

**PUSHKINIAN REMINISCENCES
IN KRUCHENYKH'S OPERA "VICTORY OVER
THE SUN" [ПОБЕДА НАД СОЛНЦЕМ]**

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The title of this paper announces a difficult undertaking, as there seems to be little in common between the classical poet Alexander Pushkin and the vanguard writer Alexei Kruchenykh, one of the most experimental authors of Russian futurism.

Key words:

Khlebnikov, Kruchenikh, Mayakovsky, Pushkin

The Russian futurists had first gained notoriety at the end of 1912 when they published their manifesto "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste" [Пощечина общественному вкусу], probably written by David Burliuk, Kruchenykh and Mayakovsky¹, but signed by Khlebnikov as well. Here the futurist poets declared that their aim was to dispense with all of past culture and tradition (Academy, museums, libraries), in order to create not only a new world, but a completely new poetic language.

In the manifesto they declare:

The past is too tight. The Academy and Pushkin are less intelligible than hieroglyphics.

Throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc. overboard from the Ship of Modernity.

And they conclude:

And if *for the time being* the filthy stigmas of your "common sense" and "good taste" are still present in our lines, these same lines *for the first time* already

¹ See V. Markov, *Storia del futurismo russo*, Torino 1973, p. 45.

glimmer with the Summer Lightning of the New Coming Beauty of the Self-sufficient (self-centered) Word.²

In his later writings about poetry, Kruchenykh often refers to Pushkin when expressing doubts or destructive criticism.

In "The Displacement of Russian Verse" [Сдвигология русского стиха], published in 1922, he discusses languor in Pushkin's poem "Evgenij Onegin", constructed on es-sounds (Evgenij, [L]enskij, [Tat]'jana)³. Then he states:

The composition in Pushkin is a natural walking, a swinging from one corner to the other and only death stopped it and drew the line which is necessary for the picture to emerge⁴.

Kruchenykh, in contrast to the euphony of classical verse, in 1913 promotes sounds like "Дыр бул щыл / ubešščur / skum / vy so bu / r l ez [Дыр бул щыл / убешщур / скум / вы со бу / р л эз] ("Lipstick" [Помада], Moscow, January 1913), sounds that are "more uncomfortable [...] than a truck in a living-room", as he states in the declaration "The word as such" ([Слово как таковое], Moscow, September 1913), written together with Khlebnikov⁵. This totally senseless combination of numerous consonants and a few vowels became a kind of programmatic slogan of the Russian futurist poetry and an example for verse-writing by means of the so called 'transmental' or 'transrational' language.

In "The Texture of the Word" [Фактура слова], published in 1923, Kruchenykh complains that in Russia there are no poetesses, except for one (Anna Akhmatova, called ironically Akhmatkina) over whom "waves the shade of Pushkin"⁶.

After this brief introduction, let me move on to the main object of my paper: the more or less direct quotations of or references to Pushkin and his works in "Victory over the Sun" [Победа над солнцем]. The libretto for this opera was written in 1913 and the opera was staged at the end of that same year in the Luna-Park-Theatre in St. Petersburg with stage music by Mikhail Matiushin and scene paintings and costumes by the suprematist painter Kasimir Malevich.

The plot of the opera, though fragmentary and confused, is rather simple: in the four scenes of the first act the battle with and the victory over the sun take place;

2 Russkij futurizm. Teorija. Praktika. Kritika. Vospominanija, ed. by V. Terechina and A. Zimenkov, Moskva 2000, p. 41.

3 A. Kručenykh, Sdvigologija russkogo sticha, Moskva 1922, p. 18; now in A. Kručenykh, Kukiš prošlakam, Moskva-Tallinn 1992, p. 50 (18).

4 Ibid., p. 60 (28).

5 Russkij futurizm, op. cit., p. 46.

6 A. Kručenykh, Faktura slova, Moskva 1923; now in A. Kručenykh, Kukiš prošlakam, op. cit., p. 29.

the two scenes of the second act are set in the ‘Tenth Country’, the ‘Desyatj stran’ [Десятый странъ], a masculinization of the feminine word ‘strana’. This Country – where, according to futurist poetics, “Everything has become masculine” [Все стало мужскимъ]⁷ – is a new world, where time runs backward and space is turned upside down. The laws of nature and the rules of logic (the gravity or the succession of cause and effect) have lost their validity and men are free to move in a pluri-dimensional universe as illustrated by the following verses: “Footsteps are hung / on sign-boards / People run / with bowler hats down” [Шаги повешены / на вывесках / бегут люди / вниз котелками]⁸. This new world requires a new language, the ‘transrational’ or ‘transmental’ language, which is free from grammar and syntax and displays neologisms or non-sense combinations of sounds.

In the rather obscure text of “Victory over the Sun” two significant moments contain disguised references to Pushkin: at the end of the first act, when the choir strikes up a hymn to the defeated sun, and at the beginning of the last scene, when the Fat Man – a survivor of the old, fat, bourgeois world – tries to find his bearing in the new unknown universe, the experienced reader will find echoes of Pushkin.

After the victory over the sun the choir sings:

“We are free / The sun is crushed... / Long live darkness!”

[– Мы вольные / Разбитое солнце... / Здравствует тьма!]⁹

This hymn to darkness re-proposes – changing them into their opposite – the last verses of Pushkin’s “Bacchic Canto” [Вакхическая песня, 1825], where the sun appears as an allegory of reason, truth and knowledge. Pushkin’s poetical composition ends with a series of rhetorical exclamations, which culminate in a long live the sun:

Long live the muses, long live reason! / You, sacred sun, shine! / As this light grows dim / in the beaming rise of the dawn / so the false wisdom dims and fades / in the presence of the immortal sun of the mind. / Long live the sun and may darkness be hidden.

[Да здравствуют музы, да здравствует разум! / Ты, солнце святое, гори! / Как эта лампада бледнеет / Пред ясным восходом зари, / Так ложная мудрость мерцает и тлеет / Пред солнцем бессмертным ума. / Да здравствует солнце, да скроется тьма!]

7 A. Kručenyč, *Pobeda nad solncem*, Peterburg 1913, act II, scene I, p. 6.

8 *Ibid.*, act II, scene VI, p. 22.

9 *Ibid.*, act I, scene IV, p. 15.

With the praise of darkness the choir subverts Pushkin's exclamations according to futurist poetics and, together with the sun, denies also reason and beauty. Turning Pushkin's metaphor upside down, Kruchenykh declares the victory over the solar world of "mean appearances"¹⁰ and permits his dramatis personae to penetrate in the mysterious universe of darkness, symbolized by the 'Tenth Country'. Here the usual categories of space and time are no longer in force, nor do the rules of logic operate which permit to organize thought in an intelligible language. The new world, which at the eyes of the Fat Man seems to be chaotic, confused and illogical, can be understood only by an enlarged mind, expressing itself in the new 'transmental' or 'transrational' language situated beyond reason. This language is used in the two arias sung in the last scene by the Young Man and the Aviator, two of the dramatis personae suited to the new world represented by the 'Tenth Country'.

Even more interesting is the following, almost unintelligible reference to a Pushkinian text.

At the beginning of the last scene, set in the 'Tenth Country', where things are turned in their opposite, the Fat Man delivers a long monologue:

"The tenth countries... the windows all face inside, the house is fenced in; live here as you know how.

What tenth countries! I didn't know I would have to sit locked up.

I can't move my head or my arm or they will become unscrewed or undone. And look at how the axe is working here, damned thing, it has shorn us all. We walk about bald, and it's not hot, only steamy. This is a rotten climate; even cabbages and onions won't grow. And where's the market then? They said it is on the islands... And if you could go upstairs, into the brain of this building, and open door no. 35 – what a wonder! Yes, nothing is simple here. Something might look like a chest of drawers, but... And then you get lost all the time... *He climbs up somewhere.* No, it's not here... All the paths have got mixed up and go up to the earth, while there aren't any side entrances. Hey, if there is one of us up there, give us some rope, or say something... Fire a shot.... Hmm! Guns made from birch trees – imagine!"

[10-ья страны... окна все внутрь проведены дом загорожен живут тут как знаешь

Ну и 10-ья страны! вот не знал что придется сидеть взаперти ни головой ни рукой двинуть нельзя развинтятся или сдвинутся а как тут топор действует окаянный обстриг всех нас ходим мы лысые и не жарко а только парко такой климат скверный даже капуста и лук не растут а базар – где он? – говорить на островах...

10 V. Markov, op. cit., p. 160, note 45.

а вот бы забраться по лестнице в мозг этого дома открыть там дверь № 35 – ех вот чудеса! да, все тут не тк-то просто хоть свиду что комод – и все! а вот блуждаешь блуждаешь
(лезет куда то в верх)
нет не тут все дороги перепутались и идут вверх к земле а боковых ходов нет... эй кто там наш есть подай веревку или голос стреляй... кст! пушки из березы – подумаешь!]¹¹

What is the Fat Man looking for and what does he expect when opening door number 35? A wonder? And why should it be just door number 35?

In Russian literature a reference to a door number 35 can be found in Pushkin's novel "Egyptian Nights" [Египетские ночи], when the young peterburgian poet Charsky looks in a cheap hotel for the Italian improvisator whose acquaintance he had made the day before. The second chapter (note: in "Victory over the Sun" the monologue is delivered in the second scene of the second act!) opens with the following narration:

The next day Charsky in the dark and dirty passage of the inn looked for the room number 35. He stopped at the door and knocked. The Italian he had met the day before opened it.

– Victory! – Charsky said to him.

[На другой день Чарский в темном и нечистом коридоре трактира отыскивал 35-ый номер. Он остановился у двери и постучал. Вчерашний итальянец отворил ее.

– Победа! – сказал ему Чарский (...).]

Then Charsky continues by telling the improvisator that the Princess** will give him her hall for a performance. Now, besides the exclamation "Victory!", which is resumed in the title of Kruchenykh's libretto, it is possible to trace other similarities between the situation in "Egyptian Nights" and the episode of "Victory over the Sun".

The Fat Man expects a miracle, or something wonderful behind door number 35. Equally wonderful in the northern Petersburg is the improvisator's Mediterranean look and, even more, the inexhaustible ability of this prestidigitator of words to continuously invent new verses, in which the skill and brilliance of versification often overshadow meaning. It is possible that Kruchenykh had in mind Pushkin's improvisator when he proclaimed the necessity of creating a new language, the non-sense 'transmental' or 'transrational' language used in "Victory over the Sun", as a way of expression more suitable to the new world.

11 A. Kručenykh, *Pobeda nad solncem*, op. cit., act II, scene VI, p. 19.

I would like to call the attention of those to whom this comparison should seem too bold and those who think that futurist poets hardly appreciated Pushkin's works to the epigraph of "Egyptian Nights":

- Quel est cet homme?
- На, c'est un bien grand talent; il fait de sa voix tout ce qu'il veut.
- Il devrait bien, madame, s'en faire une culotte.

This epigraph was well known to futurist poets, as Mayakovsky writes with autobiographical references in his poem "A Fop's Blouse" [Копра фара, 1914]:

I will sew myself black trousers / from the velvet of my voice. / And from three yards of sunset, a yellow blouse.

[Я сошью себе черные штаны / из бархата голоса моего. / Желтую кофту из трех аршин заката.]

A similar metaphor had been already used by Mayakovsky in his tragedy "Vladimir Mayakovsky" [Владимир Маяковский], staged every other night in alternation with "Victory over the Sun" at the end of 1913 in St. Petersburg. In Mayakovsky's tragedy the Man with a Long Face states: "With my soul too you can / sew such elegant skirts" [А ведь из моей души тоже можно / шить такие нарядные юбки]¹². Thus it seems possible that he was making a reference to Puskin's "Egyptian Nights" already in 1913, at the same time when Kruchenykh wrote the libretto for his opera.

These examples show that Russian futurist poets, in spite of their iconoclastic attitude and their refusal of Tradition, Academy and Heritage, were well aware of their poetic culture and quoted – though often in a disguised form – Pushkin and other classic poets in their writings. By including the references to Pushkin in a completely new context they obtain an effect of estrangement, on the one hand, and issue a challenge to the reader's skill in interpreting their verses on the other, thus realizing two of the main purposes of futurist poetry.

12 V. Majakovskij, "Vladimir Majakovskij". Tragedija, Moskva 1914, act I, p. 26.

ПУШКИНСКИЕ РЕМИНИСЦЕНЦИИ В ОПЕРЕ КРУЧЕНЫХ „ПОБЕДА НАД СОЛНЦЕМ”

Резюме

В этой статье автор сначала анализирует место Пушкина в теоретических статьях Крученыха, а потом занимается расшифровкой цитат из произведений великого поэта в футуристической опере „Победа над солнцем” (1913). Автор доказывает что в заключительной песне хора, в конце первого акта звучат реминисценции „Вакхической песни” Пушкина, а в начале последней картины, в монологе толстяка, есть прямая ссылка на повесть „Египетские ночи”, которая имеет свое значение в русском, как свидетельствует и факт, что ее эпитафия прямо влияет на стихотворение Маяковского „Кофта фата”.