

Flags

Boris Poplavsky

FLAGS

**translated by
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In memoriam Victoria Andreyeva
who loved Poplavsky's poetry

and

for Olga Andreyev Carlisle

Introduction

Boris Poplavsky: The Hamlet of Montparnasse

Boris Poplavsky is a well-kept Russian secret. Little known even to Russian residents until the relaxations of *Glasnost* in 1989 his life is as intriguing as his strange dreamlike, often mystifying poems. Why he has lain so long undiscovered outside a very small group of academics is part of just one more chapter in Russia's tragic waves of emigration—the lost generation neither famous at home or abroad struggling to gain recognition in their new home. Poplavsky was just one of the thousands of Russians fleeing the Civil War to arrive, and have to adapt from a life of relative comfort to a struggle to survive, along with the psychological disorientation of émigré life. Yet, complexes in Poplavsky's self and family background suggest he would always have been a tortured soul and his particular émigré situation only exacerbated a difficult emotional makeup.

Poplavsky was born in June 1903 to two very different parents: his father was a Polish peasant while his mother, who came from a landed Baltic background, suffered attacks of depression as well as a fascination with mysticism. She was associated with Madame Blavatsky and her circle. Although Poplavsky had a healthy relationship with his father, that with his mother was troubled and contributed to bouts of mental illness throughout his life. His upbringing was not one that he remembered with much pleasure, describing its atmosphere as prison-like. In addition, during his childhood, his ties with the Russian language were disrupted by his younger sister's tuberculosis which forced the family to spend extensive periods in Switzerland and Italy; Poplavsky's Russian deteriorated so much that he had to be enrolled in a French lycée after his return to Moscow. Another destructive influence was that of his older sister Natalia, who introduced him to narcotics at the age of twelve, and who was to die of an overdose.

After the 1917 Revolution he moved to Yalta with his father where he was to experience some of the horrors of the Civil War and where his literary career was to begin. In 1919 they both moved to Constantinople and then on to Paris in 1921. He was soon—possibly having been driven from Paris because of his mother's imminent arrival—to be part of the Russian scene in Berlin from 1922–24, where he studied art. His return to Paris may have been triggered by the

reevaluation of the mark, which meant the end of the high standard of living enjoyed by expatriate Russians during that brief period. Paris is the city with which he is most readily associated. Here he divided his time between sport, writing, art, philosophy and theology. From this point on, apart from a few half-hearted attempts to earn a living, he adopted the life of an impoverished artist surviving on the minimum. Thus he was to live out ten short years. Gleb Struve made the scathing comment that Poplavsky 'did not know how to work and did not want to work', and though it is certainly true that Poplavsky never held down a paying job for more than a few days at a time, as a writer, considering his short life, he was extremely productive. The Poplavsky of this period was known famously for the dark glasses that he rarely took off and he fits in with the French tradition of the *flâneur*—the writer who ambles along the Parisian streets absorbing sights and sounds of everything around him. However, he was seen by many as a brief flame too rapidly extinguished. During his short life, although he published only one book of poems, *Flags* (1931), he commanded great respect both amongst his peers, and also the older generation. Volumes of his poetry published posthumously were: *Snowy Hour* (1936), *From a Garland of Wax* (1938) and *Airship of an Unknown Direction* (1965). He also completed one novel, *Apollon Bezobrazov*, and started another, *Homeward from Heaven*, as well as writing extensive journals.

Poplavsky was to die under mysterious circumstances—seen in various lights as suicide, poisoning, or an accidental overdose—in October 1935. The descriptions of his tragic end may have been glossed over by those wishing to preserve his memory, but the story goes that he ran into a fellow drug addict intent on suicide, who somehow involved the poet. He died from an overdose of narcotics which may also have had an admixture of some poison. Poplavsky regularly used hard drugs throughout his life, so there was always the risk that he might die in such circumstances. Leonid Livak adds further light on the topic in his discussion of Poplavsky, where he describes his ongoing fascination with death, tracking any available evidence that there is to suggest that Poplavsky may have willingly entered into a suicide pact. Certainly in *Flags* there is a sense that poetically at least he was, like Keats, 'half in love with easeful death'.

Looking at his poetry as a whole, the novel, and at times absurd images which appear in Poplavsky's poetry reflect his affinities with avant-garde movements such as French Surrealism and the Russian

Oberiu. However, it is the poignancy of the poetry that gives it a lasting quality. As his work develops his poetry becomes increasingly personal with Poplavsky a Hamlet-like figure expressing the unbearable pain of living in the world. To reinforce this state of mind he frequently transfers this emotional state onto the natural world itself, 'the life of the woods grow sad on the mountains' and 'where with terrible voices the leaves on the trees / cry out in lament at their terrible destruction'. At the same time it is clear that he is infinitely moved by this natural world, in spite of its bleakness, 'how endlessly touching is the evening'. This ambivalence seems to be part of a search for something transcendent, mixed with fear that perhaps it is a futile hope, expressed either with moving directness, 'Everything now is meaningless and clear / be at peace there is nothing more', or on the edge of despair, 'It's terrible to think how time passes / you can neither think nor live'. One is left feeling, however, not that Poplavsky had a death-wish but more that he was absorbed in a kind of pleasurable melancholy, indeed that such a glorification of melancholy provided him with a purpose. Nikolay Tatishchev, who was instrumental in publishing a great deal of Poplavsky's poetry after his death, tells us: 'Poplavsky loved those overcast Parisian winters and to watch the poor and wealthy and their states of mind.' Many of the poems show Poplavsky as such an outsider, expressing affinities with the various isolated street figures who walk the poems. Poplavsky, both in his poetry and in life, interested himself in a wide range of beliefs. He was however predominantly focused on a traditional Christian God, although his relationship with this God is expressed as a close friendship between two ordinary people: 'I don't believe in God or myself / but I see how fragile we both are' and 'God called to me but I didn't reply, we felt shy and cursed our timidity'.

As far as translation of Poplavsky's poetry is concerned, his wordplay loses much in translation, yet at other times his poems are a gift for the translator: the novel ways in which he personifies nature, the poignant quality of many of his direct statements and the sense of movement in some of his images can all be conveyed into English without great loss. Consider these lines from 'Salome':

... to the song of
the white acacia, the evening walked away...
beyond the river and into the clouds.

...The restaurant
orchestra swam over the marsh
and into the interminable distance.

When we come to look specifically at *Flags* we see many of the above traits but also there is something decidedly unique in this text. There is certainly some indication of a poet at the apprentice stage of his career—occasionally he is a little wordy, and his ideas are sometimes stronger than emotion—but what is infinitely appealing about this first collection is its strangeness: absurd, and sometimes incomprehensible images abound and one has to track the way the poems interact to try to grasp his overall meaning. Fortunately we have the daunting scholarship of Hélène Menegaldo who has committed many years to studying Poplavsky's work, as well as getting as much of his archive into print as possible. Menegaldo offers us the vital key to help us make the journey through the network of symbols in *Flags*:

A strange fantastic world, full of fairy-tale phantoms, closer to French surrealism than Russian symbolism, a complex work, difficult to understand, however, one where it is possible to trace certain patterns.

From here she provides the reader with an exhaustive examination of Poplavsky's highly individualized symbolic system. Poplavsky's symbolism is attractive because it manages to avoid the rather archaic feel of much Symbolist verse where words become limited to a single hidden meaning which transforms them, in Mandelstam's words, into 'stuffed birds'. What Menegaldo has shown is the way the difficulty inherent in some of the poems in *Flags* is clarified by looking at this system as a whole. She describes how it works by way of a general division between earth, air and water, with the verbs of swimming and flying dominating the poetry:

In the heavenly heights the poet tries to get in contact with God: in the sea he hopes to return to the source of his existence, but in the earth he is transformed to stone, ice or marble, to dream of other universes.

What is intriguing is not so much these ideas but the endless plasticity with which Poplavsky plays around with them. Menegaldo tracks

all the images that associate with the various realms but also shows, interestingly, the way that angels, say, not only inhabit the airy realm but are also like humans and thus they may be trapped on the earth, or lose their powers if they don't get back to the sky before the dawn. Poplavsky does not create a Symbolist sky of otherness, ether and archaic words (a tendency which makes some poetry from the Russian symbolists grate on the modern ear), but one that as readily has cows or packhorses flying there. The air is the place of flight and night dreams, where one can be superior to the sleeping, but it is equally Icarus's dangerous world of chance where there is a risk of falling back into the abyss. Poplavsky's dream world takes him back below the earth where he is forced to encounter gnomes, and sorcerers. His poems are inhabited by various goddesses, each with different traits. Towers, and skyscrapers are important symbols to show the link between earth and sky, and the airship that becomes the title of his final collection is the means whereby one can travel safely to the heights. This symbolic system continues to play a role in his other collections but nowhere is it explored in quite such a surreal way as it is in *Flags*. A likely source for some of the ideas, indeed, may be one of the earliest examples of Surrealist writing, *Maldoror* by Comte de Lautréamont (1846–70; the pseudonym of Isidore Ducasse), outlined here in the blurb for Paul Knight's Penguin translation:

Maldoror, a master of disguises pursued by the police is the incarnation of evil as he makes his way through the nightmarish realm of angels and gravediggers, hermaphrodites and prostitutes, lunatics and strange children.

Without some of the darker, more sadistic elements of Lautréamont's 'hallucinatory' text, Poplavsky's *Flags* conveys the same sense of whirlwind movement, of flight and swimming through the elements and it is this feel of the reader being carried along on such a journey that is one of the key attractions of *Flags*.

And 'flags' as a symbol is in itself intriguing. This symbol has been attributed to Apollinaire, who had argued that poets should avoid nationalistic flags, and unite under the single flag of art, but, in Poplavsky's case, Menegaldo is once more illuminating. She notes first of all that the ocean has a further significance for him as reminder of his past life, the journey he has already completed and his desire for future

travel—thus the boat becomes the means for both physical and spiritual journeys. Menegaldo draws our attention to the flags on the ship in the poem ‘Flags’ noting how ‘the poet can detect the flags’ sadness, having dreamed of their former ocean life’:

On a summer day over the white pavement
Japanese lanterns were hanging.
The trumpet voice mumbled over the boulevards,
on big poles the flags were dreaming.

It seemed to them that somewhere the sea was close,
and along them a wave of heat was running,
the air slept, not seeing dreams as Lethe.
Pity of the flags overshadowed us.

The boat’s frame appeared to them.
Black smoke that tenderly flew away,
and a prayer over the boundless wave
of the ship’s music on Christmas Eve.

The quick flight on the mast in the ocean,
the noise of salutes, the cry of black sailors,
and the enormous lowering down over anchors
in the hour of the fall of the body in mourning clothes.

First the flag glistens over the horizon
and cheerfully whirls to the flashes of cannons
and last of all sinks among the debris
and still with a wing beats about the water.

Like the soul, which leaves the body,
like my love for You. Answer me!
How many times did you wish on a summer’s day
to wrap yourself up in a flag and die.

Thus these personified flags have multiple meanings: they are indicators of unknown worlds to which one might travel; symbolic of the lost world of the émigré—both nostalgia for the past and a longing for discovery—and finally even suggestive of the poet’s soul.

Poplavsky’s later poems become increasingly rich in emotion but

this early collection tantalizes in an entirely unique way—Poplavsky’s imagination takes us into a variety of other worlds, ranging from the mystical, to the magical, fairy-tale and child-like—a highly original collection.

Belinda Cooke
2009

Eagles

I remember the varnished wings of the carriage,
silence and lies. Fly sunset, fly.
This is how Christopher Columbus hid from the crew
the immensity of the voyage they had made.

The crooked back of the coachman
was encircled with orange glory.
Grey hair curled under the hard hat,
and in the back us, like a two-headed eagle.

I look, my eyes avoiding the sun,
which still manages to dazzle even more:
the powdered implacable beak,
threatens passers-by till they blink and shiver.

You threatened me for eighteen days,
on the nineteenth you softened and faded.
The sunset finally left off playing on the panes:
suddenly it turned noticeably colder.

Autumn smoke rose over the carriage
where our happiness was slow to depart,
but the captain kept from the crew
the immensity of the voyage they had made.

BC/RM

Transformation into Stone

We went out. But the scales inexorably sank.
Such cold scales of twilight,
the snowy hours floated past,
circled on the stones and disappeared.

On the island houses did not move
and cold drifted solemnly over the earthen wall.
It was winter. Doubting Thomas
placed his fingers in its scarlet sunset.

The tracks of heels in the snow
pierced like an umbrella spike, a stiletto.
My purple and steady hand
lay like stone on the bench.

Winter drifted over the city there
where sadly we no longer waited,
just like the sky holds its many towns,
as it spreads itself over the large distance.

BC/RM

‘How Cold the Public Waters Are . . .’

‘How cold the public waters are,’
You said, and looked below.
The mist flew beyond the stone ledge
where the frozen carts were rumbling along.

Over the roofs three o’clock showed up blue,
we went down to the moraine roadway
and I thought to myself: I shall raise a cry now
like these boat sirens.

But I walked on further and made you laugh,
just like the condemned joke with their executioners:
the tram horse which rushed up, neighing
suddenly became silent and calm behind us.

We parted: well we don’t always need to be ashamed
of the closeness that is already long past,
like autumn that’s passed along the embankment
never to return on its tracks.

BC/RM

Disgust

The soul was raised in a shelter for the deaf and dumb,
but the defect was cured:

she walks through the wards of the hospital
saying goodbye to everyone she meets.

Having settled in the corner on the tram car
travelling with things to the station
the mother turned her black eyes sternly
on the unfamiliar child.

And since that time how often has she wanted
to become deaf and dumb once more,
when the deathly arrow flew
of words she understood too readily.

Or at least if it were possible to go into service
in that same shelter so that she wouldn't hear
the obscene words of friendship
and the words of love heard so frequently here.

BC/RM