigal Children of Marcel Proust

The publication of *La Recherche* was among the defining events in French letters after the Great War. The French critical opinion linked the novel to the self-definition of the new literary generation. Born after 1890, this generation validated its sense of „modernity“ by construing the war as the borderline between those who had come to literature before and after 1914. This brawl of „ancients“ and „moderns“ shaped the reception of *La Recherche*. Looking for artistic authority, the new generation drew on Proust to lay the foundation for its own „modern“ tradition.

In 1919, Paul Valéry published an article entitled „La Crise de l'esprit,“ arguing that the war had brought about a spiritual crisis of European cultural elites. The post-war intellectual was a „European Hamlet“ tortured by anxiety; all thinking people in Europe had contracted this „malady.“<sup>3</sup> The myth of the post-war „malady,“ a revival of the Romantic „malady of the century,“ became an attribute of the new generation. In 1924, Marcel Arland suggested that the intellectual atmosphere shared by young French writers should be considered as a „new malady of the century.“ He argued that young writers were overcome by anxiety because the culture of positivism, which had hurried the „death of God,“ was compromised by the war. Losing „existential protection,“ they regarded literature as a means for self-study that would help them to reconstruct their culture.<sup>4</sup> Proustian exegesis served as a testing ground for new literary esthetics. Interpreted as the epitome of „modernism,“ Proust was appropriated by the new generation. „Old fogies ignore Proust... Only younger writers, his anticipated posterity, have realized that Proust is a great French writer,“ wrote Benjamin Crémieux, elaborating on Pierre Drieu la Rochelle's suggestion that Proust had delivered young writers from the „miasma“ of the preceding generation.<sup>5</sup>

Proclaiming the bankruptcy of European civilization, the myth of the „new malady“ stipulated its reconstruction from a *tabula rasa*. The new generation was „liquidating its past“ and going through a cultural rebirth according to a „great cyclical rhythm“ governed by regenerating „inundations.“ This rhythm was an

<sup>3</sup> P. Valéry, *Oeuvres*, vol. 1, Paris 1957, 992-993, 1000.

<sup>4</sup> „Sur un Nouveau Mal du Siècle,“ *Essais et nouveaux essais critiques*, Paris 1952, 11-37.

<sup>5</sup> B. Crémieux, *XX-e siècle*, Paris 1924, 10-11; P. Drieu la Rochelle, „L'Exemple,“ *Les Cahiers Marcel Proust*, 1, 1927, 320-321.

„eternal movement“ of cultural cycles; the war was such an „inundation.“<sup>6</sup> These arguments reveal another myth on which the new literary generation constructed its identity: the myth of the eternal return. The revolt against historical linearity had already been elaborated by Nietzsche. The ethos of cultural renewal was important for Proust's appropriation by the „moderns.“ They were attracted by Proust's search for „lost time“ as backward motion, a return to the „pure sources“ of regeneration that hearkened to Freud and to Nietzsche. Freud's „depth psychology“ offered the technique of a regenerating return to one's „origins.“ Especially pertinent to the myth of the eternal return is Freud's idea that one can „go back into the past“ by recalling certain incidents of early childhood. One renews one's existence by „burning“ the memories of past events. This ethos of deliverance underlay the „new malady“ whose adepts needed a cultural past in order to destroy it. They saw Proust's project as identical to that of Freud.<sup>7</sup>

Proust opposed the generalizing psychology of the realist novel which produced the static model of an individual shaped by his environment and „held together“ by a unifying principle. His „new psychologism“ offered a concept of personality in transformation thanks to the unconscious forces underlying human behavior. A new tragic opposition could be added to the conflicts „man and destiny“ and „man and passion.“ The tragedy was in the dissociation of personality by unconscious forces. But the assimilation of *La Recherche* to Freud's theory differed from Proust's own project. There is an esthetic abyss between Proust's view of literature as the only „true“ reality and the „European Hamlets“ quest for literature as, to quote Arland, „an exact painting of reality.“<sup>8</sup>

Proust's hero does not „burn“ his past. By studying his own unconscious life, Marcel seeks to attain extra-temporality, establishing an „identity between the past and the present“ which would deliver him from the fear of the future. Achieving this extra-temporal equilibrium, he liberates himself from the fear of death.<sup>9</sup> Proust and his self-proclaimed followers were linked by the common nostalgia for „origins“ and by the means of finding them through „return to the depths.“ But this methodological affinity did not lead to the same conclusions. „Return to the depths“ constitutes for Marcel the „grandeur of true art“: he affirms his existence by rediscovering his hidden „true life“ and, since he does this in a literary investigation, he concludes that „literature is the only true life there is.“<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the responses of B. Crémieux, P. Drieu la Rochelle, H. Martin-Chauffier, and H. Massis in *Enquête sur les maîtres de la jeune littérature*, eds. H. Rambaud and P. Varillon, Paris 1923, 54, 57, 69, 94, and 332.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. H. Daniel-Rops, „Proust et ses quatre critiques,“ *Cahiers du mois*, 13, 1925, 71; R. Lalou, *Défense de l'homme*, Paris 1926, 244; L. Pierre-Quint, *Marcel Proust*, Paris 1925, 142.

<sup>8</sup> Idem, 28.

<sup>9</sup> M. Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé*, Paris 1996, 178-179.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 202-203.

A „new child of the century,” on the contrary, does not need to affirm his existence. „The men of our generation know that they are alive because they are not dead having risked their life every minute for five years. A survivor... does not doubt his existence,” wrote Crémieux.<sup>11</sup> For this generation, there is no identity between the past and the present. Thus, Proust’s formula „literature is life” is replaced by the requirement that life should subordinate literature. For younger French literati, the very meaning of „reality” changed. The post-war writers argued that there was no place for imagination in literature if the writer wanted to be „truthful.” According to them, Proust expressed in writing his personal search for hidden reality.<sup>12</sup> Seeing literature as an exact painting of reality, „European Hamlets” succumbed to the „great secular myth that language imitated ideas and that signs were motivated.”<sup>13</sup> Their own „referential illusion,”<sup>14</sup> the belief in the natural semantic relation of sign and referent, explains their reluctance to speak about realist illusion and imagination in literature. The notions of „illusion” and „imagination” would have undermined their esthetic activity: the renewal of mimetic conventions.

Symptomatically, the French works cited as examples of Proust’s influence make the question of this influence problematic. In 1921, Drieu la Rochelle published his novel *État civil*. The novel starts with the protagonist’s childhood; special attention is given to his cognition of the world and himself through senses. Drieu describes the hero’s reading list, schooling, and Parisian life. In spite of the attempts to interpret it as „neo-Proustian,”<sup>15</sup> the novel is anti-Proustian in its denial of the past. The hero goes back in the past to deliver himself from the burden of his pre-war life: „I am writing this to get rid of myself, or of what I was, especially during a certain war which coincided with my entrance into life... I am writing these pages to fix outside of myself everything I want to sever myself from.”<sup>16</sup>

The ethos of psychological and cultural deliverance intensifies in Drieu’s 1927 novel *Le Jeune Européen*. Its protagonist is a young man whose post-war anxiety propels him into a pilgrimage across Europe. The narrator of *État civil* dwells on the reading list of his childhood in hopes of delivering himself from the past by fixing his former self in writing. The narrator of *Le Jeune Européen* already curses his reading list because it gave him the desire to write. The more he analyzes himself the more he loses himself. Life flees him, he „lapses into marasmus,” and sees that rather than writing about himself he wrote about the past he wanted

<sup>11</sup> *Enquête sur les maîtres de la jeune littérature*, 53.

<sup>12</sup> H. Dommartin, „Benjamin Crémieux et la littérature moderne,” *Disque vert*, 2, 1925, 72; L. Pierre-Quint, idem, 126.

<sup>13</sup> R. Barthes, „Proust et les noms,” *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture suivi de Nouveaux Essais critiques*, Paris 1972, 134.

<sup>14</sup> G. Genette, „Proust et le langage indirecte,” *Figures II*, Paris 1969, 248.

<sup>15</sup> B. Crémieux, *XX-e siècle*, 231.

<sup>16</sup> *État civil*, Paris 1977, 177-178.

to forget. The salvation is in drowning his desire to write in adventures.<sup>17</sup> His conclusion is as transparent as it is anti-Proustian: active life is the only available form of art; passive contemplation leads to senility and ossification in the past.

The same conclusion is suggested in Philippe Soupault's novel *A la dérive*. The life of its protagonist depends on the demolition of his past. Memory is a burden that slows down the pace of life.<sup>18</sup> David runs away from his past through adventures. Settling down, he is „paralyzed by memory“<sup>19</sup> and soon dies. This novel of adventure is drowned in the discursive characterizations of the hero's inner life. Similar discursivity and refusal of external description mark Drieu's novels. These features tempted critics to place both authors among „Proustians.“<sup>20</sup> But rather than a connection to Proust, Soupault and Drieu shared a new novelistic model. In 1923 French literati started speaking about the emergence of two models: the „adventure novel“ (or the „novel of energy“) and the „introspective novel.“ These models shared the „Proustian representation from within“ whereby the hero projected the external world upon the screen of his inner life,<sup>21</sup> like Marcel, who sought extra-temporality „outside action“ in the „inner reality“ of his psyche.<sup>22</sup>

The „adventure novel“ was a novel of anti-education whose hero came of age in a time of cultural rupture and evaded his past in feverish activity that could be any combination of war (Jacques de Lacretelle's *La Vie inquiète de Jean Hermelin*, 1920, and Jean Cocteau's *Thomas l'imposteur*, 1923); international trips (Paul Morand's *Ouvert la nuit*, 1922, and *Fermé la nuit*, 1923, and Soupault's *Le Bon Apôtre*, 1923); and love affairs (Raymond Radiguet's *Le Diable au corps*, 1923). This novelistic model describes an outcast whose imagination and analytical capacities replace external reality. The hero's anxiety culminates during and after the war, whether he partakes in it or experiences its consequences. The „adventure novel“ tends toward discursivity at the expense of dramatic action.

The second model, the „introspective“ novel, concentrated on the analysis of inner life, reducing even further dramatic action and external description. In this model, the hero's escape from the past is fully internalized. But it is far from Proust's search for extra-temporality. The past does not exist for the self-contemplating hero of this model: he is absorbed by his present condition, „extracting“ literary material from his own psyche according to Proust's method – a

<sup>17</sup> *Le Jeune Européen suivi de Genève ou Moscou*, Paris 1978, 42-47.

<sup>18</sup> *A la dérive*, Paris 1923, 69, 72.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>20</sup> M. Betz, „Sur une crise de la conscience artistique,“ *Cahiers du moi*, 1, 1924, 62, 70-71; A. Germain, *De Proust à Dada*, Paris 1924, 225.

<sup>21</sup> G. Bauer and J. de Lacretelle in *Enquête sur les maîtres de la jeune littérature*, pp. 87, 239; J. Ehrhard, *Le Roman français depuis Marcel Proust*, Paris 1932, 155; E. Jaloux, „Souvenirs du jardin détruit,“ *Nouvelles littéraires, artistiques et scientifiques*, 107, 1924, 3; A. Thibaudet, *Le Liseur de romans*, Paris 1925, 197.

<sup>22</sup> *Le Temps retrouvé*, 178, 189.

torturous romantic liaison. The more misfortune he encounters in love, the more fruitful his investigation becomes.<sup>23</sup> Women are but signs modeling Marcel's reality. He looks for situations in which a woman will function as a torturer by virtue of infidelity or „changes of heart.“<sup>24</sup> But unlike Marcel, the heroes of the „introspective“ novel use „female stimuli“ to the end of personal deliverance from the past rather than a connection to it. Such radical reworking of Proust's method marks Maurice Betz's *L'Incertain* (1925), Drieu's la Rochelle's *Journal d'un homme trompé* (1928), and Jacques Chardonne's *Eva ou le journal interrompu* (1930).

The narrator of *L'Incertain* scrutinizes the physical and emotional life of his wife. He suffers from anxiety whose „profound“ sources he needs to find to know himself.<sup>25</sup> His past is a muddle of uncontrollable fears which take hold of him through memory and ruin his feeling of integrity. Unlike Marcel, he longs for „deliverance“ from memory. He calls this operation a „bienfait de l'oubli“<sup>26</sup> and performs it by self-analysis. He needs his wife to contemplate his own reflection in her; she is a stimulus for his „profound renewal“ and her presence reassures him. He is, therefore, obsessed with possessing her. This aspect of their relationship recalls Marcel's longing for the full possession of another as a mirror asserting his own existence.<sup>27</sup> When his wife dies, Betz's hero is deprived of a stimulus, becoming ever more vulnerable because his „solitude together“ is ruined.

Thus, the post-war French novelists, whose writings were interpreted as the continuation of Proust's artistic project and who commonly appealed to Proust as a symbol of their own „new sensibility,“ were opposed both to Proust's view of the relationship between art and life and to the ethos of his artistic investigation. French „neo-Proustian“ novelists could not be farther from Proust in their affirmation of the primacy of life over art and in their hatred of the past. This tension between the theoretical eulogy of Proust's poetics and practical opposition to it influenced the Russian émigré view of „Proustianism“ and its artistic applications by Russian exiles.

## 2. „Proustianism“ and Prustianty

Most émigré writers treated *La Recherche* as the acme of contemporary French literature. The review *Numbers* (*Chisla*) started its existence by soliciting the

<sup>23</sup> *Le Temps retrouvé*: „La souffrance que les autres causeraient... les conflits... que la seconde personne cruelle créeraient, tout cela, interprété par l'intelligence, pourrait faire la matière d'un livre non seulement aussi beau que s'il était imaginé, inventé“. (208)

<sup>24</sup> *Le Temps retrouvé*: „Une femme dont nous avons besoin, qui nous fait souffrir, tire de nous des séries de sentiments profonds... Un écrivain peut se mettre sans crainte à un long travail (214)... On attend une souffrance pour travailler“. (217)

<sup>25</sup> *L'Incertain*, Paris 1925, 28.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>27</sup> M. Proust, *Albertine disparue*, Paris 1997, 70: „On n'est que par ce qu'on possède.“

opinions of exiles about Proust. The very formulation of the questions indicated that the émigré perception of Proust was influenced by French critical opinion. The editors inquired if Proust was the „epitome of our epoch.“<sup>28</sup> The questionnaire coincided with the publication of the first „neo-Proustian“ novels by émigré writers – Gazdanov's *An Evening at Claire's* and Iurii Fel'zen's *Deceit (Obman)*. As has been shown, by the time these works appeared, French literature offered two novelistic models seen as the products of Proust's influence. Émigré *prustiantry* perceived Proust's work through these literary filters.

Like the French „moderns,“ younger émigrés saw Proust's oeuvre as emblematic of the gap between literary generations. As the „children of the time of trouble,“ they found in *La Recherche* the sensibility of those who matured outside the cultural traditions of the „fathers.“<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, they were no strangers to the myth of the eternal return, since Nietzschean ideas had wide circulation in Russia from the 1890s on. Echoing Arland, Georgii Adamovich argued that, deprived of the integrity of religious consciousness, the anguished post-war writer had to write „as if nothing existed before,“ starting „from the beginning“ (cf. the *tabula rasa* of French „new children“) and renouncing imagination as insincerity.<sup>30</sup> Like their French peers, the „émigré Hamlets“ used Proustian exegesis as a battle field for their esthetic self-definition. Older émigrés spoke about Proust's novel as a „fairy tale“ whose power of verisimilitude broke the mimetic conventions of the realist novel, creating new realist illusion.<sup>31</sup> Younger writers, for whom the very concept of „reality“ was different, regarded *La Recherche* as a record of Proust's self-study. Where the „ancients“ saw mundane memoirs, the „moderns“ found an in-depth quest for truth.<sup>32</sup>

The rejection of the psychological novel in Soviet letters of the 1920s was another factor in the émigré view of Proust. For Maiakovskii's LEF, this novel contradicted the goal of the avant-garde – the creation of a new human being. The Serapion Brothers rejected the Russian psychological novel in which literary technique was secondary to extra-literary preoccupations. The creation of a novelistic tradition for a new Russia required the emulation of Western models.<sup>33</sup> In

<sup>28</sup> „Anketa o Pruste,“ *Chisla*, 1, 1930, 272.

<sup>29</sup> Iu. Fel'zen, „Mal'ro. (Frantsuzskie 'Triditsatye gody'),“ *Vstrechi*, 1, 1934, 32; I. Golenishchev-Kutuzov, „Sovremennye Zapiski. Kniga 49,“ *Vozrozhdenie*, 2557, 1932, 3; N. Gorodetskaia, „Soirée franco-russe,“ *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, 5, 1930, 55; P. Muratov, „Iskusstvo prozy,“ *Sovremennye zapiski*, 29, 1926, 254.

<sup>30</sup> G. Adamovich, „Soiuz molodykh poetov v Parizhe,“ *Chisla*, 2-3, 1930, 239-240; and „Nachalo,“ *Sovremennye zapiski*, 41, 1930, 500-511.

<sup>31</sup> M. Aldanov, „Marcel Proust. A la recherche du temps perdu,“ *Sovremennye zapiski*, 22, 1924, 453; Iu. Fel'zen, „Umiranje iskusstva,“ *Krug*, 2, 1937, 126; V. Veidle, „Odnochestvo khudozhnika,“ *Novyi grad*, 8, 1934, 55.

<sup>32</sup> Iu. Fel'zen, „O Pruste i Dzhoise,“ *Chisla*, 6, 1932, 216, 218; I. Shmelev, „Anketa o Pruste,“ *Chisla*, 1, 1930, 277-278; M. Tsvetaeva, „Soirée franco-russe,“ *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, 5, 1930, 50-51; B. Vysheslavtsev, „Proust et la Tragédie objective,“ *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, 5, 1930, 28-30.

<sup>33</sup> L. Lunts, „Na Zapad!“ *Rodina i drugie proizvedeniia*, Jerusalem 1981.

the writings of Lunts, Kaverin, Ivanov, Fedin, and Zoshchenko situation and event predominated at the expense of character analysis. For the émigrés, „Western“ literary markers were opposite. They „learnt from the French“ to distance themselves from Soviet letters. Psychological discursivity contradicted „Soviet external descriptiveness“; solipsistic analysis emphasized the absence of „spiritual intuition“ in the Soviet hero; Proust's language contrasted with „Soviet“ style.<sup>34</sup>

Gazdanov's early stories were written in short periods modeled after Babel's writings. *An Evening at Claire's* marked his stylistic transition which shows that Gazdanov's conception of „Proustianism“ derived from the critical discussions of *La Recherche*. The common critical view presented *La Recherche* as a web of very long periods. In reality, sentences longer than ten lines occupy less than a quarter of the novel.<sup>35</sup> These long periods echo the construction of Proust's narrative in which episodes are grouped by parenthetic contiguity rather than by logical development in space (succession) or time (chronology). The syntactic complexity of Proust's long periods illustrates the „thinking mechanism“ in which memory occupies a pivotal place. Their reading requires memorization and analytical work; linguistic behavior thus models psychological behavior.

For Proust, the linguistic articulation of reality is an approximation: intelligence creates a gap between an object's „true impression“ and the „nominal impression“ of its description.<sup>36</sup> What is for Proust a matter of artistic vision, is for Gazdanov only a marker of literary kinship with the *maître*. The language of his novel is devoid of the semantic aura of Proust's style; his „Proustian“ sentence differs structurally from Proust's longer sentences. The structure of Proust's longer period is based on the deceleration of semantic development by a set of syntactic devices. These include parenthetic clauses, correcting repetitions, ramifications, and disjunctions of syntactic patterns. Striving for precision, Proust conveys sensations through approximations that delay the semantic development of a sentence. No such preoccupation with the „right word“ can be sensed in Gazdanov's language. His longer periods do not evolve by approximating parenthetic clauses. They usually represent a combination of two syntactically autonomous sentences in which one breaks the semantic structure of another, shocking the reader's linguistic expectations:

Он любил физические упражнения, был хорошим гимнастом, неутомимым наездником, — он все смеялся над посадкой его двух братьев,

<sup>34</sup> G. Adamovich, „O frantsuzskoi „inquiétude“ i o russkoi trevoge,“ *Poslednie novosti*, 2822, 1928, 2; Iu. Fel'zen, „Razroznennye mysli,“ *Krug*, 2, 1937, 130. On the impressionistic description as a reaction to the old psychological novel in Soviet letters cf. M. Chudakova, *Masterstvo Iurii Oleshi*, Moscow 1972, 34-40; R. Maguire, *Red Virgin Soil*, Princeton, 1968, 97-99. On the style of Soviet prose, especially the „abridged phrase,“ cf. Chudakova, *ibid.*, 25-34, 41-50.

<sup>35</sup> J. Milly, *La Phrase de Proust*, Paris 1983, 5.

<sup>36</sup> *Le Temps retrouvé*, 176.



драгунских офицеров, которые, как он говорил, даже кончив их эту самую лошадиную академию, не научились ездить верхом... Впрочем, они и в детстве были не способны к верховой езде, а пошли в лошадиную академию потому, что там алгебры не надо учить, и прекрасным пловцом (53).<sup>37</sup>

Unlike Gazdanov, Proust links his parenthetical clauses both grammatically and syntactically. It is possible that Gazdanov understood linguistic „Proustianism“ as the creation of a semantic shock by combining autonomous sentences within an unusually large period. Furthermore, Gazdanov's narrator problematizes the notion of a „correct“ usage. Those with whom Nikolai Sosodov clashes over usage, military instructors (69) and school teachers (72), belong to the generation of „fathers.“ This linguistic gap symbolizes other gaps between war-separated generations that Gazdanov's „roman du siècle“<sup>38</sup> portrays.

### 3. Nikolai Sosodov's „Journey to the South“

Similarly to his French peers and contrary to Proust, Gazdanov adhered to the myth of the eternal return and argued for the direct dependence of art on its creator's life. He cited Proust as an example of that artistic attitude in which „spiritual vision“ spanned the gap between fiction and reality; a record of the artist's „listening“ to his psyche was the only „true“ art.<sup>39</sup> Incidentally, this was the method French „moderns“ ascribed to Proust. Gazdanov's interest in the concept of circular time is evident already in his „Stories about Free Time“ (1927), which describe the „category of time“ as „a series of concentric circles.“<sup>40</sup> In 1929, he scandalized many émigrés by calling the Russian revolution an „event of local importance,“ one of many that recur in human history.<sup>41</sup>

Structurally, Gazdanov's narrative is closer to the French „adventure“ novel than to *La Recherche*. Proust preserved only two traditional novelistic figures, the scene and the temporal ellipsis, eliminating the summarizing narrative and the descriptive pause. He broke the rhythm of the novelistic canon, in which the summarizing narrative provided resumes of the non-dramatic time, replacing the scene as the place for dramatic concentration with a temporal unit which grouped chronologically diverse information. Both the French „adventure“ novel and *An Evening at Claire's* were less radical with regard to traditional novelistic figures. Preserving summarizing narrative and a chronological plot, they reduced the role

<sup>37</sup> G. Gazdanov, *Večer u Kler, Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, vol. 1, Moscow 1996. (All further references to this edition in text by page number only.)

<sup>38</sup> M. Osorgin, idem, 3.

<sup>39</sup> „Zametki ob Edgare Po, Gogole i Mopassane,“ *Volia Rossii*, 5-6, 1929, 97.

<sup>40</sup> „Rasskazy o svobodnom vremeni,“ *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, vol. 3, Moscow 1996, 30.

<sup>41</sup> „Soirée franco-russe,“ *Rencontres*, eds. R. Sébastien and W. de Vogl, Paris 1930, 142.

of dramatic action in favor of psychological characterization and eliminated the descriptive pause. In *An Evening at Claire's* dramatic action is scant, non-climactic episodes are singled out by the narrative focus, and historical and geographical context is almost absent (even the location of Nikolai's hometown is imprecise). Some émigrés saw this narrative structure as „artificial,” others praised its rejection of „literary tricks” such as eventfulness and complex plot peculiar to Soviet literature.<sup>42</sup>

Proust's Marcel rallied against the realist myth that truth could be expressed „literally.” The fallacy of „art that called itself realistic” confirmed his view that the writer should create by means of the unintentional discovery of material in his own psyche.<sup>43</sup> This absence of intent gave involuntary memory its authenticity. To convey the absence of intent, Marcel groups chronologically unrelated events into temporal units which serve as focal points for multiple narratives.<sup>44</sup> Gazdanov, on the contrary, arranges his story chronologically, while indicating involuntary memory as his method. But he hardly saw this as a deviation from „Proustianism”: he followed the model of the „adventure” novel, pronounced „neo-Proustian” by French critics. From the protagonists of *État civil*, *Le Jeune Européen*, and *A la dérive* Gazdanov's Nikolai also contracted his spirit of adventure, his interest in psychological self-study, and his hatred of the „fathers.” In the year when Gazdanov was finishing his novel, Mark Slonim decried the proliferation of memoirs in the literature of the émigré „fathers.”<sup>45</sup> It is doubtful that by his novel Gazdanov wanted to contribute to this memoir literature. While the French „adventure” novel was an anti-*Bildungsroman*, Nikolai's „memoirs” were in fact anti-memoiristic.

Symptomatically, the „fathers” were irritated by the way Gazdanov treated their cultural past. Speaking about Nikolai's eclectic reading list – Avvakum, Cervantes, Dostoevskii, Hume, Andersen, Verbitskaia – K. Zaitsev wrote: „The reader doubts that he actually read these things... because there is no link, logical or psychological, between them and Gazdanov's narrative.”<sup>46</sup> But Nikolai evokes his reading list not to venerate tradition: he reconstructs his cultural past in order to „burn” it. There are two types of books in his past. The first type, comprising adventure novels and fairy-tales, gives him the taste for adventure. The second type, the „serious” books of the „fathers,” merits oblivion. Similarly to French „anxious” heroes, Nikolai has too much imagination as a child and spends his

<sup>42</sup> N. Otsup, idem, 232-233; P. Pil'skii, „Gaito Gazdanov, 'Večer u Kler',” *Segodnia*, 62, 1930, 6; A. Savell'ev, „G. Gazdanov, 'Večer u Kler',” *Rul'*, 2843, 1930, 5; M. Slonim, „Roman Gazdanova,” *Volia Rossii*, 5-6, 1930, 455.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *Le Côté de Guermantes*, Paris 1997, 59; and *Le Temps retrouvé*, 188.

<sup>44</sup> These temporal units occupy the greater part of the novel: Mme de Villeparisis' reception (*Guermantes I*), a dinner at the duchess of Guermantes (*Guermantes II*), the princess of Guermantes' reception (*Sodome et Gomorrhe I-II*) and matinée (*Temps retrouvé*).

<sup>45</sup> „Molodye pisateli za rubezhom,” *Volia Rossii*, 10-11, 1929, 116.

<sup>46</sup> „Večer u Kler'” Gaito Gazdanova,” *Rossia i slaviansvo*, 69, 1930, 3.

formative years in solitude. His imagination is fueled by books. As a result, he stops distinguishing between Russia and foreign lands, assimilating „home“ and „abroad“ in one imaginary space (52) and becoming a „Russian foreigner“ (128).

During the civil war Nikolai meets Russian refugees who „pity their past“; he thinks that they „have not mastered the art of memory“ (142) because their concept of reality differs from his own. Their reminiscences are limited to banal „external“ events like church holidays or material comfort. Nikolai calls them „whores with memoirs“ (143); this appellation may be addressed to the memoir literature of the „fathers.“ As for Nikolai, he cannot distinguish between external reality and imagination. This „malady“ (47-48) makes him indifferent to external events: „My inner life began to overshadow the actual external events... The time when I was completely immersed in introspection... kept coming back like the attacks of a latent but incurable illness“ (52). He scrutinizes his „second existence“ (66) with the „memory of senses,” different from voluntary memory – his „most imperfect capacity“ (48). This „memory of senses“ takes him on a downward journey into his unconscious, „that ephemeral sphere where my imagination seldom descended, discovering what looked like the geological layers of my history [moei istorii]“ (76).

The expression „moia istoriia“ is intentionally ambiguous. It can mean „my story,” in which case the passage takes on a meta-descriptive function that refers to the mode of textual production: an investigation into the creator's unconscious evoking the story/history of Marcel's literary vocation.<sup>47</sup> But what Nikolai finds „deep down“ in his psyche makes all the difference between the ethos of his versus the ethos of Marcel's search. Marcel finds there an unadulterated record of his past. Nikolai finds the „ruins“ and „wreckage“ of his past because he can reach the profound sources of his imagination only after a „powerful shock“ destroys his imaginary reality, forcing him to the „bottom of consciousness“ in search of sources for reconstruction (76). This shock can be generated by a critical situation, such as Nikolai's presence at the scene of a suicide, by an emotional experience, such as his love for Claire or his participation in the civil war, or simply by a new book.

This periodical regeneration is the only means at Nikolai's disposal to fight his fear of death, because God is banished from his universe. Since every inner crisis throws the narrator into the depths of his psychological life, this downward journey brings him close to the realm where dream and death are indistinguishable (77). The comings and goings of these regenerating shocks follow the „mysterious rules of inner motion“ (76), evocative of the myth of the eternal return. Although Nikolai has no control over these regenerating shocks, he can anticipate them. Hence follows the permanent sensation of anxiety that haunts him from childhood on. The anticipation of a shock and the cult of „inner crises“ force

<sup>47</sup> *Le Côté de Guermantes*: „La vocation invisible dont cet ouvrage est l'histoire“. (385)

Nikolai to speed their advent with a lifestyle of adventure. His first „adult“ action is to join the White army in the hopes that war experience will „regenerate“ him (119-120). Indeed, he receives the „greatest shock of his life“ (95), which sends him on a journey across Europe in the footsteps of the anxious heroes of the French „adventure“ novel.

Treating „external“ facts as unimportant, Nikolai confirms his rejection of the linear concept of history with its stress on the unprecedented. That is why every war-time event he describes evokes a similar event from his past. This thinking in archetypes characterizes Nikolai's meeting with the „whores with memoirs.“ Their meeting hearkens to and finds its explanation in the description of Nikolai's grandfather – the only survivor in his horse-stealing trade, who radically changed his lifestyle after the Russians had conquered the Caucasus. For someone who „had much to remember“ (79), this operation involved the renunciation of the past and the reconstruction of the present *tabula rasa* (80). His peers perished due to their inability to „burn“ their past. The same fate awaits the „whores with memoirs“ who live in their idealized past. They are already dead in Nikolai's „true“ reality: in his memory they form one nebula from which they cannot be distinguished individually.

The episode with the grandfather recalls an earlier episode in which the narrator watches the battle of a tarantula with ants. The spider can flee but remains on the battlefield and is drawn into the ant-hill. This scene is very evocative, suggesting the existence of hidden knowledge in the depths of Nikolai's consciousness (78-79), knowledge that saves his grandfather and makes Nikolai denounce the irreversibility of time. The tarantula is killed because „it never retreats“ (78). The same is true for the „whores with memoirs“ who believe in the irreversibility of history: they perish under the burden of the past which prevents their adaptation to new conditions. To shake off this burden, one must go back and „burn“ one's past. This is the ethos of Nikolai's art of memory, opposed to Marcel's search but identical to that of the French „new children of the century.“

The image of fighting against the external world haunts Nikolai. The tarantula scene recalls the scene in which a wounded wolf runs from dogs, falling on the ground, „as if terrible earthly force tried to chain him to one place.“ The narrator applies this image to himself: „The same force, like a gigantic magnet, stopped me in my spiritual vagrancy and glued me to my bed; and again I heard my nanny's weak voice coming from the opposite bank of a blue invisible river“ (89). This river could be the Styx where dream and death meet. The nanny's song is a symbol of „home,“<sup>48</sup> that arresting „earthly force“ which burdens Nikolai with the memories of his past. For Nikolai, who often imagined himself as a sailor, it is also a Siren's song. He has long stopped distinguishing between „home“ and

<sup>48</sup> „Ах, не вижу я милова / Ни в деревне, ни в Москве, / Только вижу я милова / В темной ночке да в сладком сне.“ (89)

„abroad,“ merging them in one imaginary space for „spiritual vagrancy.“ Giving into the magnetic force of „home“ means ossification and death. He thus looks for deliverance from the burden of memory, finding it in a „foreign“ Siren – Claire.

The apparition of Claire signals the imminence of his flight from „home.“ Her image absorbs his past and alludes to future deliverance: „Claire's black stockings, her laughter and eyes merged in one inhumane and strange image mixing the fantastic with the real, and my childhood reminiscences with the vague anticipation of catastrophes“ (89). Claire's „foreignness“ fits Nikolai's desire to leave „home“ (96). She intensifies Nikolai's „malady“ of confusing reality and imagination (89). Stimulating his imagination, she supports his space of „spiritual vagrancy.“ At first, the song of the foreign Siren scandalizes Nikolai by its lack of „profundity“: „C'est une chemise rose/Avec une petite femme dedans,/Fraîche comme la fleur éclose,/Simple comme la fleur des champs“ (43). He denounces it as an example of shallow „French psychology,“ which cannot produce true art because it is not „serious“ (44). But he is immediately irritated with himself for using an argument from the arsenal of the „fathers.“

Thus, Nikolai juxtaposes the nanny's song with two images: the water color „Leda and the Swan“ in Claire's bedroom and the knight on her floor rug who resembles Don Quixote. The sexual nature of Claire's magnetism is clear from its projection onto the story of Leda's possession by Zeus. The swan is a three-tiered allusion. It refers to Proust's Swann, whose name, thanks to Odette's Anglophilia, was pronounced by their acquaintances *à l'anglaise*. By extension, it is a reference to Marcel's „philosophy of love“ developed from Swann's example. Secondly, it is an allusion to Baudelaire's poem „Le Cygne,“ whose leitmotifs of memory and exile, and dedication to the émigré Hugo, foreshadow Nikolai's future. Baudelaire's narrator elaborates the image of a swan in the streets of Paris as a metaphor for an émigré in a foreign land: „Je pense à mon grand cygne, avec ses gestes fous;/Comme les exilés, ridicule et sublime,/Et rongé d'un désir sans trêve!“<sup>49</sup> Finally, Nikolai draws on Andersen, evoked as part of his reading list (51, 60).

In „The Wild Swans,“ Andersen tells the story of eleven princes exiled from home by their stepmother who turns them into swans without voices. They are humans only by night and live beyond the sea. The brothers are delivered by their sister who weaves coats of mail which give them „new skin“ and make them permanently human. Only the youngest brother keeps a swan's wing in place of an arm. The tale does not say whether the siblings returned to their fatherland: by their own admission, their new country was as beautiful as the one they left behind.<sup>50</sup> The image of a swan without a voice aptly describes the situation of an exiled writer in a foreign linguistic environment. The dichotomy of two women,

<sup>49</sup> Ch. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, Paris 1991, 60.

<sup>50</sup> Andersen's *Fairy Tales*, transl. E. Lucas and H. Paull, New York 1945, 199-200.

one of whom delivers the swans from the spell of the other, evokes Nikolai's „home“ and „foreign“ Sirens. A swan's wing reminds the delivered prince of his exile. This image of a prince with a wing conveys the tension between the burden of memory and happiness that an „émigré Hamlet,“ *prince* Hamlet's progeny, found in a foreign land.

The image of Don Quixote is also a complex signifier. First of all, it symbolizes the conflict of imagination and the external world in which the quest for the fair Dulcinea may end in a pig sty. But for the Russian reader, it also recalls Turgenev's speech „Hamlet and Don Quixote.“ The association of these names was further reinforced by the émigré critical discourse that used the concept of „émigré Hamlet,“ fully applicable to Nikolai. The coupling of Hamlet and Don Quixote in Nikolai's image projects his love on Turgenev's interpretive paradigm in which Don Quixote and Hamlet embody two types of the human relation to an ideal. Don Quixote is the epitome of faith: he „values his life so long as it can be the means of attaining his ideal.“ Hamlet is a symbol of egocentric skepticism: his rationality precludes faith and puts his ideal in the service of self-contemplation.<sup>51</sup> Nikolai's love for Claire comprises both trends. On the one hand, as the novel's epigraph suggests, Nikolai's life is a token of their meeting with Claire. On the other hand, he uses Claire very rationally to the end of personal deliverance.

The quixotic conflict of imagination and reality is pivotal to Marcel's „philosophy of love.“ Bewildered at the gap between the „true impression“ of an object and the „nominal impression“ of its description, he realizes that the name of a city refers not to a location but to its image. People also „perish“ if Marcel approaches them. Thus, carnal desire and traveling, women and places, are united by this split between the object and its image.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, Marcel's, Swann's and Saint-Loup's affairs are a chase after an imaginary construct. The distance between the woman and her image must be preserved at the risk of upsetting the lover's imagination and ruining his interest in the desired object.

Nikolai also constructs the idealized image of a woman. But he does this because his inner equilibrium requires an image amalgamating the past he needs to „burn.“ Gazdanov draws this addition to Marcel's „philosophy of love,“ the use of a woman to the end of psychological deliverance, from the French „introspective“ novel. To possess the object is to eliminate its distance from the image, killing love. For Proust's characters this creates tension between the desire of possession and the awareness that it will ruin the image. For Nikolai this tension does not exist: the destruction of Claire's image is his goal. His quest for possession physically removes him from „home“: „I saw France... where I often imagined Claire and myself; it was a place unattainable for the sounds and images

<sup>51</sup> „Gamlet i Don Kikhot,“ *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem*, vol. 8, Moscow / Leningrad 1964, 172-175.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. *Du côté de chez Swann*, Paris 1997, 380-381; *Le Côté de Guermantes*, 4-5; and *La Prisonnière*, Paris 1997, 161.

of my past life“ (152). The consummation of desire will kill the remains of the memories from the „opposite bank,“ restoring the equilibrium in his imaginary space for „spiritual vagrancy.“ Aboard a ship to Turkey, he realizes that his exile is liberation: „But Claire is French... what was the use of this constant and intense grief about the snow, green plain, and the lives I had lived in the country that disappeared behind a curtain of fire? And I started dreaming how I would see Claire in Paris“ (152).

The operation that involves the death of Nikolai's guiding star and of the past it symbolizes fills him with nostalgia. He prolongs the moment preceding physical possession, as did Swann, who looked at Odette's face as if it were an image of the country he was leaving forever.<sup>53</sup> Having consummated his ideal, Nikolai feels the „sadness of love's end and imminent death“ (46). He proceeds to the final review of the memories amalgamated in the magnetic field of Claire's image. He feels the recession of memory in the impossibility of understanding and expressing the „endless sequence of thoughts, impressions and sensations“ that led him to this moment in his life (47). The crush of Claire's image exposes the film of memory, developed but not fixed. He sees the images disappear forever in his hands.

Nikolai's civil war experience culminated in his „journey to the south“ with the retreating army of Baron Vrangeli. Recalling this journey, Nikolai observes that he never regretted the people and places he left behind because he was doomed to carry their images until the time of his „last journey“: „That deadly journey, a slow fall into black depth... during which I will forget it all, everything I have seen, remembered, felt, and loved; and when I forget everything I have loved, I will die“ (137). Yet, he forgets the love of his life in the very beginning of the novel, as if confirming the regenerating nature of this „death.“ „Black depth“ may be the realm of the unconscious, where Nikolai descends in search of regeneration. The key to the nature of his „death“ is hidden in the last frame of the exposed film. As he leaves Russian coast, he hears a ship bell beat out time. For him, this sound recalls another one – the long and high-pitched sound similar to that of a vibrating saw (153). This sound introduces a web of intertextual allusions that explain the full meaning of Nikolai's trip across the Black sea at night – his literal fall into „black depth.“

The narrator of Alexander Blok's poem „Starost' mertvaia brodit vokrug“ (1905) is sawing a dormer while the sun is setting. The sunset is accompanied by the yelping and whistling sounds of his saw.<sup>54</sup> Blok metaphorizes the setting of the sun as the departure of a ship that takes his narrator into darkness. By sawing a dormer, the narrator finds a way out of his confinement, joining the sun's descent into the black depth of night. This poem contains all the elements of

<sup>53</sup> *Du côté de chez Swann*, 230.

<sup>54</sup> *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh*, vol. 2, Moscow / Leningrad 1960, 73.

Nikolai's descent into „black depth“: a departure into the sea at night (or the sea of night) accompanied by the high-pitched sound of a saw that symbolizes the process of severing one's ties with the abandoned land. The night sea may also be a metaphor for the unconscious state of a dreamer and for death itself. Both states take one on a downward – „southward“ – journey.

In the same year, Blok wrote another poem in which departure was symbolized by a high-pitched sound. In „Utikhaet svetlyi veter,“ the sound of a „sleepy string“ echoes a girl's farewell to her lover who is leaving at night for a „foreign and dark land.“<sup>55</sup> The central theme in the heroine's monologue is her lover's memory: she asks him not to chase away her image even when he is „happy with another girl.“ This poem recalls the song of Nikolai's nanny, for both share a female narrative voice, the theme of parting, night and dreams as the meeting place, and the meter – four feet trochee.<sup>56</sup> In Blok's earlier poem, „Vzmor'e“ (1904), the motif of departure also brings about a long and high-pitched sound.<sup>57</sup> In this poem, a departing ship is accompanied by the „voices of ship Sirens“ that produce the „burdensome sound“ („tiagostnyi zvuk“) of death. Thus, leaving for the land where he will be „happy with another girl,“ Nikolai hears an echo of his „home“ Siren's song. She is afraid that he will forget her, but this is his goal. Nikolai's trip is that of oblivion which for him equals regenerating death. This „deadly“ ambiguity of his „journey to the south“ hearkens to Blok's poems „Poslednii put'“ and „Poslednee napuststvie.“

In „Poslednii put'“ (1907) ships are leaving a snowy coast into the night. They are called back by a woman „chained in snow.“ But her call is dangerous, for those who step on the „snowy path“ never leave it – it becomes their last journey.<sup>58</sup> In „Poslednee napuststvie“ (1914) the tempting call of the „home“ Siren is countered by the call of a Siren from the opposite shore. One can read this text as a description of physical death – a journey from suffering to peace – or of spiritual death and subsequent regeneration. As the traveler's ship passes the people and cities from his past, he hears a „crystal sound“ that touches his heart „like a tender violin.“<sup>59</sup> When this „light earthly music“ stops tormenting him (cf. the „earthly force“ that arrests Nikolai's spiritual vagrancy), his beloved leads him to the Elysian fields:

А когда пройдет все мимо,  
Чем тревожила земля,  
Та, кого любил ты много,

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>56</sup> Gazdanov: „Ах, не вижу я милова / Ни в деревне, ни в Москве, / Только вижу я милова / В темной ночке да в сладком сне.“ Blok: „В стороне чужой и темной / Как ты вспомнишь обо мне? / О моей любви скромной / Закручинишься ль во сне.“

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>59</sup> *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh*, vol. 3, 272-273.



Поведет рукой любимой  
В Елисейские поля.

Choosing between two „last journeys,“ Nikolai abandons the „snowy coast“ of Russia, opting for the regenerating death at the hand of his „foreign“ Siren in Paris – the only city in the world that has the Elysian fields.