

Marietta Šaginjan and Verner von Heidenstam

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MARIETTA ŠAGINJAN and Verner von Heidenstam... what could they possibly have in common — she a chronicler of the Five Year Plans and a Soviet propagandist, he a Swedish aristocrat and aesthete? Yet at one historic moment in the wake of the so called October Revolution, their paths unexpectedly converged. On 25 February 1918 the Baku newspaper *Kavkazskoe slovo* carried Šaginjan's enthusiastic review of the recently published Russian translation of Heidenstam's first novel *Endymion* (1889). At this particular point in history, the work resonated with Šaginjan, and a look at the biographical prelude to the review may tell us why.

Šaginjan had been molded by the Russian Symbolist movement, in which life and art were an almost inseparable unity. At various times she had been a kind of 'muse' to leading Symbolists and other modernist figures, ranging from Andrej Belyj to Sergej Rachmaninov. Her life took a crucial turn in 1912 when she began an intense emotional and intellectual relationship with Ėmilij Metaer (Medtaer) — philosopher, publisher, music critic and a key personage in the Symbolist milieu. In my book *The Russian Mephisto* I discuss the almost hypnotically charismatic Metner's attempt, as Šaginjan herself phrased it, to 'enslave' her to his inexorable intellect (Šaginjan 1988, 397). A Germanophile, he aspired to use his Musaget publishing house to push the entire Russian Symbolist movement westward and anchor it in Goethe and Kant. He was

contemptuous of native Russian culture and objected in particular to what he considered Oriental features in it, not least anything Jewish (Ljunggren 1994):

Šaginjan came from a Christian Armenian family.¹ That background made her especially attractive to Metner, who, apparently driven by a combination of racial prejudice and misogyny, constantly sought the company of 'Eastern' (including Jewish) women. In various genres over the next several years, Šaginjan energetically asserted an Eastern cultural identity in a desperate bid to defend herself against his massive indoctrination. While living intermittently together with Metner, his composer brother Nikolaj, and Émilij's wife Anna (whom the brothers shared), in 1913 she published the poetry collection *Orientalia*, which was dedicated to Sergej Rachmaninov, but essentially aimed at Metner and his ideological tyranny. Significantly, in a newspaper article from this period entitled 'Arijskoe izuverstvo' (Šaginjan 1913a) she strongly condemned the sensational trial of the Jewish bookkeeper Mendel' BejHs in Kiev, who was wrongfully accused of ritual murder. Given the positive connotations of 'Aryan' in Metner's lexicon, there was no mistaking the target of the barb.

In their letters to each other in the Metner household on the outskirts of Moscow Émilij often called Šaginjan his 'little Asiatic' or little child.² It was clear — and sometimes explicitly stated — from the outset that in the role of Goethe's alter ego Wilhelm Meister he was projecting on to her features of Meister's sexually indeterminate muse, the impulsive young southerner Mignon. Presumably like Metner's affair with Šaginjan, Meister's relationship with Mignon is at once both very sensual and chaste.

As Metner's grandiose publishing venture — and with it the entire Symbolist movement — was collapsing, in 1913 he entered an increasingly serious psychic crisis that first brought him to Sigmund Freud and subsequently, around the outbreak of WWI, to Carl Gustav Jung.

¹ Her father was a physician, and her paternal grandfather a priest.

² See Metner's June-October 1913 epistolary diary to Šaginjan (RGB, f. 167, kart. 25, ed. ehr. 26).

In Šaginjan's Symbolist essays around this time there is an interesting discussion drawing on Goethe, inter alia, about human power plays and dominance aspirations. She emphasizes that even young children struggle for leadership in their games (Šaginjan 1914). It is obvious that she has by no means capitulated to his intellectual power. Beneath his need for control was a painful sense of inadequacy that he did not attempt to conceal and that she knew how to manipulate. In sexually charged images in their correspondence he occasionally described her as a brazen Amazon setting off in a wild gallop mounted on the tired old mare of his soul.³

With Metner at a distance during the war, Šaginjan gradually broke free in various ways from his firm grip on her personality. Still under his influence just before the war broke out she had traveled around Germany in Goethe's footsteps. Now she was writing her report on the journey, which included a discussion of masculine vs. feminine in Goethe's works that underscored the philosopher's 'feminine' attitude to objects of knowledge (Šaginjan 1971, 669). She also continued to address the 'racial problem' and even more forcefully highlighted her own Eastern cultural background. One article devoted entirely to the Jewish question was based on a book by a scholar who opposed further Jewish assimilation and instead held that for the benefit of Europe, Jews should preserve 'their own race'.⁴ In Metner's absence she also deepened her relationship with the Jewish composer and music pedagogue Michail Gnesin. In yet another article she gave a positive assessment of an Eastern story by Petr Uspenskij, imbued with the Caucasian mystic Gjurđžiev's

³ See Metner's June-October 1913 epistolary diary to Šaginjan (especially the entry for 16 June). According to a letter to his wife, in what he called Jung's psychological 'laboratory' it became quite clear that Šaginjan suffered from a repressed homosexual component, a masculine side, in her personality that she unconsciously attempted to realize in their relationship. This had been harmful to him, in that it evoked a similarly latent feminine component in his own psyche. Thus despite his intellectual superiority, the sexual identities in their relationship tended to change places (letter of 9 July 1915 to Anna Metner and letter of 17 January 1924 to Vera Tarasova (presendy in RGB, formerly in the possession of the Ponsov family)).

⁴ Her review of a book on the 'racial question' by a certain Dr. Col'shan was published under the rubrics 'Evrejskij vopros' in *Baku* 2, 9, 15 August 1913 and 'Rasovaja problema' in *Kavkazskoe slovo* 16 June 1915 and *Severnye zapiski* 10, 1915.

'practical metaphysics',⁵ and her story collection *Sem' razgovorov* (Šaginjan 1916) addresses the East-West issue from various perspectives, including war-torn Europe through the eyes of a Japanese and an African.

Tightly bound as she was to Metner, Šaginjan had trailed after him to Switzerland before returning to Russia. Just before she turned homeward in November 1914, she happened to attend a meeting of émigré Bolsheviks in Zurich. In them she discovered a preparedness for political action that fundamentally distinguished them from the morbidly self-centered Symbolists with their endless metaphysical ruminations. Soon she was working on *Svoja sud'ba*, a major novel that represented a settling of accounts with the entire Symbolist outlook. It is set in a psychiatric clinic, where a doctor treats impractical (recognizably Symbolist) neurotics by prohibiting them from addressing abstract subjects and putting them to work on systematic, practical tasks.

In 1917 Metner finished his analysis with Jung and began a new life. As for Šaginjan, she was prepared for *her* new *Me*. The Bolsheviks' seizure of power in the fall made a deep impression on her and the total transformation of life that Symbolism had seemed to offer soon acquired Bolshevik overtones. From the very beginning she appears to have regarded Bolshevism as an Eastern phenomenon. Lenin became her new hero. When Stalin eventually came to power she felt even more at home in the new society: with a Caucasian like herself as the leader of Bolshevism, her own experience of the revolution was confirmed once and for all. She reported from the ideological fronts and wrote in various genres in compliance with the dictates of Socialist Realism. Metaphysical Symbolist speculations, it would seem, were far, far away. Characteristically enough, in 1951 she was awarded the Stalin Prize for her heroicizing travel sketches from Soviet Armenia.

At the turn of the year 1917-18, when the fate of Russia hung in the balance, Verner von Heidenstam appeared in Šaginjan's life with a novel that had an utterly liberating effect on her. It was published

⁵ Uspenskij's *Razgovory s d'javolom. Okkul'tnye rasskazy*, Petrograd 1916, consists of two stories, one of which has an Oriental background. See Šaginjan's review in *Sevenrje Zapiski* 6, 1916.

in serial form in the journal *Sovremennyj mir* during the summer of 1917 and the winter of 1918, with an interruption in the fall due to revolutionary events (for Geidenstam 1917-1918). To some extent the translation owed its existence to Heidenstam's 1916 Nobel prize, but the work was also in step with the times. It was his first major work to appear in Russian. Šaginjan knew nothing about him and referred to him incorrectly as 'Geijerstam'. Understandably, she had confused him with Gustaf af Geijerstam, who was extremely popular in Russia and had been published earlier in the journal.⁶

What was it about Heidenstam that appealed so strongly to Šaginjan at a time when the pain of separation from Symbolism was easing and she opened up to a new world view in which the catchwords were concreteness and practicality?

Endymion had once served as a protest against the naturalism of the 1880s in Sweden — a manifesto of the 90s, an anti-naturalistic tribute to strange and colorful ways of life. The young author rejects Western civilization as anemic and depleted. Heidenstam needed this concept of the Eastern alternative as what Fredrik Böök calls an imaginative figment and artistic method that contrasted with the vulgarity and intellectual sterility he perceived in his own culture (Böök 1945, 128). He is at his most skilful in impressionistic, savoury, precisely detailed scenic depictions of everyday life and nature, drawing upon his impressions of especially Damascus.

Endymion is enacted on two skilfully interwoven levels. On the one hand is the American Nelly Harven, whose encounter with the Arab poet Emin and his Oriental approach to life upsets all her views of reality. On another level it is the story of a revolt led by Emin against colonial supremacy and a Western civilization that has been suffocating Muslims for centuries. Emin's revolt is crushed, but he has penetrated Nelly's hard shell: she returns home a different woman, acknowledging the spiritual superiority of Eastern ways of life.

⁶ Šaginjan had already shown an interest in Swedish literature. A few years earlier she made a bold attempt to draw parallels between Selma Lagerlöfs Gösta Bergling and the young scientist who questions all prevailing standards in Andrej Belyj's experimental prose work *Vorrat*, his third 'symphony' (Šaginjan 1913b, 59).

Heidenstam's novel, of course, belongs to a tradition. The Western traveler visiting the Orient — Flaubert's *Voyage en Orient* being a typical example — was a recurrent theme in nineteenth-century literature. As Edward Said has shown, usually the 'feminine' Orient was viewed through prejudiced masculine eyes as a harem fantasy or a brutal, cunningly evasive, underdeveloped civilization. The novelty in Heidenstam's work is that he reverses the concepts. Here it is a female traveler who observes and falls in love with a Muslim man (Landmark 2003, 69), and the Orient is portrayed as superior in all respects. The Western 'race' as Heidenstam says, is spiritually hollow, despondent, rendered passive and unfit for life by its cult of suffering. The Arab 'race' enjoys a far more harmonious, free and joyful experience of existence.

It is not for nothing that Emin is a poet. Nelly herself dreams of becoming a writer, and she is surrounded by others with a flair for words. Traveling with her are her father, who writes humorous trifles, and a quack German doctor, whose vacuous eloquence in pursuit of her epitomizes the hubris and shallowness of the civilization he represents.

There is an inner dialectic at work in both East and West, and everything is actually much more complicated than it seems. Emin is quite manly but also has clearly feminine features. The way the often rather masculine Nelly, guided by Emin, penetrates dark alleys and passageways bears a striking resemblance to the conventional pattern in depictions of the Orient, where the male Westerner is shown penetrating a female Eastern culture. The East is said to be living in an intense present unregulated by any clock, yet it is familiar with the delights of antiquity as well. At once both old and new, it embraces all eras. It is marked by ruin, yet it rises to revolt. The doom confronting the West is different. Although it continues to consolidate its dominion over the East, Western civilization is slowly decaying from within. Emin's rebellion is crushed, but, as Šaginjan maintains in her review, he preserves his dignity and is victorious on a deeper level. He meets his death, but his culture proves far more representative of life than does the West.

Power, of course, is central to Emin and Nelly's relationship. She feels she is culturally superior and repeatedly tries to put him in his place. He manages, however, to break her pride and shake her to

the core. More than just a dreamy poet, he is prepared to defend his philosophy and ideals with deeds. Defying rationality, he aspires to guide history into new channels. His revolutionary action is consistent with his entire mysterious affirmation of life. Whereas the charlatan doctor loses himself in empty verbiage and gestures, Emin unites poetry and bold action.

Due to conditions in Russia, the depiction of the revolt in the closing section of the novel does not seem to have reached Šaginjan until February 1918. It is almost as though the work was written especially for her at this particular moment, including a final chapter that met her urgent needs. The work mirrored remarkably well the complexity of her dramatic relationship with Metner, with her, one suspects, empathizing with the vibrant and sensual Oriental Emin and with Metner in Nelly's feminine role as a representative of self-absorbed, self-congratulatory Western civilization. Power and eventually reversed power positions, where the oppressed rise up and the oppressor is overthrown, likewise characterized Šaginjan and Metner's relations. Šaginjan was just about to come out in support of Lenin's 'Eastern' revolution, the upheaval that Aleksandr Blok would soon portray as Russia's anti-Western 'Scythian' face.

Šaginjan emphasizes in her review that Heidenstam depicts Islam as an *earthly* religion that has no need of supernatural holiness. It is a form of vitalism or worship of life that has sanctified all that is concrete and physically material. What the novel presents is not one faith against another, she maintains, but the Muslim faith rebelling against Western unbelief, which has reduced religion to routine. 'Socialism' can in fact be substituted for 'Islam', for she came to hold a similar view of Lenin's movement. Further, she underscores the specifically Oriental nature of Emin's sensualism. The closest physical contact between him and Nelly is a spontaneous kiss he gives her as he excitedly reads Arabic poetry. Nelly cannot forget the kiss, for its intensity offends her American morality. Surprisingly enough, Šaginjan points out that Emin kisses her 'poziatski' — long and firmly on the mouth, perhaps even biting her lip. Yet essentially the act was chaste. Nelly's simultaneously enthralled and insulted reaction reveals that the encounter is between two kinds of chastity: one Oriental and naïve, the other Western and hypocritical.

It is no coincidence that Šaginjan should dwell in such detail on the kiss. The tide of the novel harks back to the ancient Greek myth of the young shepherd Endymion, whose beauty so enchanted the goddess Selene that she persuaded Zeus to put him to sleep eternally to remain young forever so that she could return again and again to kiss him. Endymion, with his perpetual youth and irresistible allure, is Heidenstam's metaphor for the Orient.

Marietta Šaginjan's life and works may appear to have gone through several different and diametrically opposed phases. At a deeper level, however, such is not the case. Her shift from Symbolism to socialism was skin-deep. In conversations with me in Peredelkino in December 1977 and Moscow in March 1981 she stressed that Russia represents the East, that the West can never understand the East, and that Bolshevism had been guided all along by a higher religious purpose.

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