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OF JOURNEYS AND MASKS

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO, SARYAN AND WORLD LITERATURE UNDER QUARANTINE

Abstract. In the following text, I want to look at the nexus of word and visuality that is so central to Ognyan Kovachev's work (and to how important themes and stock images of world literature travel in time), and to do so with our recent pandemic crisis in mind. I take my cue from the importance, until recently also ubiquity, of the mask in order to examine the co-existence of word and image from a different perspective, moving also in a different geographical direction, from Europe to the Caucasus, where the consolidation of Armenian literature as a national literature takes place in the first two decades of the last century.

Keywords: world literature, mask, Surrealism; Giorgio de Chirico; Yeghishe Charents, Martiros Saryan

Commencing with Thucydides, European literature abounds in narratives about crises focused on the plague. Thucydides, of course, should also be credited with a narrative that places a crisis within another crisis: the depiction of the plague of Athens during the second year of the Peloponnesian War; narratologists would probably refer to this as "framed crisis". Further examples readily spring to mind: Boccaccio, Defoe, and of course Camus. Some of the contemporary dimensions of the crisis Covid plunged us all into can be made sense of, and consolation sought in, in other works of world literature. Think of Sophocles' "Antigone" and the denial of intimate communication with the deceased, indeed the denial of dignified burial rights. Peter Sloterdijk has recently thematised this denial, without reference to Sophocles, but with clear reference to what was taking place in Europe in 2020.

In the following text, I want to look with fresh eyes at the nexus of word and visuality that is so central to Ognyan Kovachev's own work, and to how important questions, themes, and stock images of world literature travel in time; and to do that with our recent pandemic crisis in mind. My text is divided into two parts: "Journeys" and "Masks".

Journeys

As I was following last year David Damrosch's riveting blog and lectures titled "Around the World in 80 Books" (now also a book¹), I kept thinking of a painting by de Chirico which he created late in his life, in a phase some art historians refer to as "neo-metaphysical". This painting, "The Return of Odysseus" (1968), represents a young-looking Odysseus in a boat, rowing in a puddle in the middle of the room; it could no doubt be just as much a painting about reading in the midst of Covid – because it is about exploration chained and framed by interiority, a return to the self, a forced return in our case last year. The pandemic has occasioned a revisiting of our basic premises of life, a rediscovery of interiority as a space of movement beyond our physical confines, but also a sense of timeless motion, a Nietzschean return of the ever-same, much as in de Chirico's painting in which Odysseus is depicted as an un-bearded adolescent, as if he had not travelled for years returning to Ithaca as a mature man; in 1922, de Chirico had drawn him with a beard, but now, and also in a later version of 1973, without. (De Chirico was an avid reader of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, and he shared with Nietzsche a fascination for Turin and its architecture.)

But where is literature in all this? One could instantly add that de Chirico painted the portraits of at least two household names in our anthologies of world literature: Apollinaire and Clarise Lispector (the latter is an uncharacteristically realist painting in de Chirico's *oeuvre*). Much more important and germane, the image of rowing across the world in a puddle in one's one room, still tossed to its four corners by gales and storms, first occurs in a novel de Chirico finished in October 1929 and titled "Hebdomeros". He wrote it in French, not in Italian, and it is usually considered one of the few surrealist novels (on Surrealism as world literature, many of us here would be familiar with Delia Ungureanu's seminal book²). In fact, the novel is a strange amalgamation of Symbolism, post-Romanticism, and neo-Baroque with a strong metaphysical twist. De Chirico's novel is plotless other than to take the reader through Hebdomeros's journeys – often in a dream-like condition, without ever leaving his room, from China to Africa, and through the realm of Greek mythology. The tone is sometimes mock-heroic, just as in the painting of 1968: "He went all around his room in a boat continually forced into a corner by the undercurrent and, at last, abandoning his frail craft and gathering all his strength and skill as a former gymnast, he hoisted himself up to the window which was placed very high."³ In 1968, de Chirico combined the themes of return and of Hebdomeros's restless dream-like

¹ DAMROSCH, D. *Around the World in 80 Books*. London: Pelican, 2021.

² UNGUREANU, D. *From Paris to Tlön: Surrealism as World Literature*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2018.

³ The quote is from: DE CHIRICO, G. *Hebdomeros: With Monsieur Dudron's Adventure and Other Metaphysical Writings*. Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1992, p. 37.

quest in a painting titled “The Return of Hebdomeros”. De Chirico’s novel clips the wings of the great old Bildungsroman in favour of representing a journey that accentuates interiority – but without individuation. Hebdomeros remains but a symbol, or one may also say, a mask throughout the novel.

Masks

Masks have been central to the wave of literary mystifications that had swept Europe in the last decades of the XVIIIth century, and also to fin-de siècle literature, especially Symbolism. They were also very much part and parcel of avant-garde art at the time, in Expressionism (Emil Nolde, for example), and in de Chirico’s own metaphysical painting. And they have become an almost permanent feature of our daily lives. Some of the masks we see on the London underground reintroduce in a commercially savvy way examples of Art Deco, van Gogh, Warhol, Edvard Munch – not by chance modelled on “The Scream”, and so many other artists. The wearers of such masks cry out: we don’t want to be totally anonymous, we want to regain some measure of individual choice and taste beyond the efficiency and blandness of the surgical face-covering.

I take my cue from this importance, until recently also ubiquity, of the mask in order to look at the nexus of word and image in world literature from a different perspective, and also move in a different geographical direction: from Europe to the Caucasus, and the consolidation of Armenian literature as a national literature in the first two decades of the last century. Martiros Saryan (1880–1972) is firmly established as a pillar of the modernist and avant-garde art canon in the Caucasus. Masks were central to his work, and his interest in them was triggered by his participation in an archaeological expedition to Egypt (1910–1913), from where he brought home a small collection of Egyptian masks that he later donated to the National Gallery in Yerevan. When asked about the meaning of the mask in his art, he would reply that it symbolises eternity, a very different view from our current emphasis on expedience. Here are a few of his paintings with masks: a tension between the ephemeral and eternal in an early still-life (“Still-Life with Masks”, 1915), still very much reminiscent of Matisse; a tension between the public persona and its political compromises, on the one hand, and the notion of a self, untouched by the confluence of outward circumstances, an essence deposited in a mask, in a way that is both paradoxical and revelatory, as in Saryan’s self-portrait of 1933 (“Portrait of the Painter with a Mask”). And finally, and even more to the point, the writer through the screen of eternity (“Portrait of Charents”, 1923). The writer in question, Yeghishe Charents, is a hugely significant name in modern Armenian literature and a close friend of Saryan’s (Charents was translated by Aragon, amongst others; Aragon translated him from the Russian, not from the Armenian original, and no doubt

with Elsa Triolet's crucial help).⁴ What matters here is that not long ago, in June 1922, Charents, together with two other Armenian poets (Gevorg Abov and Azat Vshtuni), had published "The Declaration of the Three", a daring manifesto in the Futurist vein. In fact, it was the first avant-garde manifesto in Armenia, and as such it sparked a polemic that spilled over into 1923, the year when Saryan would paint Charents' portrait.⁵ The declaration was urging Armenian literature to leave behind the "tuberculosis" of "romanticism, pessimism, and symbolism".⁶ The brief text opposed "bourgeois nationalism", promoting instead "proletarian internationalism" (p. 56); it was a clear signal of poetic allegiance to Moscow (Mayakovsky was revered by Charents), implicitly calling for Yerevan to replace Constantinople and Tiflis (with which the older generation of poets had been associated) as the new centre of Armenian literature.⁷ Thus, the "Declaration of the Three" was re-creating a young national literature while seeking to position it internationally vis-à-vis Futurism and the wider Left avant-garde. This was a gesture that was redrawing not just the spatial but also the symbolic boundaries of writing in the Armenian language, extricating it from Empire (the Ottoman, then the Russian), and both 'privatising' it as a national endeavour but also de-territorialising it by screening it against an established international poetics and the global realm of proletarian culture. World literature is also this historically contradictory movement towards the fragmentation of a shared, often multilingual legacy, and, in the same breath, its re-internationalisation; and Charents played a prominent role in that move. Would this young national literature measure up to eternity, which floods in through the Egyptian mask montaged alongside Charents' image in Saryan's portrait of the poet? Will this new literature be of enduring value, and to whom? These may have been some of the questions on Saryan's mind as he approached the task of capturing Charents' spirit of revolt against the musty canon of fin-du-siècle Armenian poetry.

⁴ In Bulgarian, there is a book-length selection of Charents' poetry, also a translation from the Russian, by Andrei Germanov (CHARENTS, E. *Izbrani stihotvoreniya i poemi* [Избрани стихотворения и поеми], trans. A. Germanov, Sofia: Narodna kultura, 1971).

⁵ For a bibliography of texts attacking the declaration and Charents, see: AGABABIAN, S. *Egishe Charents. Ocherk tvorchestva*, trans. M. Malkhazova, Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1982, p. 140 n. 2. The attacks came both from the dogmatic Left and from the defenders of Symbolist and neo-Romantic aesthetics.

⁶ The quote is from the English translation: "Declaration of the Three". In: CHARENTS, E. *Selected Prose*, trans. Jack Antreassian and Marzbed Margossian, New York: Ashod Press, 1985, pp. 55–56, here p. 55. Further references to this text are in the main text, with page numbers indicated in brackets.

⁷ According to Abov's memoirs, the declaration was penned – indicatively and ironically – in Vshtuni's home in Tbilisi (see Marzbed Margossian's notes in: CHARENTS, E. *Selected Prose*, p. 57, n. 1).

Allow me to conclude by saying how grateful I am to my fellow-panellists and to the organisers of this conference for the chance to think together about literature and the visual arts in a way that honours Ognyan Kovachev's seminal work.

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