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ILYA ERENBURG'S *LIFE AND DEATH OF NIKOLAY KURBOV* AS THE BASIS FOR BRUNO JASIEŃSKI'S NOVEL *I BURN PARIS*

Abstract

Bruno Jasieński wrote his novel *I Burn Paris* after translating Ilya Erenburg's *Life and Death of Nikolay Kurbov*. This article analyses the complex relationships between these two works and investigates how their artistic and ideological facets intertwine in both positive and negative ways.

Keywords: Ilya Erenburg, Bruno Jasieński, *I Burn Paris*, *Life and Death of Nikolay Kurbov*, translation, polemics, contexts

As there is a generic and ideological affinity between Bruno Jasieński's own novel *I Burn Paris* and his translation of Ilya Erenburg's *Life and Death of Nikolay Kurbov,* we assumed that an analysis of the above translation would reveal the actual translation strategies adopted by Jasieński, unveiling the literary and ideological impact of Erenburg's book on Jasieński's writings. Alas, such an assumption led us to a dead end. Jasieński's translation turned out to be so literal that some sections are incomprehensible to a Polish

reader. The poet consistently calqued common and proper names, typical of early Soviet Russia (e.g., terms describing the realities of life or taken from the then Russian Newspeak, abbreviations, toponyms, etc.), thus producing a bland translation, full of lexical mistakes and stylistically awkward phraseology. "Strangulated" by its own literalness, it is a work in which one cannot discern any trace of the translator's own written idiosyncrasies or opposition to the original text at a linguistic level.

Due to the failure of the initial, translatological approach, we decided instead to study the similarities and complex relationship between *I Burn Paris* and *Kurbov* using a different method; a comparative analysis of both novels reveals the direct influence of the earlier text on the later one, and the very mechanisms of the literary agon. In our opinion, it proved to be the correct analytical tool because, through its prism, Jasieński's book indeed comes across as a polemic against the specific concept of revolution put forth by Erenburg in *Kurbov*. The detailed results of the investigation are presented below.

The avant-garde roots of Erenburg's *Kurbov*

In Soviet Russia, the years in which Ilya Erenburg worked on *Kurbov* were marked by intense change that manifested itself not only in the form of post-revolutionary unrest, but also through bold avant-garde experimentation in the arts and ideological matters. It should be remembered that 1922 brought a brief period of abatement from ideological pressure, allied to the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP). With such an about-turn, the Bolshevik authorities admitted that without legalizing private entrepreneurship they were unable to stabilize either the economy or the internal consumer market, both of which had been severely disrupted by the upheaval of World War I and the subsequent civil war (cf. Malia 2017). On the other hand, the political situation in the first year after the end of the latter conflict was still unclear and the economic and cultural spheres were relatively free; official collectivist institutions – dedicated to making sure that every aspect of life conformed to the party's ideological directives – were still to gain a monopolistic position and near absolute power.

Ilya Erenburg came from the so-called petty-bourgeoisie, as the bourgeoisie was called in Bolshevik newspeak (his father was a brewery manager in Moscow). Roughly speaking, he was brought up in the milieu of

the intelligentsia. An early fascination with leftist ideas led to his arrest for communist agitation in workers' circles at the age of fifteen. Thanks to his father's influence, he managed to escape abroad, and from 1906 lived in Paris, but returned to Russia on hearing of the revolution. In his mind, two elements coexisted in a strange way: left-wing ideas about social order and the intellectual ethos; the former sought social justice (strongly associated with collectivist thinking), while the latter revolved around personal freedom as well as human subjectivity and emotionality.

When Erenburg was writing *Kurbov*, literary and artistic groups continuing the traditions of the Russian Silver Age were still legal and thriving. "Fellow travelers" (попутчики), as non-politically engaged artists were called in those days, tended to carry out aesthetic experiments, especially ones rooted in avant-garde thinking, but it was just one facet of a much richer intellectual life in which they participated.

If we put aside the philosophical or ideological meaning of Erenburg's works of the time, especially his series of novels including *Kurbov* and *The Love of Joanna Ney,* it becomes clear that he drew on two specific cultural sources. The first of these was the avant-garde movement of the early 20th century. Less than a year before writing *Kurbov*, Erenburg published his constructivist manifesto *And yet it moves* (А все-таки она вертится…) in an émigré Berlin publishing house. The manifesto, which became well-known, was co-authored by the renowned avant-garde artist El Lisicki, while none other than Fernand Léger designed its cover. Around the same time, Erenburg, one year younger than Lisicki, published the ephemeral constructivist magazine *Вещь* ("The Thing"). Both the periodical (three issues came out in total) and the above-mentioned manifesto should be taken into account when one considers the on-going trends at the time of the creation of *Kurbov.*

The artistic formula used by Erenburg in his novel seems to owe a good deal to Andrei Bely's "rhythmic prose", which was popular at the time, especially within Russian émigré circles. The first fifteen chapters were later described by Erenburg himself as *беловщина*, i.e., heavily drawing on Bely (беловщина; see Фрезинский 2013); apart from that, he borrowed a good deal from Alexei Remizov's stylistic manner. Set against this stylistic and cultural background, Erenburg's novel clearly belongs to the experimental literature of the time, whose intention was to challenge typical and deeply ingrained patterns of literary reception; this could have been a significant incentive for Jasieński to translate the work into Polish.

The second source of inspiration for Erenburg, and one which stylistically brought him closer to Bely and Remizov, was so-called "ornamental prose". The origins of ornamental prose can be found in expressionism; it was one of an array of artistic devices used by both left-wing writers (for example, members of the Kuznitsa group), and "fellow travelers". Reading Vsevolod Ivanov's novel *Armoured Train 14–69,* Boris Lavrenov's stories *The Forty-First* and *The Wind*, almost all Boris Pilniak's work, and Artem Veseloy's *Russia Bathed in Blood*, the reader is struck by how – regardless of differences in ideological overtones – these authors all use the same textual devices: juxtaposing unrelated events so that the reality looks fragmented, introducing scenes involving masses of people and the use of *skaz* or highly colloquial language, typical of the lower classes. In the opinion of the authors, such devices were intended, among other reasons, to represent the era with its turmoil and internal incoherence, and to vividly demonstrate both the unpredictability of human fate in the face of history, and the futility of human efforts in levelling out reality with rational measures. The echoes of such techniques of textual construction even found their way into the much later novel *Doctor Zhivago,* where Boris Pasternak applied them in order to express the tensions and specific mood of the civil war. Even with this limited explanation, it becomes obvious that in writing *Kurbov* Erenburg was inspired by the constructivist and expressionist avant-garde; he may also have drawn on the concept of *занимательность* (attractiveness of literature) promoted by the association of young artists from Saint Petersburg called the Serapion Brothers.

However, his influences were not limited to the field of aesthetics because for Erenburg — and in this regard Jasieński was no different — the artistic revolution of the avant-garde was inseparable from its social counterpart (or rather counterpoint). In fact, social revolution constitutes the very core of *Kurbov*, a book which reveals the clash of two ideological universes: the Bolshevik and counter-Bolshevik, through the juxtaposition of their pure political manifestations.

From translating *Kurbov* to burning Paris. What interested Jasieński in Erenburg's novel?

Kurbov is a novel concerning the entwined fates of a Cheka functionary and an ideological counter-revolutionary. Bruno Jasieński, a writer ten years

younger than Erenburg, would have been interested in translating such a work for several reasons. The first was no doubt its experimental avant-garde form, which manifested itself in a very specific approach to language. Erenburg did not employ the typical *mimesis* but adopted a much more demiurgic and creative strategy: he tried to construct the entire reality of the novel on a linguistic level. This consisted of the bold use of two powerful linguistic repositories: firstly, everyday colloquial speech overlapping with the technique of feverishly naming everything anew (characteristic of the post-revolutionary era and its spirit), and secondly, poetic speech constructed in accordance with the idea of the autonomy of language in relation to reality, and governed by internal laws reflecting the writer's own way of thinking. Such poetic speech manifests as a barely penetrable, bizarre language which violates the usual rules of lexical coherence and makes extensive use of ellipsis, together with the assembling and juxtaposition of elements with completely different origins and functions. The result of Erenburg's refined linguistic approach reflected how the solid body of Russian reality had been shattered into a million pieces by the revolution.

Jasieński turned out to be unable to find in the then Polish reality or literary tradition the necessary tools and references for creating an adequate linguistic rendering of the above experiences; his chances of conveying the complex layers of Erenburg's novel were, at best, slim. For this very reason, however, he may have assumed that if such unprecedented experiences could be successfully reflected in Russian via a "linguistic revolution", then perhaps an excessive use of calques could graft the same revolution into Polish and give it a new developmental impulse. Yet, as we noted in our introduction, this proved to be a very misguided assumption.

Erenburg's book concerns also the notion of revolution in its extra-linguistic sense, which was a very important factor, drawing Jasieński's attention to the work. The author of *I Burn Paris* certainly deserved the label of "revolutionary poet" since all of his longer poems (and many shorter ones) are about revolution. Yet the revolution he continually refers to is more of an idea than a physical experience (see Świeściak 2020). *I Burn Paris*, written shortly after the completion of the translation of *Kurbov*, promotes the "mutual independence" of revolutionary ideas and revolutionary practice, where the former stems merely from the evolution of Jasieński's way of thinking. In Erenburg's case, conversely, it is experience which provides substantial support for his ideas.

Indeed, a "practising communist" such as Jasieński must have been offended by the fact that Erenburg saw his novel as a work about the triumph of instinct over will (emotionality over rationality). Since this is only the first item on a long list of notable differences between both writers, it seems that the true ideological point of reference – and invisible object of criticism – underlying Jasieński's *I Burn Paris*, was Erenburg's *Kurbov* and not Paul Morand's *Je brûle Moscou.* Although many scholars disagree on this point, Jasieński in fact borrowed and transformed only one element of the latter work: its title. What he really tried to respond to was Erenburg's novel.

Kurbov as a missed opportunity. What is missing in *I Burn Paris*?

If the style of Erenburg's experimental prose appealed to Jasieński, the resulting novel became a missing link in the chain of evolution of Polish avant-garde prose. In reality, the aesthetics of *I Burn Paris* is quite traditional (Rawiński 1971) and the only element it clearly owes to *Kurbov* are its expressionistic, naturalistic descriptions. As a matter of fact, such descriptions are more numerous in Jasieński's novel than in Erenburg's, and embedded in his futurist poetics. For the Polish author, the metropolis is never neutral. It may be a place where humans experience the glorious triumph of the machine, merging together into a new organism, but also, as in his *Hunger Song,* it can result in a beautiful and horrible chimera whose transformation into a machine is advanced enough to threaten man. In the novel, Paris is a ruthless city, provoking an equally cruel counterattack by the oppressed. But although its descriptions are shifted (or rather pushed) towards hypernaturalism, its mercilessness is mainly depicted via the use of animal metaphors.

The manner of conveying the content to readers in *I Burn Paris* remains largely traditional, since little remains of Erenburg's constructivist technique based on smart truncation, i.e., stripping the text of "relaxing" fragments of the narrative and descriptions that make it easier to read. Jasieński's "conservatism" was not, of course, intended to "tear Erenburg's experiment asunder". When writing *I Burn Paris*, Jasieński was, beyond any doubt, on the verge of an aesthetic shift from a futurist past towards the idea of simplicity. At that time, however, the literary prism proposed by Erenburg was too difficult and impractical to attract the attention of Polish readers, and Jasieński was determined to present the entire revolutionary concept to

as many readers as possible. Copying or imitating the style of his Russian source of inspiration would greatly compromise his chances of fulfilling such a task, and, given the aesthetic failure of his translation of *Kurbov*, he probably knew this. All in all, a technique of intelligent subtraction made its way into the composition of *I Burn Paris.* The novel is constructed in loosely connected scenes – a literary technique which does not hinder communication – on the contrary, it sharpens the juxtaposed views. But our analysis once again reveals that in the Erenburg/Jasieński polemic, style has never been a particularly prominent battleground: their fiercest dispute concerns their attitudes towards the revolution, and is mainly manifested through their characters' background and viewpoints on the subject.

I Burn Paris as a revised version of *Kurbov*. Why is "the more revolutionary revolution" so unorthodox?

I Burn Paris does not contain direct references or even allusions to *Kurbov*. Their interplay becomes visible only when one compares the fates of the main protagonists. The lives of Pierre and P'an Tsiang-kuej from Jasieński's novel are either poorly devised (Pierre) or corrected (P'an Tsiang-kuei) versions of Kurbov's fate. So let's examine where it came from.

In Erenburg's novel, Nikolai Kurbov is one of the revolutionary activists. We first meet him at the end of 1917, when he decides to undertake what everyone else has gone out of their way to avoid: namely, to take command of the security services. Kurbov's former life is described as a series of turbulent experiences, including his conception itself (his mother, having fallen in love with a profligate impotent, sells her virginity to pay off the debts of her lover). The consequent events unfold in a deterministic scenario: we are witness to his label of bastard, his deplorable poverty, the death of his mother who becomes a prostitute in order to feed him, his difficult education path, and his humiliation at the hands of the bourgeois family that employs him as a tutor to their youngest son; in the meantime, Kurbov joins the communist party and serves his first prison sentence. His further initiation into revolutionary circles is marked by the betrayal of a friend who turns out to be a provocateur, his penal servitude in a remote part of Russia, his escape, frontline battles and, finally, revolution. In other words, the fate of the protagonist proves the necessity for revolution and constitutes a prism through which the reader perceives Russia at the moment of revolution. The pivotal

scene in which Kurbov becomes fully aware of its inevitability takes place when a girl he meets by chance dies of starvation. At that moment he realizes that the revolutionary intelligentsia ("pince-nez"), with their unending inconclusive debates, will not undertake a real revolution and fix the situation in the country (where little girls are starving to death): in order to change it, terror is needed. Nikolai had already been tough and intuitively understood the need to use violence. With his accession to Cheka, he becomes a cog in the powerful revolutionary machine.

Pierre and P'an Tsiang-kuei are ideological figures to an even greater extent than Nikolai Kurbov. Created out of the shards of trauma, humiliation and misery, they are meant to reveal the social inequalities of the capitalist world and the necessity of changing the status quo. Since the author of *I Burn Paris* is concerned with global revolution, it should come as no surprise that the novel takes place in the capital of France or that the protagonists are Polish and Chinese. Pierre has lost his job and has been abandoned by his beloved who now seeks happiness with others as a prostitute. The story of P'an Tsiang-kuei repeats, but also transforms, the fate of Kurbov, since it leads from the misery of an orphaned child, simultaneously shaped and destroyed by school and religion, to the consciousness of an internationalist revolutionary. Pierre is the "truncated" version of Kurbov, because he can be considered the embodiment of only one of his traits – the desire for revenge. This revenge ends ultimately in his death from which, however, the seed of revolution grows: Pierre poisons Paris with plague germs, the population of Europe's largest capital slowly dies out, and only the prisoners survive who go on to build the nucleus of a future communist society in an enclave spared by the disease. Interestingly enough, in reaction to the novel, many Polish communists accused Jasieński of lacking a communist consciousness (cf. Wolski 1929). They were probably wrong but their objection to the work stemmed from the fact that the revolution in *I Burn Paris* is "instigated" by a single man – a madman who is not even a communist but also an abandoned lover (this detail was added to express disdain by emphasizing the protagonist's effemination, typical of the *fin de siècle*.

However, the fate of Pierre is less important for Jasieński. A much more prominent role concerns another alter-ego of Nikolai Kurbov: P'an Tsiang-kuei. Like Kurbov, he begins life as an orphan and, although gifted, cannot afford regular education. While Kurbov earns his tuition by teaching, P'an is dependent on the charity of missionary priests. Thus, instead of copying Erenburg's diagnosis of the bourgeois environment, Jasieński conducts an

analysis of the (un)ethical and (anti)social role of the church and religion in pre-revolutionary society.

P'an is offended and humiliated harder and more often than Kurbov before he grows into the idea of revolution, but he never takes the received slights personally: they are mere stages in his revolutionary education. The "corrected" version of Kurbov, is, therefore, a barely concealed allegory of global revolution ("pan-revolution") in human form.

The evidence that Jasieński transgressed against communist orthodoxy is barely evident in his protagonists. He does begin with the idea of individual revenge, but crowns the novel with the vision of a collective new order at work. This is why all the protagonists in the first two parts of *I Burn Paris* die, and the protagonist of the third part is a properly collective body including the prisoners (most of them are, of course, political prisoners). Such is the proper way of revolution for Jasieński: from individual actions, ambitions and needs, towards a common cause that absorbs, grinds, destroys, and, in the end, invalidates everything individual, regardless of whether this is a suitable outcome.

Thus, we come to the essence of Jasieński's polemic with Erenburg, a better understanding of which first requires a historical-literary gloss. *Kurbov* was published almost simultaneously in Berlin by Helikon and (a few days earlier) in Russia by Novaya Moskva. To release such a subversive book in Moscow, the latter publishing house provided it with a foreword titled *От редакции* (editors' note) whose author was Nikolai Angarski, a fairly well-known revolutionary activist and literary critic. This one-and-a-half page text emphasizes the reliability of Erenburg's knowledge of the Russian émigré community, but challenges his credibility as a witness to the Russian reality of the time. The writer, Angarski stated, was no different from other "good fellows belonging to the intelligentsia who have grown accustomed to the October Revolution but are still unable to accept its methods of 'class dictatorship'" (Эренбург 1923: 4). But what else could he have written? Without such an *imprimatur* the publication of the work would have been impossible.

As can be seen, in order to publish *Kurbov,* it was necessary for the Russian publisher to provide a strange act of ideological contrition, simultaneously declaiming the writer a heretic whilst at the same time granting him absolution for his committed sins. By contrast, the reception of Jasieński's *I Burn Paris* in Russia was very different from that in Poland. In the Soviet Union, his novel proved much less controversial than Erenburg's *Kurbov*,

and its publication allowed Jasieński to move to Moscow immediately after he was expelled from France (the attempt to destroy Paris, even though literary, prompted his expulsion). The meaning of the work was, after all, symbolic: a vision of the obliteration of the capital of the imperialist world. But it was also read as a general paean to revolution. In Erenburg's novel, there is a sonorous dissonance in this regard because Kurbov, the embodiment of the most controversial ideas of legitimated terror, gives up his revolutionary faith and commits suicide. Moreover, he does this with motives that could be attributed to Jasieński's Pierre: this is not about revenge but about realizing that the world has more facets than he thought (or even that it is just the opposite of what he thought). This allows private motives to prevail and feelings to come into prominence – unthinkable for a communist. Jasieński's Pierre falls for the same reason. The pattern of protagonist metamorphosis is thus the opposite of that expounded in *I Burn Paris* – from the idea of community (based on shared misery), through revolution, to the right of the individual to self-determination: to having one's own feelings and making one's own decisions. Kurbov, who believes that love is merely a relic of the past or a petty obstacle to achieving reasonable common goals, falls in love – and, to make things worse, with a counter-revolutionary. It is also significant that before he dies, he expresses open disappointment with the direction the Russian revolution seems to be taking. Kurbov does not like NEP and considers it a step backwards, perhaps even a betrayal of the revolution as such. His suicide stems not from a hasty decision but is rather a conscious calculation to withdraw from a world where social objectives are no longer important and where there is no place for individual desires: such a world does not meet his expectations.

In Jasieński's hands, the sole protagonist in Erenburg's *Kurbov* ultimately turns into a pair of protagonists, but that process includes fundamental ideological corrections. Pierre and P'an Tsiang-kuei also commit suicide. The former kills himself in a reckless act that entails the death of almost all the inhabitants of Paris, whereas the latter is altruistically motivated and does not infect anybody with the plague he contracts. Pierre has only one goal – to satisfy his own emotions, which leads to the destruction of himself and thousands of other people. By contrast, P'an thinks in collective categories – he wants to invent a vaccine so that the revolutionaries of Paris survive and become the new seed of the global revolution; his suicide is prompted by the fear that if he dies, work on the vaccine will stop. It would be hard to find a clearer statement of Jasieński's firm conviction that private goals

are pointless, while the collective ones are of paramount importance and worth dying for (in accordance with the idea of revolution). That conviction, which pervades *I Burn Paris*, is the polar opposite of the schema in Erenburg's novel, but Jasieński goes even further and removes individual protagonists altogether. He creates a world of pure revolution: one which is, in fact, non-human. One could almost say that he desperately strives to prove that he understands the ideas of revolution better than Erenburg, that he is a more unbending, more orthodox communist…

One should remember that from the perspective of a Westerner – a Pole living in France – the revolution in the East looked completely different to that of a Russian (who also experienced living in France). Jasieński was living in Russia in 1917, but left the country in May 1918 and only saw the realities of Soviet communism from 1929 until his untimely death in 1938. That is why his vision of the revolution from the time of *I Burn Paris* is Utopian and very risky in its naivety. For Jasieński did not treat the Bolshevik revolution as the only correct and final one in accordance with the strict interpretations of its fathers, Lenin and Stalin. Instead, claiming that the Bolshevik revolution was only a seed of the idea of truly global revolution (all the Bolsheviks in *I Burn Paris* perish like the rest of the old world), he showed some symptoms of a Marxist-Trotskyist deviation. If one considers the novel from that angle, it may even seem more unorthodox than *The Life and Death of Nikolai Kurbov*, except for the fact that Jasieński never planned to stray from the path of accepted doctrine and in fact did it unconsciously (see Świeściak 2020).

However, one must admit that, *sensu stricto* and *sensu largo,* Jasieński fell prey to his own ideological zeal. He penned a misbegotten novel which successfully presents the timeless truth about class struggle but whose psychological and historical credibility is questionable; it has all too many characteristics of an ideological Sunday school. The author, like many "believing" Russians – Erenburg, at least at the time of writing *Kurbov*, was an exception – fell prey to the totalitarian regime that had no compunction in killing intelligent and creative people, both those who deviated from established political orthodoxy as well as its staunch acolytes and believers. How did Erenburg manage to survive? Nobody knows. Stalin is said to have had a weakness for him.

Translated by Piotr Plichta

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