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ANDREI BITOV'S BOOKISH LANDSCAPES:
TRAVELLING THROUGH THE TEXTS IN "UROKI ARMENII"

"— мы еще почитаем, поглядим."
(О. Мандельштам, *Египетская марка*)

1.

Susan Sontag's polemical essay "Against Interpretation" (1964) deplores the compulsive urge to translate the world and, more specifically, the work of art, into authoritative (allegoric) meaning. Sontag discerns a modern terrorism of hermeneutics and the idolization of (signified) content over (signifying) form. The vehicle of the hermeneutic dictatorship is interpretation. Interpretation is "the revenge of the intellect upon the world" (Sontag 1983: 98), the assumption that in the post-mythic world the object is in perennial need of being redeemed, of being made sense of, and that, in fact, such signification can be suspended.

Allegoric reading thus depletes the world. Sontag has the allegoric "translator" "naturalize" the results of his reading by declaring them the innate property of the text:

However far the interpreters alter the text (...), they must claim to be reading off a sense that is already there. (Sontag 1983:98)

Sontag deplores the loss of mythic "innocence" (Sontag 1983:96). The hermeneutic urge presupposes a world in which meaning is no longer naturally at home, but has become detachable from its "carrier". In myth, meaning is not redeemable in the act of interpretation:

Here, the meaning of objects and occurrences is not the result of the individual's interpretation (...), here, "meaning" is, so to speak, inspired by nature and "real" in the sense that its efficacy can dispense with our interpretation and attribution. (Hansen-Löve 1987:14)

If the spell of allegoric reading is to be broken and interpretation is to cease its violation of the text (whose essential semantic stability "Against Interpretation" tacitly assumes), attention must shift to its formal properties. The question whether such "description of form" (Sontag 1983:103) would not in itself presuppose another reading (als the debate surrounding the "open" work of art assumed!) goes beyond the confines of Sontag's polemics. What is noteworthy is the conscious decision to suspend (allegoric) reading for a seemingly more contemplative approach to form which appears to promise the discontinuation of interpretation.

Art seeking to escape interpretation attempts to "reinstate the magic of the word" (Sontag 1983:101). It thus conveys the "secular myth which wants language to imitate the idea and which (...) thinks of signs as motivated signs." (Barthes 1967:158) The word whose formal structure is in (perfect) harmony with its signifying function restores a degree of mythic unity. The defiance of interpretation reflects the melancholic desire to restore such unity to the world of difference, or, in Andrei Bitov's words, to overcome "the vandalism of differentiation" (Bitov 1987:75).

Bitov's *Uroki Armenii* (1969)² participate in the *τόπος* of the readability of the world. The travelling writer poses as the reader of what seems inscribed into the world.

Ереван — моя азбука, мой букварь, мой каменный словарь-разговорник.
(...) Я шушу страницами кварталов, улиц и площадей (...). (Битов 1978:10)

Uroki Armenii present themselves als a textual journey across a textual land, *mir-kniga*³. The traveller, throughout in very close proximity to the real author himself, carries with him an emblematic "model" of the foreign land whose readability is guaranteed by the traveller's own habitual hermeneutic procedures.

Этот макет справедлив еще и потому, что соответствует наиболее расхожим представлениям о стране. Город? Ереван. Озеро? Севан. Гора? Арапат. Это мы знаем назубок (...). (Битов 1978:48)

Armenia is "Encyclopedic landscape" (Barthes 1982:219) littered with decipherable signs. If in Roland Barthes's early semiotic investigations of urban space every object "speaks" to the stroller ("Modern man, urban man, engages in continuous reading (...)", [Barthes 1988: 165]), the Armenian traveller in *Uroki Armenii* finds that even Armenia's "natural" symbols have been processed into the emblematic code of the consumer world. Such removal of the "original", a consistent concern in Bitov's writing, is corroborated on the narration level.⁴ It is only on the very last day of his stay that Bitov finally manages to see Armenia's mountain:

Он (Ararat, S.S.) оказался не таким лучезарным, как на этикетках или фресках московского ресторана "Арапат". (Битов 1978:67)

The traveller-reader's initial confidence in the possibility of Armenia's decipherment gives way to increased uncertainty. The *prishlets* is uninitiated into the right code that would unlock the country to him. Armenia defies his efforts to decipher: "Etu knigu mne raskryli posredine, i ia nichego ne ponimal." (Bitov 1978:49)

Uroki Armenii share in the literary myth of Armenia's inaccessibility and herme(neu)tic seclusion. The focus of her intricacy has shifted from topography (Pushkin's *Puteshestvie v Arzum* (1836) describes the descent into Armenia as an act of distinct border-crossing: "Ia stal podymat'sia na Bezobda', goru, otdeliaiushchuiu Gruziiu ot drevnei Armenii. (...) Mne predstavilis' novye gory, novyi gorizont (...)." [Pushkin 1960:434]) to cognition. The country hermetically sealed by mountaneous ridges is hermeneutically sealed by the multiplicity of its codes. Mandel'shtam's *Puteshestvie v Armeniiu* (1933) devotes itself to a "physiology of reading" ("*fiziologiiia chteniia*") and his Armenian cycle of poems focusses interpretative failure ("... Akh, Erivan', Erivan'! Ne gorod — oreshkek kalenyi./ Ulits tvoikh bol'sherotykh krivye liubliu vavilony./ Ia bestolkovuiu zhizn', kak mulla svoi koran, zamušolil./ Vremia svoe zamorozil i krovi goriachei ne prolil./" [Mandel'shtam 1971:163; Mandel'shtam 1967:152]).⁵ It is Mandel'shtam's "*zamušolennaia*" *kniga* which Bitov ultimately refuses to read: "Ne khochu ia chitat' etu zamušolennuiu knigu (...)." (Bitov 1978: 50)

3.

Bitov's intra-textual travelogue reveals itself as an eminently inter-textual one. The path the traveller-writer is following is strewn with quotation and literary allusion. Pushkin's, Mandel'shtam's, Bely's Armenian texts orchestrate a meta-discourse on the poetics of travel in Armenia which appears to partly determine Bitov's itinerary. The analogy between travelling (in Armenia), reading (Armenia) and writing (the Armenian travelogue) is reinforced: again, the travelling writer turns reader (of the pre-texts feeding into his own travelogue) and produces a text which is in itself the result of manifold reading. Bitov is not the first Armenian traveller, but a compulsive latecomer. Lost for the right word, he finds solace in quotation:

И так же выразить это нечем. И поскольку выразить нечем, чувство прибегает к цитированию. (Битов 1978:58)

Uroki Armenii map out Bitov's intertextual poetics. The writer as reader re-opens texts always already in existence.

Дело в том, что если человек пишет, то он сам познает то, чего до этого не знал. (...) Гении, быть может, познают то, чего до них никто не знал. Прочие — заново открывают (...). Человек, собственно, не дарит миру ничего нового (...). (Битов 1978:174)⁶

The motto to Bitov's travelogue, from *Puteshestvie v Arzrum*, has Pushkin confidently and wilfully inscribe his own name into the wall of an ancient derelict minaret, over and across "neskol'ko neizvestnykh imen, natsarapannykh na kirpichakh (...)." (Bitov 1978:3) *Uroki Armenii*, on the other hand, rather shares in the Romantic search for the lost inscription, the missing word restoring the original's completeness and unity. Bitov's Armenian *puteshestvie* is, with Hugo's preface to *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831; a novel essentially concerned with the readability of the world), "written about that word" (Hugo 1978:25):

И не есть ли мой судорожный поиск непременно одного слова (...) косвенное доказательство того, что существует такое слово для этой страны (...)? (Битов 1978:71)

Uroki Armenii initiate Bitov's search for the "signifier of signifiers", the word-icon releasing his journey out of the circularity of *tsitirovanie*.

4.

The Armenian Traveller's inability and ultimate refusal to read is matched by his inability to see. The verb *videt'* represents a solid lexical stratum in *Uroki Armenii*. It is conspicuously foregrounded by manifold repetitive use throughout the text. Before its background the travelogue develops as an account of the failing vision. The section "Uroki geografii" has the author fly into Erevan. The very first attempt to visualize Armenia fails: "(...) ja nichego ne videl vnizu (...)." (Bitov 1978:49) The inability to see underscores the absence of border-crossing punctuating the chronology of travel. Such absence aptly introduces Armenia as a

neo-mythic realm in which the experience of time and its measurement have come to be detached from punctuated succession.

Это очень существенно (...) пересекать границы и ощутить перемену качества (...). (...) Книжки надо читать с первой страницы или вообще не читать... (Битов 1978:49)

The joys of border-crossing ("peresekat' granitsy") pervade Pushkin's *Puteshestvie v Arzum*: "Nikogda eshche ne vidal ia chuzhoi zemli. Granitsa imela dlja menia chto-to tainstvennoe; s detskikh let puteshestviia byli moemu liubimoiu mechtaiu." (Pushkin 1960:438) If the attempt to cross spatial boundaries constitutes the archetypal core of the literary event (Lotman 1975:111; van Baak 1983:72-3), its denial to the writer in *Uroki Armenii* amounts to the denial of his own plot.

For Bitov's Armenian traveller, the Soviet Airline assumes the part of Sterne's *Des-obligent*. The writer-traveller is no longer the master of his own itinerary. The latter seems governed by a metonymically inflated trade-mark: "(...) esli by u Aeroflota vdrug ob'iaivilis' by durnye namereniia, ia mog by ochuti'sia gde ugodno..." (Bitov 1978:49)

The poetics of *Uroki Armenii* develop the travelogue as the negative offprint of what was seen.

(...) и теперь могу рассказать о том, что видел. То есть, у меня несколько другая задача: рассказать, как я не видел. (Битов 1978:32)

Uroki Armenii constitute their narration as puteshestvie-punktir, with those incidents, characters, settings not selected for representation marking the traveller's failed efforts to see. The blank, textless gaps organizing the travelogue's sequence of sections and sub-sections thus reproduce accurately what was not seen, with the printed page relating the troubled vision or the struggle to see at all. On the meta-poetic level, the travelogue subsequently seeks to counteract the traveller's dislocation and the journey's apparent aimlessness by creating a network of sound equivalence and repetition around the signifiers tse! and tsep!. However, the narrative presents the traveller's confusion similar to the way in which the narration models his failing vision.

Bitov's Armenian travelogue is, like Mandel'shtam's, a piece of commissioned koman-dirovka-writing which turns out to be the genre's blatant contrafact. The refusal to rectify the dilemma facing the traveller (failure of his attempts to "read" and understand; his inability to "see") by means of siuzhet-composition marks the travelogue's subscription to the post-Socialist Realism poetics of prose (Schmid 1979). The writer-traveller's insistence on the absence of any retrospectively introduced siuzhet merges with his appeal to the reader to reassemble the narrative, a device not uncommon in the earlier "molodaiia proza":

Арбузы выбираются, остужаются, разрезаются и съедаются. То есть (...) последовательность иная: арбузы разрезаются, съедаются и остужаются. Опять не так. Расставьте сами (Битов 1978:103)

Occasionally, such refusal to construct the siuzhet precludes the syntagma: "Nardy, arbuzy, popugaichiki." (Bitov 1978:106)

Bitov's "fabul'nye rasskazy" model the experience of novoe videnie. The astonishment at the non-habitual (udivlenie) rejects familiar procedures of recognition (uznavanie). Novoe videnie is initiated as an impulse leading to the cognition of the object's essence (sushchnost') (Schmid 1980:27). In *Uroki Armenii*, Bitov's interest appears to have shifted from the search for such "sushchnost'" to the hermeneutics of its decipherment. The journey in *Uroki Armenii* appears as a replica of the hero's search for a "reality" no longer guaranteed by an established siuzhet. Bitov's attempts to "read" Armenia are depicted as his prolonged search for the right code (the word), the search for reality amidst all its possible readings.

In Erevan, during the first day of his stay, the travelling writer meets continuous summonses "to see" (vidish?"/"uvidish!") with eventual negation: "My idem, i ia ne vizhu." (Bitov 1978:51) The journey through town is reduced to mere blindfold movement in space.

The principal pre-texts feeding into Bitov's poetics of the failing vision in Armenia are Mandel'shtam's and Bely's. Bely's Armenian travelogue (result of his first journey to the region in 1928) develops the theme of vision in front of Sar'ian's paintings: "Ia videl Armeniiu — dva uzhe dnia: no uvidel' v pervye — v polotnakh Sar'iana; ikh vynes na ulitsu (...), chtoby tam razvivat' rone prepodannoe masterstvo: umet' uvidet'." (Bely 1985:31) "Learning how to see" is, to be sure, a principal concern of Mandel'shtam's *Puteshestvie v Armeniiu* whose fifth section ("Frantsuzy") develops the theme as a scrutiny of Cézanne, Matisse, Van Gogh etc. Bely's "Zhivopis': eto — n a u k a u v i d e t'." (Bely 1985:31) is dialogically echoed by Bitov's Armenian traveller ("Zhivopis' — eto dvizhenie... dumaiu ia." [Bitov 1978:167]). Mandel'shtam's "Akh, nichego ia ne vizhu, i bednoe ukho oglokhlo./ (...)" (Mandel'shtam 1967:152) is finally reproduced by Bitov in *Uroki Armenii* (Bitov 1978:66). Another of Mandel'shtam's Armenian poems connects the failing vision to the impossibility of reopening the closed Armenian book: "Ia tebia nikogda ne uvizhu./ Blizorukoe armianskoe nebo./ (...) (I uzhe nikogda ne raskroiu/ V biblioteke avtorov goncharnykh/ Prekrasnoi zemli pustoteluii knigu/ Po kotoroi uchilis' pervye iudi." Mandel'shtam 1967:155) Vision has to be learnt where it is no longer analogous to cognitive understanding: "Videt', slyshat' i ponimat' — vse eti znachenia slivalis' kogda-to v odnom semanticheskom puchke." (Mandel'shtam 1971:144) Such is Bitov's experience in Armenia. Even where Armenia is visually available he finds himself at a loss for ponimanie:

Ну, розовый Ереван, розовый. Из туфа. (...) Но почему это именно Армения, я еще не понимал. (Битов 1978:50)

5.

Later on, the traveller-writer observes the bubbly liquid left in a bottle of beer and, for the first time, he shares in the lexis of vision in an affirmative way. "— Smotrite, — skazal ia, — vidite!" (Bitov 1978:52) What illuminates him is symbolic reading: through the bubbling "kolichestvo chut' vypuklykh ploskosti" (Bitov 1978:52) he all of a sudden "sees" an Armenian church of presumably similar shape. The operation reveals two strategies: first, the traveller's objective is to produce a metonymically reduced model of Armenia.⁷ If such an Armenia-model would be appropriately walk- and controllable, such comfort is reinforced by the fact that the metonymically minimized land again has a familiar textual consistency:

Пусть это даже некая фантастическая страна, домысленная мною из нескольких впечатлений по сравнению. Страна гуингномов... И сам я новый Гулливер (...). (Битов 1978:108)

Secondly, the quoted episode illustrates the traveller's beginning to organize his own text around instances of figurative speech, coining for himself a string of images (such as vypukhlye ploskostil) which his allegoric reading subsequently translates into Armenian "reality" (the Armenian church). The writer turns reader of his own text, a constellation *Uroki Armenii* throw into relief on several levels of their narration. To the writer-traveller in Armenia, only figuratively mediated reality is experienceable. Bitov begins to produce readable tropes as the safeguard of the continuation of Armenia's decipherment. One of these tropes, metonymy, has been the writer's consistent tool. The other, obraz, also constitutes a response to the dilemma of perennially having to match the "new" experience with the "old" word, an impasse familiar to Bitov's itinerant heroes ("Ibo nikakikh epitetov k sem'e (...), krome 'ladnaia, družnaia, kreпкаia', ia, po-vidimomu, ne naidu. A v nashem iazyke oni davno stali shtampami." (Bitov 1978:83) The image as a way out of such speechlessness is a ploy cherished by the travelling Walter Benjamin:

Finding words for what is before one's eyes — how hard can that be! But when they do come they strike against reality with little hammers until they have knocked the image out of it, as out of a copper slate. (Benjamin 1955:83)

Bitov's image-coining activity in *Uroki Armenii* is presented as essentially an act of 'making it strange'. Instances of Shklovskiiian ostranenie are prevalent in Bitov's rasskazy and povesti.⁸ The poetics of Olesha's glance "through the (wrong end of) binoculars" informs the coinage of the arbuz-image:

В бинокль я вижу большие вещи, например арбуз — и ничего, кроме арбуза. Арбуз заслоняет мир. Или вижу друга — и ничего, кроме друга (Битов 1978:48)

The estranging glance through the binoculars foregrounds the object-image to a degree where it obstructs the wandering viewpoint, the prerogative of the straying traveller: "Arbuz zasloniaet mir." Bitov is following Shklovskii's polemics with Potemkin, using the same example (arbuz) for "obraz, kak prakticheskoe sredstvo myshleniia, sredstvo ob'ediniia' v gruppy veshchi (...)" (Shklovskii 1969:6). The summary trope obstructing the "real" is the premise for Bitov's growing concern about his written image-world. The second instance of trope-production is again an example of metonymic reduction, reducing the object into insignificance (the glance "through the wrong end of binoculars"):

Каждый раз что-то заслоняет мир. Я переворачиваю бинокль — от меня улетает арбуз, как ядро, и исчезает за горизонтом. И вижу я в невообразимой глубине и дымке маленькую круглую страну с одним круглым городом, с одним круглым озером и одной круглой горой, страну, которую населяет один мой друг. (Битов 1978:48)

The growing suspicion of the secondary reality of the figurative is exemplified by the map. It becomes a pointer to the impossibility of living and travelling the metonymically minimized land.

Когда я смотрю на карту (...), я (...) еще не ощущаю простора. И если где-то в углу зажато пятнышко: болоцем — Эстония, корыщем — Армения, то какой же можно заподозрить там простор: (...) Да и как жить на подобном пятачке? (Битов 1978:54)

Ostranenie comes to be in complicity with the impermissible transformation of the world into an instance of secondary figuration: "I ia sleduiu obrazu, kak metodu. Nevooruzhennym glazom ia nichego ze vizhu (...)," (Bitov 1978:48) The trope is identified by the Armenian traveller as "a kind of falsification, because every trope (...) is necessarily an interpretation and so a mistaking." (Bloom 1975:93) It invites the allegoric "reading off" which "alters the text" (Sontag 1983:98). The image's "violation" of the reality it frames is implicit in Benjamin's (metaphorical!) rendering of how the traveller coins the image ("hammers"/"knocked out of it"). The hostility towards the trope informs Bitov's statement on Mandel'shtam's "Akh, nichego ja ne vizhu (...)": "Velikaia poeziia vseгда konkretna. A obrazov nikakikh net." (Bitov 1978:66)

6.

И я думаю вдруг, что никакой трансформации художнического видения не терпит эта натура — так она точна. Быть в плену у этой абсолютной точности (...) не под силу художнику, а копия — невозможна. (Битов 1978:59)

The uninitiated writer-prishlets projects Armenia as a mythic realm in which any attempt to "read off" meaning amounts to the "alteration" of a text whose outward form presents itself to the traveller as being in complete unity with its signifying function (thus, as an iconic sign). But writing as an act of reading and deciphering (the world, the pre-texts, one's own text) is deeply involved in such alteration. In the face of an object excluding mimetic participation ("ne pod silu khudozhniku"), the written travelogue helps turn the original text into a palimpsest. The travelogue written all across its original finds itself in undesired complicity with the former's disappearance. *Uroki Armenii* seem to duplicate the act of erasure/renewed inscription which the travelling Pushkin performs in the motto ("On nachertal na kirpiche imia emu liubeznoe, imia svoei zheny — shastlivets, — a ia svoe." [Bitov 1978:3])

The distant ideal of the book's mere contemplation is afforded to the traveller after his visit to Gekhard. He observes an old priest on a balcony: "Starik sidel, sovershenno nepodvizhnyi, i smotrel v knigu (imenno smotrel, ne chital (...))." (Bitov 1978:116)

The poetic myth of Armenia as an iconic sign defying the reader-traveller's decipherment is complemented by a second one. The textual, readable land is in conflict with the writer's desire and pretension to write the world into being himself, a desire which "comprehends writing as the creation of a world as yet unnamed (...)" (Lachmann 1987:403).

Здесь надо было заново учиться языку, зародить его, разлепить с трудом губы (...) и произнести первое слово (...), чтобы назвать то, что мы видим: м и р. (Битов 1978:183)

Such tension between the world's textual consistence and the writer's urge to write and name the world himself is in itself part of a textual circle, with Nabokov's *Priglasenie na kazn'* (1938) as one identifiable pre-text (Lachmann 1987:403). Nabokov's novel attempts an anagrammatic re-spelling of the world. The letters begin to dominate narration released out of their merely communicative function into a symbolic one. However, ultimately, "the belief in the alphabet's matrix as being at the free disposition of the writer who unfolds and re-folds the world like the Creator God (...) prevails." (Lachmann 1987:405) Bitov's traveller-writer does not share in such hubristic confidence, although when shown paintings by an eminent Armenian painter he reluctantly admits to his urge to respell the objects depicted.

(...) столько фруктов, столько гор, столько лиц! (...) И ни разу не захотелось ему, чтобы эта груша перестала быть грушей, стала бы (...) какой-нибудь грушей через два "у" или два "ш", треугольником, шаром... Мне бы захотелось. (Битов 1978:158)

The metaphor of the readability of the world features prominently in Nabokov's writings, most conspicuously perhaps in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941) (cf. Barton-Johnson 1978).

The answer to all questions of life and death, "the absolute solution" was written all over the world he had known: it was like a traveller realizing that the wild country he surveys is not an accidental assembly of natural phenomena, but the page in a book where these mountains and forests, and fields, and rivers are disposed in such a way as to form a coherent sentence; the vowel of a lake fusing with the consonant of a sibilant slope; the windings of a road writing its message in a round hand (...); trees conversing in dumb-show, making sense to one who has learnt the gestures of their language.... Thus the traveller spells the landscape and its sense is disclosed (...). (Nabokov 1982: 150)

И так же точно подобна армянская буква своим верхним изгибом древней армянской церкви или ее своду, как есть эта линия и в очертаниях ее гор, как подобны они, в свою очередь, линиям женской груди, настолько всеобще для Армении это удивительное сочетание твердости и мягкости, жесткости и плавности, мужественности и женственности — и в пейзаже и в воздухе, и в строениях и в людях, и в алфавите и в речи. (Битов 1978:8)

Armenia's mythic iconicism defies the hermeneutics of reading nature exercised by Nabokov's hero. The world in *Uroki Armenii* is not instrumental in spelling out its meaning even to the literate deciphering eye of the traveller-reader. He is consequently lost for its "solution" where Nabokov's itinerant reader assembles for himself precisely that "answer to all questions of life and death."

Armenia to the uninitiated travelling writer in *Uroki Armenii* is homonymic country where phonetic difference ceases to operate. As to the foreign traveller all the words sound alike, any single word's semantic potential turns out boundless. Terms such as *lavash* appear to Bitov an infinite array of homonyms arbitrarily expanding. The Armenian word to him is is

what it denotes, it seems the mythic sign-image whose sounds as well as its written denotation are the iconic replica of its signifying function. Initially, it appears to Bitov as if his only means of reproducing such iconicity is by presenting Armenia as a realm of impenetrable tautology:

(...) просто страна, где все было тем, что оно есть: камень — камнем, дерево — деревом, вода — водой, свет — светом (...). (Битов 1978:70)

The tautological realm dooms the travelling writer's (allegoric) reading to failure.

Bitov experiences Armenia as a realm of constant mythic presence. The spatialization of diachrony is exemplified in the sub-section "Istoriia s geografiei" (Bitov 1978:45-7). In Armenia's book, everything exists side by side without any successive prominence: "Istoriia v svoei posledovatel'nosti treshchit po shvam." (Bitov 1978:35)

Такое впечатление, что в Армении нет начала истории — она была всегда. И за свое вечное существование она освятила каждый камень и каждый шаг. Наверно, нет такой деревни, которая не была бы во времена она столицей древнего государства, нет холма, около которого не разыгралась бы решительная битва (...). (Битов 1978:20)

The message is written all over the world but it is not retrievable. The book's solution is the natural property of its outward form.

7.

Back home in Leningrad, Bitov revamps and rewrites his Armenian travel notes in an act of "filling the gaps", completing his puteshestvie-punktir (again) as the reader-interpreter of his own travelogue: "Ia pishu eti stroki (...) chtoby zapolnit' pustoe mesto." (Bitov 1978:39) The return home does not suspend the writer/reader-analogy but reinforces it. The author returned home begins the journey anew, travelling through his book which assumes the role of the "actual" journey's prolongation:

Я прожил в этой книге много дольше, чем в Армении (...). Я прожил в Армении десять дней, а писал ее больше года — я прожил в Армении около двух лет... (Битов 1978:171)

As he did with the "real" one, the writer-reader again embarks on a journey "through the text": "(...) ja obnaruzhivaiu, chto uzhe ne v Armenii i ne v Rossii, a v etoi vot svoei knige ia puteshestvuuiu." (Bitov 1978:108)

Bitov's "new" journey is the story of the completion of his travelogue. He has re-entered the world of signifying difference with the joys of mythic iconicity irretrievably lost. The travel-writer's ultimate temptation is to re-write the myth, to pose as its translator and promulgator, attempting to restore to his writing a degree of the mythic unity he has experienced. Wolf Schmid has shown how modernist prose reproduces mythic thinking in structures of poetic organization, a phenomenon loosely referred to as "ornamentation" (Schmid 1987). "Ornamentation" prose thus diminishes the sign's lack of motivation as a token of its critique of the (Socialist!) Realist tradition. Such increased motivation reintroduces a degree of myth-

ic iconicity where "there is no convention mediating between name and object (...)" (Schmid 1987:373).

Armenia's nature as an iconic sign is "translatable" into Russian either as a merely referential tautology ("strana, gde (...) kamen' — kamnem") or by the conscious modelling of the sound material, a dominant feature of Bitov's prose which has largely escaped attention.⁹ In *Uroki Armenii*, the introduction of forms of poetic organization establishes a sense of iconic equivalence between discourse and fable. Thus, although the constituent words taken by themselves are usually neither onomatopoetic nor sound symbolic,¹⁰ the segments over-determined by sound repetition suggest a degree of re-mythicization and re-approximation to the assumed original. Such forms of poetic organization in prose weaken the word's referential function and thus the "principally transitive, representative character of narrative discourse" (Schmid 1984:489). With respect to *Uroki Armenii*, this implies a further weakening of the siuzhet and the enhancement of the travelogue as the writer's journey "through his own book".

Bitov's description of his arrival at Erevan airport is modelled as the tentative iconic replica of its referent:

Так и запечатлелся во мне первый кадр: ветер и выгоревшая трава (...). Ветер подталкивал меня к Еревану. (Битов 1978:4)

As pervyi kadr unfolds into veter and vygorevshaia trava, thus shaping its own subsequent composition, veter anagrammatically preempts Erevan: Bitov's claim "veter podtalival menia k Erevanu" acquires a twofold, "iconic" justification.¹¹

Paronomasia and homoiopiton frequently organize the sound level of Bitov's travelogue. In the following passage, the writer-traveller relates his impression of Erevan's airport. Parallelism underscores the achieved effect.

Не было тут той затравленности пассажира, где каждый сам по себе — боится за чемодан, боится опоздать, боится быть обиженным и обойденным, — и оттого появляется в нем автобусная, вокзальная твердоватость и туговатость, и сам он становится похож формой и твердостью на свой фанерный чемодан с парапающими и цепляющими углами, и лицо — как замок. (Битов 1978:5)

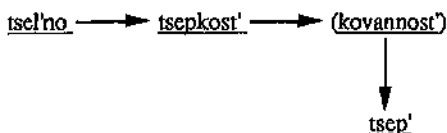
Sound repetition re-phrases the passenger's anxiety to lose his suitcase as his transformation into it (tsarapaiushchimi → tseplaiushchimi → litso → zamo). The ts (ʃ)-sound accentuated in the quoted passage subsequently unfolds into two words mapping out Bitov's travelogue as Leitlaute as well as Leitmotive: tsel' and tsep'. Tsep' undermines the stringency of travelling movement (tsel'). It connotes the traveller bound and statically captive.

Тут все цельно и образует круги. Цепкость армянской речи ("дикая кошка — армянская речь") так соответствует ковности армянских букв, что слово — начертанное — звякнет, как цепь. И так ясно представляются мне эти буквы выкованными в кузнице: плавный изгиб металла под ударами

молота (...). Этими буквами можно подковывать живых коней... (Битов 1978:7)

Sound repetition leads from tse'l'no as the epithet the traveller-writer finds for the Armenian script to the tsepkost' of its corresponding sounds. The recurrence thus fulfills a twofold function:

- it iconicizes the coincidence between script and sound in Armenian referred to on the level of discourse;¹²
- it prefigures the emergence of tsep', which is phonetically already present in tsepkost'.



The imagery in the quoted passage relates to the Mandel'shtamian subtext in *Uroki Armenii*, with the Armenian poem "Ty krasok sebe pozhelala- / (...)" as the dominant pre-text: "(...) Kak liub mne iazyk tvoi zloveshchii, / Tvoi molodye groba, / Gde bukvy — kuznechnye kleshchi, / I kazhdoe slovo — skoba..." (Mandel'shtam 1967:151). The traveller in Bitov's *puteshestvie* is held captive by the chain (tsep') forged in Mandel'shtam's poem. Such bondage is induced by the impenetrable Armenian language as well as by the ways of the foreign land.

Я попадаю в сладкий плен (...). Я познаю всю прочность армянских родственных связей и опутан этой цепью (...). (Битов 1978:11; my emphases)

The theme of captivity around the signifiers tsep' and plen also marks Bitov's jocular reenactment of the Romantic plight of the *Kavkazskii plennik*: "Po obstoiatel'stvam chisto vnutrennim ia chuvstvoval sebja zapertym v rodnom gorode i udral iz nego... Udrav zhe, opiat' okazalsia v kletke, prichem chuzhoi." (Bitov 1978:53) At the same time, the chain is that from the end of Chekov's *Student* (1894), a story fed into *Uroki Armenii* through quotation in the sub-section "Ozero" (Bitov 1978:66).

Sound repetition and alternation give profile to disjointed passages equivalent in their reference to the theme of the word/language:

Слово — с^[a]мое точное о^[ʌ]рудие, какое было когда-либо у человека, но филология еще не достигла точности угаданного слова. Ей пристала скромность. Она при слове, а не слово при ней. (Битов 1978:9)

Поразительно все-таки прочна природа уважения к печатному слову — ничем его не подорвать. (Битов 1978:6)

The alternating [o] / [a]; [ʌ]-sequences of the first passage and the recurrence of the [p] / [r] pair in the second provide sound-linkage between the two segments in addition to their equivalence on the level of "transitive" discourse (the Armenian word). A similarly high de-

gree of poetic organization is in evidence in the following passage. Its focus is again the Armenian (written) word.

В армянской букве — величие монумента и нежность жизни, библейская древность очертаний лаваша и острота зеленой запятой перца, кудрявость и прозрачность винограда и стройность и строгость бутылки, мягкий завиток овечьей шерсти и прочность пастушьего посоха, и линия плеча пастуха... и линия его затылка... И все это в точности соответствует звуку, который она изображает. (Битов 1978:8)

The segment is conspicuously orchestrated around [i; i; j; e]-sounds. Paronomasia underscores the effect:

<u>zelenoi</u>	<u>kudriavost'</u>	<u>stroinost'</u>
<u>zapiatoi</u>	<u>prozrachnost'</u>	<u>strogost'</u>

The syntactical keystone of the quoted passage (zatyilka) is anagrammatically preempted by butyli and zavitok:

butyli zavitok
 \ /
 zatyilka

The fable is propelled by the word as much as vice versa. Bitov's travelogue seeks to re-write its original faithfully. At the same time, though, it assists the former's increased obfuscation. If the palimpsestic travelogue is in complicity with the burial of its original text under a new layer of decipherable writing, the shift in narrative propulsion from the story level to that of sound organization underscores such "aberration".

The following passage describes the proximity between food / cooking / eating and writing, a proximity iconically stored in the sound material itself.

- 1 Я завираюсь. Я ловлю себя на том... (...) Я ворую у самого себя невозможность каждой следующей страницы, с тем чтобы написать ее. И тут же ловлю себя на слове. Ловлю и отпускаю, кошки-мышки... Пища, как не солгать? Обнаружив лож, как не отшвырнуть перо? (Вот опять...
- 5 Откуда же перо взялось? Когда машинка...)
Однако я забываюсь в узкую щель... Эта глава вся состоит из ряда путанных и непереваренных впечатлений, непереваренных в буквальном смысле, потому что не может человек переварить столько мяса и зелени (...). А пищеварение, от кого-то я слышал, тесно связано с головой.
- 10 (Битов 1978:101)

The writing-related paradigm "zaviraius" (1); "voruiu" (1); "pisha" (4) paronomastically connotes a food-related sequence (zavarivat'; varit'; pishcha) even before it appears in the syntagma ("neperevarennykh", 8; "perevarit'", 10; "pishchevarenie", 10). The question "Otkuda zhe pero vzialos'?" (5) is answered by the anagrammatic re-spelling of the "koshki-

myshki"-game (4) as "Kogda mashinka..." (6), with the letters stirred in the cauldron by the writer-cook.

Andrei Bitov's Armenian traveller is the writer attempting to read the world-text and the other texts inscribed into it. Uninitiated into the right code to decipher a book whose iconic consistence defies his compulsive allegoric reading, the traveller-writer is at a loss for the "solution". At the same time, his writing, of necessity another instance of reading what is already written, cannot escape the circularity of tsitivoranie. Such circularity is at odds both with the chronology of travelling and with the writer's urge to write the world into being himself, a task rendered anathema by an object (Armenia) whose mythic iconicity excludes mimetic participation. Bitov's attempts to model such iconicity in his travelogue by restoring to his Russian prose an equivalence between discourse and fable similar to the one experienced in Armenia represent an ambiguous answer to the traveller's dilemma. If some degree of iconicity is restored to the verbal material, such advance is muted by the word's sudden propulsion of the fable (rather than vice versa). The puteshestvie continues to be the "journey through words" the travelling writer had been eager to suspend. In Andrei Bitov's travelogues, the object of inquiry is, as a rule, comfortably at large.

Notes

- 1 U. Eco's *Opera aperta* was first published in 1962.
- 2 This publication (abridged version) carried the subtitle "Sentimental'noe puteshestvie". Bitov 1976 is subtitled "Puteshestvie v nebol'shuiu stranu". Schmid 1980:50 has "Puteshestvie iz Rossii" as the originally conceived subtitle.
- 3 Piskunova 1988 has a short evaluation of the book-metaphor in Bitov's work although her conclusions are, in actual fact, in conflict with the idea of mir-kniga: "Konceptsiia zhizni-knigi pomogaet Bitovu zapolnit' obrazovavshiisia mezhdū zhizn'iu i literaturoi zazor, unichtozhit' granitsy (...)." (Piskunova 1988:191) The very inability to conceive of and see such boundaries would seem a more apt description of Bitov's poetics.
- 4 Terminology here as in Schmid 1982. His four-partite model of narrative levels ("Geschehen", "Geschichte", "Erzählung", "Präsentation der Geschichte") is rendered here as "story", "narration", "narrative", "narrative presentation".
- 5 I thank Mr. Andrew Reynolds (Oxford) for his valuable advice concerning the Mandel'shtamian subtext in *Uroki Armenii*.
- 6 "zanovo otkryvaiut" is linked to mir kniga, where the writer performs the renewed opening of the book (cf. Mandel'shtam's "Ia tebia nikogda ne uvizhu, / (...)": "(...) I uzhe nikogda ne raskroiū/ V biblioteke avtorov gonchamykh/ Prekrasnoi zemli pustoteluiū knigu, / (...)." (Mandel'shtam 1967:155)
- 7 Metonymic reduction is a principal structuring device in Bitov's rasskazy and povesti where it models the fable (for an evaluation of the alleged "besfabul'nost'" of the travelogue, cf. Schmid 1980:50) as well as the hero's perception of the world.
- 8 See Schmid 1980 for a description of B.'s device.

- ⁹ The only critic to have noted the importance of sound repetition and rhythmical organization in Bitov's prose is Schmid (Schmid 1980:53). However, the way in which the modelling of the sound material iconically complements the fable goes unremarked.
- ¹⁰ The two types represent two forms of sound iconicity. Onomatopoeia seeks to render an accurate phonetic "copy" of a sound event. Sound symbolism, on the other hand, "does not imitate acoustic phenomena but evokes synthetic sensations, emotions, moods and abstract ideas." (Schmid 1984:495)
- ¹¹ I follow the qualificatory framework for sound repetition (of vowels and consonants) suggested by Schmid (1984:492-3). It is based on the assumption that "the equivalence of verbal sounds does not necessarily depend on the repetition of one or more phonemes, but may already be constituted by the acoustic similarity of single sounds." (Schmid 1984:492)
- ¹² Another instance of such tentative rendering of the iconicity of the Armenian language occurs when the traveller comes across the Armenian word for "sea": "I vdrug ne chuvstvuiu 'more', v nem net volneniia, zerkalo, i vdrug sochuvstvuiu slovu 'tsov' — vishu v nem volnu nabegaiushchuiu... no volna, okazyvaetsia, vovse ne 'tsov', volna — 'alik', nezhno lizhet bereg." (Bitov 1978:14)
The sound symbolic quality of the Armenian word is "translated" into Russian by means of sound repetition "'alik', nezhno lizhet bereg.").

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