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GOGOL'S OPIUM

Genesis and meaning of the Piskarev-sujet in „Nevskij prospekt“

1. In 1994 a new Russian translation of De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* was published.¹ The editors followed the first edition, printed in 1821 in *London-Magazine* and as a separate book in 1822 under the pseudonym „X.Y.Z.“ The annex of this new translation contains three „fragments“ taken from text of the first Russian translation of De Quincey's sketches, published in 1834 as *Ispoved' Angličanina, upotrebljavšago opium. Soč. Matjurina, Avtor Mel'mota. Sanktpeterburg v tipografii N. Greča*. The annex attributes the fragments, which are not to be found in De Quincey's original draft, to an unknown author, a „Psevdo De Kvinsi“, rating them as „fal'sificirovannye perevodčikom fragmenty teksta romana“² An essay of V. Kondrat'ev in the same annex speculates fruitlessly about the identity of this translator/author, searching between „mnogočislennykh russkikh avtorov Biblioteki dlja čtenija“.³ Kondrat'ev mentions that the translation of 1834 had a high impact on Gogol's „Nevskij prospekt“: generally on the conception of „arabesque prose“ as well as especially on the Piskarev-sujet. Kondrat'ev is the first to mention De Quincey's influence on Gogol', but even he as co-editor of the new edition does not realise that Gogol' borrowed motifs and whole scenes for the most part – if not exclusively – from the „falsified fragments“.

The 1834-translation is indeed very free, omits more than 25% of the original text, divides the material into four sections and adds the above mentioned new episodes. But not only the newly invented material, the whole text is of an extraordinary quality preparing the future „arabesque style“. Neither Greč nor his friends would have been able to write on this stylistic level while adapting English prose. It was indeed a formidable transformation of De Quincey's hypertrophic writing and an outstanding artistic invention. An implication of Kondrat'ev's speculations is: Gogol' himself could have designed his new arabesque manner while translating „Maturin“. Gogol' – as far as we know – was never a plagiarist. It would have been consistent, that „Nevskij prospekt“ only re-used inventions, he himself had drafted in a translation. Gogol' was, by the way, the only important author who reflected the *Ispoved' angličanina* in his work. And there are allusions in Gogol's letters during the summer of 1834, that Greč – apart from

that to Gogol' a „persona non grata“ – is indebted to him.⁴

But Kondrat'ev is wrong. There is no text of Gogol' or any other Russian writer to be discovered. The 1834 edition was translated not from De Quincey's text, but from the first French translation, made by the 17-year old Alfred de Musset and published as *L'Anglais, mangeur d'opium* in 1828.⁵ The Russian translation (still a very good piece of work) follows Musset strictly. The added fragments are Musset's romantic inventions; Gogol' is fascinated by them: The dream of the reading child and the skeleton (145-151), the „ball“ and the box on the ears (87-106) and the description of a third state of intoxication – neither exaltation nor depression but the gaping void of waiting and the vice of emptiness – in a „Spanish“ setting of inquisition and tribunal (74-82).⁶ Musset's French version of the *Opium-Eater* was no succes; three decades later Baudelaire (who did not like Musset at all) made a revision of the translation which had a strong influence on European symbolism and the life-syle of symbolistic poets like Brjusov in Russia. Again, it seems that Baudelaire didn't know that *L'Anglais, mangeur d'opium* was Musset's work. The 1828 edition was signed „A.D.M.“ There was nearly no public reaction: A few vaudevilles, which alluded to the old-fashionedness of opium;⁷ Berlioz found inspiration for the programme of his *Symphonie fantastique* (1829); Balzac wrote a short review-essay in 1830 („Opium“) and mentioned, that the style of Maturin, the author of *Bertram* and *Melmoth* (who had died in 1825) influenced this prose. Obviously, Balzac never heard of De Quincey, who lived at that time – still a polytoxicomaniac – in Scotland. In the Paris of the July revolution nobody cared about the identity of „X.Y.Z.“ Greč or his lecturer must have read Balzac's essay. They deciphered the „A.D.M.“ on the French edition as an abbreviation of Maturin's name, maybe starting from the assumption that Maturin was the most famous contributor to the *London Magazine* during the early 1820s. Maturin's *Melmoth* was a big „succès d'estime“, when it was first published in Peterburg in 1832/33. Gogol' admired Maturin's novel and used a few motifs in *Mertvyje duši*.⁸ The Russian translation of the *Opium-Eater* was started, because Greč and his lecturers believed Maturin to be the author. It was not made, because there was an actual interest in opium or (as Kondrat'ev in ignorance of the book-market's economy suggests) because Greč hoped to sell more copies, if he attributed the book to a more prominent writer. Nevertheless, the attribution characterises the intellectual situation in Russia. It was contradictio in adjecto to sell Maturin, the most famous contemporary Irish writer, as author of the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*.

2. A reconstruction of the fabula of the Piskarev-story in „Nevskij prospekt“ helps to understand the fundamental importance of the opium-motif (and all secondary motifs which derive from it) as well as the influence of *Ispoved' angličanina* on the text in general. In chronological order Piskarev's first visit to the shop

of the Persian is the first act of the tragedy. The painter Piskarev is interested in the style of the shop, the colored ornamentality of the orientalism en vogue. Until then, Piskarev's art was grey and based on drawing and nature morte. The Persian orders a picture of a really wonderful woman. He gives Piskarev the impression that the picture would be paid with drugs. When Piskarev returns to the shop he knows, what he can get there. He also knows about the stimulating effects on the recollection of female beauty caused by opium. It is not important that the Persian himself told him about the effects of opium, but that Piskarev had got some information. Firstly, Piskarev, who needs money, seems not to be interested in the Persian's commission. But unconsciously he is already in the power of the oriental. The vision of the beautiful woman – the first episode of the sujet – fulfills but the Persian's will. Even before drinking opium for the first time, Piskarev's reactions and dreams are the excitements of the drug. (Gogol' quotes the *Opium-Eater* as an authentic source!) Piskarev has the vision of the beautiful women (who is actually a prostitute and not very beautiful with her worn face), because he hops to recall this same extended vision, the suspended moment, the retarding „peripeteia“ – the mise en abyme of the artistic method with the help of opium. De Quincey's „dream-fugue“-effect has its impact on Piskarev and his sujet. „Dux“ and „comes“ perpetually change parts. The dream of the ball quotes whole passages of Musset's text: In the *Confessions* the confessor is intoxicated, in Gogol's text Piskarev has not yet taken the opium. The observer and the observed, the persecutor and the persecuted fluctuate. The motion of the sujet is Piskarev's motivation: the search for a (new) motif – capturing through repetition (and repeated abuse).

The opium liberates Piskarev's male sexuality. He changes from the active into a passive role and becomes himself the vision, he follows in his dreams. As a „lunatic“ the male artist becomes a female romantic „sommambula“.⁹

Arabesque means orientalisms.¹⁰ „Arabesque“ prose is part of Gogol's conception of religious art, taken from daily life and popular literary topics. Gogol' used the contemporary fashion of orientalism (especially in French literature and culture) as material for his religious subversion of the reader.¹¹ Piskarev exchanges opium for the women (for the female in himself). But he is deceived by this arabic deal. The woman is an illusion caused by (the wish to have) opium, which stimulates his artistic abilities to paint a beautiful woman and to earn enough money with his paintings to found a family. A vicious circle.

3. Piskarev is a victim. As a real artist he has to be a Christian and a pilgrim. The Nevskij is the straight way from the Egyptian obelisc in the center of Russia's capital to the Lavra, to Jerusalem, to the Holy Grave, to eternity (cf. Piskarev's lonely coffin). The Persian is an oriental devilish agent. His shop on the Nevskij is a temptation which blocks the pilgrim's path. The opium is his secret weapon. In De Quincey's text instead of the Persian there is a Turk and a Chinese. During the

1830s Orient meant nearly everything between Egypt, India and China.¹² De Quincey is fascinated about the possibility to explore the Orient through opium and sleep. Creativity means to have „oriental dreams“ at one's disposal; amalgamatic rêveries of visits to the dead and eternal funerals, Brahma, Vishnu, Isis, Osiris, Mohammed and Ali, sphinxes and mummies, hearts of eternal pyramids, labyrinthic architectures of antique monuments and ancient cities.¹³ De Quincey's intentions are spiritual. Through „the doctrine of the true church of opium“¹⁴ the confessor explores with Jean Pauls *Levana* further steps of religiosity and reconciles intellectual doubts with the eternal truths of John Forster's (a friend of De Quincey's mother) Baptism.¹⁵

The prostitute is a second weapon of oriental vice and heresy. The unknown at the ball who „zagovoril s nej na kakom-to neponjatnom dlja Piskareva jazyke“¹⁶ is the Persian. She is a dancer (a „alameh“ or Alma – while Piskarev in the translinguistic palindrom wants to be a „Maler“, i.e. a painter), who puts Piskarev on the wrong track, from the straight way into the periphery, the labyrinth of the little oriental streets and into her empire, which is miserable but seems to be a magic castle for Piskarev.¹⁷ The prostitute is wicked; she is nameless, without identity and able to look like Piskarev's mother: The description of her face and her hair to be painted by Piskarev in „Nevskij prospekt“ is also a description of the portrait of Gogol's mother. Piskarev loses his orientation not only in space but in time, when he (like the Opium-Eater) remembers – instead of the woman – his innocent childhood¹⁸ and starts to design his future as a continuation of a dream-narrative: „Iz vsech snovidenii odno bylo radostnee dlja nego vsech...“¹⁹ The motif of the illusionary harem being a trap can be found in Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* where Armida and her magic garden are the ultimate weapons of the muslimans against the brave Christian heroes. Goffredo and Rinaldo, at least, do not succumb to Armida, because she reminds them of their mothers. (The same motif is developed in Wagner's *Kundry*.) So this trick proves to be the musliman's mistake.

Tasso was the romantic archetype of the mad artist. His Russian admirer and translator was K. Batjuškov. He praised Tasso in poems and an article „Ariost and Tass“, which appeared first in 1815 and two years later in his *Opyty v stichach i v proze*.²⁰ There it was introduced by an eulogy about the healing power of sleep and dreams („Pochvalnoe slovo snu“). Batjuškov accepts the help of „laudanum“ for people having problems to fall asleep. Like Coleridge and De Quincey, Batjuškov belonged to a generation that was personally interested in opium. Stimulated by the drug, he explored the etymology of „laudanum“, connected with the fame and the poet's laurel. This is the basis of his interpretation of Tasso: Armida, her garden and her beauty are but an opium-fancy. Tasso's heroes, intoxicated and sleeping, are victims of the musliman's drug, but when they come round from the anesthetic they are able to tell the difference between dream

and reality. Batjuškov used a lot of opium; doctors (following Brown's pharmacology) prescribed it. It is impossible to analyse whether Batjuškov's complete mental breakdown was influenced or caused by intoxication. However, Batjuškov was in 1834 Russia's most renowned mad artist when Glazunov published his *Sočinenija v proze i stichach* – a complete edition. Batjuškov, his illness and his „Tasso“ were widely discussed, while Gogol' invented the Piskarev-sujet for „Nevskij prospekt“ (cf. Kjuhel'beker's first letter to Puškin from Sibiria!). The character Piskarev derives is not only from De Quincey's and Musset's Opium-Eaters but also from the personal and artistic tragedy of Batjuškov.

With the opium Piskarev consumes, he is consumed by the Orient. Piskarev drinks the opium and does not eat it like the oriental/islamic warriors of the myth (the Turk and Persian „Teriakis“). In Gogol's story a few (seven: the seven allegorical sins) drops of the liquid are enough to plunge Piskarev into ruin. He is predisposed. The carefully measured dose is very small compared with the enormous amounts of opium consumed by De Quincey (or prescribed by the Brownists). De Quincey is investigating with opium, but Piskarev is the object of an experiment. Piskarev's body and mind are eaten away by the opium. The Orient of the opium is a topic, where everyone has to return to mindlessly, even after the end of his pilgrimage; it is the „inferno“. Piskarev is an „exemplum“ for Gogol's own later pilgrimage, his journey to the Holy Grave and his inability to paint an affirmative portrait of the real, the female-sophiotic beauty. „Nevskij prospekt“ shows Gogol's orientalism in statu nascendi. No map or description of the Nevskij during the 1830s mentions a Persian shop. This „ambiente“ is a literary import from London and Paris. Gogol's orientalist religion/persecution mania (as described by Vajskopf) is both imperialism in nuce and obvious atavistic revanchism. This is important, even if around 1830 everyone thought like that, in as far as Gogol's texts helped to establish Russia's cultural and hegemonical pretensions during the 19th and 20th centuries.

A n m e r k u n g e n

- ¹ Tomas de Kvinsvi, *Ispoved' angličanina, upotrebljavšego opium*, Moskva, 1994.
- ² *ibid.*, 142.
- ³ V. Kontrat'ev, „Pokazanija počtov“, *ibid.*, 134.
- ⁴ Cf. letter to Maksimovič 23.8.1834 in: N. Gogol', *Pis'ma I*, Sankt Peterburg, 321.
- ⁵ A.d.Musset, *Œuvres complètes en prose*, t.2, Paris 1982. The textual

differences between De Quincey's text and the French translations of Musset and later Baudelaire are investigated in detail by A. Noe, *Stilometrie und Interpretation. Stilistische Merkmale der Sprache Alfred de Mussets mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Prosa*, Frankfurt/M., 1992, 249-258.

- 6 Numbers=pages in brackets refer to the Russian edition of 1834; I give them, because there is no such information in the new 1994-edition. The ball (2nd movement), the tribunal (4th movement) and the „dies irae“ of the skeletons (5th movement) are important for Berlioz' *Symphonie fantastique*. Berlioz' fantasma is re-transferred on Gogol' by Musorgskij in his scherzo „Ivanova noč' na Lysoj gore“, originally written for his Gogol'-opera „Ženitba“. The box on the ears (Musset's, not De Quincey's invention) excited Dostoevskij; cf. G.M. Fridlender, „O nekotorych očerednyh zadačach i problemach izučeniya Dostoevskogo“, in: *Dostoevskij, materialy i issledovanija* 4, Leningrad, 1980, 7.
- 7 Cf. A. Kupfer, *Die künstlichen Paradiese*, Stuttgart, Weimar, 1996, 98.
- 8 Cf. A. Sinjowski (A. Terz), *Im Schatten Gogols*, Berlin, 1979, 260.
- 9 Cf. N. Gogol', *Sobranie sočinenij*, Bd.3, Moskva, 1949, 25.
- 10 Gogol's „arabesque“ implications differ from Puškins subtle use of the arabesque intermediality, Cf. H. Meyer, „Die realisierte Travestie und die tra(n)svestierte Realisierung. Arabeske und Groteske in Puškins Manuskripten am Beispiel von ‚Domnik v Kolomne‘“, in: *Zeichen zwischen Klartext und Arabeske*, Amsterdam, Atlanta, 1994, 125-142.
- 11 Cf. M. Vajskopf, *Sjužet Gogolja*, Moskva, 1993.
- 12 Cf. E. Said, *Orientalismus*, Frankfurt/M., Berlin, Wien, 1981, 8-14.
- 13 Cf. T. De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Prose*, Oxford 1985, 73f. The imperialistic intentions of these motifs are (on the base of E.W. Said's classic *Orientalism*) discussed in: J. Barell, *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey. A Psychopathology of Imperialism*, New Haven, 1991.
- 14 De Quincey 1985, ibd., 62.
- 15 Cf. J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God*, Cambridge/Mass. 1968. Gogol' was without doubt impressed by „De Quincey's“/„Maturin's“ attachment to his mother and her believes. Gogol' often confessed sympathy for protestant, i.e. puritanic spirituality.
- 16 Gogol' 1949, ibd., 23.
- 17 The charming disorder of things in the prostitute's room reappears in the 6th chapter of Gogol's *Mertvyje duši* as the components of Pljuškin's „kuči“.

¹⁸ Cf. T. Fabricius, *Zeit und Raum bei Maturin und De Quincey*, MA Uni München 1994.

¹⁹ Gogol' 1949, ibd. 27.

²⁰ K. Batjuškov, *Opyty v stichach i v proze*, Moskva, 1977, 122-148. Cf. Ju. Mann, *V poiskach živoj duši*, Moskva, 1984, 71.