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WHAT INTERPRETATION DID VLADISLAV KHODASEVICH GIVE TO THE LIFE OF NINA PETROVSKAYA IN EMIGRATION?

On the Poetics of *Renata's End*, a Memoir Essay

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Abstract. This article suggests a literary analysis of “Renata’s End”, a memoir essay written by V. Khodasevich (1928), one of the key examples for understanding the particular nature of Russian symbolism. It is focused on the interpretation that Khodasevich gave to Petrovskaya’s life abroad. The author of the memoir looks at the life of his character through the prism of a symbolist life-creation (*zhiznetvorcheskaya*) model based on the concept of *doppelgangers*, or doubles. Simultaneously, the author’s commentary of Petrovskaya’s life abroad is related directly to his own arduous experience as an *émigré*. In other words, in the article “Renata’s End” is examined as a text where Khodasevich reflects upon his trauma of emigration. In this perspective it is clear that Petrovskaya’s biography – in keeping with Symbolism – was perceived by Khodasevich as an alternative version of his own life. Particular attention is paid to the composition of the memoir essay and to its textological history.

Key words: Vladislav Khodasevich; *Renata’s End*; *Necropolis*; Nina Petrovskaya; emigration; the psychological trauma of emigration; poetics; Russian symbolism; *doppelgangers*.

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Как В. Ходасевич объяснял жизнь Н. Петровской в эмиграции? О поэтике мемуарного очерка «Конец Ренаты»

Аннотация. В статье анализируется один из ключевых для понимания специфики русского символизма мемуарных очерков «Конец Ренаты» (1928) В. Ходасевича. Основное внимание сосредоточено на том, как Ходасевич объяснял заграничную жизнь Петровской. Мемуарист приписывает своей героине символистскую жизнетворческую модель, основанную на идее двойничества. Вместе с тем, осмысление заграничной жизни Петровской связано с тяжелым эмигрантским опытом самого Ходасевича. Иными словами, «Конец Ренаты» рассматривается в статье как текст, в котором Ходасевич осмысляет травму эмиграции. В такой перспективе становится понятно, что Петровская – вполне в символистском духе – воспринималась Ходасевичем как альтернативный вариант собственной жизни. Особое внимание уделено композиции и текстологии мемуарного очерка.

Ключевые слова: В.Ф. Ходасевич; «Конец Ренаты»; «Некрополь»; Нина Петровская; эмиграция; травма эмиграции; поэтика; русский символизм; двойничес-



СТВО.

“Некрополь” (*Necropolis*; 1939), a collection of memoirs written by the outstanding poet, critic, and essayist Vladislav Khodasevich on emigration, has in many ways determined research approaches to the life-creating (жизнетворческие) practices of Russian symbolists (for a more detailed explanation of the term’s rendition in English, see: [Paperno 1994]). The first of these memoir essays, “Конец Ренаты” (*Renata’s End*), is rightly considered to be the most striking and example of this style. It was first published in 1928, in the newspaper “Возрождение” (*Vozrozhdenie*), April 12-14 issue, and was later published in the book with slight alterations. Using the example of Nina Petrovskaya’s biography (1879–1928), Khodasevich demonstrates Symbolism’s “endeavor to become a symbolist life-creating method” (“порывался стать жизненно-творческим методом”) [Ходасевич / Khodasevich 1996–1997, IV, 7]. Studying Petrovskaya’s life and especially her romantic relationship with Valery Bryusov, which formed “the text of life” crucial for the creation of “the text of art” – namely the novel *The Fiery Angel* – Khodasevich shows that a life that is subject to the rules of symbolist aesthetics results in tragedy. The concept behind this memoir essay has often been confirmed by scholars studying both symbolism [Mintz 2004]; [Paperno 1994], and Petrovskaya’s life [Gretchishkin, Lavrov 1990]; [Lavrov 2004]; [Bogomolov 2004]; [Mikhaylova M., Velavichyute 2014].

Unfortunately, scholarly interest in Khodasevich’s essay has often focused on an explicit description of Briusov’s life-creating experiment, or treated it as a source of information about the details of Petrovskaya’s private life. Literary scholars have as a rule not been very interested in the poetics of *Renata’s End*, however. Oleg Lekmanov is one of the few scholars who has paid some attention to the structure of the essay, discussing excerpts from it and remarking that *Renata’s End* structurally resembles Lermontov’s *Fatalist* (the chapter from the novel *A Hero of Our Time*) [Lekmanov 2014]. At the same time, the structure of the novel’s first chapter (as well as the structure of the rest of *Necropolis*) is quite remarkable and calls for a separate study. In this article I would like to take a closer look at the ending of the essay dedicated to Petrovskaya’s life as an emigrant. At first glance it seems that a few pages describing Renata’s hardships abroad fail to add any significant changes to the argument established in the main plot. They seem to have been written to illustrate the point that Petrovskaya’s life after 1906 was “a torturous and frightening epilogue, unnecessary and lacking all motion” (“мучительный, страшный, но ненужный, лишенный движения эпилог”) [Ходасевич / Khodasevich 1996–1997, IV, 18–19]. Yet this very epilogue was especially important for the memoirist: pondering on Petrovskaya’s life abroad, Khodasevich was not simply assigning one more symbolist life-creating model to his character, but also making sense of his own emigration experience on the basis of his contemporary’s biography.



The Narrative Features of Khodasevich's Essay

In terms of the essay's conceptual structure, the episode describing Petrovskaya's attempt at suicide stands out most vividly. Khodasevich brings the reader's attention to it on purpose, furnishing the narrative with some "theoretical" reflections, which de facto serve as an explanation of Renata's life in emigration:

“Двадцать два года она жила в непрестанной мысли о смерти. <...>

Что же удерживало ее? Мне кажется, я знаю причину.

Жизнь Нины была лирической импровизацией, в которой <...> она старалась создать нечто целостное – “поэму из своей личности”. Конец личности, как и конец поэмы о ней, – смерть. В сущности поэма была закончена в 1906 году, в том самом, на котором сюжетно обрывается “Огненный Ангел”. С тех пор, и в Москве, и в заграничных странствиях Нины длился мучительный, страшный, но ненужный, лишенный движения эпилог. Оборвать его Нина не боялась, но не могла. Чутье художника, творящего жизнь, как поэму, подсказывало ей, что конец должен быть связан еще с каким-то последним событием, с разрывом какой-то еще одной нити, прикреплявшей ее к жизни. Наконец, это событие совершилось.

С 1908 года, после смерти матери, на ее попечении осталась младшая сестра, Надя, существо недоразвитое умственно и физически (с нею случилось в детстве несчастье: ее обварили кипятком). Впрочем, идиоткой она не была, но отличалась какой-то предельной тихостью, безответностью. Была жалка нестерпимо и предана старшей сестре до полного самозабвения. Конечно, никакой собственной жизни у нее не было. В 1909 году, уезжая из России, Нина взяла ее с собой, и с той поры Надя делила с ней все бедствия заграничной жизни. Это было единственное и последнее существо, еще реально связанное с Ниной и связывавшее Нину с жизнью.

Всю осень 1927 года Надя хворала безропотно и неслышно, как жила. Так же тихо и умерла, 13 января 1928 года, от рака желудка. Нина ходила в покойницкую больницы, где Надя лежала. Английской булавкой колола маленький труп сестры, потом той же булавкой – себя в руку: хотела заразиться трупным ядом, умереть *единою* смертью. Рука, однако ж, сперва опухла, потом зажила. <...>

Смертью Нади была дописана последняя фраза затянувшегося эпилога. Через месяц с небольшим, собственной смертью, Нина Петровская поставила точку” [Ходасевич / Khodasevich 1996–1997, IV, 17–18].

[“She spent twenty-four years of her life with the constant thought of death. ...

What stopped her? I believe I know the reason.

Nina's life was a lyrical improvisation during the course of which ... she was trying to create something holistic: “a poem out of her personality”. The end of personality, much like the end of a poem about it, is death. Technically, the poem was finished in 1906, the very same year that the storyline of “The Fiery Angel” breaks off. From that moment on, both in Moscow and in her wanderings abroad Nina was subject to a torturous and dreadful epilogue, unnecessary and lacking all motion. She was not afraid of



putting an end to it all, but she couldn't do it. The intuition of an artist who creates life as if it were a poem was telling her that the end must be related to some other final event, to the severing of another thread connecting her to life. At last, this event took place.

After her mother's death in 1908 she was in charge of her younger sister Nadia who was immature both physically and mentally because as a child she was accidentally scalded with boiling water. She wasn't an idiot, but had a special quietude and meekness about her. Pitiful to the extreme, she was devoted to her older sister with utter selflessness. She obviously had no life of her own, so when Nina left Russia in 1909, she took her sister with her, and from that moment on Nadia shared all the calamities of Nina's life abroad with her. This person was the last and the only creature still related to Nina and binding Nina to life.

Throughout the fall of 1927 Nadia suffered from an illness, which she bore just as humbly, quietly and meekly as she lived. She died of stomach cancer on January 14, 1928, quietly, as well. Nina went to the hospital mortuary where Nadia's body was kept. She took a safety pin and pricked first her sister's miniature corpse, and then her own arm. She wanted to contract cadaveric alkaloid poisoning and share the same death with her sister. However, her arm first swelled up, and then healed. ...

Nadia's death became the last word in this prolonged epilogue. After about a month, Nina Petrovskaya put a full stop to it all with her own death"].

Much as is the case with the other episodes of *Renata's End*, this passage is characterized by the alternation of a generalized idea with events illustrating it. Khodasevich uses the episode concerning Nina's sister Nadia to demonstrate the urge to create "a poem out of one's identity", which can be perceived as another layer of the symbolist life-creating model. The memoirist doesn't conceal his subjectivity in this passage ("I believe I know the reason"), and yet he narrates the story impartially. By doing this he creates a strong link between real life events and the theory that responds to the question: why hadn't Petrovskaya committed suicide earlier?

It is noteworthy that in the version of the obituary essay that was published in a newspaper in 1928, Khodasevich assumed that his explanation may seem too far-fetched for his contemporary readers. At the same time, he did not conceal his confidence in the accuracy of this interpretation: "What held her back from doing it? I believe I know the reason. Should my explanation seem crude to some readers, it means that I haven't demonstrated the psychological circumstances of Nina Petrovskaya's life well enough from the very start" ("Что же удерживало ее? Мне кажется, я знаю причину. Если кому-нибудь мое объяснение покажется грубым, – значит, я с самого начала не сумел достаточно ясно показать те психологические условия, в которых протекла жизнь Нины Петровской") [Ходасевич / Khodasevich 1928 b]. Khodasevich's willingness to admit the possibility of the essay's failure engenders the ending with a feeling of credibility and this calls for a close reading of the quote cited above.

While narrating the circumstances of the end of Petrovskaya's life, Khodasevich introduces an inversion in the plot. In fact, while writing about Renata's tumultuous life as an emigrant a few pages before, the memoirist made no men-



tion of her sister. Nadia appears unexpectedly, and her appearance contradicts a certain statement made by the author: “Bryusov and I accompanied her to the train station. She was parting for good. ... In addition, she was feeling ill, with an attendant doctor by her side” (“Брюсов и я проводили ее на вокзал. Она уезжала навсегда. <...> Уезжала еще полубольная, с сопровождавшим ее врачом”) [Ходасевич / Khodasevich 1996–1997, IV, 16]. Later on – still making no mention of her sister – Khodasevich outlines in a few passages Petrovskaya’s tragic life in emigration, where she “would sometimes reach drastic stages of decline” (“порой доходила до очень глубоких степеней падения”) when “it seemed as if she has certainly crossed onto the other side of life” (“уже была точно по другую сторону жизни”) [Ходасевич / Khodasevich 1996–1997, IV, 16–17].

In terms of the essay’s narrative structure, the memoirist quite possibly consciously decided to introduce the figure of the younger sister at just the right moment as a key factor restraining Petrovskaya from committing suicide. This choice would serve as evidence in support of Khodasevich’s theory. At the same time, the model offered by Khodasevich contradicts his own narration of events to a certain extent. For example, while talking about Petrovskaya’s life in Paris, the memoirist mentions: “I believe it was in 1913 that she jumped out of the window here, at the hotel on Boulevard Saint-Michel. She broke her leg which never healed well, and she remained lame for the rest of her life” (“Здесь, кажется в 1913 году, однажды она выбросилась из окна гостиницы на бульвар Сен-Мишель. Сломала ногу, которая плохо срослась, и осталась хромой”) [Ходасевич / Khodasevich 1996–1997, IV, 16]. This accident is mentioned in passing, and the date mentioned is uncertain (“I believe it was in 1913”). Interestingly, a different version of Petrovskaya’s suicide attempt has been told in émigré circles: R. Gul’ mentions a story told by A.N. Toltsoy, according to which Petrovskaya allegedly “jumped under a car in Munich” [Гуль / Gul’ 2001, 257]. Discrepancies in the testimonies of various memoirists lead modern researchers to believe that the attempts at suicide are fictional, and that Petrovskaya’s limp was “a consequence of the tuberculosis of the knee which caused her to suffer all her life” [Mikhaylova, Velavichyute 2014, 31]. However, Khodasevich thought otherwise and he offered his own audacious interpretation to readers despite the facts contradicting it. This only emphasizes the interpretation’s significance and testifies to its thoroughness. What made it so important for the memoirist?

It seems that while interpreting the circumstances of Petrovskaya’s life that were known to him, Khodasevich sensed some psychological peculiarities that were pertinent to his own condition, and assigned a vivid symbolist life-creating model to Renata’s story.

‘Twin paradox’

From the memoirist’s point of view, the concept of Petrovskaya’s life in emigration is based on the idea of doubles, or doppelgangers. The phrase from



the essay's ending quoted above is supposed to explain why Renata hadn't committed suicide before, upon her separation with Bryusov. The explanation provided by Khodasevich is of quite simple: her sister alone was "the last and the only creature still related to Nina and binding Nina to life" ("единственным и последним существом, еще реально связанным с Ниной и связывающим Нину с жизнью") [Ходасевич / Khodasevich 1996–1997, IV, 18]. Thus, Nadia turns out to be her older sister's double. This explanation has an inscrutable character: even though Khodasevich does not mention the fact that nobody knew Petrovskaya's younger sister, the inversion of the plot and the omission of Nadia's presence and participation in it creates a sensation of a mysterious and profound explanation known only to the memoirist. Indeed, at first the reader perceives Petrovskaya's life in emigration as continuous agony, but in the light of the last few lines it obtains a particularly novel and enigmatic meaning.

The theme of doubling appears explicitly during the description of Nadia's death, when Petrovskaya "took a safety pin and first pricked her sister's miniature corpse, and then her own arm. She wanted to ... share the same death with her sister" ("колола маленький труп сестры, а потом той же булавкой – себя в руку: <...> хотела умереть *единою* смертью"). This very same theme may well be interpreted as applying to Petrovskaya's life abroad more generally, especially considering Khodasevich's explanation of Petrovskaya's restraint from committing suicide during the 22 years of her life, beginning from 1906.

Portrayed by Khodasevich with a certain detachment and significant reserve, this semi-mystical bond between Renata and her sister reminds us of the Symbolist treatment of doubles (see [Mintz 2004 b]). It is likely not pure coincidence that immediately after narrating these events, Khodasevich alludes to Symbolism: "In those days Nina would visit me. ... She would talk to me in the bizarre language of the 1890s that had once been common to us and that we used to share ..." ("Нина бывала у меня в это время. <...> Говорила со мной на том странном языке девяностых годов, который когда-то нас связывал, был у нас общим <...>") [Ходасевич / Khodasevich 1996–1997, IV, 18].

As a result, according to the memoirist, Petrovskaya saw Nadia as her secret and physically flawed double, and the older sister's life depended solely on the life of the younger sister. Thus, Khodasevich attributed one more symbolist life-creating model to Petrovskaya's life, one based on the concept of doubling.

Plots revealing the figure of a double are very significant for the conceptual ensemble of *Necropolis*. They play an important role in the description of Petrovskaya, as well as in the reflections about the lives of other symbolists. In his essay *Andrey Belij*, Khodasevich remembers a strange coincidence: a "woman from the streets" (i.e. a prostitute) and Petrovskaya, having never met, utter nearly identical phrases in the course of two days: "Everyone calls me *poor Nina*. That is how you should call me, too" / "I should be addressed as *poor Nina*" ("Меня все зовут *бедная Нина*. Так зовите и вы" / «Меня надо звать *бедная Нина*»). This is important, as Khodasevich writes, "In those days such coincidence meant a great deal to us" ("В те времена такие совпадения для нас много значили") [Ходасевич / Khodasevich 1996–1997, IV, 50–51].



The first publication of *Renata's End* included an important episode, which possibly supplied an explanation on the level of association. Khodasevich faultily recalls Petrovskaya's attempt on Bryusov's life (the essay mentions an attempt on Andrey Belij's life, and the original version of it features an attempted murder of "Count Heinrich", a character from *The Fiery Angel* for whom Belij served as a prototype). The memoirist adds: "Eight years later Bryusov offered the same revolver to Nadezhda L'vova. She used it to commit suicide in November of 1913" ("А через восемь лет Брюсов подарил тот же револьвер Надежде Львово́й. Из него же она и застрелилась в ноябре 1913 г.") [Ходасевич / Khodasevich 1928 a]. According to Khodasevich, one situation seems to echo the other, although with substantial variations.

The essay entitled *Muni* ("Муни") contains an episode that is no less remarkable in which the author does not only reflect upon the plotline containing a double, but reveals it as characteristic to symbolism:

"В горячем, предгрозовом воздухе тех лет было трудно дышать, нам все представлялось двусмысленным и двусзначим <...> Явления становились видениями. Каждое событие, сверх своего явного смысла, еще обретало второй, который надобно было расшифровать. <...>

Таким образом, жили мы в двух мирах. Но, не умея раскрыть законы, но которм совершаются события во втором, представлявшемся нам более реальным, нежели просто реальный, – мы только томились в темных и смутных предчувствиях. <...> "Символический быт", который мы создали, т. е. символизм, ставший для нас не только методом, но и просто (хоть это вовсе не просто!) образом жизни, – играл с нами неприятные шутки. Вот некоторые из них, ради образчика.

Мы с Муни сидели в ресторане "Прага", зал которого разделялся широкой аркой. По бокам арки висели занавеси. У одной из них, спиной к нам, держась правой рукой за притолоку, а левую заложив за пояс, стоял половой в своей белой рубаше и в белых штанах. Немного спустя из-за арки появился другой, такого же роста, и стал лицом к нам и к первому половому, случайно в точности повторив его позу, но в обратном порядке: левой рукой держась за притолоку, а правую заложив за пояс и т. д. Казалось, это стоит один человек — перед зеркалом. Муни сказал, усмехнувшись: – А вот и отражение пришло.

Мы стали следить. Стоящий спиной к нам опустил правую руку. В тот же миг другой опустил свою левую. Первый сделал еще какое-то движение - второй опять с точностью отразил его. Потом еще и еще. Это становилось жутко. Муни смотрел, молчал и постукивал ногой. Внезапно второй стремительно повернулся и исчез за выступами арки. Должно быть, его позвали. Муни вскочил, поблбднв как мел. Потом успокоился и сказал: – Если бы ушел наш, а отражение осталось, я бы не вынес. Пощупай, что с сердцем делается" [Ходасевич / Khodasevich 1996–1997, IV, 69–70].

[“Everyone found it difficult to breathe in the hot electrified air of those years, like just before a thunderstorm. Everything seemed ambiguous and dubious to us ... Events would become visions. In addition to their initial obvious meanings, everything that



happened would acquire a second signification, which had to be deciphered. ...

As a result, we dwelled in two worlds. And yet, we didn't know how to find the clues to the laws conditioning the events happening in the second world, which seemed more real to us than the one that was, in fact, real and authentic. We could only brood and languish in the somber and nebulous state of foreboding. ... "The symbolist routine" that we had created proved to be not just a method, but simply (would that it were so simple!) a way of life, and was playing cruel jokes on us. Here are some of them.

Muni and I were sitting in the Prague Restaurant. A broad archway divided its main hall. Curtains were hung on both sides of the archway. A waiter dressed in a white shirt and white trousers was standing next to one of the curtains, with his right hand on the lintel and his left hand behind his back. A short while later another waiter of the same height appeared from behind the archway. Having stopped facing us in the same manner as the first waiter, he happened to copy latter's posture, only in reverse: he put his left hand on the lintel and his right hand behind his back. It looked like the same person was standing in front of a mirror. Muni said with a sarcastic smile: "Here comes the reflection".

We began watching them. The waiter who stood with his back to us put his right arm down. Immediately, the other one put down his left arm. The first waiter made another movement – once again the second one repeated it with precision. This happened again and again. It was beginning to feel eerie. Muni watched them in silence, tapping his foot. All of a sudden, the second waiter turned in haste and disappeared behind the ledge of the arch. His name must have been called. Muni jumped to his feet, pale as chalk. Then he calmed down and said, "Had our waiter gone, and the reflection stayed, I wouldn't have survived that. Here, feel the way my heart is beating"].

The above episode makes an allusion to the theme of the mirror and the notion of reflection that is essential for symbolist literature [Mintz 2004 c]. An analogous example from literature would be, for example, Bryusov's "В зеркале" (*In the Mirror*; 1902, 1906) [Брюсов / Bryusov 1983, 51–60]. In addition to that, the implicit plotline of *Muni* revolved around the portrayal of the memoirist and the essay's protagonist as doubles (see [Andreeva 1999]).

When the author of *Necropolis* assigns a symbolist life-creating model based on the notion of doubling to Petrovskaya, not only does he associate her with the Symbolism movement of the 1890s, but he also demonstrates her anachronistic and obsolete nature.

There is another remarkable moment in the interpretation proposed by Khodasevich, and it requires elaboration. We must explain why the memoirist decided to give such a symbolist explanation to Petrovskaya's life while taking into account all the facts of her biography known to him. Besides, as we have mentioned earlier, the memoirist's interpretation does not entirely align with the facts: despite Nadia's presence binding Nina to life, the older sister still made an attempt to commit suicide.



Trauma of Emigration

It seems that the answer lies in the interesting correlation between Khodasevich's émigré mindset and the circumstances of Petrovskaya's life. The notion of doppelgangers in "Renata's End" is complicated by the fact that the story's doubles are not entirely tantamount to each other or interchangeable. Though mentally exhausted, Nina nonetheless appears to be a fully functional person, while Nadia seems to be a disabled person, "immature both mentally and physically". At the same time, we cannot neglect the fact that both sisters share certain physical weaknesses. When Khodasevich mentions Petrovskaya's attempt at suicide, he brings attention to Nina's limp, as if this physical defect brought the older sister closer to the disability of the younger one.

Viewed in the context of an artistic domain, the tragic circumstances of Petrovskaya's life obtain a literary dimension. The mental and physical inferiority of one of the sisters complicates the plotline of their doubling. This theme could remind the reader of Hoffman's "Крошка Цахес" (*Little Zakhes*) [Гофман / Hoffmann 1996], with the caveat that Little Zakhes becomes an object of everyone's admiration while remaining a monster. Khodasevich uses a similar construction in the plotline featuring doubles. Not only does the younger sister turn out to be her older sister's double, but, to some extent, her genuine essence, as well as a representation of her anguished and imperfect soul.

By choosing this technique of interpreting Petrovskaya's biography, Khodasevich was analyzing his own traumatic experience of emigration (see [Uspenskij 2015; Uspenskij 2018]). Indeed, for Khodasevich emigration turned out to be a protracted traumatizing condition, during which he was unable to find a new expatriate identity. Constantly lacking a basic feeling of personal integrity, Khodasevich was suffering from a feeling of flawed self-identity. This is manifested in the usage of traumatic imagery and metaphors for describing his condition. I suggest looking at two examples, 14 years apart, from private correspondence.

In a letter to Mikhail Gershenzon dated November of 1922, Khodasevich seems to be searching for a correct metaphor to describe his condition in emigration. A series of traumatic images strikes the reader:

"Мы все здесь как-то несвойственно нам, неправильно, не по-нашему дышим – и от этого не умрем, конечно, но – что-то в себе испортим, наживем расширение легких. Растение в темноте вырастает не зеленым, а белым: то есть все в нем как следует, а – урод. Я здесь не равен себе, а я здесь я минус что-то, оставленное в России, при том болящее и зудящее, как отрезанная нога, которую чувствую нестерпимо отчетливо, а возместить не могу ничем. <...> Я купил себе очень хорошую пробковую ногу, как у Вашего Кривцова, танцую на ней (т.е. пишу стихи), так что как будто и незаметно, – а знаю, что на своей я бы танцевал иначе, может быть, даже хуже, но по-своему, как мне полагается при моем сложении, а не при пробковом. И это так иногда смущает, что бросаешь танец, удачно начатый. Бог даст – пройдет все это, но пока что – жутко" [Ходасевич / Khodasevich 1996–1997,



IV, 454].

[“Here we all breathe in a strange, abnormal and improper way – certainly, it shall not be the cause of our death, and yet – it feels as if we are going to ruin something inside ourselves, or grow bigger lungs. A plant doesn’t grow green in the dark, but white: technically, everything is intact, yet it is hideous and defected. Here I am not equal to myself, but it is as if I were me minus that which is left in Russia. In addition to that, I am aching and itching like an amputated leg, every cell of which I can feel perfectly well, yet which I cannot replace with anything else. ... I got myself a very nice cork leg like the one your Krivtsov has; I use it to dance (i.e. to write poetry) as if it were my real one – I know I would have probably danced worse on my own leg, but at least it would have been my personal manner of dancing, the way I am supposed to dance with my complexion, not with one distinctive of a cork. Sometimes it unsettles me to such an extent that I stop my dance, even if it had a promising start. God knows if this too shall pass, but as for now, it is simply dreadful”.]

In October 1936, 14 years later, Khodasevich wrote a letter to his fellow schoolmate, Arkady Tumarkin, as if psychologically summing up his experience in emigration:

“Но поверь, будь добр, что я окончательно и бесповоротно выбит из колеи, потому что вдребезги переутомлен умственно и нервно. Прямо говорю: твое общество я бы предпочел всякому другому, если бы вообще был еще способен к общению. Но я могу делать два дела: писать, чтобы не околесть с голоду, и играть в бридж, чтобы не оставаться ни с своими, ни с чужими мыслями. <...> Молодых поэтов, ходивших ко мне по воскресеньям, тоже “закрыл”. Я – вроде контуженного. Просидеть на месте больше часу для меня истинная пытка. Я, понимаешь, стал неразговороспособен. Вот если бы я мог прекратить ужасающую профессию эмигрантского писателя, я бы опять стал человеком. Но я ничего не умею делать. <...> Беда в том, что я куда-то лечу вверх тормашками” [Бергер / Berger 2004, 318–319].

[“Trust me, I am completely and ultimately thrown off track and unsettled because I am overwrought to smithereens, both mentally and physically. To tell the truth, I would prefer your company to any other, if only I were still capable of communicating. There are only two things I can still do: write, in order not to starve to death, and play bridge, which spares me from remaining alone with reflections, my own or someone else’s. ... I have “closed the doors” to the young poets who used to visit me on Sundays, too. It is as if I was shell-shocked. It has become a true ordeal for me to spend more than an hour sitting in one spot. You see, I have turned into a person incapable of conversation. If only I could put an end to the horrifying vocation of an émigré writer, I would become an adequate person once again. But apart from writing I have no skills. ... The trouble is that I am already plummeting somewhere upside down”.]

Separated by 14 years, these two letters are characterized by a constant



sense of a flawed identity that is typical for Khodasevich in emigration. In both letters the poet is petrified by his own internal state. For example, he states, “As for now, it is simply dreadful” and mentions “the horrifying vocation” of writing. Khodasevich seems to feel the acute menace of illness and diagnoses himself accordingly. Most importantly, the condition of being in emigration is expressed by metaphors suggesting his own physical inferiority: an amputated leg and a comparison with a shell-shock victim. These conditions bring forth a feeling of being destabilized (“I am plummeting upside down”) as well as an excruciating pain – he experiences an “aching and itching like an amputated leg” and describes his life as “a true ordeal”. Khodasevich’s mental representation of his body reflects the way his personality self-identifies itself. At the same time, literary work is also incorporated into the traumatic experience of emigration: “I got myself a very nice cork leg ... I use it to dance (i.e. to write poetry)”. He continues, “If only I could put an end to the horrifying vocation of being an émigré writer, I become an adequate person once again”.

The letter to Gershenzon is crucial for understanding the poetics of the poet’s last collection *European Night* (“Европейская ночь”), which includes the poems dated from 1922 to 1927. It suffices to recall the image of a one-armed man from the second *Ballad* (“Баллада”), John Bottom from a poem of the same title, a chopped off head in *Berlinskoe* (“Берлинское”) in order to see the pattern: in his poems from the period of emigration, Khodasevich often describes imaginary amputations on his characters and himself, which most likely serve as characterizations of the trauma of emigration. Apart from the disabled characters, there are many monstrous figures in *European Night*. They are appalling and repulsive people who provoke the author’s antagonism. This could be read as the poet’s attempt at renouncing the experience of emigration. Finally, it seems that the same traumatic experience of emigration caused a state of poetic numbness in Khodasevich, since he characterizes composing poetry as a much too painful and disturbing process for him. I refer the reader to the memoirs of Vladimir Veidle: “How miserable was he then! Especially during the last ten years of his life, when he almost couldn’t compose any more poetry. It was both a pain and a joy to write; but not to write at all was all pain, pain, and pain again” (“Но как он был несчастен! Особенно в последние десять лет жизни, когда почти не писал больше стихов. Писать их была боль и радость; не писать – боль, боль и еще боль”) [Бергер / Berger 2004, 387]. (A propos of the poems reunited in the *European Night* in the light of the traumatic experience of emigration: [Uspenskij 2015]).

Thus, Khodasevich as an émigré writer reveals a certain psychological configuration of consciousness in which his most genuine and acute sense of self is represented by the image of a disabled person. At the same time, (and despite the poet’s multiple illnesses), his physical appearance in reality did not correspond to the cripple he identified with.

It seems fitting to relate these observations to *Renata’s End*. In the circumstances of Petrovskaya’s life in emigration, Khodasevich, be it consciously or subconsciously, saw the same psychological pattern that was torturing him.



The symbolist life-creating model described earlier that Khodasevich assigned to Petrovskaya was, in fact, the exterior projection of his own trauma that he assigned to different people. Thus, Nadia became the analogue of his “inner disabled self”, while Nina was the equivalent of his “exterior self”. In this context Renata’s limp, which was presented as a consequence of an unsuccessful attempt at suicide, is crucial as a defect acquired specifically in emigration. In the poet’s perception physical imperfections were often tokens of the émigré consciousness. This probably explains why the memoirist mentions his own unsuccessful attempt at suicide, even if it contradicts his symbolist life-creating model at first glance.

[An even more representative and symbolic example of an exterior projection appears in one of the poet’s ideas for a story from the 1930s as remembered by Vasili Yanovsky:

“Успокоенный и подобревший Ходасевич вдруг начал мне пересказывать содержание давно задуманной им повести; рассказ этот исходил из каких-то интимных глубин поэта и, насколько мне известно, не был написан. <...> Насколько помню, речь шла о знакомом нам всем типе интеллигента, горожанина, который внезапно порывает с прежней жизнью и селится в курной избе, где-то в глухих лесах. Когда, несколько лет спустя, друзья его навестили, то нашли на поляне заросшего волосом анахорета, а у ног его покорно лежал огромный серый медведь. Что-то в этом духе – во всяком случае, для Ходасевича совсем неожиданное” [Яновский / Yanovsky 2012, 184].

[“Khodasevich, who became pacified and more amicable, began telling me about the synopsis of a story he had thought of a long time ago; it originated from the poet’s most intimate mysteries, and, to my knowledge, wasn’t written. ... If memory doesn’t fail me, the story revolved around a sort intellectual familiar to all of us, an urbanite who decides to give up his former life and settle down in a small hut far away in a remote forest. When his friends paid him a visit a few years later, they found an ill-kept hermit and a giant grey bear lying meekly at his feet. It went something like that, but, in any case, it was an unexpected story to come from Khodasevich”.]

If we look upon the characters of this unwritten story as projections of the poet’s sense of “self”, we might discern an attempt to overcome the traumatic dissociation of the author’s personality. The protagonist, an urban intellectual, undergoing difficulties with his current life, is a reflection of a part of Khodasevich’s personality that strives to reunite with the remaining, repressed part of the self — the natural and the genuine side that is, nonetheless, destructive and dangerous at the same time. Remarkably, such a reunion is only possible in the context of social isolation, i.e. by quitting the social framework of an émigré’s existence, whereupon the human being risks becoming a complete savage. Even though the story of the friends finding a hermit in a meadow with a tame bear by his feet may remind the reader of medieval hagiography, the literary subtext of this plotline accentuates its tragic undertone.



The protagonist of Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin's classic fable *The Wild Landowner* ("Дикий помещик"; 1869) is a landlord who, once abandoned by his peasants, is driven into a state of utter savagery:

"Весь он, с головы до ног, оброс волосами, словно древний Исав, а ногти у него сделались, как железные. Сморгаться уж он давно перестал, ходил же все больше на четвереньках и даже удивлялся, как он прежде не замечал, что такой способ прогулки есть самый приличный и самый удобный. Утратил даже способность произносить членораздельные звуки и усвоил себе какой-то особенный победный клик, среднее между свистом, шипеньем и рывканьем".

[“He became overgrown with hair from head to toe, as if he were the old Esau, and his nails looked as if they were made of iron. He had stopped blowing his nose a long time ago, and took to crawling on all fours, marveling at not having noticed before that this was the most proper and convenient way of walking. He even lost his ability to pronounce distinct sounds, and adopted a particular cry – something between a whistle, a hiss, and a bark”.]

Having undergone these changes, the landowner successfully chases hares and becomes “so strong that it seems natural to him to develop friendly terms with the very same bear that has once been looking at him through the window” («до того силен, что даже счел себя вправе войти в дружеские сношения с тем самым медведем, который некогда посматривал на него в окошко») [Салтыков-Щедрин / Saltykov-Shchedrin 1974, 28–29].

The tone of the story told by Khodasevich according to Yanovsky's rendition can be interpreted in several distinct ways. From one point of view, the story can be seen as therapeutic because it joined the two separated parts of the “self” symbolically. However, due to the literary subtext, the therapeutic function turns out to have a reverse side, namely, the risk of turning into a savage and the loss of human appearance. One way or another, Yanovsky's observation about the idea having “originated from the poet's most intimate mysteries” appears to be very poignant, and it makes sense to relate the unwritten story to the condition undergone in emigration.]

Thus, his personal trauma served Khodasevich as an explanatory model for the circumstances of Nina Petrovskaya's life abroad as it was known to him. It remains to be conjectured why the memoirist paid such close attention to his character's personality. Slightly generalizing, we could say that in Petrovskaya's life Khodasevich saw an alternative of his own biography.

Nina Petrovskaya as Khodasevich's Doppelganger

Indeed, in the first stages of his creative biography, Khodasevich himself had initiated a symbolist life-creating experiment that corresponded to the practice of the Russian symbolists in general, particularly Bryusov and Petrovskaya (see [Uspenskij 2014: 15-46]). It was this very experiment of simultaneously



creating “the text of life” and “the text of art” in 1905–1907 that allowed Khodasevich to describe the practices of the Russian symbolists in such detail and with such insight. Later analysis of the symbolist movement brought Khodasevich to regard Petrovskaya’s life as an alternative to his own experiences in emigration and as a very unsuccessful case of immersion into symbolist practices, which led her to a tragic denouement.

The other aspect of an alternative life scheme is related to committing suicide in emigration. According to the memoirs of Nina Berberova, upon realizing that he was never going to return to Russia and that he had to remain in Paris for the rest of his life, Khodasevich often thought about committing suicide:

“Я не могу оставить Ходасевича больше чем на час: он может выброститься в окно, может открыть газ. <...> я не могу бросить его одного в квартире”; “Я видела, как он в эти минуты строит свой собственный “личный” или “частный” ад вокруг себя <...> Ходасевич говорит, что не может жить без того, чтобы не писать, что писать может он только в России, что он не может быть без России, что не может ни жить, ни писать в России, — и умоляет меня умереть вместе с ним” [Берберова / Berberova 1996, 263, 258].

[“I can’t leave Khodasevich alone for more than an hour. He might jump out of the window, or turn on the gas. ... I can’t abandon him alone in the apartment”. Berberova continues, “At such moments I saw him constructing his personal or private hell around himself... Khodasevich tells me he can’t live without writing and that he is only capable of writing in Russia, that he can’t survive without Russia, but that he can neither live nor write in Russian and he begs me to die with him”].

In general, Berberova associated Khodasevich’s life in emigration with suicide (see also an interpretation of Berberova’s dream: [Uspenskij, Shelia 2014]).

In connection with what has been said, it is important to remember a phrase from *The Life of Vasily Travnikov* (“Жизнь Василия Травникова”; 1936) – which is in many aspects an autobiographic oeuvre – in which Khodasevich reflected on his experience in emigration: “Yet to approach the end artificially would still be abominable to his entire spiritual and poetic philosophy, since it was based on the notion that ... a human being should bear everything to the very end out of pure pride” (“Но приблизить конец искусственно было бы все же противно всей его жизненной и поэтической философии, основанной на том, что <...> человек из единой гордости должен вынести все до конца”) [Ходасевич / Khodasevich 1996–1997, III, 114–115]. Evidently, for all his aversion to the notion of suicide, the thought of it was an object of serious reflection for Travnikov, as it probably was for Khodasevich.

[Nevertheless, judging from the same *Necropolis* (the essay entitled *Muni*, 1926), we know that Khodasevich had thought of suicide before emigration as well: “Once in the fall of 1911, while going through a gloomy stage of my life, I decided to pay a visit to my brother. There was no one at home. ... The first thing that caught my eye was a revolver. The temptation was strong. Standing at the same table where I saw it, I called Muni: ‘Come at once. I shall wait for



you for about twenty minutes, but I won't be able to stand a second more'" ("Однажды, осенью 1911 года, в дурную полосу жизни, я зашел к своему брату. Дома никого не было. ... первое, что мне попало на глаза, был револьвер. Искушение было велико. Я, не отходя от стола, позвонил к Муни по телефону: 'Приезжай сейчас же. Буду ждать двадцать минут, больше не смогу'") [Ходасевич / Khodasevich 1996–1997, IV, 78–79]. This episode precedes the description of Muni's own suicide, whose death haunted Khodasevich, since he blamed himself for the death of his friend and his "double" ([Uspenskij 2014, 182–183]; In addition, see the poem *The Lady was Washing Her Hands for a Long While* ("Лэди долго руки мыла..."); It is crucial to add that the aspect of suicide evokes a resemblance between the essay about Muni and the essay about Petrovskaya, and the latter could be inspired by similar psychological reasons).]

* * *

Returning to Petraskaya and Khodasevich's relation to her, the finale of Petrovskaya's life was her suicide "in Paris, in a wretched, squalid hotel in an impoverished neighborhood" ("в Париже, в нищенском отеле нищенского квартала") in the early hours of February 23, 1928 [Ходасевич / Khodasevich 1996–1997, IV, 7]. It probably appealed to the poet as a tempting alternative to his own life in emigration. Perhaps Khodasevich even wrote his memoirs about Petrovskaya in an attempt to resist the temptation of a similar fate.

Altogether, in his memoir essay entitled "Renata's End" Khodasevich not only described and recreated and the symbolist mindset and its practices of life-creating with his considerable insight, but also projected his own traumatic experience of life in emigration onto the expatriate destiny of Nina Petrovskaya.

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