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Conversion to Dionysianism: Tadeusz Zieliński and Heptachor

In the spring of 1910, a group of young people travelled from Petersburg to Odessa by train, and from there to Piraeus by boat. Tadeusz Zieliński led students of Saint Petersburg University and of the Bestuzhev Higher Women's Courses, where he was professor, and of the Raev Higher Women's Courses, where his colleagues, Innokentii Annenskii and Viacheslav Ivanov taught. Vsevolod Meyerhold joined the excursion to prepare for the staging of Greek tragedies; later he remembered how beautifully the students sang folk songs on the boat (Kats, 2007: 142). Sitting in the bow, Zieliński

was surrounded by women students. They took off their scarves and decorated the ropes. Wind played with little coloured flags above the teacher's head. And he narrated to them how the Athenians returned from Tauris or Colchis to their natives shores and how they peered into the distance, to see the golden spear of Pallas Athena, who crowned the Acropolis, sparkle in the sun. (Antsiferov, 1992: 157)¹

The professor led his pupils to their native home rather than to distant ruins. Each European, he believed, has at least “two motherlands: one is the country by which name we call ourselves, the other – Antiquity” (Guseinov, 1993: 3).

On the very eve of the twentieth century, Zieliński announced the coming third Renaissance, after the first Italian Renaissance and the second Romantic one (Zelinskii, 1899: 140). An appeal to the spiritual motherland, Ancient Greece, had twice rescued the Europeans from barbarism and religious fanaticism. Zieliński hoped it would rescue them once again from contemporary “rebarbarization”. For him, Antiquity was “an array of healthy themes which, up to the present, have repeated themselves in innumerable variations and which will last until the world stands” (Zelinskii,

1 All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated (Irina Sirotkina).

1899/1995: 2–3). Zieliński devoted his entire life to returning to the youth of humanity, the time when its energy was bubbling.

His appeal to Ancient Greece became a source of almost religious conversion. By conversion to faith, we usually mean something more than a change of intellectual preferences – we expect religious feelings and beliefs, a system of moral rules and commandments, and, not the least, certain practices and rituals. The gods of the Greeks, their moral laws and rites – in particular, the “synthetic” art of chorea (in Russian, *pliaska*) – all this appeared to Zieliński wise, beautiful and worthy of imitation. Not only did he think “Ancient Greek religion” the most humane, joyful and peaceful in the world – he also attempted to live by it and urged others to do the same. Zieliński was not alone: other adepts of “Greek religion” around the world created communes where they could live in accordance with their ideas of a good and joyful life, in friendship and morality free from the repressive Christian notion of sin. Viacheslav Ivanov’s “Tower” in Petersburg and Raymond Duncan’s studio in Paris were but two examples. Young women who, in 1918, formed a dance studio, “Heptachor”, provide another example. They chose as their teachers Tadeusz Zieliński and Isadora Duncan – the two “saints” of the religion to which they converted.

“Ancient Greek Religion”

Tadeusz Stefan Zieliński (1859–1944), or Faddei Frantsevich, according to the Russian spelling of his name, was born in Kiev to Polish parents and studied at the St Anne Gymnasium in St Petersburg and at the universities of Leipzig, Munich and Vienna. He received his doctoral degree in Leipzig in 1880, for a dissertation, *Die Gliederung der altattischen Komoedie*. He had an early and powerful start as a scholar and quickly became the pride of St Petersburg University where he worked for over 30 years. In both his teaching and public lectures he was a great popularizer of Antiquity. He tackled contemporary moral and political problems by pointing out their roots in Ancient Greece. A defender of classical education, he beautifully rendered Greek myths and tales in the editions he prepared for schoolchildren. His efforts to bring the Greek cultural heritage alive were highly successful. Zieliński’s contemporaries called him – together with Viacheslav

Ivanov and Dmitrii Merezhkovskii – both a “luminary” and a “saint” of “ancient Greek religion” (Poplavskii, 2009: 72).

Though Zieliński taught in the History and Philology Department, students of science also came to his lectures for the sake of “pantheistic experiences”. “As if you breath with the scents of the boundless sea”, one of them said. And his fellow student, a participant of the Greek tour in 1910, when he saw Zieliński going to bathe in the sea, ran after him: “he had a vision that a Hellenic god had risen and was about to immerse his divine torso in the eternally roaring sea” (Antsiferov, 1992: 157). Both science students, according to the author of the memoirs quoted, had sober personalities and were not known to be easily exalted. But such was Zieliński’s charisma: he combined intelligence with erudition, eloquence with a handsome appearance, which suggested comparison with Sophocles – the author whom Zieliński translated, with a Christian apostle, or even with Zeus himself. He usually lectured at the Classical Seminary; against the background of ancient steles, sarcophaguses and statues along the walls, he resembled “an inspired poet, the successor to Homer”:

Zieliński was tall. His prominent forehead crowned his face like a dome. Dark hair touched with grey framed his slightly thrown back head. His curly beard reminded one of Sophocles. His eyes, widely open, appeared to reflect the world that he resuscitated with his inspired speech. He spoke slowly, solemnly, as if through his teeth, and it seemed that his word came not to us but that he directed his speech above our heads to distant listeners. At times his voice trembled and a tear sparkled on his eyes, reminiscent of the eyes of a deer. (Antsiferov, 1992: 157)

Just like his lectures, Zieliński’s written works were imbued with lively emotions, not common in the dry scholarship of his colleagues. He considered feeling a constructive element in approaching his subject, and he criticized work on Greek religion devoid of any live spark. Regarding the “voluminous treatise” of a German, Otto Gruppe, he wrote: “what you read in his works could never have been a subject of anybody’s faith. As an atheist, the author cannot feel the difference between the living and the dead in ... ‘Greek religion.’” By contrast, religious feeling is a “magic wand ... He who has it will easily decipher the maze of ancient Greek rituals and tales; he who lacks it, no scholarship will help” (Zelinskii, 1918a). Citing Goethe (“Gefühl ist alles”), Zieliński wrote: the ecumenical religious feeling is the real “core of religion; the rest is but a fable.” In opposition to feeling, “fables” carry the danger of dogmatism, nationalist intolerance and

religious fanaticism. In the spirit of his time, he found in Judaism the “negative” root of Christianity and in Antiquity the “real Testament” (Zelinskii, 1922/1986). In his book, *The Rivals of Christianity*, he mentioned various cults of mainly Greek origin, such as the cult of Hermes Trismegistus, arguing that in the Hellenic and Roman periods they developed in the same direction as Christianity, providing both the background and the alternative to the latter (Zelinskii, 1908/1996).

According to Zieliński, the “ancient Greek religion” contains all the cosmogony, morality and eschatology of Christian faith and it also has obvious advantages. One is its universality or, using Dostoevsky’s famous expression in his Pushkin Speech, *vsemirnost’*. Another is religious tolerance: the ancient Greeks would rather recognize in other peoples’ deities embodiments of their own gods than go to war with them. Finally, ancient Greek religion is advantageous because it is based on the most positive feelings of joy, beauty and fullness of being. This is the reason why its commandments are so easy to fulfil – people act out of joy and not out of obedience. And that is also why it is so easy even for a contemporary person to convert, especially if this person has an artistic streak. Zieliński could quote from another lover of Ancient Greece, Nietzsche:

Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live. What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance ... Are we not, precisely in this respect, Greeks? Adorers of forms, of tones, of words? And therefore – *artists*? (Nietzsche, 1974: 36)

A true beauty, Zieliński argued, should not be limited to words; it existed as “the triune chorea consisting in equal measure of poetry, music and dance-*pliaska*.”² All three were devoted to the deity; yet *pliaska* prevailed in the trinity” (Zelinskii, 1918a). Regretting that since that time “the word had killed gesture, and writing had killed the [sounding] word” (Zelinskii, 1918b/2010), Zieliński hoped to correct the logocentrism of contemporary culture. After the Russian Revolution, he became a co-founder of the Institute of the Living Word in Petersburg. The living word meant the word made expressive, dramatized, gesticulated and danced – just as it was in chorea-*pliaska*. The Institute was the first institution, for both teaching and research, where the habitual domination of the written word was reversed,

2 On the difference between *dance* and *pliaska* see Sirotkina (2010).

and the written word subordinated to the word performed, sung and danced. Courses included declamation, stage movement and the dance taught by Zieliński's pupils, the neophytes of *pliaska*, the Dionysian dance.

Under the spell of its "negative root", Judaism, Zieliński believed, Christianity ignored free bodily movement. Yet, it had nothing to fear, for in Ancient Greece free movement had never meant "a wild orgy". Even the most Dionysian *playska* had a sacred meaning. Excited by a vision of "Bacchantes in deer skins girded by live serpents, with ivy wreaths over their undone hair", Zieliński, however, did not ignore the "eschatological meaning of Dionysianism":

In the frenzy of *pliaska*, the soul positively transcends the boundaries of bodily existence and, transfigured, it partakes of the bliss beyond the body, of the entirety of being undivided from nature. In his own experience, the person made certain of the originality of his soul, of the possibility of it living separate from the body, and hence of its immortality. (Zelinskii, 1918a)

Zieliński's reference to the mystical meaning of Dionysian ecstasy was echoed in the work of his pupil, Mikhail Bakhtin. In one of his early works, he wrote:

In *pliaska*, everything inward in me strives to come to the outside, to coincide with my exterior. In *pliaska*, I become "bodied" in being to the highest degree, I come to participate in the being of others. What dances [*pliashet*] in me is my *present-on-hand* being, my *sophianic* being dances in me, the *other* dances in me. (Bakhtin, 1986: 127)

Sophia Goddess of Wisdom is therefore a blood sister of Plato's Diotima, and *pliaska* is a bridge connecting the "Bacchantes in deer skins" with divine wisdom. To reveal this wisdom, words do not suffice: nothing but *pliaska* can do it:

Are we able to understand Plato's important words: "Our youth should not only dance well, they should dance goodness"? ... To guess their meaning, we must use an analogy with words: "not only speak well, but say good things." (Zelinskii, 1918a)

Pliaska is capable of conveying moral messages at least as well as words, and it could be even more expressive, persuasive and effective. "The gesture is more direct and suggestive than the word, and the poem of gesture, were it fulfilled, would plough our soul deeper than even the best poem of words could do it" (Zelinskii, 1918a).

Isadora Duncan's contemporaries called her dance "a poem of movement", and herself "the queen of gesture". Already before the Revolution, the dancer had paid three visits to Russia. On her third Russian tour, in Petersburg on 22 January 1913, Isadora performed her dances from Gluck's *Iphigenia in Aulis*, to the accompaniment of an orchestra and a choir. The performance was preceded by a lecture from Zieliński who introduced the dancer as his "inspired ally in the mission to resurrect Antiquity" (Mochul'skii, 1999: 159). In a critic's words, Zieliński's lecture

added to Miss Duncan's performance an exceptionally solemn character ... A master of fine expression, Prof. Zieliński, interpreted the 'great' art of Duncan as a true renaissance of the 'idea of ancient orchesis', pointing out the similarities between her endeavour and the oeuvres of Nietzsche, Böcklin and Wagner. (Levinson, 1913; see also: Knizhnik-Vetrov, 1913)

While even the best educated audience found the dance "somewhat unusual, spontaneous and unclear", the professor's mission was to interpret Isadora's art. Yet she was just as able to interpret it, and she often addressed the audience at her performances in speech as well as in writing. Duncan's most influential piece, the manifesto, *Dance of the Future*, had been twice translated into the Russian language. Like Zieliński, Isadora preached the religion of beauty (she would sometimes add, "of the beauty of the human foot", to emphasize her own view of the body and its movements as something sacred). In Russia of the Silver Age she caused a sensation: intellectuals welcomed in her a modern Bacchante and a priestess of Dionysian religion, artists painted her, poets glorified her in their verses, and she acquired crowds of fans and followers. Stanislavskii became one of her greatest admirers and would not miss a single concert. Her dance appeared to him a "prayer in theatre", which he himself had dreamt of. The Artistic Theatre organized her personal matinées and introduced a "Duncan class" as part of its curriculum (Stanislavskii, 1941: 429; 1986: 539, 412; Koonen, 2003: 165).

Following in Duncan's bare footsteps, both dancers and lay people founded schools and studios of the so-called free or *plastique* dance. For inspired souls, no special dance training seemed to be necessary. The daughter of an owner of pastry shops, Ella Bartels, saw Isadora during her first Russian tour and was so excited that, at home, she dressed in a tunic and sandals and began to dance. Four years later she already taught *danse plastique* at the Moscow Artistic Theatre (Surits, 1996: 144–146). In

December 1907, the 17-year-old Stefanida Rudneva came for the first time to a Duncan matinée in Petersburg. Over 60 years later, Rudneva remembered how stunned she was. Isadora, she said, “opened windows”, changing people’s lives; someone who saw her “could no longer be the same person”. At home, Rudneva dressed in oriental cloth and tried dancing (Rudneva, 1971). Earlier she had wanted to be a Russian language teacher, but after seeing Isadora, she changed her mind and read ancient history. Her and her friends’ favourite professor at the Higher Women’s Courses, indeed, their Teacher with a Capital “T”, was Zieliński. Soon they started their “white gatherings”; dressed in tunics, they improvised to piano accompaniment, to their own singing or to the “inner music.” Zieliński actively supported the idea and later suggested the name for the group, *Heptachor*, from the Greek, επτά – “seven” and χορός – “chorea-pliaska” (Kats, 2007: 129, 139).

If Zieliński’s male students formed an intellectual circle, “The Union of the Third Renaissance” (to which both Bakhtin brothers and L. V. Pumpsianskii belonged) (Braginskaia, 2004: 49), his female followers had a mission to revive chorea. Though they still were far from the Greek ideal, the professor could but encourage them:

Nowadays, inspired by Antiquity, people attempt to “liberate the body” and to restore to the expressive gesture its rights. And although an ancient Hellene would be impressed by them as much as we are by the exercises in articulate speech of a dumb person who, in a mature age, is taught to speak, we should welcome and encourage these attempts. Perhaps, our grandchildren will be able to dig up the buried temple and deliver back to people the completeness of life which had been lost. (Zelinskii, 1918a)

“Hellenes knew this completeness of life well”, continued Zieliński, “but they did not invent a grammar for pliaska, and the poems of ancient choreographers of genius, passed from hand to hand, are forever lost” (Zelinskii, 1918a). Yet neither he nor Duncan and her followers like Heptachor would have wanted to limit themselves to a historical reconstruction of antique choirs. Their ambitions went further: they set out to restore the joyful experiences characteristic of pliaska.

On their educational trip to Greece, the future Heptachor members met Vsevolod Meyerhold. Rudneva remembered when, on a boat-trip, he, “half-jokingly, condescendingly, talked about the boredom of life and the illusory nature of art.” She thought that this “modernist pessimism” was not like him but listened silently. Unexpectedly, the site of Mount Parnassus made her intervene: “Is it not possible to reverse it: to make art real,

and the rest – illusory?” Meyerhold “turned brusquely towards me, threw at me his sharp, unforgettable look and quickly said: I did it, and that is why I am joyful.” In her nineties, Rudneva vividly recalled this episode (Kats, 2007: 142). Heptachor’s members shared this artistic utopia of the Silver Age. “Only a creative experience of life [*zhizneoshchushchenie*] gives a person inner strength and freedom, makes him or her beautiful” – they wrote in the group’s manifesto (Kats, 2007: 497–501).

And yet rare are the moments when such a creative harmonious sense of life is revealed to a modern man. How to make these moments last? How to make life always appear holistic and vividly expressed? One of the few ways to this sense of being alive lies through *pliaska*. (Kats, 2007: 497)

It gave them “the feeling of catharsis” and, in Rudneva’s words, “protected them from flirtatiousness” – from a superficial, petty relationship with life (Kats, 2007: 497). When Heptachor decided to develop “a method of teaching and cultivating *pliaska* in students” it was about this particular “creative experience of life.” The selection of new students was based on their “potential for *pliaska*” – their “emotional responsiveness to music”; “ability to reveal their musical feelings through movements” – rather than their physical shape (Kats, 2007: 497).

Each year Heptachor organized a “*pliaska* competition”. The prize went to the participant who could “merge completely with the music and give herself or himself to movement”, who could touch the feelings of others with a direct unmediated response to music, rather than to the one who excelled in technique. This required “great intimacy and concentration”, an ability to be absorbed by the music without “thinking anything up” – and this was what Heptachor called *pliaska* (Kats, 2007: 308, 340).

Faithful to their teacher’s ideas about friendship in its ancient Greek sense, Heptachor members lived as a commune. From their first acquaintance, Rudneva and Natalia Enman, another Bestuzhev student, conceived the idea of a group of people sharing ideals, of “a commune building a new life yet unheard of” (ibid.: 126). The young women formed “a small commune of Amazons of scholarship and art”: if one “married, her women

friends were deeply worried. Will the husband be able to join in their particular way of life? Rudneva's son, Nikon, became a child of the entire Heptachor" (Antsiferov, 1992: 159). Their "Greece on the shores of Neva" lasted into the mid-1930s.³

Zeus' Sins

To convert is more than just to adopt a dogma by one's reason; it is also to have faith and to live accordingly. In other words, conversion is above all a practice and a way of life. Once converts begin a new life, they accept all the consequences and all the risks that follow. They have to show in practice whether their "conversion" is indeed more than just a fashion or a volatile idea that passed through the mind. And, importantly, they have to be prepared to defend their faith against convention and to bear sacrifices, from giving up comfort to sacrificing life for the sake of the new gods.

As we have seen, Heptachor dancers completed their conversion by adopting new ideas, values, practices and a particular way of life. And shortly afterwards their faith was put on trial. In the early months of 1910, a drama shook the group. One of Zieliński's students, Liudmila Zavalishina (not a Heptachor member), confessed to having a relationship with him. The young woman helped her teacher to translate Ovid's ballads (Ovidii, 1913), and the work brought them closer. "For her, Zieliński was a likeness of Zeus, the deity who fertilised Leda, Europa, Dana and many other young Greek women. She believed that to have a son by Zieliński was the utmost bliss" (Antsiferov, 1992: 160). Heptachor was struck by the news as if by a lightning. In Rudneva's words, "all of us were very modest girls from very strict and pure families" (Kats, 2007: 134–137). Zieliński students could be recognized by their appearance: "In the years of the fashion for high coiffures, they had straight hair (a braid turned around the head was allowed). They wore plain blouses and aprons and were always neat and tidy" (Kats, 2007: 159). They could not reconcile the image of their teacher

3 When the commune ended, their art continued as a practice of "musical movement", and it came to us thanks to several generations of *pliaska* dancers (see <www.heptachor.ru>).

and some love adventure: “Yet he was our Teacher. And we came to him for explanation” (Kats, 2007: 134–137).

Others besides Heptachor wanted to ask Zieliński questions. A memoirist recalled: “The gossip of Pan Tadeusz’ fall became widely known. And we, Zieliński’s students and admirers were deeply disgusted by his conduct.” A Bestuzhev student, Kazanovich, noted in her diary:

From time to time, the most hard-working members of Zieliński’s seminary go on a would-be “private mission abroad” or, simply speaking, retreat for a certain period of time under the heroic heaven of either Greece or Italy in order to bring to the world a fruit of their painstaking work in the seminary of the Antique professor.

She also mentions the scandal it caused in the University Council and the visit to Zieliński of angry colleagues who protested against “adventures which insult scholarly ethos” (quoted in Antsiferov, 1992: 159).

Zieliński hurried to clear himself in public. At the Higher Women’s Courses an extra-lecture, “The Tragedy of Faithfulness”, was announced. Students of all departments flooded the room. Using a few examples from Greek tragedies, Zieliński juxtaposed notions of male and female faithfulness: “Female faithfulness”, he argued, “is negative. For, in order to be faithful, a woman should renounce all temptations of another love. By contrast, male faithfulness is positive, for a man is able to be faithful to many women at the same time, without giving up numerous realisations of his Eros” (Antsiferov, 1992: 159).

This “philosophy of the cock-hen”, – the memoirist commented, –was presented with such dignity and talent that it left a positive impression rather than a repulsive one, as might have been expected. And after the lecture a group of female students presented Zieliński with a bunch of lilies as a sign of his acquittal. (In the interval, they had had time to run to a flower shop on the Srednii Prospekt.) (Antsiferov, 1992: 159)

Although Rudneva did not mention this lecture in her memoirs, one could easily imagine: it was she and her friends who ran for flowers. As a matter of fact, the Professor had convinced Heptachor already before the public lecture, in a private conversation. He used all his confident eloquence to convert them to his views:

He firmly believed that a cultured person ought to contribute to the improvement of the human race by all means including producing posterity. He believed that having children was an inalienable right of a cultured and healthy man. (Kats, 2007: 135)

Zieliński showed the girls portraits of his children born out of wedlock, whom he loved no less than his four legal children and whom he was proud of – especially of his son, Adrian Piotrovskii (1898–1937), the future talented scholar, writer and public figure. “Everything was illuminated by light and was meaningful and beautiful” – Rudneva remembered. – “We regained our faith and found again our Teacher” (Kats, 2007: 137).

In other words, Zieliński presented himself as an adept of positive eugenics: the best human exemplars, including himself ought to have as many descendants as possible. In his own terms, it was a matter of “biological immortality” or the immortality of the family when “the father passes on the torch of life to his son” (Zelinskii, 1911). Besides the four children from his wife, Zieliński had the son mentioned above, Adrian, with Vera Petukhova, who was at first his student and then assistant teacher at the Higher Women’s Courses. In 1911, Valentin, his son with Liudmila Zavalishina, was born, and later on he fathered two daughters, Tamara and Ariadna, with another of his students, Sof’ia Chervinskaia (Chervinskaia, 2005: 230–254). Zieliński complained of the severity of Russian law, which did not allow the adoption of one’s illegitimate children. In giving birth, he saw an apotheosis of love and longing for goodness, and part of the immortality and eternity allotted to a mortal being. Both Isadora Duncan and Stefanida Rudneva, with her friends, shared the cult of birth. When her pregnancy started showing itself, Isadora continued to perform and fought against puritan remarks with Diotima’s words that pregnancy is about love and beauty. When Rudneva (then not married) learnt from the doctor that she was pregnant, she leaped up from the coach exclaiming “What happiness!” (Kats, 2007: 271).

Although Zieliński’s arguments had convinced Heptachor, to other people who were not apologists of *pliaska* they appeared to be “the cock-hen philosophy”. Contradicting Rudneva’s statement, a fellow student believed that “Heptachor did not give their teacher absolution. Only after some years was the deep crack smoothed over” (Antsiferov, 1992: 159). The same person repeatedly called Zieliński’s conduct “sin”. From the Christian point of view, the professor’s conduct with women was indeed amoral and even vicious. But what if one assumed the ancient-Greek point of view? Zieliński himself was puzzled by the issue of “sin”, and he investigated the origins of the notion in a long essay (Zelinskii, 1917). He was generally convinced that all modern categories including, Christian ones, existed, at least in embryo, already in Antiquity. When Homer speaks about “a

violation of the moral law”, Zieliński claimed, we can translate it as “sin”. The moral law rules over the world, and gods are its messengers and guardians. If only man could understand this law, he would be able, by contemplating it, “to draw inviolable norms for his moral conduct”. Yet, man is limited by moral blindness which Homer called *elpis*. Seeking an adequate translation for this world Zieliński could find none; the closest, he said, was the German *Wahn* (delusion, mania) and the Russian *вожделение* (desire, lust). Dimming man’s eyes, *elpis-Wahn-вожделение* immerses him in sin.

“Now, what is the source of sin?” – Zieliński asked and responded: In a happy man, it is the deceptive confidence that his happiness will never leave him. In an unhappy one, it is the equally deceptive certainty that his misery is, rather than something which the gods have sent down for his sins, a passing spell of bad weather which came to him by accident and will similarly go away. This confidence makes him blind to the great truth of god-protected life and to its immutable moral law, by the force of which sin entails punishment. And, in this blindness, is his feebleness. (Zelinskii, 1917)

In another article, Zieliński defined sin as illness (which blindness is too), and purification from sin as moral health. Forgiveness is a recovery of mental balance, of the health of the soul (Zelinskii, 1899/1995: 1–44).

The story of translating “sin” surpassed linguistic boundaries. The issues at stake were cultural values and ethical norms. This became clear in the light of the critique that a philologist of the next generation, Viktor Iarkho (1920–2003), addressed to Zieliński. Iarkho reproached the latter for “modernizing” the ancient Greeks by attributing to them categories of “conscience” and “sin”, which they did not have. He insisted on the contextual or “antiquarian” approach, which treasures all peculiarities of a culture and respects its otherness. Between the lines, one can read that Iarkho found futile the task so important for Zieliński: to revive ancient Greek ideals and values and to use them in order to reform contemporary Christian consciousness. While Zieliński summoned up the Third Renaissance, Iarkho’s post-revolutionary generation believed it unnecessary and even dangerous.

Together with Mikhail Gasparov, Iarkho re-edited the tragedies by Sophocles in Zieliński’s translations. He argued that the notion of sin is absent from the Ancient Greek language, which uses the words *αμαρτία* – literally, “mistake”, “missed target”, and *ὑβρις* – literally, “trespassing authorized boundaries”, “haughtiness”, or “arrogance”. Instead of speaking

of “sin”, Iarkho argued, the Greeks called an unconscious crime a “mistake” or “guilt”, and a conscious crime, especially in the area of kinship, “pollution” or “defilement” (Iarkho, 1990: 524). In his opinion, Zieliński misused the word “sin” by rendering with one single word such diverse notions as grief, misfortune, suffering, deed, guilt and error (Iarkho, 1990: 526). (Zieliński used the title “Kalidonian Sin” for a myth that was essentially about an insult to the gods and their subsequent revenge, and Heptachor staged a composition with the same name.) Born in Soviet times and educated in the spirit of scientific atheism, Iarkho was particularly critical of the word, which, he thought, carried a clear Christian connotation. He claimed that Zieliński and the interpreters of his generation made Greek characters utter speeches better fitted for Christian apostles (Iarkho, 1973).

When, however, Iarkho demanded a more authentic translation for the ancient Greek categories, he ignored Zieliński’s own task of *conversion*. The latter set out to find, in Ancient Greece, roots of all modern categories, including the category of personal responsibility. In a widely spread opinion, ancient religions were stuck with the notion of fate – an immutable destiny that dominates both mortals and gods. By contrast, it was thought, Christianity overcame this fatalism by endowing humans with free will and personal responsibility. Freedom (including freedom to err) was believed the indubitable advantage of Christianity. The price for it was the notion of sin and the belief that absolution of sin could only come from God.

Zieliński would not have agreed with this view, which diminished his cherished Greeks. He argued, firstly, that the idea of individual freedom and responsibility went back before Christ and, secondly, that the idea of moral justification already existed in ancient Greece. Moreover, he wanted to prove that the Greek idea of moral justification was much more constructive than the Christian one of absolution because it made moral judgement and acquittal the work of people and not of gods. He examined the origins of moral justification in a substantial article finding the model for it in the Oresteia. As the famous myth goes, Orestes avenged his father’s death by slaying his mother and her lover, Aegisthus. For this sacrilege, Erinyes, whom no one including gods could stop, pursued Orestes, menacing him with death. Finally, Pallas Athena advised him to seek rescue “in the opinion of the community of the best of your peers”. Orestes came to the city of Athens, and the citizens voted on his case. The votes divided half-and-half, but the goddess added her own voice, and, by a single vote, Orestes was acquitted. Moral justification, Zieliński concluded, is therefore

a result of both divine and human deeds, and the final judgement is made by the “community of the best peers” (Zelinskii, 1917: 40). He, of course, realized that, when people rather than gods made the verdict, there is a risk of an unfair judgement. Yet, he preferred the democratic decision to the divine one:

And we obey the eternal commandment of Pallas Athena to a human person: “Seek support and justification for yourself in the opinion of the community of the best of your peers!” “Even if – our conscience timidly asks – even if the decision is made by one vote only?” – “Yes, even if it is so.” (Zelinskii, 1917: 44)

Yet, having once admitted the rights of human judgement, Zieliński himself became their hostage. This was the price he had to pay for his own conversion. Although he and the women with whom he had children did not think of it as a sin, public opinion decided otherwise. The label, “sin”, stuck to the professor, and some of his texts showed his concern. Zieliński himself would not admit his “sins” because he did not think that he had acted in a state of *elpis*, out of mad desire and moral blindness. On the contrary, he believed that he had followed the moral law – the way Greeks understood it – according to which a healthy man should leave as many progeny as possible. It was the utmost divine commandment and will and the pledge of continuing and proliferating life on earth (Zelinskii, 1917: 27). Yet, outside his closest circle, no one seemed to share his faith. Only Heptachor had passed the test of conversion by remaining faithful to their teacher and loyal to their new religion.⁴ Other people issued a harsh judgement.

Zieliński was shaken first by the rejection of his colleagues and, later, by the turn of events that took Russia very far from Ancient Greece. During his last year in Russia, he began to think about the course of his life in terms of retribution for sins. At a Dante evening in Petersburg, he did not look his usual self:

He became emaciated. His curly hair stuck out with disordered locks. The long jacket hung from his shoulders like on a hanger. His shoe was split open showing a white

4 One of the last books by Zieliński to appear in Russia was a joint publication with Heptachor. In 1916, the professor prepared *Attic Tales* for publication and asked Natalia Enman to illustrate them. Unfortunately, all her drawings (except for a few illustrations of the tale “Secrets of Long Rocks”) perished during the fire in the Sabashnikov Publishing House in 1918 (Kats, 2007: 698).

sock painted over with ink. Zieliński spoke slowly, with difficulty. He said that our cruel epoch gives us plenty of opportunity for understanding Dante's oeuvre; that we live in a *cita dolente*; that we have realised how bitter is the bread we receive from the hands of others, and how steep are the stairs that we have to climb to receive it. (Antsiferov, 1992: 160)

In his lecture course, as before, the professor recited the *Bacchantes* by Euripides. Yet, as one of his students witnessed, "the Bacchantes called Dionysus in a muffled voice, their bellies were empty, and they feared police searches" (Freidenberg, quoted in Braginskaia, 2004: 65). In 1921, Zieliński went to Warsaw: as a Pole, he did not "emigrate" he was "repatriated". His children were scattered: after a spectacular rise, his son, Adrian Piotrovskii perished in Soviet Russia, and his daughters with Chervinskaia also suffered from repression. In Warsaw, only one daughter, Weronika, stayed with him, but she had an ailing heart. In 1939, when Zieliński was eighty, Warsaw University burned from an air bomb, and with it the professor's flat also burned. Zieliński had a stroke and could hardly move. He spent his last years with his son's family in Bavaria, suffering terribly from what had happened to his country (Lukianchenko, 2009). Was it "fate", "retribution" or "illness" with no subsequent "recovery"? One day Heptachor received a letter from their old teacher. He wrote that he was losing sight like Homer and that the outer world had darkened for him, yet "the voices of the inner world are even better heard" (Lukianchenko, 2009). Before he died, Zieliński completed his six-volume work on "ancient Greek religion" (Zielinski, 2000–2002).

As to *pliaska*, in Soviet Russia it became more and more difficult to practise, as it became harder and harder to live according to the commandments of "ancient Greek religion." Yet, having once converted, Heptachor did not give up their faith (see Sirotkina, 2012); but this is a different story.

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