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Naples

Poetics in Contact: Vjačeslav Ivanov, Ettore Lo Gatto, Alexander Puškin

Vjačeslav Ivanov (1866—1949) spent the last twenty five years of his life in Italy. His participation in several cultural enterprises indicates that he was closer to the Italian social and intellectual life of those years much more than one may believe when reading the somehow timeless and spaceless poems that he wrote in Italy on Italian themes. In the poetry of Vjačeslav Ivanov, Italian landscapes are often nothing but fictional pretexts or, one may say, abstract reflections of purely mental images.

The poet himself described his artistic method as a complex exercise governed by upward and downward emotions resulting in Dionysian and Apollinian experiences, their combination and synthesis. Apart from any consideration concerning the place of such a poetic theory in the context of twenty-century Neoromanticism and, more particularly, of religiously oriented Symbolism, it appears that Ivanov's semantic experimentation depended to a remarkable extent on verbal effects. When the poet settled in Italy, he must have been aware that many men of letters whom he might meet in the Peninsula were raised in an old tradition, which was dominated by the study of poetry as verbal art aiming at polysemy through the use of sound figures. It was only natural that he tried to define any possible equivalence or correspondence between, on the one hand, the kind of poetry he was heralding in his native Russian language and, on the other hand, that of the Italian classics from Petrarch to Leopardi.

Formal, that is, linguistic and rhetorical components of the Italian tradition affected Ivanov's style more than any thematic motive. Thematically, Ivanov's Italian clichés were dependant on Goethe and Tjutčev more than

on Dante or Petrarch, in spite of the poet's assiduous study of Italian classics. In a sonnet entitled *Italija*, the Russian exile assembled several images of the Romantic convention to place his literary yearning against the proper background. The Italian landscape lacks here any physical credibility. It merely acts as a set of rhyming rhetorical refrains:

V strane bogov, gde nebesa lazurni
i mež oliv gde more svelozarno,
gde Piza spít, i mutnyj pleščet Arno...¹

That is to say, "in the land of gods, where the sky is blue and the sea glows amid the olive-trees, where Pisa sleeps and the Arno river splashes turbidly", the poet is seized by his Neoromantic variant of intellectual *Sehensucht*. *Tuda, tuda* — he exclaims — [...] *nesu ja posox, luč lovja večernyj*. *Tuda, tuda* ([over] — there, [over] — there) echoes of course Goethe's *dahin, dahin*. It is to that Romantic set of Italian symbols that the poet wants to walk "with his pilgrim's staff", "hankering after an evening gleam."

Many other examples can be found of a similar treatment of Italian literary symbols. The prototypes of such symbols lie mostly outside the Italian tradition. A different conclusion, however, can be reached concerning the Italian impact on the elaboration of at least a part of Ivanov's repertory of semantically marked sound figures. A clue for the interpretation of this aspect of the poet's technique may be found in the motto which opens his *Italian Sonnets (Ital'janskije sonety)*:

Italija, tebe slavjanskij stix
zvučit, stesnen v dospex tvoix sozvučii!
Stix rodiny otzvučnoj i pevučej,
Priimi ego — dar ot darov tvoix!²

My semi-literal translation reads as follows: "O Italy, for you the Slavic verse resounds, straitened in the armour of your harmonies. [This] verse [comes] from a land which perceives sounds, and sings; accept it as a gift among your gifts!" The literary program contained in this quatrain suggests that a new and freer melody produced by the Russian muse became part of a universal patrimony of which Italian poetry is a classical component. Ivanov seems to aim at a sort of *imitatio variata*, that is, at creating equally dignified effects by using poetic ingredients of a different nature.

¹ В. Иванов: *Собрание сочинений*. Т. 2. Брюссель 1971, p. 496.

² *Ibidem*, Т. 1, p. 612.

What may be termed his *imitatio Italiae* is conceptually stressed by the poet's offering his creation as a gift to Italy. The *variatio*, on the other hand, is emphasized by the quatrain's internal system of phono-semantic cross references. The quatrain's network of supralinear markers shows a complex distribution which is typical of Russian Symbolist poetry. These four lines contain not less than seven series of internal phono-semantic interconnections, besides the main series of the final rhymes (*stix* — *sozvučii* — *pevučej* — *tvoix*). The seven series are: (1) *stix* — *stix* — *tvoix* — *tvoix* — (*dospex*); (2) *Italija-slavjanskij* — *Italija-stix* — (*tebe*); (3) *slavjanskij* — *stix* — *stesnän* — [*do*]-*spex* — (*sozvučii*); (4) *zvučit* — *sozvučij* — *otzvučnoj* — *pevučii*; (5) *otzvučnoj* — *ot darov*; (6) *pevučii priimii* (alliterative enjambement); (7) *rodiny* — *dar* — *darov*.

Detailed analyses of this kind are extremely useful and help us understand the make up of poetry. Unfortunately they are as pleasant as any vivisection, or rather autopsy. I will not abuse my readers' professional endurance. Let me only note that, out of twenty one words which make up this poetic motto, nineteen are part of sound clusters, and twenty four phono-semantic formants result from their various combinations.

This example suggests that Vjačeslav Ivanov was very much interested in establishing a sort of comparative interrelationship between the Russian and the Italian patrimony of sound figures. In order to fully evaluate his efforts in this particular domain of comparative poetics one should begin with the study of his valuable studies in Italian literature. It seems equally important, however, to ascertain whether he ever managed to overcome the limitations inevitably connected with a merely passive response to the Italian models. Did Vjačeslav Ivanov ever try — one may ask — to test the poetic strength of the Russian poetic tradition by adapting Russian formulae to the Italian poetic language itself?

I think that I have come across some hitherto neglected piece of information which may help us answer this question. In an autobiographical book entitled *I miei incontri con la Russia*³ (*My Encounters with Russia*), Ettore Lo Gatto refers to the friendly assistance granted to him by Vjačeslav Ivanov when the same Lo Gatto was translating Puškin's *Evgenij Onegin* into Italian.

"During my visits with Ivanov — Lo Gatto writes — not only did I read to him the stanzas which I had translated, but we also tried together to improve my translation. Ivanov, who had an absolutely perfect knowledge of the Italian language, suggested single words and rhymes. On many occasions he translated entire lines, which have since remained in my text. These lines amalgamate so perfectly with my own, that today I would not be able to

³ E. Lo Gatto: *I miei incontri con la Russia*. Milano 1976. (Russian translation: Э. Ло Гатто: *Мои встречи с Россией*. Ред. А. Мавер Ло Гатто. Москва 1992).

single them out. I remember some of them mainly because they were the result of hard labour. Among such lines, certainly belong to Ivanov those of the beginning of the forty ninth stanza of the first chapter”.⁴

Thus, thanks to this enthusiastically candid testimony by an eminent Italian scholar, we can now rescue from an otherwise unmarked context some Italian hendecasyllables originally composed by Vjačeslav Ivanov. They appear to be of great interest because they represent an attempt to adapt Italian poetic schemes to a well-known passage of Puškin’s work, to which Vjačeslav Ivanov certainly devoted particular attention. Puskin’s text reads:

Adriatičeskie volny,
O Brenta! Net, uvižu vas
i, vdoxnovenija snova polnyj
uslyšu vaš volšebnyj glas!⁵

The literal translation is: “O Adriatic waves, O Brenta! No, I shall see you, and, full again of inspiration, I shall hear your magic voice!” Vjačeslav Ivanov’s Italian translation, as it is explicitly quoted by Lo Gatto, reads:

Adriatici fluttì, o Brenta! Tarda
al poeta d’udir l’incantatrice
vostra voce, al cui suono ancor riarda
l’ispirazione al suo cuor felice!⁶

I would hesitate before calling this translation a masterpiece, even if it provides the reader with an accurate rendering of Puškin’s message. We can believe Ettore Lo Gatto when he tells us that neither for him nor for Ivanov the poetic recreation of Puškin’s text was an easy task. In the last line, the words *al suo cuor felice* (“to his happy heart”) represent what is usually called, in the Italian literary jargon, a *zeppa*, that is a ‘filler’ used to artificially complete a poetic line. The added words, however, are not chosen at random. They are meant to convey in plain explanatory terms the sense of joyous expectation contained in Puškin’s allusion to his wholeheartedly longed-for trip to the homeland of Petrarch. These initial lines introduce a motive which is made explicit at the end of the same stanza. Puškin dreams of learning Italian from a Venetian girl on a gondola, and says: *S nej obretut usta moi / Jazyk Petrarki i ljubvi* (“From her, my lips will learn / the language of Petrarch and love”).

⁴ Ibidem, p. 71.

⁵ *Ežeznuŭ Onežun* 1, XLIX.

⁶ A. S. Puškin: *Eugenio Onegin. Romanzo in versi*. Trad. E. Lo Gatto, introd. V. Ivanov. Firenze 1967, p. 42.

However, it is the translation's phono-semantic organization that deserves our attention even more than its interpretative and explanatory intent. Ivanov transfers into his Italian text the same alliterative signal which Puškin introduced in the first two lines. In the Russian text the words *Adriatičeskie* and *Brenta* convey a sound signal resulting from *r* plus *i* (or *ja* = palatalized *a*) or *e*. The same signal occurs again at the end of the stanza in the crucial words *obretut* and *Petrarki*. There is no doubt that Puškin used this particular repetition as a semantic cross-signal. Ivanov's translation not only takes the dominant role of such a marker into account, but transforms it into a leit-motif.

The last word of the translation's first line, that is the rhyme-word *tarda* is connected to the first one, that is, *Adriatici*, by means of a mirror inversion of the key sound cluster: *rda* instead of *adr*. Functionally, this sound figure can be identified with epanalepsis, the sophisticated use of which by Petrarch has been so thoroughly investigated⁷. Its variant, based on the mirror-inversion of a sound sequence, reflects a more modern kind of experimentation. Russian equivalents of precisely this sound effect can be found in Vjačeslav Ivanov's poems. Let us re-read, for example, the first line of the motto for his *Italian Sonnets*, which I have cited before:

Italija, tebe slavjanskij stix

Here too, a variant of epanalepsis is represented by the sound connection which exists between the first and the last word of the line, namely *Italija* and *stix*. And here too, the sound effect is based on the mirror-inversion of the key consonantic cluster, that is to say, by the fact that the initial *it-* is echoed by the final *-ti-*.

The phonic predominance of the consonant cluster *rd* plus *a* is emphasized, of course, by the rhyme *riarda*. At the same time a parallel sound motive dependant on the same sound signal is skillfully developed by the Italo-Russian translator. The initial word *adriatici* shows a clear sound connection with the second rhyme-word, *incantatrice*. This connection represents a variation on the theme of the epanaleptic link between *adriatici* and *tarda*, and is based on the alliterative correspondence of the cluster *-driat-* in the word *adriatici* with the cluster *tatri* in the word *incantatrice*. One may add that this alliterative cross-signal becomes even more marked if one performs Ivanov's translation with a slight Russian accent. The opposition of voiced versus unvoiced dentals is deemphasized if the text is not totally dependant on a native Italian pronunciation.

⁷ M. Picchio Simonelli: *Figure foniche dal Petrarca ai petrarchisti*. Firenze 1978.

Ivanov's elaboration of Puškin's initial phono-semantic signal is not the only feature that characterizes his attempt to provide an Italian equivalent of the original sound texture. In Puškin's text the sound effect of the verbal cluster *vaš volšebnyj glas* plays an important role. It occurs in a line — *uslyšu vaš volšebnyj glas* — which represents an emotional and intellectual climax. The Italian text by Vjačeslav Ivanov preserves this very effect with great precision thanks to the presence of an equivalent alliterative pair in the words *vostra voce*.

It is fair to assume that the network of Italian-Russian correspondences, barely disclosed and hinted by this isolated sample of poetic translation, was a matter of serious concern for Vjačeslav Ivanov. The stanza from *Evgenij Onegin* which he helped translate into Italian is connected with a crucial aspect of Puškin's dream. Puškin's allusion to the "proud" English lyre (*po gorđoj lire Al'biona*), in dialectic connection with the Italian muse of Petrarch, can be seen as a reference to a major Romantic conflict. In Puškin's vision "the language of Petrarch and love" (*jazyk Petrarki i ljubvi*) was the symbol of higher poetic achievements. This attitude was very close to that of Vjačeslav Ivanov himself. Again, it is the testimony of Ettore Lo Gatto that helps us understand the cultural and spiritual background of the poetic translation we have just examined. Lo Gatto's commentary to Vjačeslav Ivanov's translation reads as follows: "Puškin, who had such a strong desire to visit Italy, but never was given the necessary permit, expressed his vain expectation. Ivanov, who from his early years had known so well the enchanting and inspiring voice of Italy [here Lo Gatto refers Puškin's expression *volšebnyj glas* to Vjačeslav Ivanov himself], Ivanov could find better than me the [Italian] sound of his great countryman's voice".⁸

Perhaps further studies of Vjačeslav Ivanov's work will reveal more connections between the make up of some of his poems and certain Italian poetic models. My fragmentary considerations on a neglected episode of his career may contribute to this research.

⁸ E. Lo Gatto: *I miei incontri con la Russia...*