

Ivan Aksenov's Novel *The Pillars of Hercules*

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This was a man of vertiginous erudition.

Nikolai Khardzhiev¹

In his memoirs, Il'ia Sel'vinsky writes: "Ivan Aksenov was in many ways an exceptional figure. In art he was everything!" The Constructivist poet enumerates the fields in which Aksenov was outstanding: radical free verse, translation, theater, French art, poetics, etc.:

Иван Аксенов – фигура по-своему исключительная. В искусстве он был всем! Он писал стихи (крайне левые по форме, без размера и рифм, вплотную приближающиеся к разговорной речи), переводил пьесы с английского («Великодушный рогоносец»),² входил в модный триумvirат режиссеров «МАБ» (Мейерхольд – Аксенов – Бебутов), написал книгу о французской живописи («Пикассо и окрестности»), но ярче всего проявил себя как законодатель неоэстетических вкусов и пользовался непререкаемым авторитетом теоретика стиха. (Сельвинский 1973: 285)

In addition to everything that Sel'vinsky mentions one could add other genres at which Aksenov also tried his hand, most notably narrative prose. The novel *Геркулесовы столпы* (*The Pillars of Hercules*) remains one of the multifaceted writer's least known works. The existence of this novel was well known already in the early 1920s. Rodchenko's graphical design for the book was mentioned in *LEF* no. 1, 1923 as an example of constructivist typographical production.³ In his

¹ «Это был человек умопомрачительной эрудиции», Nikolai Khardzhiev in conversation with Marietta Chudakova (II: 314).

² Aksenov did translate from English—primarily Elizabethan writers—but *Velikodushnyi rogonosets* (*Le cocu magnifique* by the Belgian playwright Fernand Crommelynck) was a translation from French.

³ *LEF* 1 (1923): 251.—Aksenov had at that time already invited other avant-garde artists to contribute to his books, namely Aleksandra Ekster—the poetry collection *Neuvazhitel'nye osnovaniia* (Moscow: Tsentrifuga, 1916); *Pikasso i okrestnosti* (Moscow: Tsentrifuga, 1917)—and Liubov' Popova (the poetry collection *Eifeleia. 30 od*, unpublished, ca. 1920). Earlier recurrent statements that Rodchenko's collages in Aleksandr Gan's journal *Kino-Fot* 1922, No. 1, were intended as illustrations for Aksenov's novel seem unconvincing: with the novel at

“Zametki o Maiakovskom” Nikolai Khardzhiev states that the novel was conceived in 1917.⁴ Natal’ia Adaskina, the editor of Ivan Aksenov’s selected works in which *The Pillars of Hercules* was first published in 2008, states that the novel was finished in the early 1920s, thus dating his work on the novel mainly to the years 1917–1918 (II: 340, 387).⁵

The Novel

The Pillars of Hercules consists of three parts with four to six chapters each.

Part I: *Pamiat’ devich’ia* (meaning both “Innocent [lit. ‘maidenly’] memory” and “Memory like a sieve”)

Chapter I: *Zolotyie gory* – Golden hills

Chapter II: *Predvaritel’noe osvobozhdenie* – Preliminary liberation

Chapter III: *Zvonkie izviniia* – Ringing excuses

Chapter IV: *Opriatnye opravdaniia* – Tidy justifications

Part II: *Na dobruiu pamiat’* (In good memory)

Chapter I: *Vse-taki vertitsia* – And yet it moves

Chapter II: *Kar’era istorika* – The career of a historian

Chapter III: *Tikhie otkrovennosti* – Silent revelations

Chapter IV: *Paralipomenon (na papirosnoi bumage)* – Paralipomenon (on cigarette paper)⁶

Chapter V: *Trogatel’naia istoriia* – A moving story

Part III

Chapter I: *Takelazh i klotik* – Rigging and masthead

Chapter II: *Sem’ mertvykh grobov* – Seven dead coffins

Chapter III: *Zakon i vera* – Law and Faith

Chapter IV: *Omela* – Mistletoe

Chapter V: *Mutnyi glaz* – Lackluster eyes

hand: one can find hardly any relation between the pictures and the text. Cf. Karginov (1979: 122); Lavrent’ev (1988: 178).

⁴ «Тонким знатоком произведений Лотреамона был поэт, филолог и художественный критик И. Аксенов. В оставшемся неизданном романе Аксенова «Геркулесовы столбы» [sic] (1917) один из главных персонажей занят поисками рукописей Лотреамона» (Харджиев и Тренин 1970: 323).

⁵ In her introduction to the edition of 2008 Natal’ia Adaskina repeatedly but without further explanation uses the title *Gerkulesovy stolpy romantizma*, retaining, however, the shorter established version for the publication itself (I: 37; II: 176).

⁶ *Paralipomenon*—a philosophical notion introduced by Schopenhauer (*Parerga und Paralipomena*, 1851) for digressions and remarks not belonging to the main text and published as appendices.

The generic diversity of these paratexts is striking: we find a mixture of, among other things, clichés which were used to stimulate the interest of readers in the nineteenth-century novel; quotations such as Galileo’s alleged remark “And yet it moves”; professional terminology such as the philosophical *Paralipomenon*, the naval “Rigging and masthead” or the theological “Law and Faith”; and puns like *Pamiat’ devich’ia*. Play with sound patterns like *Zvonkie izvineniia*, *Opryatnye opravdaniia* or *Paralipomenon (na papirosnoi bumage)* as well as the absence of a title for Part III—following the titles indicated for the first parts—also turns the attention of the reader to the tension between the plane of expression and the plane of content. Altogether, this diversity of expressions evokes associations to mock-heroic and Romantic narrative.

What kind of novel, then, is *The Pillars of Hercules*? At first glance it is a story about a group of Moscow upper-class youths just before World War I, with a young man by the exotic name Flavii Nikolaevich Boltarzin as the main hero. The narrative follows Flavii Nikolaevich in his wanderings, encounters, and travels for several years before and during World War I.

The novel carries an epigraph:

Il faut lui rendre justice. Il m’a beaucoup cretinisé. Que n’avait-il pas fait, s’il eût pu vivre davantage!

C-te de Lautréamont.

This is a quotation from the concluding pages of the famous proto-surrealist *Chants de Maldoror* (1869) by Comte de Lautréamont, where the author expresses his hope that the reader will at least remember him in these words:

One must give him his due. He has greatly stupefied me. What might he not have done had he lived longer!

In short, the plot of the novel is as follows. In the introductory chapter of Part I, the young Flavii Nikolaevich Boltarzin takes part in a skiing party on the outskirts of Moscow, where he unsuccessfully tries to approach Zinaida Pavlovna Lents, a rich girl to whom he is attracted. However, she is now (and, as it turns out, always) more interested in other men. On the other hand, Flavii, less a hero than an anti-hero (although he bears the name of an emperor—Flavius—and although his life will be full of the most breathtaking events), is actually most of all interested in his own intellectual project. He is obsessed by the fate of Comte de Lautréamont and “intends to devote his life to collecting material for his biography” (II: 181), that is, to write a study of the life of Isidor Ducasse (1846–1870), the enigmatic author of *The Songs of Maldoror* about whom, even almost a hundred years after Aksenov wrote his novel, scholars have been unable to find

any substantial information.⁷ At the time of the action of the novel, Lautréamont and his work were practically unknown even to the literary world in France, not to speak of other countries. But Zinaida, an upper-class Moscow girl, knows enough to have a definite opinion of him:

Но в Зинаиде Павловне этот мальчишка, сын Дюкасса, французского консула в Парагвае, приехавший в Париж сойти с ума, издать отвратительную, бесконечно длинную непристойность под названием: «Песни Мальдорора» и умереть так, что и могилы то его никто найти не может, в Зинаиде Павловне этот Сидор, псевдограф Лотрэамон, возбуждал только омерзение. О вкусах, впрочем, не спорят (о, есть бесспорная истина в этой области) и Флавий Николаевич собирается посвятить свою жизнь собиранию материалов для биографии этого маленького поэта. (II: 181)

Before leaving Moscow for his research in Paris, Flavii has a rendezvous with Zinaida at the Tretyakov Gallery. In the Pantheon of Russian realist painting (about which the narrator makes ironical remarks) he encounters another woman, Maria Markovna Korneva, composer *in spe*, whom he will meet again in Paris. In Flavii's absence Zinaida Lents marries a man by the name of Voronin, but she soon takes a lover, a mystical figure of Nordic appearance ("mother—Polish, father—Irish") with the strange name Patrikii Braiss, who apparently infects her with syphilis. Flavii Nikolaevich rushes back to Moscow to comfort Zinaida, but she suddenly throws herself under a train.

In Part II Flavii leaves Moscow once more, now travelling to Latin America in order to find materials about the author of *The Songs of Maldoror* in his birthplace, here given as Asunción, the capital of Paraguay. There Flavii discovers nothing about Ducasse-Lautréamont but soon finds himself in the middle of a local miniature revolution and is forced to flee. On the boat back to Europe he encounters a professional revolutionary, a certain Swede called Rainer Skram, who was recently fighting on the other side of the Asunción barricades. It appears that Skram is also a Maldoror specialist: "And they kept Maldororing for three days" (*I oni Mal'dororili dnia tri podriad*, II: 220). Skram involves Flavii in further revolutionary activities, now focusing on Germany. An anarchist republic is organized—the action takes place already in 1918—but fails. After Skram's sudden death Flavii becomes involved in a new project: to publish the writings of the deceased leader, including his over 600 page-long dissertation, *On Diphthongs in Norwegian as a Result of the Regress of Melodic Accentuation*, allegedly a work of great importance for comparative metrics (II: 228).⁸ Back in Paris, Flavii meets the woman from the Tretyakov Gallery, Maria the composer, who

⁷ For an English introduction to Lautréamont and *The Songs of Maldoror*, see de Jonge (1973).

⁸ The published Russian text has *metodicheskogo udareniia*, a misprint for *melodicheskogo udareniia*.

lives a miserable life and asks him for help; but the relation does not develop further. From now on, nothing more is said about Flavii's life project, the study of Lautréamont and his works.

In part III Flavii is back in Moscow and desperate to understand what to do with his life. He is afraid of making any decisions but experiences a great need for love. He decides to go to a prostitute, *gospozha N*, but finally in bed with her thinks only about the dead Zina.

So far, Aksenov's novel is written from the point of view of the hero, Flavii Nikolaevich, with long passages in indirect free speech. However, in a kind of epilogue, chapter IV of the third part entitled "Mistletoe," the perspective changes. Here the narrator, a Russian officer obviously close to Aksenov himself, describes finding a package of love letters in an antique drawer in an idyllic and forgotten old house with a beautiful garden in a little Russian provincial town where his regiment has made a halt. The nine beautiful letters between a deceased man and *M. K.*—probably the composer Maria Korneva—are included in the novel. The main topic of the correspondence is a long-planned meeting which ultimately seems to have taken place when the male correspondent has left his house, the town, and Russia for Paris.

After what at first glance would seem to be the ending of a fragmentary novel, Flavii Nikolaevich suddenly reappears. On a grotesque-mystical trip described in a fairy-tale manner that takes him to eastern Siberia and perhaps halfway to Tibet, Flavii finally encounters the mysterious Patrikii Braiss (or Patrick Brice). He kills this foreigner in revenge for infecting Zinaida with syphilis—or making her believe she was infected, which in any case made her commit suicide. Flavii then returns westward, probably to Moscow, but here the narrator finally leaves him:

Все, что осталось прожить Флавию Николаевичу, протекало в обстановке, настолько подверженной наблюдению и настолько принадлежа истории всем известных событий вошло в нее, что от нее его биографии, а не повести, которую я сейчас дописал – не отделить. (II: 285)

Lautréamont

Who was this Comte de Lautréamont who plays such an important role in Aksenov's novel? His real name was Isidore Ducasse, born in 1846 in Montevideo, Uruguay (not in Asunción, Paraguay, as the erratic narrator of the novel wants it) and dead in Paris in 1870. Almost nothing is known about the life of Ducasse-Lautréamont. But thanks to his grotesque infernal "preachings," *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1869), the author was to have a major influence on modern French literature and, together with Baudelaire and Rimbaud, to be considered as one of the great *poètes maudits*—"accursed poets." *The Songs of Maldoror* was

published just before the author's death at the age of only 24. The first edition of the book was minimal and hardly even distributed. Only in 1917 did the poet Philippe Soupault find a copy of *Les Chants de Maldoror* in a bouquiniste shop in Paris, after which Lautréamont was rediscovered by the French surrealists. Thanks to writers and artists like André Breton, Max Ernst, and Réne Magritte, Lautréamont's work became a central phenomenon in the French literary life of the 1920s and 1930s. How then could Ivan Aksenov, already before or during World War I, have become well acquainted with Lautréamont's work, which was familiar at best to a handful of people in Paris? This is only one of the many enigmas of Aksenov's life in general and of *The Pillars of Hercules* in particular.

It seems that Lautréamont had a very select group of admirers among Paris artists and writers already before the war. In her reminiscences of the painter Modigliani, whom she met in Paris in 1910 and in 1911, Anna Akhmatova says that "he always carried *Les Chants de Maldoror* in his pocket. At that time the book was a bibliographical rarity."⁹ Could Aksenov have learned about Lautréamont from Akhmatova? In 1910 he had indeed been best man at Nikolai Gumilev and Akhmatova's wedding in Kiev, but this was obviously before Akhmatova met Modigliani, and later they had little or no contact. The Russian reader was introduced to Lautréamont for the first time in 1913 through the translation of Remy de Gourmont's anthology *Le livre des Masques*, where fragments of *The Songs of Maldoror* were translated by Mikhail Kuzmin. Aksenov was probably familiar with *Le livre des Masques* as well as its Russian translation and searched out Lautréamont's book during his visit to Paris in spring 1914, when the artists Aleksandra Ekster and Aleksandr Arkhipenko introduced him to Picasso, George Braque, Robert Delaunay, and, possibly, to Modigliani.¹⁰ From the novel it is clear that Aksenov was very well informed about both Lautréamont and his poetry, although its pseudo-Gothic and grotesque style can hardly be said to have been a major influence on his writing.¹¹ Almost like Flavii Nikolaevich Boltarzin's plan in the novel to write a biography of Ducasse-de Lautréamont, Aksenov's own insights into the work of the great "accursed poet" remain surrounded with questions.

⁹ Ахматова (2001: 15). In his reminiscences of the poet Viacheslav Vs. Ivanov notes: "She was in principle interested in the controversy about whether Modigliani could have read Lautréamont. Ehrenburg thought—no, Lautréamont, he said, was only discovered in the 1920s. But Khardzhiev refuted him: 'The difference between a scholar and a journalist.'" (Иванов 1991: 490).

¹⁰ The Italian painter's name, however, does not seem to appear in any letters, memoirs or other documents related directly to Aksenov.

¹¹ Although Nikolai Khardzhiev calls Aksenov "a refined connoisseur of Lautréamont's works" (see above, note 4), his name is conspicuously absent from the first Russian edition of Lautréamont's complete works, published with great care by G. Kosikov, who also notes how little interest he aroused in Russia (Лотреамон 1998).

The Anti-novel

Aksenov's novel, more than anything else, is an amazing kaleidoscopic exercise of styles. The narrative about unhappy and melodramatic love and historical cataclysms is permeated with authorial irony and full of pseudoromantic addresses to "dear readers, dear lady readers" (*dorogie chitateli i dorogie chitatel'nitsy*).

Я не стану утомлять вас, уважаемый читатель, полным изложением этого разговора и его дальнейших последствий, полагаясь на вашу собственную память, тем более, что мои милые читательницы, мои прекрасные читательницы, мои обожаемые читательницы... Не надо, Бога ради, не надо этого выражения. Я ведь всегда дослушиваю и разве я сказал, что это плохо? Разве я позволил сказать своему персонажу что-нибудь такое? Да нет же, нет. И потом, если я что-нибудь вам дурное сделал, а то, ведь, я, ей богу, ничего, кроме хорошего. Ну? Разве я не прав? Прав. И так?.. И так, когда Флавий Николаевич Болгарзин, в условленный день и на час раньше назначенного времени приближался ко Святая-Святых Лаврушенского переулка¹² [...]. (II: 185)

This verbose, ironic conversation with the imagined readers, typical of the romantic parodic genre, continues throughout the novel, until the narration suddenly stops in the middle of a fragmentary sentence (also a romantic device):

А я не хотел бы ее [повесть] кончать, потому что, если я поставлю точку, я уже не буду видеть ваших блестящих, позвольте считать их черными, дорогая читательница, глаз, а передо мной станут серо-синие, большие и круглые, как солнечное затмение, глаза и я буду несчастен. Потому что, да будет известно вам, дорогая читательница, женщина, которую я люблю, меня, стыдно сказать, не любит и не хочет разговаривать о бессмертии души под тем предлогом, будто я ко всему отношусь легко. Она не понимает, поймите, что это происходит от моего отношения к весовой единице и мой коэффициент к русскому фунту = 120, тогда как... (II: 285)

The most striking feature of *The Pillars of Hercules* is not the development of the bizarre plot centered on the adventures of the young hero and his friends, but rather the lyrical, philosophical or metatextual digressions from it. Aksenov actually writes in the tradition of the parodic or mock-heroic novel, which since Cervantes' *Don Quixote* has been the forever-young double of the "serious" philosophical, educational, or political novel. Aksenov's catalogue-like digressions, which at times completely get the upper hand of the narration, play with the styles of Rabelais, Laurence Sterne, and E. T. A. Hoffmann. The innocent hero's

¹² The Tretyakov Gallery.

constant travels over the world, which involve him in abortive revolutions, confrontations with exotic cultures and conversations with persons of different worldviews, all point back to the classics of the parodic novel, especially, of course, Voltaire's *Candide*. But there are also obvious ironical allusions to Russian literature and revolutionary or pseudo-revolutionary themes (including the frequent travels by train) in Chernyshevsky, Dostoevsky, and especially Andrei Belyi, whose meandering ornamental prose is often the object of imitation and/or parody. Many intertextual links may have been understandable only to a small group of people even at the time of the writing of the novel, not to speak of the twenty-first century reader.

In some ways *The Pillars of Hercules* seems to anticipate the somewhat better-known prose work of Aksenov's colleague and friend Sergei Bobrov. In 1914, together with Nikolai Aseev and Boris Pasternak, Bobrov had formed the futurist group Tsentrifuga. Aksenov joined the group in 1916 and together with Bobrov soon became active in its publishing activities.¹³ During his colleague's involvement at the fronts of World War I and the revolutions of 1917 it was Bobrov who was primarily responsible for practical activities and the often provocative proclamations in the name of the group. Starting as a talented post-symbolist poet, he later turned to prose. His first attempt in this direction, *Kritika zhiteiskoi filosofii* (*Critique of the Philosophy of Life*), was made as early as 1912–1913 and was scheduled to appear with the imprint of Tsentrifuga in 1918, but for some reason it was never printed.¹⁴ Bobrov's second prose work, *Vosstanie mizantropov* (*The Uprising of the Misanthropes*, 1922) was the last title to be published by Tsentrifuga. The interrelation between Bobrov's eccentric prose and Aksenov's *The Pillars of Hercules*, which was conceived during the war years at a time when the two writers were in frequent epistolary contact (I: 63–153), requires further research.¹⁵ Obviously, the two Tsentrifugists shared an interest in many things, e.g., Hoffman, Belyi, French symbolism, metrics, pseudonyms, and all kinds of parody and self-parody. In her analysis of *The Uprising of the Misanthropes*, Daniela Rizzi describes the style of this anti-utopian and parodic work in terms that could also be applied to Aksenov's novel. As characteristic features of Bobrov's prose, Rizzi points out

¹³ "Istoriia 'Tsentrifugi'" (Флейшман 2006: 521–543).

¹⁴ This Hoffmannesque mystification by the pseudonym "K. Bubéra"—a 'critique' of the philosophy of the German romantic's *Tomcat Murr*—has survived only in proof sheet (Бобров 1993). Aksenov alludes to "the venerable K. Bubera" in his novel (II: 283).

¹⁵ Cf. Mikhail Gasparov's comment: "It seems to me that there is a common denominator in the prose of the neighboring 'Tsentrifuga' poets: in Bobrov, in Aseev's forgotten 'Sanatorium', in Aksenov's still [in 1993] unpublished *The Pillars of Hercules*, in the early prose of Pasternak, which has become classical. But what exactly—I would not say without further study."—«Мне кажется, есть что-то общее в прозе соседствовавших в «Центрифуге» поэтов: у Боброва, в забытом «Санатории» Асеева, в ждущих издания «Геркулесовых столпах» Аксенова, в ставшей классикой ранней прозе Пастернака. Но что именно – не изучив, не скажу» (Бобров 1993: 89).

сплетение литературных мотивов (клишированных приемов научной фантастики [...]) с сатирическим обыгрыванием современной действительности. [...] Итак, прямо с заглавия начинается вкрапление в повествование аллюзий, реминисценций, цитат, насыщающих его, и образующих тот слой, который, при более пристальном рассмотрении оказывается особенно значимым – это слой, ориентированный на внеположенный литературный (и, шире, культурный) текст.¹⁶

The Pillars of Hercules belongs to a genre which, in the tradition of the Menippean satire, permits the inclusion of practically any kind of discourse. Sometimes the narrator makes digressions above the head of his own hero or even as if polemicizing with him, entering into current literary or artistic debates to which Aksenov (but none of his heroes) actually had access. When Flavii Nikolaevich goes to the rendezvous in the Tretyakov Gallery he adores, the narrator comments that he personally detests that kitschy “soufflé” in national style with its collection of Russian realist painters (not least Valentin Serov, towards whom Aksenov had a life-long aversion).¹⁷ In one passage the narrator comments on the literary situation of which the author himself was very much a part, anticipating with biting irony how critics will attack the novel (soon to be published by Tsentrifuga) for its lack of any political or moral educational value:

Кстати. Так как эту книгу будут обвинять в безнравственности и порнографии (особенно те критики, которые ее не будут читать, ругая из доверия к нашему книгоиздательству), то мы видим себя в необходимости (этот оборот речи отвратителен, но его применяют все наши правительства, ничего не поделаешь) раз навсегда исповедать ее (книги) основные тезисы, дабы с одной стороны нас не винули в намеренном утаивании истинного смысла повествования, а с другой не упрекали бы в развращении подрастающего поколения. Вот, значит, что мы хотим этим сказать. – Надо уважать своих родителей. Любить своих родственников. Избегать мясной пищи. Пить только безалкогольные напитки (если противное не вызывается государственной необходимостью). Вступать в полообшение только с женщиной и только для ее оплодотворения, причем испытывать от сего какое-либо удовольствие совершенно недопустимо, чрезвычайно безнравственно и чревато последствиями. Научные исследования должны позволяться только вполне добродетельным людям. Правительство, обладающее полнотой власти, сегодня, в этом городе, есть лучшее из всех возможных правительств. Нельзя читать всякую

¹⁶ Рицци (1999: 472). If Aksenov’s *Pillars of Hercules* can be considered a *roman à clef* in the way Rizzi interprets *The Uprising of the Misanthropes* is an open question. One hint in this direction is the name of the writer who—as Maria Korneva in vain tries to convince Flavii Nikolaevich—should write a preface to Skram’s metrical dissertation: *Gumniuk* (a contamination of Nikolai Gumilev and David Burliuk) (II: 247).

¹⁷ Sergei Eisenstein especially remembers Aksenov’s sarcastic comment on Serov’s portrait of the actress Mariia Ermolova, which the director once analyzed for its dynamic composition: “Well, she was always acting with her tummy protruding...” (Эйзенштейн 2000: 135).

попавшуюся книгу, следует читать преимущественно (если не исключительно) издания Центрифуги.

Все эти тезисы в образной форме защищаются данной книгой, почему она не только должна быть признана нравственной, но и рекомендована Министерством Народного Просвещения, как обязательное пособие, во все средние женские и мужские учебные заведения, а также и на акушерские курсы. (II: 197–198)

The action of the novel often comes to a halt when the narrator lets loose dazzling chains of visual metonymies. Sometimes the metonymical catalogue is motivated by the actual connection of the hero, Flavii Nikolaevich, to a means of swift communication, be it a tramway, a train or a car. Thus, for example, when he—“the Maldororian reader”—is leaving the doctor with Zinaida Lents, who has received her fatal diagnosis, the movement and the outer and inner planes are intertwined and the hero seems to dissolve in the surroundings:

Сумерки все больше овладевали положением и положительный шофер, включив лампы, все кругом погрузил в небытие: живым оказался только предрадиаторный плес света, остров блаженных – автомобиль, да щебечущая пыль в освещении и горящие белые бабочки в луче прожекторов. Болгарзину думалось, что не из фонаря, а из сердца его бьют эти фонтаны и он радовался, если толчком дороги подбрасывались высоко в черное окружение прямые и бесконечные раструбы луча, а цис<тола> или диастола совпадали с ним. Мальдорорный читатель разбивался в пыль этим огнем и возрождался акацией в цвету, чтобы вновь потерять всяческий образ и подобие чего бы то ни было, в смысле черной и быстрой, фиктивной ночи. (II: 203–204)

When Flavii Nikolaevich travels by train along the banks of Lake Baikal (on his way to the Pacific, heading for Paraguay), the segmentation of the landscape seen through the window as the train passes through a tunnel produces striking metonymical effects:

Вот что он увидел. Он увидел золотые горы и золотую степь. Это было на границе весны и лета. Чувства обострились и обработанные паровой машиной штамповались в бесчисленные пентаграммы из чистого золота, которые и отбрасывались на изумрудный рынок арийской впадины. Если такую лилию понюхать, то нос будет желтый; это было известно Флавию Николаевичу и он чихнул. Как только это произошло, машина сделала поворот, свет потух, и, после большого дыма с копотью тоннель кончился. Тогда золото засыпало решительно все, но за ним стало зелено, а потом были очень синие горы под ярким небом и это было рукой подать. Однако, на меже зеленого и синего обнаружилось подвижное многоточие. Это был, понятно, караван верблюдов и стало ясно, что до гор страшно, невероятно далеко, еще дальше, чем до верблюдов. И все

это сдавливало грудь и заставляло человека чувствовать себя царем неограниченного пространства.

Many things here—the train, the metonymical collage, the synesthetic effects—recall the prose of the young Boris Pasternak from the same World War I period, especially *Detstvo Liuvers* (1918). Different, of course, is Aksenov's almost compulsive need to interrupt the flow of narration with one more ironic digression:

... чувствовать себя царем неограниченного пространства. Это все были плоды машинного производства пейзажей и Болтарзин еще раз прославлял торжество техники, развернутой промышленности, а также и высокой организации, позабыл, что он совершает акт присвоения прибавочной эстетической стоимости, о которой не догадывались ни обработанные верблюды, ни безобразные, вблизи, сопатые туземцы. (II: 211)

The Verbal and the Visual

The metonymical principle in the prose of the young Boris Pasternak works through chains of associations that link detail to detail but also sound to sound. In Aksenov's metonymical cascades it is more than anything else contours and colors that seem to be the connecting nodes. This is not surprising for an author who wrote the first important book about Pablo Picasso, the inventor of cubist metonymy. However, in comparison with the analytical cubism discussed in *Picasso and the Environs*, the color gamut of Aksenov's prose is much richer:

Был тот час, когда солнце, без видимой причины, вспыхивает ракетой, на высшей точке восходящей ветви своей кривой; час, когда лучи бегут параллельно земле и зажигают золотом кругло замершие колонны сосен, когда небо само не знает, что оно: голубое или желтое, снег обращается в зернистую икру пентаграмм света и счастья, глаза горят, щеки вспыхивают ярче рубина полночных семафоров, и все-таки, ничего не видят – ресницы-то длинные, и на них иней, тоже блестящий. (I: 177)

This colorful visual mosaic seems closely connected with tendencies in contemporary Russian painting which interested Aksenov perhaps even more than the ascetic cubism of Picasso or Braque. Already in one of his first public appearances early in 1913 the young critic had made himself a name as an energetic spokesman for the Jack of Diamonds group, which at the time included energetic painters inspired by French fauvism and cubism and Russian neo-primitivism such as Il'ia Mashkov, Aristarkh Lentulov, Petr Konchalovsky, and Aleksandra Ekster.¹⁸ Lentulov was a particular focus of Aksenov's interest at the time he was

¹⁸ "К вопросу о современном состоянии русской живописи" (I: 193–198). (English translation "On the Problem of the Contemporary State of Russian Art" in Bowlit 1976: 60–69.)

working on *The Pillars of Hercules*.¹⁹ Natal'ia Adaskina notes one passage in the novel where one can see an interesting parallel to Lentulov's well-known Moscow paintings of 1913, especially *Moscow* and *Vasilii Blazhennyi* (I: 338).

Back in Moscow after his adventures in Latin America and the German revolution, Flavii Nikolaevich ascends the Ivan the Great Belfry in the Kremlin in order to get a fresh view of reality in general and of his own life in particular. The Moscow panorama, overwhelming in its multitude of colors, forms and movement, can indeed recall the Lentulov's *panneaux*. But the point of view is different, and the atmosphere not so joyous as in *Moscow* or *Vasilii Blazhennyi*. In fact, the city is aggressive and threatens the hero with all its sharp pointed forms, which he sees from above:

Москва двинулась на своего занесшегося потребителя. Сначала пошевелились трубы самых высоких домов и погнули в сторону лыжника²⁰ свои черные телескопы, крыши, выкрашенные ярью-медянкой, втянули бока и нацелили прыжок, железная дрожь пробежала от переулка по переулку и четыре фаллических обелиска завода Келлера осторожно подвинулись на левый берег Москвы-реки. [...] Церковь Никиты-Мученика бросила в Болтарзина своим циферблатом, но не докинула и он влип к колокольне Никитского Монастыря, только что превратившей свой крест в арбалет и накаливший золотую стрелу апрельского луча в сторону соглядаята. То было стартом: все золото, вся синька и сурик, смиренно лежавшие на сорока-сороках, съезжились, качнули и брызнули хороводом расцветающей неожиданности. Они били в колокола, перекидывались солнечным зайчиком и шатали шапками на предмет закидания несчастного наблюдателя. (II: 249–250).

The cityscape which seems to attack and crush the hero in some ways recalls Vladimir Mayakovsky's "Self-portrait," also called "The Yellow Blouse" (1918?), where the futurist poet in his well-known top-hat and yellow-black-striped jacket is pressed down by the high buildings surrounding him. In Aksenov's description, however, the martyr-like hero is *above* the cityscape whose aggressive spires, crosses, chimneys, and "phallic obelisks" threaten to pierce him, calling forth the image of the urban Saint Sebastian (perhaps not coincidentally a classical homosexual icon):

Всеобщая ярость достигала крайних пределов: шпили, кресты, громоотводы, дефлекторы и трубные колпаки – все были направлены в грудь

¹⁹ Aksenov's brilliant long essay on Lentulov, unpublished in the writer's lifetime, was probably written in 1919 (II: 250–284).

²⁰ "The skier," a reference to Flavii's participation in the ski-party in the first chapter of the novel, is only one of the many ironic epithets used for the hero: "the Maldororian reader," "the friend of the long-suffering Zinaida," "the Laplatian fortifyer" [referring to Flavii's activity as barricade-builder in the Latin American revolution], "the expert on metrics," etc., etc.

Флавия Николаевича: в ней перекрещивались бесчисленные траектории, она пронизывалась неисчислимыми выстрелами света и ребра ее оказались лесами дома Титовых по Калашному переулку. (II: 250)

Even the Kremlin and all its architectural ensembles so harmoniously enclosed in Lentulov's synthetic composition *Moscow* take part in the fierce assault on the hero:

Зато Кремль получил большую свободу действий. Медленно и важно, как по чину положено, как медведь вокруг козы или грузовик перед земским мостом, заерзал, споткнулся, клюнул и пошел в круговую, дрыгая зеленой Кутафьей, орлеными Спасскими, розовой Собакиной и облезлыми Троицкими бастеями, в то время, как почерневшие, но с золотыми отливами, маковки пыжились наподобие пузыряного замка из-под солломки мальчика, отчаявшегося в искусстве пускать радужный шарик свободного полета. Болтарзин утратил всякое хладнокровие: все лезло и перло на него: рев и громозд стояли невыносимые; он делал тщательные, но тщетные усилия отбояриться от наседающего кирпича, слишком хорошо ощущая последнюю минуту личного самоусовершенствования. (II: 250)²¹

If Moscow ranks first among the cities in Aksenov's work, second is without doubt Paris, which is a frequent point of reference in everything he wrote—criticism, poetry, and prose. The writer seems to have been infatuated with the city. It was here that his most important encounter with contemporary European art took place during his journey in spring 1914. His poetry afterwards often reflects images of the French capital—the cityscape, the streets, the bars, the metro, the *flâneurs* and their women. Paris also inevitably appears in *The Pillars of Hercules*:

Париж завивался и разбивался в хрустальных ресторанах, в камнях коко-ток, в разноцветных жидкостях полных стаканов. Этот вечер был один сплошной поцелуй и красивые рекламные огни сводились приближающимся прикосновением. [...] На бульвар они врезались пешком, в каскад авто, но добрые звери пневматически обегали их, виляя лучами. Огни вывесок падали и вертелись, каштаны, прорезанные ими, распинались за автономию и ершились черными лучами, но и они были свет, свет, свет. Улица редела и трещала от взрыва бензина и зеркальный асфальт игрался горящей ночью, как мячиком, игрался змеиной толкотней тротуаров, как телеграфной лентой, как бесконечной бумагой ротационной машины, газеты *Temps* с ее голубыми ананасами. (II: 235–236)

²¹ An interesting discussion of Lentulov's paintings in relation to the Tsentrifuga group is in John Malmstad's analysis of Pasternak's ekphrasis poems "Mel'khior" and "Ob Ivane Velikom," both from 1914 (Malmstad 1992: 301–218).

Aksenov's prose is often constructed according to the same principles as his poetry, where John Bowlt (in this volume) especially notes

the absence of hierarchy in the world of images, movements and gestures. There is neither governor, nor governed, neither cause, nor effect—as if the action were taking place inside some gigantic kaleidoscope [...].

Elements of ekphrasis are certainly to be found in Aksenov's Parisian digressions. Here again, a painter more colorful than the analytical cubists seems to be of importance: Robert Delaunay, about whose work Aksenov was planning to write a monograph.²² Aksenov became familiar with Delaunay's cubist views of Paris during his visit to the French capital in 1914. He shared the painter's fascination with the Eiffel tower—the symbol of the modernity and power of Paris—and made it the theme of a whole cycle of poems.²³

The Pillars of Hercules

The title *Gerkulesovy stolpy*—*The Pillars of Hercules*—is not the least enigmatic element of Ivan Aksenov's book. Why this ancient mythological or semi-mythological monument, usually identified with the exit from Gibraltar, a place outside of which, according to the legend, was the Great Sea where the island of Atlantis disappeared (described by Plato in the dialogues *Timaeus* and *Critias*)? The two Pillars of Hercules, according to Roman tradition, bore the text *Nec plus ultra* or *Non plus ultra* ('nothing beyond this'), warning mariners to go no further.

But the Pillars of Hercules are not only a geographical and mythological emblem connected with the legend of the sunken Atlantis. The title page of Francis Bacon's *Instauratio magna* (1620), which contains his manifesto for the advancement of learning, *Novum Organum*, shows a galleon passing between the Pillars of Hercules. The allegoric meaning of the picture is that daring new knowledge breaks the boundaries of old prejudices (the Mediterranean), exploring the hitherto unknown (the Atlantic Ocean). The Latin text at the bottom of the title page reads: *Multi pertransibunt et augebitur scientia* ("Many shall run to and fro and knowledge will be increased"), a quotation from *The Book of Daniel* 12: 4 (see illustration).

²² The book, *Delaunay and Dynamism*, was announced in 1917 on one of the back pages of *Picasso and the Environs*, but it was never printed. The manuscript seems to be lost (II: 340).

²³ *Eifeleia. 30 od* (ca. 1920, II: 116–145).

The Pillars of Hercules on the title page of Francis Bacon's *Instauratio Magna*,
which contains his *Novum Organum* (1620).

Francis Bacon was not only one of the founders of modern empirical knowledge and the enemy of superstition and “idols.” According to a parallel history, he was also deeply involved in a different kind of knowledge—occultism, where “enlightenment” was understood in Rosicrucian and Freemason terms.²⁴ In occult literature one can find many interpretations attributed to the figure of the two columns, but one element is always present: the pillars represent the entrance or

²⁴ Cf. Yates (1972) and Dawkins (1984).

the gateway to the world of the initiate. Behind the columns are the Mysteries and, consequently, the source of true knowledge and power. In the Freemasonic tradition the Pillars of Hercules as the gateway to the sphere of the enlightened are associated with the twin pillars that stood at the entrance to Solomon's Temple.²⁵ Furthermore, by analogy these "Great Pillars" are also identified with the astrological sign of the Gemini and the twin brothers Castor and Pollux, often called the *dioscuri*. This sign appears in the title of Boris Pasternak's first collection *Bliznets v tuchakh* (*Twin in the Clouds*, 1913). As Susanna Witt has pointed out in an analysis of a poem from this collection, *castor* is the Latin name for the beaver, in Russian *bobr*, thus alluding to the organizer of Tsentrifuga, Sergei Bobrov.²⁶ This connection should have been evident to the polyglot author of *The Pillars of Hercules*. If Sergei Bobrov is Castor, one of the twins symbolized by the Great Pillars, the candidate for Pollux would seem to be the other of the two *dioscuri* or comrades-in-arms of Tsentrifuga: Ivan Aksenov himself. The possible semantic connection between the second pair of names, however, remains unclear.

The Pillars in the title of Ivan Aksenov's deeply ironic novel can thus be interpreted in several ways. The initiation symbolism seems to be the most prominent. What the novel actually tells is the story of an unachieved or *unsuccessful initiation* of the hero Flavii Nikolaevich—as a lover, as a Lautréamont biographer, as a revolutionary, as a specialist in metrics. However, the Pillars can also symbolize a possibly more successful initiation: the introduction of the reader into the mystery of an endless universe of cultural references, echoes, and reminiscences soon doomed to sink like Atlantis into the ocean of oblivion.

²⁵ References to the occult symbolism of the Pillars of Hercules are to be found in numerous sources, not least on the Internet, e.g., <http://www.zoence.com/article/the-pillars-of-hercules> (accessed on 30.03.2011).

²⁶ According to Susanna Witt, in Pasternak's context, Pollux was an anagram for his friend, the critic Konstantin Loks (Витт 2008: 183).

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