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“WHAT MAKES A WOMAN AN AMAZON”:
PASTERNAK, CVETAEVA
AND THE HERITAGE OF HEINRICH von KLEIST¹

Gender categories in the semantic, pragmatic, and metapoetic areas of text explication are often a vital tool for understanding certain aspects of the artistic ideology of Pasternak and Cvetaeva. The text addressed here was largely overlooked by Pasternak scholarship; only quite recently there appeared an important study that paid some attention to it in connection with the Kantian source of Pasternak's concept of “the second birth”, as well as the treatment of asceticism in his notebooks on philosophy [Вигилянская 2007].

In an article on Cvetaeva's two periods of discipleship [Ронен 1992: 185, 187] I tentatively reconstructed her reaction to Pasternak's first letter to her (dated June 14, 1922) as far as his reference to Swinburne was concerned. Pasternak seemed to derive the title of Cvetaeva's collection *Версты* (*Mileposts*) and her lines *Версты, и версты, и версты, и черствый хлеб* (= *Miles, and miles, and miles, and the stale bread*) from those verses out of Swinburne's piece “By the North Sea” (*Miles, and miles, and miles of desolation! // Leagues on leagues on leagues without a change!*) which Bal'mont had taken as an epigraph for his poem “На версты и версты протянулось болото...” (“For miles and miles the marshes stretched...”). Pasternak wrote:

“Как могло случиться, что слушав и слышав Вас неоднократно, я оплошал и разминулся с Вашей верстовой Суинберниадой (если Вы даже его не знаете, моего кумира, — он дошел до Вас через побочные влиянья, и ему вольно в Вас, родная Марина Ивановна, как когда-то Байрону было вольно в Лермонтове, как Якобсену и России вольно в Рильке)” = “How could it happen that, having listened to you and heard you on more than one occasion, I slipped up and missed your milestone Swinburniad (and even if you do not know him, my idol, he has reached you through side influences², and he feels at ease in you, darling Marina Ivanovna, just as Byron was at ease in Lermontov in those times, and — as Jakobsen and Russia are at ease in Rilke)” [Эфрон 1989: 143 (without the mention of Jakobsen); Цветаева, Пастернак 2004: 11].

Pasternak, ever conscious of the feminine/masculine, *anima/animus* dichotomy in lyrical inspiration, assumed that the theme of *Atalanta in Calydon*, “Dolores”, and the dramatic trilogy about Mary Queen of Scots (which he had translated into Russian) should attract Cvetaeva's attention for the same reason that made him chose as the epigraph for *Поверх барьеров* (*Over the Barriers*) Swinburne's appeal

to his *anima*, the sea, which he called in his poem “By the North Sea” the “sister” of “death’s self”; the lines quoted by Pasternak are highlighted in their context:

I, last least voice of her voices,
 Give thanks that were mute in me long
To the soul in my soul that rejoices
For the song that is over my song.
 Time gives what he gains for the giving
 Or takes for his tribute of me;
 My dreams to the wind everliving,
 My song to the sea.

In her poem “Рас-стояния — версты, мили...” (“Dis-stances — versts, miles...”, 1925), Cvetaeva deciphered Pasternak’s obscure allusion to Bal’mont in that first letter, but did not develop any interest in Swinburne. However, in 1923, when she began to work on her mythological verse dramas, the original title of which, *Гнев Афродиты* (*The Wrath of Aphrodite*), she eventually dropped³ apparently because of its compromising resemblance to the title of Nagrodskaja’s novel *Гнев Диониса* (*The Wrath of Dionysus*), Cvetaeva began to share with Pasternak another early infatuation of his, Heinrich von Kleist, of whom he had not written to her. She may have noticed Pasternak’s translations of *Die Familie Schroffenstein* and *Robert Guiskard* in the first volume of Kleist’s selected writings brought out by *Всемирная Литература* (see [Клейст 1923]). Kleist must have been part of her girlhood German reading, but it is only after 1923 that one finds irrefutable examples of Kleist’s presence in her poetry and plays. Her main attention was devoted to *Penthesilea*, the tragedy which had been translated into Russian not by Pasternak but by Fedor Sologub and A. N. Cebotarevskaja, and published in 1914 with an accompanying essay by V. M. Žirmunskij [Жирмунский 1914]. It was from *Penthesilea* that Cvetaeva quoted in her poem addressed to Pasternak:

Так разминулися: сын Фетиды
 С дочерью Аресовой: Ахиллес
 С Пенфезилеей.
 О, вспомни — снизу
 Взгляд ее! сбитого седока
 Взгляд!

(“Двое”)

[= *Thus they missed each other: the son of Thetis // And Ares’ daughter: Achilles // And Penthesilea. O remember — her glance // From below! An unhorsed rider’s // Glance!* (“The Twain”).]

Kleist, in Scene 8 of *Penthesilea*, has:

Er, der Pelide, steht, Penthesilea,
 Sie sinkt, die Todumschattete, von Pferd.

⟨...⟩ ihr Götter! ruft er,
Was für ein Blick der Sterbenden traf mich!

(= *He, the Pelide, stays upright; Penthesilea, // She sinks, in the shadow of death, off her horse. ⟨...⟩ you Gods, he calls, // What a glance the dying one is casting upon me!*)

Cvetaeva explored further one of the tragic lessons which she derived from Kleist, the fateful non-recognition of the ideal mate by the lover, in her essay “Наталья Гончарова”:

“Есть пары — тоже, но разрозненные, почти разорванные. Зигфрид, не узнавший Брунгильды, Пенфезилея, не узнавшая Ахилла, где рок в недоразумении, хотя бы роковым. Пары — всё же” = “Some are couples also, but set apart, almost torn apart. Siegfried, who has not recognized Brunhild; Penthesilea, who has not recognized Achilles, when fate is in a misunderstanding, albeit a fateful one. Couples, nevertheless” [Цветаева 1965: 753].

Siegfried’s obliviousness is a common motif in various versions of the Nibelung tale, but there is no motif of Penthesilea not recognizing Achilles in her fury, and killing him, in Greek mythology, either in Gustav Schwab’s popular adaptation *Die schönsten Sagen des klassischen Altertums (The Most Beautiful Legends of Classical Antiquity)*, much used by Cvetaeva [Karlinsky 1985: 181–182], or anywhere else. This situation was a fruit of Kleist’s poetic imagination, and Cvetaeva could have borrowed it only from his *Penthesilea*, in which, by the way, Ananke, Fate, was the name of the Amazon queen’s “Führerin der Hunde”, the mistress of the hounds, which she set upon Achilles.

The fact of Cvetaeva’s reading or re-reading *Penthesilea* thus established, the original impetus which made Cvetaeva turn to the Greek mythological subjects precisely during 1923 can be narrowed down from the all too general reference to the polygenetic origins of *Федра (Phaedra)* and *Ариадна (Ariadne)* [Цветаева 1988: 370]. More specifically, Cvetaeva’s treatment of classical themes, so dissimilar from Viaceslav Ivanov’s reconstruction of the archaic, pre-literary myths or from Annenskij’s wistful and subtle diachronic irony, is closest of all to Kleist’s freely anachronistic, emotive and gender-oriented approach, and the dominant mood of passionate touchiness verging on Teutonic fury.

The specific preoccupations of Kleist which elicited Cvetaeva’s poetic response were not so much his disclosure of what, in Pasternak’s words, “makes a woman an Amazon”, a self-evident matter for Cvetaeva the artist and the woman, judging by her poem “Амазонки” (“The Amazons”), but the reason why an Amazon should, as Kleist had put it, “renounce the law of the women and follow a young man” (*Ich sage vom Gesetz der Fraun mich los, // Und folge diesem Jüngling hier*) (Scene 24). It is evident from Cvetaeva’s preparatory notes for *Phaedra* that she gave this problem a great deal of thought in connection with Hippolytus and his Amazon mother, who had fought against her own former subjects on the side

of Theseus, her son's father. She did so, according to Cvetaeva's final version of the play, as well as her "Letter to an Amazon" ("Lettre à l'Amazone", 1932, revised 1934), not out of love for Theseus but for the sake of her own son. Kleist's Penthesilea, on the other hand, forsook her women to join Achilles, whom she had torn to pieces, in the ultimate sacrificial union of a *Liebestod*. In her earlier notes, Cvetaeva paid much more attention to the possibility of a Kleistian double suicide:

"Подумать: Федра предлагает Ипполиту умереть вместе, только в смерти осуществить общий сон. Благородно, но — не нелепость ли?"

Странность предложения: не целовав меня, умри со мной...

Странность ответа Ипполита: *Гадина* — на благородное — пусть бредовое — предложение общей смерти".

(= "To consider: Phaedra offers Hippolytus to die together, to realize shared sleep only in death. Noble, but is it not an absurdity?")

The strangeness of the offer: not having kissed me, die with me...

The strangeness of Hippolytus' response, *You wretch*, —to the noble, albeit lunatic, offer of a joint death") [Цветаева 1988: 378].

In the final version of the play this ascetic offer of chaste self-immolation is debased by Phaedra's naked lust, and Kleist's heroic single combat of sexes turns into a tragicomedy of a failed seduction.

It is tempting also to perceive in the character of Cvetaeva's Theseus, whom she called in an early version of her "Ariadne" poems "an immortal coward" [Цветаева 1980: 515] but vindicated in her tragedy *Ariadne* apparently after reading or re-reading Kleist, some features of Prince von Homburg, with the theme of the sacred obedience as a tragic fault replacing Kleist's "sacred disobedience". Just as the Elector prevails over Homburg not by his power of the sovereign but by asking him to be his own judge, so Bacchus prevails over Theseus not by exercising his diving prerogative but by appealing, as an equal would, to the human virtue of self-sacrifice.

In the published correspondence of Pasternak and Cvetaeva, Kleist is never mentioned. When Cvetaeva disregarded Pasternak's explicit invitation to read Swinburne and pounced, instead, upon Kleist as a secret key to their affinity, she could not have known anything about Pasternak's essay "Г. фон Клейст. Об аскетике в культуре" ("H. von Kleist. On Asceticism in Culture"), draft fragments of which, dated 1911, were published only recently, in at least two somewhat different versions [Пастернак 1990: 247–255; Пастернак 1991, 4: 675–682; Пастернак 2004: 294–303]. Incidentally, the phrase quoted in the title of this paper, "what makes a woman an Amazon", appears in the collection *Об искусстве* [Пастернак 1990: 254] and in volume V of his complete collected writings [Пастернак 2004: 302], but is omitted in volume 4 of the five-volume edition [Пастернак 1991, 4: 681], and there are lacunae marked with suspension points in all the three editions.

In this abandoned essay, Pasternak addressed at length and in characteristically evasive detail those categories of biological predicament (masculine vs. feminine, Nordic vs. southern) which remained manifest components of his later artistic ideology. The essay opens with the description of a northerner visiting Odessa and registering with dismay that the inhabitants of this southern port “rent culture rather than own it and that everything rests here at the stage of naturalness, unhappy or happy” (“он видит, что здесь снимают культуру, но не владеют ею, что здесь все покоится в стадии естественности, несчастной или счастливой”). The natives did not understand him when, observing them, he discovered, and tried to share with them, the notion of asceticism⁴ in culture. It was then that he decided to write about this and “suddenly remembered the nearing centennial since the death of one of the greatest ascetics of creativity, whose suicide proceeded out of his peculiar worship of life” (“он внезапно вспоминает о близости столетия со дня смерти одного из величайших аскетов творчества, самоубийство которого шло из своеобразного его поклонения жизни”).

Pasternak regarded Kleist’s constant deviations from his vocation (toward philosophy, mathematics, music, moral preaching, etc.) as ascetic “exercises” [Пастернак 1990: 251]. Like Solger and Hegel⁵ before him, he perceived Kleist’s inspiration as “an ascetic act of breaking with the natural, a longer or shorter stage on the road of death” (“аскетический акт, разрыв с естественным, больший или меньший перегон по дороге смерти”) [Пастернак 1990: 250]. It turned out that, after all, Kleist did not deviate from his calling, because “his calling was deviation, hard, painful, funereal toward the end” (“Уклонение было призванием его, тяжелым, мучительным, погребальным к концу”) [Пастернак 1990: 251].

Pasternak formulated several questions at the outset of his essay that had to do with the obscure logic of the relationship between life and the artist:

“Клейст — реалист, достаточно смелый и для нашего времени. Значит, он аморалист?
(Клейст — реалист и самоубийца. Значит его убийца — жизнь?)

Клейст — реалист. Значит, он противник культуры?

И, наконец, сходя с этического поля на эстетическое: Клейст, преследуемый своими замыслами, преследуем — жизнью — ибо его замыслы — ступенная, нагнетенная жизнь”.

[= “Kleist is a realist, courageous enough even for our time. Does this mean that he is an amoralist?

(Kleist is a realist and a suicide. Does this mean that his killer was life?)

Kleist is a realist. Does this mean that he is an adversary of culture?

And, finally, descending from the ethical to the aesthetic field: Kleist pursued by his conceptions is being pursued by life, because his conceptions are a concentrated, compressed life”] [Пастернак 1990: 250].

Toward the end of his notes, Pasternak drafted a seemingly unexpected answer to the riddle of Kleist:

“Мы пойдем Клейста, если примем его жизнь за повесть об изуверстве замысла о том, что делает женщину амазонкой. Так мы овладеем значением, смыслом его смерти. И мы внесем свой долг, если отделим от его судьбы идею, скрытую в ней, и в ней найдем вечный мотив его канонизированной смерти” = “We shall understand Kleist if we consider his life as the tale of the perversely cruel fanaticism of the conception of what makes a woman an Amazon. So we shall master the significance, the meaning of his death. And we shall pay our debt if we separate from his fate the *idea* concealed in it, and find in it the eternal motif of his canonized death” [Пастернак 1990: 254].

How can one explain the logic of this representation of Kleist, the male ascetic, by what for Pasternak appeared to be his feminine equivalent, the Amazon? Within the context of his essay it is reasonably clear that the Amazon in question was life that pursued Kleist as a “creative conception” (“замысел”). It should be recalled, as Pasternak did in his later essay on Kleist [Пастернак 1990: 150], that Kleist's half-sister Ulrike was an Amazon who wore man's riding breeches and hated her sex. Prefiguring, as it were, the title of his subsequent collection of poetry, and following the special logic of that particular trope, Pasternak perceived Kleist's “sister life” as the story of “what makes a woman an Amazon”.

Culture for Pasternak, especially science, philosophy, and moral doctrine, was masculine and of no use to the feminine. In a letter to A. L. Štix, dated July 17, 1912, Marburg, he wrote: “Но я гнушаюсь тем трудом, которого не знает, не замечает, которого не хочет знать женственность” = “I shun such work which femininity is ignorant of, does not notice, and has no need for” [Пастернак 1992, 5: 66]. The lyric creativity, on the other hand, was the service and worship of the feminine, and required, to be meaningful, a second participant in its final act, in the “attentive, pure, interpreting presence of which a meaningful eternity is enacted” (“присутствие второго, в чистом, толкующем внимании которого разыгрывается значащая вечность”) [Пастернак 1991, 4: 682]. Hence Kleist's participation in a double suicide with Henriette Vogel.

A year after composing his early notes on Kleist, apparently following his return from Marburg, Pasternak turned to the problem of asceticism, masculine and feminine, in a fragment beginning with the words: “Прежде всего мне хочется говорить о той быти, которая появляется иногда на пороге вдохновения” = “First of all I should like to talk about that reality which sometimes appears on the threshold of inspiration” [Пастернак 1991, 4: 775–777]. Here he wrote:

“Я всегда испытывал такую быль, как ударяемый слог конечной стопы, которая должна быть женской. Действительность давала лишь тяжелый слог; первую половину стопы; — какая-то певучая осмысленность требовала второй части, вечера, сумерек, в которых бы ослабла быль или ее повязки. (Повязки, наложенные на большую быль той рукой культуры, которая врачует: рукой научного и нравственного творчества, *наложенные этой и разматываемые той, которая не знает излечений и хочет болезни: вечной веры: снятые рукою лирики, лирического аскетизма.*)

⟨...⟩ Жаждой неударяемого хаоса, тоскующей волей — быть женственной бывает проникнута быть (это странное слово — мужского рода), когда она — на пороге вдохновения”.

[= “I have always experienced such reality as a stressed syllable of the final foot, which ought to be feminine. The reality yielded only the downbeat, the first half of the foot. Some kind of melodious meaningfulness demanded its second part, an evening, a twilight which would relieve the reality or its bandages. (The bandages placed upon the ailing reality by that hand of culture which heals, the hand of scientific or moral creative activity, ⟨placed by this hand and unbound by the hand which does not know any cures and wants an ailment: an eternal faith: removed by the hand of lyric, of the lyric asceticism⟩.)

⟨...⟩ A thirst for the unstressed chaos, an anguished will to be feminine permeates the reality (this strange word is of the masculine gender), when she is on the threshold of inspiration”].

The second step in interpreting the image of the Amazon in reference to Kleist’s life should involve Pasternak’s subsequent (1941) essay on Kleist, which was related to the first one as Pasternak’s later poetry was to his early poetry. Here Pasternak reinterpreted Kleist’s death (in the first essay, Kleist invited the woman to join him; in the second, he responded willingly to the woman’s tentative invitation) and formulated anew the message of Kleist’s life and art:

“Это единственные в своем роде изображения человеческих аффектов, в особенности инстинкта справедливости в его слепой первооснове, когда под влиянием обид и пробужденной мстительности этот благотворительный задаток превращается в источник столь же безотчетных злодейств и преступлений” = “These are unique depictions of human affects, especially the instinct of justice in its blind fundamental principle, when under the influence of affronts and awakened vindictiveness this beneficent inclination turns into a source of equally unaccountable villainies and crimes” [Пастернак 1990: 148–149].

Obviously, Pasternak was speaking here about the “perversely cruel fanaticism” (“изуверство”) of the instinct of justice just as in the early fragments he referred to the “perversely cruel fanaticism” of the idea of “what makes a woman an Amazon”.

The logical link between the two formulas of Kleist’s pervasive moral concern can be found in Pasternak’s own interpretation of the Russian revolution as a revenge for the wrongs and the indignities suffered by womanhood:

И так как с малых детских лет
Я ранен женской долей,
И след поэта — только след
Ее путей, не боле,
И так как я лишь ей задет
И ей у нас раздолье,
То весь я рад сойти на нет
В революционной воле.

(“Весеннею порою льда”, 1931)

[= *And as since early childhood years // I have been wounded by a woman’s lot,
// And the poet’s track is but a track // Of her paths, and no more than that; // And*

as I am affected only by that lot // And it is unconstrained with us, // I should be glad to come to naught // If revolution wills it (“During the springtime of ice”).]

The aesthetic aspect of the Amazon’s retribution is formulated in the well-known passage out of *Охранная грамота* (*Safe Conduct*): “I have become a bondman of forms sooner than I should have, because I have seen on them too soon the form of bondwomen” (“раньше, чем надо, я стал невольником форм, потому что слишком рано увидел на них форму невольниц”) [Пастернак 1990: 37]. This evocation of the Dahomey Amazons’ naked parade in a zoo, the rhetoric of which followed Baudelaire’s definition of man in “Le Voyage”, *esclave de l’esclave*, immediately preceded a recollection of a young student’s noble self-sacrifice in an attempt to save a drowning woman, and the eventual failed suicide and ultimate madness of the woman for whose sake it had been offered: a curious subliminal recollection of the 1911 essay on Kleist.

The moral aspect of the revenge for the humiliation of womanhood was later explored, and found tragically wanting, in *Doctor Zhivago*, in the image of Strel’nikov, a male Amazon, too, in this particular sense.

Pasternak’s free attitude toward the gender of his Amazons and much of his interpretation of Kleist’s “deviations” and death owed a great deal to Otto Weininger, as did his evaluation of the masculine, feminine, and Jewish cultural creativity [cf. Деринг-Смирнова 1999]. He shared Weininger’s rejection of Judaism as essentially feminine and uncreative, but persistently defended the suffering, militant, and triumphant womanhood, not as bearer of creativity, but as its object and addressee. A psychologist might be able to explain how in Pasternak’s conception of the Russian revolution the affronted and avenging woman took the place of the vindictive Jew of the less sophisticated ideological discourse.

However this may be, unlike Weininger, who committed suicide because he was effeminate and a Jew, and unlike Cvetaeva, who did so to avoid dishonor and to save her son, similar to the fighting Amazon queen Antiope, Pasternak believed that the biological predicament, the “accident” of gender and the “particularity” of race, is something to be overcome by fortunate chance and by an effort of will, if such a predicament is spiritually alien to its bearer. Two quotations, from a letter to Cvetaeva dated March 25, 1926, and from the manuscript ending of Pt. 3, Ch. 10 of *Safe Conduct* (excluded from the printed version) should suffice to illustrate this salient feature of Pasternak’s philosophy of life:

“Как удивительно, что ты — женщина. При твоём таланте это ведь такая случайность. И вот, за возможностью жить при Debordes-Valmore (какие редкие шансы в лотерее!) — возможность жить при тебе. И как раз я рождаюсь. Какое счастье” = “How strange it is that you are a woman. With your talent it is after all such a fortuity. And now, after the opportunity of living in the days of Debordes-Valmore (how low are the odds in the lottery!) — an opportunity to live in your days. And I was born just then. What luck” [Цветаева, Пастернак 2004: 152–153].

“И я не об антипатии (Есенина), которую я принимал, как принимаю до крайности неудачную, совершенно мне не нужную и чуждую по духу частность моего рождения (...)” = “ And I am not talking about (Esenin’s) antipathy (towards me), which I accepted as I accept the particularity of my birth, extremely infelicitous, totally unneeded by me, and alien to my spirit. (...)” [Пастернак 1991, 4: 786].

NOTES

¹ This article is based on the author’s preliminary communication made in 1992 on the panel “Issues of Gender in Russian Cultures” at the annual convention of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages.

² Pasternak obviously meant here the unmentionable Bal’mont.

³ “Нельзя «Гнев Афродиты», потому что (...) так может называться явно-плохая вещь” = “*The Wrath of Aphrodite* is impossible because (...) this can be the title of an obviously bad piece” [Цветаева 1988: 373].

⁴ Asceticism is defined in Pasternak’s university notebooks, in connection with his Kant studies, as “a dialectical process of continuous return to the unity of transcendental apperception. What is important here is the pure content of this process: an alienation from the nature of common sense” (“Аскетика есть диалектич<еский> процесс постоянн<ого> возвращения к единству тр<ансцендент>альной апперцепции. Здесь важно чистое содержание эт<ого> процесса — отчуждение от природы здрав<ого> смысла (...)”) [Пастернак 1996: 31; Вигилянская 2007: 143].

⁵ Hegel’s “Über: Solgers nachgelassene Schriften und Briefwechsel. Herausgegeben von Ludwig Tieck und Friedrich von Raumer, Leipzig, 1826”; first published in: *Jarbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik*, 1828. See [Гегель 1973: 461–462, 566].

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