

Invisible Greece

If the author is not exactly dead, a naive biographism is no longer in fashion.
(Terry Eagleton. *Literary Theory. An Introduction*)

On a cold winter morning I was waiting for my friend Vassiliy* to get off the train on a platform of the Riga train station to collect the books he brought me. We walked to the old town together and despite Vassiliy laughing at my shivering, for in Saint Petersburg the temperature was about ten degrees lower, we decided to stop by a cafe. Our conversation turned to writing being an autobiographic gesture, the role of the imaginary in constructs of the past and the impact of author's biographical moments upon the creation of textual meaning.

– Some time ago I overheard this conversation at the canteen† of the Academy of Sciences, – Vassiliy suddenly said.

I looked at him with expectation of what will follow.

– If I am not mistaken, this is about Hölderlin's epistolary novel *Hyperion*‡ and the fact that without ever having seen Greece, the poet was able to capture it with such precision, to the point that Greeks themselves use his poems as signatures to images of the Archipelago (Aegean Sea islands).

– The conversation at the coast of the Neva River is rather unusual, - I added.

– Why unusual? – Vassiliy looked at me impetuously. – The whole novel was translated into Russian in 1939 by Jevgeniy Sadovskiy. Yet this translation was only first published in 1969 and repeatedly published in 1988 as part of the series *Литературные памятники*§ and along with various additional materials, broad commentary and history of the novel itself. Another translator of Hölderlin, the

* Vassiliy Voronov – my friend and Russian translator

† Vassiliy means the former building of Saint Petersburg Academy of Science built by Jacomo Kvarengi at the end of the 18th century, now the building of the Russian Academy of Science, Saint Petersburg Scientific Centre.

‡ Full title of the novel is *Hyperion oder der Eremit in Griechenland*.

§ Series *Monuments of Literature*.

Russian philosopher and writer Jakov Golosovker, who worked on his unfinished drama *The Death of Empedocles* (it was published in 1931 with a preface by Lunacharsky**), attended to fragments of *Hyperion* as early as in 1935, which are now available in an edition of the series *Литературные памятники* mentioned earlier.

Vassiliy was knowledgeable enough in Russian culture and I listened to him with great interest, only adding that I thought Lunacharsky owns the rather funny designation of *Hyperion – the fantastic novel...*

– The fate of both translators of Hölderlin is much more interesting, but this is not what I was about to tell you – Vassiliy continued. – Hölderlin’s novel echoes not only Greece that the poet has never seen, but also his tragic and hopeless love story, embodied in the novel and in separate poems by the image of Diotima.

– Because I had taken a certain interest in this period of German literature, I then added that the word *Hyperion*, by which Hölderlin understood the Sun God Helios, which actually should be called Hyperionid, i.e. the son of the titan Hyperion... can be attributed to Hölderlin himself. More so as one of his *Tübinger Stift*†† course mates has said: “When he walked back and forth along the benches, we would think it was Apollon walking about the hall.”‡‡

– “To walk like that, one must feel like Apollo”§§, – Vassiliy added. – Yet this ‘feeling’ should be understood not in a way separate moments of personal life are

** This one fact is worthwhile mentioning from the multifaceted biography of Anatoliy Lunacharskiy. Namely, opinion about *Hyperion* (by for not as an example of socialist realism) was given and preface to Hölderlin’s translated work was written by no other as the USSR First Folk Education Comissioner (taking this position until 1929).

†† Tuebingnen Theological Seminary has been part of Tuebingen University since 1536; here Hölderlin would study together with Schelling and Hegel.

‡‡ Apollon is however of different origins – he is the son of Zeus and Leto, but Appollon is also the god of sunlight (he carries a bow and golden arrows that symbolize the rays of sun) and he is also the advocate of poetry and art.

§§ By writing down my conversation with Vassiliy and listing through his mentioned Russian edition of *Hyperion*, I found out that Vassiliy indirectly cited Belyaeva’s article on the making of the novel– see Беляева, Н. Т. *Сотворение “Гипериона” // Гельдерлин, Фридрих. Гиперион. Стихи. Письма / Издание подготовила Н. Т. Беляева. Москва: Наука, 1988, p. 524.*

reflected in a work of art, but rather as overlaps of times in the poet's life, novel's story and as retold experiences, which can by no means be clearly separated..***

– We could probably also mention the Russian-Turkish war which is part of the novel action, the unsuccessful Greek strive for independence linked to that (the movement of the Russian navy towards the archipelago in the second part of the novel allows identifying at least one chronological reference point, the year of 1770) and the Great French Revolution so important to Hölderlin.†††

– Indeed, the adventures of Hölderlin and his protagonist and descriptions of Greek sceneries and historical events based solely on secondary sources have all intertwined in the novel in a way hard to decipher for its reader. The article on the making of the novel claims that for Hölderlin *alles ist innig*, for the soul is not turned inside out, but everything external has become internally significant, attempting to explain it by Mikhail Bakhtin's *chronotope* or the notion of space-time...‡‡‡

– For Bakhtin the author exists outside the chronotope of the depicted world, even in cases when he has created an autobiographical piece. If I remember correctly,

*** The novel is written in an epistolary form – it consists of letters that the Greek Hyperion sends out to his German friend Bellarmin. Sometimes Hyperion simply rewrites letters from Diotima or those addressed to her, creating a peculiar form of correspondence within correspondence.

The undetermined time plan of the novel is also due to how in the first letters Hyperion looks back at adventures and events described in detail in future correspondence, by saying with resignation that his work on Earth is finished. That however does not fit the mood of his last letter (we can assume that at the end of the novel the reader cannot remember its beginning to much detail).

††† Hölderlin's novel was written between 1792-1799. Hölderlin's attitude to the Great French Revolution shows in his letters and a solid legend tells that the revolutionary minded students of Tuebingen, among which could also have been Hölderlin, Schelling and Hegel, celebrated 14th of July in 1793 (Bastille Day) by setting up a 'freedom tree'.

‡‡‡ See the article by Belyaeva mentioned above – pp. 592–593.

I noted after a short break, which Vassiliy wholeheartedly granted – the position of the author is characterized as a tangent of the chronotopes of the described world. §§§

– Yet in Hölderlin’s case, if we are to go on with this metaphor, the poet is not the tangent of the novel circle, but its very centre, - Vassiliy took over the thread of conversation. – Surely, the text of *Hyperion* can be read solely as an example of the romantically pantheistic, like poetry endowed with classical ideas (it was deemed poetry by his Diotima – Susette Gontard****), without knowing anything about the author’s biography. Yet without a biographic positioning within this plane of geometric metaphors, Hölderlin’s work loses the multilayeredness of its verbal expression meanings and to our reader it becomes a foreign example of literature from some forgotten century.

The voice of Vassiliy had become somewhat more solemn and he may have noticed this, for he became silent. The topic of conversation seemed to be exhausted, but I was interested in one other aspect of it.

– By looking at Hölderlin, don’t you think that this ‘invisible Greece’, which is what you could call all the existing aspects of meaning outside the literally perceived form of an artwork, also exists in painting (if only a painting represents something)? – My question was rhetorical, therefore Vassiliy looked at me questioningly and did not say anything. – In other words, to the painter the depicted objects are like literary characters and events to a writer in the sense that their meaning (as well as their spatial and colour relations) may include multilayered and

§§§ Vassiliy once gave me a book by Mikhail Bakhtin published in Saint Petersburg in 2000 titled *Эпос и роман (An Epos and a Novel)*. It also includes his piece we mention in our conversation - *Форма времени и хронотопа в романе. Очерки по исторической поэтике (The Form of Time and Chronotope in a Novel. Essays on Historical Poetics)*. This piece by Bakhtin was written in 1937-1938 and first published after his death in 1975 as an independent piece with amendments and corrections made by the author in 1937 as part of the Bakhtin’s compilation of articles *Вопросы литературы и эстетики (Questions on Literature and Aesthetics)* published by *Художественная литература*.

**** I would like to remind that the novel is written in prose. Vassīlijs is calling Hölderlin’s love the Russian way – “Suzetta” (*Susette Gontard*), although in Latvian her name has at least once (“Jaunā Gaita”, March 2008) been adapted as “Zuzete”. Given the French roots of her mother’s family, I believe that the pronunciation used by Vassiliy is acceptable.

also autobiographical references. This may clarify the statement of a certain artist that painting to him is a type of writing, - I hereby conclude my idea.

– But then again, – Vassiliy uttered after thinking for a while, - is it at all possible to reveal the ‘time of things’? For instance, take the still life genre title *nature morte* – it points to the termination of the flow of time, while if a painting depicts a certain event (its ‘fruitful moment’, as Lessing would say), then ‘literary’ knowledge is needed for it to be recognized as elements of a broader narrative.

– The fact that we cannot express what we see in an image with a certain notion, is a characteristic trait to these ‘aesthetic ideas’, which “encourage us to tense thinking, although no concrete thought can be appropriate for these ideas”^{††††}, – I said sharply. – This idea of ‘reasoning criticism’ can be used outside the context of Kant’s system. It therefore is not important that we cannot (in principle or in any particular case) recognize perhaps unconscious intentions of the artist...

I wanted to propose my arguments against Vassiliy, but I casually looked at my watch and noticed that I had to rush to my lecture. The topic of that day was by the way “Laokont or On the Borders of Painting and Poetry”...

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^{††††} Citing from memory; sal. Kants, Imanuels. *Spiestspējas kritika*. Translated from German by Rihards Kūlis. Rīga: Zvaigzne ABC, 2000, 125 p.