Incompatible Collaborators: Gor'kii, Khodasevich, and "Belfast" (1924-26)

Irene Masing-Delic

Dusha vzygrala. Ei ne nado
Ni uteshenii, ni uslad.

Rapture seized my soul. Now it does not need either solace or sweet pleasure.

Khodasevich, "Elegiia," 1921

Introduction

In his memoir piece "Progress" (1938),[1] Vladislav Khodasevich tells of two instances when he personally saw Maksim Gor'kii enraged beyond self-control. In one of them, the anger was aimed at Khodasevich himself.[2]

The two former *Beseda* (*Colloquy, Conversation, Dialog*) collaborators who had come to disagree about this journal's mission--or at

[1] Citations of Khodasevichs' works in this article are from *Sobranie sochinenii* (*SS*) in 4 volumes. All translations from Russian are mine unless otherwise indicated.

[2] The other time, according to Khodasevich who witnessed the scene, the anger was aimed at Mariia Fedorovna Andreeva, Gor'kii's second wife. She had said that it would "be fine by her" ("i otlichno"), if V. P. Burenin, a writer-critic who had satirized left-wing writers including Gor'kii, did not receive food ration cards and starved to death, and that she would be happy to execute him (*rastreliat'*) "with her own hands" (4: 346). Gor'kii "turned crimson" and told her never to make such remarks in his house again.

least how to accomplish it[3]--had had a discussion in Gor'kii's Sorrento home in spring 1925 (during Gor'kii's second Italian exile) on a topic apparently related to the notion of what might be termed "historical progress." Gor'kii drew it to its close saying that if all people reasoned like Khodasevich, "progress would become unrealizable." The memoirist put an end to the conversation by replying that "he, indeed, did not like progress" (4: 346). Gor'kii "turned crimson," (*pobagrovel*) extinguished his cigarette not in the ash-tray but on the table, and left for his room.[4] He then had a violent coughing-fit that could be heard several rooms away. Khodasevich and his companion Nina Berberova soon after this incident left the Gor'kii household where they had been staying for about half a year (October 8th, 1924— 18th of April, 1925). A few more letters were subsequently exchanged but the correspondence broke off when Gor'kii, in what was to be his last letter (August 13th, 1925) to Khodasevich, "maliciously" (*iazvitel'no*, 4: 347) quoted the latter's remark about "not liking progress." Khodasevich

[3] *Beseda* was to print both Soviet and Western writers relying on the services of a Western publishing house, thus eschewing Soviet censorship's stamp of approval; it was to be distributed both in the West and in the Soviet Union. This arrangement was increasingly undermined by the Soviet authorities. For a detailed discussion of the failed *Beseda* project, see Scherr. It was clearly a major cause of the rift between Gor'kii and Khodasevich, the former being prepared for compromises with the Soviet regime, the latter seeing no point in having a journal "curtailed" (to quote Scherr's article title) by the Soviets, since the main point of its creation had been to establish a platform for pluralism and a West-East dialog (*colloquy*). Scherr believes that part of Gor'kii's reluctance to part with the journal project in spite of Soviet duplicity was his longtime goal of preserving Russian culture threatened by the Bolshevik Cultural Revolution. He writes, "Gorky seems to have been motivated […] by a genuine conviction that helping the Soviet Union maintain cultural ties with the West would be of benefit to his fellow Russians" (143). For the history of *Beseda*, also see Bethea, pp. 269—272.

[4] It is interesting to note that Gor'kii's choleric "high-blood-pressure reaction" (*pobagrovel*, cf. note 2) was the result of very different causes. In one case, he was apparently upset about his wife's hatred for a person embracing a different ideology, in the other case about a friend's dismissal of his own "sacred beliefs."

did not reply thus taking the initiative in breaking off relations after some hesitation.[5] Gor'kii, on his part, made no attempt to renew communication.

Nor is it likely that he was happy to learn about the latest twist in the *Beseda*-saga: to make it a journal of "contemporary science," eliminating fiction and poetry altogether (Gor'kij, *Pis'ma*, 15: 244). In subsequent letters to friends (such as the literary critic Iulii Aikhenval'd), Khodasevich would stress that their parting of ways was ideological and not personal. He had hoped to "cause serious discord between Gor'kii and Moscow," but had arrived at the conclusion that he had failed in his "mission" (4: 504). The discussion about "progress" recorded by Khodasevich and discussed above apparently marked a moment when he fully understood that whatever he had wanted Gor'kii to achieve vis-à-vis Soviet power under his guidance would not be realized, and that Gor'kii would sooner or later, conform to Soviet policies even while claiming to maintain an entirely independent stance, probably himself believing (or wanting to believe) that he was doing just that.[6] According to Khodasevich, Gor'kii's main character trait was his ability to believe what he wanted to believe, thus more and more becoming

[5] "Having suffered grave doubts for some days, I took the decision not to answer Gor'kii at all, ever" (4: 373).
[6] According to Nina Berberova, Khodasevich's final assessment of what Gor'kii stance would eventually take was summed up in his remark at their departure from Gor'kii's Sorrento villa: "Zinoviev [Gor'kii's main political enemy on "home ground"] will be removed and he will return to Russia" (190). She claims that Khodasevich, after much hesitation, had come to share her own conviction that Gor'kii never would break his ties with the Soviet "establishment."

the dupe of—not only others' deceptions--but above all his self-delusions.[7] Faith in incessant and unstoppable Progress under Soviet Socialism was the cornerstone of Gor'kii's beliefs, or, more precisely, the essence of his Faith. The discussion that took place in Sorrento "crystallized" the issues that had made them increasingly drift apart and soon was to lead to their parting of ways.

Although Khodasevich claims to have been taken "by surprise" by Gor'kii's strong reaction to his brief remark about "not liking progress," it seems likely that he had intended to pique his former collaborator and friend, perhaps even to provoke anger. By this time he cannot have been unaware of Gor'kii's total and virtually "religious" commitment to the concept of progress (to him "Progress"). Khodasevich's skeptical remark had the presumably desired effect of creating an irreconcilable opposition between their ideological positions which once had overlapped to a considerable degree, but no longer did as the sector of shared views had gradually, but irreversibly, dwindled. There seems to have been a realization on

[7] In his memoirs of Gor'kii in *Nekropol'* (1937) and in the later "Gor'kii" ("O sovremennikakh," 4: 348--378), it was this self-delusional feature that Khodasevich emphasized in the characterizations of his personality. According to him, Gor'kii was a firm believer in "nas vozvyshaiushchii obman" (4: 374, 375). The "elevating lie" is a phrase from Pushkin's poem "Geroi" ("The Hero," 1830). In his 1902 play *The Lower Depths* (*Na dne*), Gor'kii—inspired by Henrik Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*—debated what kind of "life lie" was preferable: the elevating lie meant to inspire the strong to transcend (even) themselves, becoming the super-strong (represented by Satin), or the comforting lie motivated by pity for those weak-willed characters who were unable to cope with stark truths (represented by Luka). Gor'kii clearly did not see his "elevating lie" as a "doubly" comforting one—both prettifying current reality (like Luka) and conjuring up the ultimate lie about future utopia. Rather he claimed that the "elevating lie" was the truth. See Nils Åke Nilson's *Ibsen in Russland*, particularly pp. 178-190.

Khodasevich's part that amicable surface relations *could* be maintained and that it would be *possible* to enjoy Gor'kii's continued hospitality, but only at the cost of *skuka*, i.e., a constant pretense that would become "a bore" (or, to use religious terminology, result in the *acedia* that is the consequence of betraying one's innermost values).[8] Khodasevich had by this time made his choice against an ideology that had an explanation for everything, justified everything in the name of the Future and was unfailingly convinced it represented the Truth of Progress.[9] Gor'kii could not part with his dream of a Paradise of Progress, where Art, Science and Industry would develop in close interaction with art mainly serving Science and Industry. Arguably, Gor'kii who usually is seen as an "internationalist" was also motivated by

[8] In his biography of Derzhavin (*Derzhavin*, 1931, Khodasevich dwells in some detail on the former's attempts to please the influential magnate P. I. Panin in order to promote his career goals at the court of Catherine II. Having achieved his goal at the cost of some self-abasement and compromise, Derzhavin, while enjoying Panin's hospitality, suddenly—without apparent cause ("i *vdrug* emu stalo *skuchno*," 3: 186; italics mine)—walked up to his host and insulted him, causing an unbridgeable rift ("nazhil vraga," 3: 187). Khodasevich's behavior in the Gor'kii episode related in "Progress" and discussed above, displays some resemblance to the behavior of Derzhavin as reported by his biographer. Arguably the rejection of moral compromise that Khodasevich attributed to Derzhavin was an aspect of his character that he sympathized with, having himself rejected various "magnates" in his life, including the Soviet magnate Gor'kii apparently was considering to become in the middle 1920s. In his second memoir of Gor'kii, he wrote about their parting: "I understood that our further relations would boil down to Aleksei Maksimovivh lying to me and my catching him lying" (4: 373).

In addition to Gor'kii, Khodasevich also broke other close relationships with fellow writers by a remark that by them was perceived as hiding barbs (which it probably did). The friendship with Andrei Belyi, for example, ended when on the eve of Belyi's return to the Soviet Union, at a banquet in honor of the departing returnee, Khodasevich said that the émigrés "did not expect him to crucify himself" for their sakes when he was back home, responding to Belyi's promise that this was what he was planning to do for them. For details and contexts, see Vaisband, "'Khodasevich byl….'" For Khodasevich's memoirs of Belyi, see *Nekropol'* ("Andrei Belyi"; 4: 42—67).

[9] This is not to say, there were no other factors impacting Khodaevich's decision. He did, for example, believe that both Ekaterina Pavlovna Peshkova, Gor'kii's first wife (who was close to Cheka-boss F. Dzerzhinskii), and "Mara"/ Moura/Maria/ Baroness Budberg, the companion of Gor'kii's second Italian exile) were persuading Gor'kii to return to the Soviet Union and were viewing him, Khodasevich, as an obstacle to their plans. Also, Gor'kii's son Maksim Peshkov was at the time being wooed by the Cheka to rejoin the organization, according to Khodasevich, in whom Maksim confided at some stage. The memoirist emphasizes that the naïve Maksim "did not know what he was doing," in the biblical sense.

"ideological patriotism," a wish to see Russia (and its republics, i.e., the Soviet Union) recognized as the world leader of Progress, or *primus inter pares* (see Masing-Delic, "Rescuing").

As is well-known, Gor'kii returned to the Soviet Union (in stages from 1928-1932) while Khodasevich and Berberova went to Paris, joining the Russian emigration there (in April, 1925). The geo-political demarcation lines were thus clearly drawn between the two former long-standing[10] collaborators, who had shared the *Vsemirnaia literatura* (*Universal Literature*) translation and publishing venture in Soviet Russia (1918-22) and had worked together in the *Beseda* project—until it separated them (see note 3). There had also been cordial personal relations;[11] these were more gradually,[12] but also irreparably severed after Gor'kii's "malicious" remark. This article examines the role of the issue of "p/Progress" in the Gor'kii--Khodasevich relationship focusing on Khodasevich's essay "Belfast" (1925) for clues to their ideological parting of ways in 1925. Khodasevichs's essay/sketch (*ocherk*) "Belfast" proved to be the litmus test that irrefutably demonstrated the ideological irreconcilabilities that had been "brewing" for

[10] It is perhaps surprising it lasted for so long. As Shubinskii puts it, "the literary friendship with Gor'kii "was the strangest in Khodasevich's life" (340). In all, they maintained friendly relations for about seven years (in the *Nekropol*'-memoir, 4: 155).

[11] These personal relations began in 1918, in Petrograd when Gor'kii invited Khodasevich to join *Universal Literature*, the translation-publishing enterprise that offered a livelihood to numerous members of the intelligentsia. For the early stages of their professional and social contacts, see Khodasevich's memoirs "Gor'kii" (in *Nekropol'*).

[12] As late as July 20th, 1925, Gor'kii wrote a letter to Berberova (15: 223-224) in a friendly and even flirtatious tone. This letter preceded the "final letter" to Vladislav Khodasevich of August 13th, 1925 (15: 243-244).

some time, in regard to *Beseda* and other issues. Faith in "Progress," and lack thereof, undoubtedly belongs to the significant reasons for Gor'kii's return to the Soviet Union and Khodasevich's choice of emigration. Gor'kii went to the land of "the Future and of Faith" (the Soviet Union as he envisioned it) and left behind him the realm of "cynicism and decline" (Western Europe), which "skeptics," like Khodasevich and other émigrés of "little faith," had opted for.[13] Khodasevich, as is well known, did not feel at home in the emigration and abhorred the cultural decline he perceived in Europe (in this regard sharing Gor'kii's opinions about the inevitable demise of Europe), and expressed in a cycle of poetry, entitled "European Night."[14] He preferred the "bitter air of exile"[15] and the dire financial problems of most Russian exiles in Paris, however, to Soviet utopian dreams bought at the price of inhumanity and its concomitant: the Socialist Realist degradation of art to political propaganda.[16]

[13] Since Gor'kii believed his Faith had irrefutable scientific foundations, i.e. was a new type of non-irrational faith, he saw those who did not share it, not as people with different opinions, but as saboteurs undermining the Only Truth.

[14] *Evropeiskaia noch'* is the title of Khodasevich's last poetry cycle (never published as a separate work), one that records his deep disillusionment with contemporary European civilization, as well as his farewell to his own waning creativity.

[15] This is an image in *Poem without a Hero* by Anna Akhmatova. Her line gave the title to the landmark anthology of émigré writings and essays edited by Simon Karlinsky and Alfred Appel, Jr. that made Russian émigré literature better known in the West.

[16] Nor did Khodasevich embrace literature with other types of overt messages, including religious ones. His rejection of Zinaida Gippius's and Dimitrii Merezhkovskii's late émigré writings led to a rift between them and their circle, and him. See Vaisband "'My' Khodasevicha …"Rejection of Soviet ideology does not mean that Khodasevich never contemplated a return to his homeland. In his case, there was a strong awareness it was but a dream.

Context for "Belfast"

"Belfast" is a seemingly straightforward account of a visit to the eponymous city's vast shipyard—the second largest in the world at that time; it is however a text with multiple intertexts, subtexts and contexts fraught with significance, while having few overt messages. Before focusing on this essay, let it be said here already that the "progress issue" between Gor'kii and Khodasevich was more complex than one of its participants (Gor'kii) advocating Progress and the other (Khodasevich) disliking any advances in technology and science and any new ideas regarding social change; it was not as simple as one being a "progressivist" and the other a "retrograde."

Rather, one of them, Gor'kii, by this time, believed that material progress would assume its ultimate and absolute form in the Soviet Union where it would realize the not only grandiose, but even utopian, visions that Gor'kii had outlined as early as in his 1904 prose poem *Man* (*Chelovek*). To Gor'kii, it was Progress that would make "liudi" into "cheloveki" (Luka makes that distinction between "mere people" and "real Humans" in the play *The Lower Depths*) and these *cheloveki* would eventually become the collective *Chelovek* (*Mankind* acting as One) whose name has "a proud ring

to it" (as Satin puts it in the same play) and the poem *Chelovek* spelled out.[17] The dialectic interaction where collective work would positively transform human beings and these improved human beings would perfect collective labor strategies by applying new technologies inspired by unfailing enthusiasm, thus facilitating progress, would inevitably lead to an interpenetrative stage that would make Progress *unstoppable*. And unstoppable Progress would continue *ad infinitum* until Humankind had become the Ruler of the Universe filling God's empty throne.

Khodasevich did not believe that utopian visions of endless Progress offered a good roadmap to a future reality seen as predictable because assumed to be pre-determined; he rather thought that assessing current issues soberly without relying on "elevating lies" was more important than "scientific prophecy." Nor did he think that the Soviet Union was in any position to demonstrate "progress," let alone all-redeeming Progress. He saw industrial-technical-scientific progress in the West as vastly superior to that in the Soviet Union, partly because the work force in Western countries was more disciplined, efficient and productive than the untrained Soviet one (largely of peasant origin), and partly because Western technology was so

[17] Luka says in Act II: "Est'—liudi, a est'—inye—cheloveki […]. In Act IV, Satin adds: Chelovek –vot pravda! And later he adds: "Chelo-vek! Eto –velikolepno! Eto zvuchit … gordo! Che-lo-vek! ("Man – that is truth." M A N! This is a magnificent concept! It has a proud ring to it! M A N!

much more advanced, as his visit to the Belfast shipyard confirmed. At the same time, he also frequently stated throughout his writing career that all progress—*wherever* it manifested itself--was a two-edged sword. Already in early essays (from the 1900s), he stressed that progress could work both ways. Commenting on the recent strides that aviation had made, for example, he wrote in an early article that airplanes certainly could become a means of transport and communication, but that they also could become a vehicle for dropping bombs. He feared that the latter would easily become a priority over communication and transport, as he records in "Progress," where he also notes that his prediction was met with ridicule and declared "absurd" (4: 347).[18]

"Belfast"--eulogy, satire, or remembrance of the past?

Let us now turn to a close reading of the "sketch," or essay, "Belfast" (published in Paris, in May 1925[19]) in which the author who had spent some months in the Northern Ireland capital in the summer of 1924, and thoroughly disliked it (for a variety of reasons, not least its climate),[20]

[18] Khodasevich's statements in that essay are not entirely accurate—he misremembered some titles and publication dates—but the gist of the matter is correctly conveyed. For details, see the commentary on "Progress" (4: 588).
[19] Vladimir Maiakovskii's "Brooklyn Bridge" was published in December 1925. Its thematics are similar to those in "Belfast": Western technological might (admired by the representative of a country that had not achieved it yet); the aesthetic appeal of industrial structures; the prospects technology opened up for the future; and others. Possibly the poem was a response to "Belfast." It also shares with "Belfast" the acknowledgment of Western achievements.
[20] Before seeing Belfast, Khodasevich could not imagine a city "devoid of any charm whatsoever" ("goroda, okonchatel'no lishennogo vsiakogo oboianiia"; 3: 40), but Belfast proved it was possible.

nevertheless gave his due of admiration to its huge harbor-cum-shipyard complex. He described it as truly impressive in spite of the economic depression at the time which had significantly decreased its capacity. He saw it as testifying to western industrial might ("progress") in comparison with which the infant industry of the Soviet Union could only evoke ridicule, Calling them "bednye rossiiskie vospevateli gorna i molota" ("poor Russian singers of the anvil and hammer," 3: 44), he presented them and their colleagues, the "skorbnoglavye futuristy" ("the Futurists with their sorrow-laden brows," *ibid*.), as naïve peasant lads ("ot sokhi," "straight from the plow," *ibid*.) who had no idea how a genuine industrial complex functioned and what grandiose proportions material progress had acquired in the West.

In spite of this critique of Soviet naiveté and its unfounded self-glorification, and his acknowledgment of the grandeur of the Belfast shipyard, Khodasevich's picture of its activities, offers far from an unadulterated homage to Western, or any other purely material, progress, contrary to prevailing critical opinions. Thus, having met his English guide and named him "Vergil," Khodasevich states that he was led "in circles" ("po krugam," 3: 42 and describes the out-lay of the offices and drafting rooms in circular terms, clearly presenting them as Dantean "circles of

Inferno" (3: 42) and himself as an observer guided by his "Vergil."[21] Two of these (upper) "circles of hell" are represented by the drafting rooms forming inner circles within the outer ones of the accounting offices--both inhabited by the damned souls of pale-faced puny creatures, doomed to be glued to their desks for an "eternity" ("obrechennye prebyvat' zdes'"; 3: 42), doing book-keeping and planning ocean-liners. Looking at the walls of these offices, the narrator sees pictures of mighty ships built in Belfast displayed on them, such as the "Majestic" and the "Olympic," but he sees no depictions of the "deceased Titanic" (*ibid*.), even though it too was built at this shipyard. Concluding from this that the Titanic was a taboo topic (perhaps relying on his experience of invariable Soviet denial of failure in any form), the author decides not to mention the ship and its inglorious and tragic end at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean after its collision with an ice-berg in April 1912.

Once outside the offices, he notices that the current economic crisis with its concomitant unemployment is quite visible in a certain emptiness of some shipyard space, such as workshops, clearly meant for many more people than are seen moving about and working **in** them at the time of his visit. Nevertheless he is impressed by what he sees: a "whole city" ("tselyi

[21] Dante was much on his mind at the time: he wrote his well-known poem "Pered zerkalom" ("Before the Mirror") with its Dante epigraph in 1924.

gorod," 3: 43) lies before him. It is an unusual one which combines streets with rails and contains the most diverse buildings imaginable made out of all possible materials from wood to glass to bricks and stones. He is struck by the "grandiose scope and conception of this city" ("grandioznyi razmakh i zamysel etogo goroda") which make it resemble "an independent republic" (3: 43; this *republic* is noticeably marked by diversity, not homogeneity). Amidst the variety of fascinating objects and structures he sees ("forests" of chimneys emitting steam and smoke, cranes and winches, towers and bridges), he is above all captivated by the sight of huge ship structures enfolded by "gigantic *cubes* of scaffolding" (44; italics mine). These gigantic "cubes" that have replaced the "circles" he previously observed apparently trigger the author's associations to the Russian Cubo-Futurists and their glorification of domestic industrial activity. He estimates that what they and their colleagues, the Proletarian poets, have glorified as "miracles of progress" in the U.S.S.R., at best, is the production of "two pairs of tongs" and the "cleaning-up of half a pound of rusty nails" performed in "voluntary" (and presumably disorganized) *subbotnik* labor by "lads straight from the plow," and subsequently duly "sung" in hymns to Soviet achievement (3: 44). What is accomplished at the Belfast shipyard is on a different scale—not a ridiculously exaggerated, but truly grandiose, scale

that has produced genuine marvels of construction. The author intimates that Futurist and Proletarian fantasies have become reality here: "monstrous machines, using no furnace heat, but just the slightest pressure of their short proboscises, drill through almost two inches of steel boards as if they were paper; elsewhere—square beams of steel are sliced up by knives and in yet another place a drill looking like a spear makes holes for clinchers, perforating the beams. And high up some kind of iron turtles run along iron bridges with their backs turned downward, like flies crawling on a ceiling" (3: 44--45).

This work on a gigantic scale with the help of an almost phantasmagorical technology has an all-pervasive avant-garde feel about it that the Soviet "country-bumpkins" of the Proletkul't could not even imagine as realizable, although they glorified it in their naive and provincial poetry stridently claiming modernity. It does also have a genuine lyric–poetic quality, however, which becomes palpable when the author of "Belfast" gets closer to the ships under construction.

One of them is almost ready for its first voyage; the author's gaze is captured by a worker who "hanging in a cradle" (mast outlook) high above the deck, at the "height of a four-floor house" (45) is banging away with his hammer, being part of, but also isolated from the crowd of workers below--

who are "smoothing wooden boards, caulking inside [the life-boats], on them, and under them" (45). Since we are in Northern Ireland, this lonely worker high up on the level of the tall chimneys and masts around him evokes Wagnerian imagery, i.e., the sailor in the outlook who ushers in Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde* by singing his tuneful ditty about the "wind freshly blowing homeward" and his missing his "Irish girl" who is not with him and unbeknownst where; true, no wistful ditty is being sung here—there is just the sound of a hammer pounding solid matter.[22] Perhaps this lonely "hammerer" evokes the author's contrasting memories of quasi-Proletarian Smithy poets finding inspiration in "hammers bashing anvils", and other such scenes of proletarian labor.

The Integral and the Titanic

In the sections of "Belfast" dealing with ship-building, Khodasevich describes the activities taking place in both quite romantic, and, apparently, admiring, terms, as if quite taken, or even overwhelmed, by the marvels of industrial technology, imbuing them with a poetic aura. The first ship he is taken to, for example, he describes as "endless" (45); crawling underneath its gigantic hull resting on a massive support structure, he sees a "tunnel"

[22] The first lines of this song are: "Frisch weht der Wind der Heimat zu. / Mein irisch Kind / Wo weilest du?"

that seemingly goes on forever, and only when "Vergil" points into the distance, the author perceives a "small light-gray spot emitting dull rays of light," marking the point where the ship ends and "the sea begins" (45). The mighty ocean, it seems, is reduced to a tiny spot by the bulk of the giant ship which will soon be sailing on it, claiming control of vast watery expanses. Gor'kii's dreams about "the conquest of nature" here seems to find their symbolic realization, as the sea is reduced to a tiny spot in comparison with which the gigantic ship—at least from the perspective of a land-bound observer—seems to be "ruling the waves." Will that perspective prevail once the ship is on the ocean however, or will the ship be reduced to a tiny spot on the mighty ocean, once the voyage has begun? Will it perchance even be destroyed when, for example, colliding with a gigantic iceberg? This is a question that seems implied here as the essay's author apparently keeps thinking about the Titanic even though he is not "letting on" that he has not forgotten its tragic fate.

The second ship that the author visits in the company of his Vergil is still in the earlier stages of construction and not yet ready to be launched; in its still raw stage it evokes multiple reactions on his part, including memories of childhood picture books about Peter the Great building ships in Zaandam, as well as Robinson Crusoe constructing his raft—both of his

childhood heroes seen as representatives of human initiative and enterprise. The construction before him is not a wooden and moderately sized ship or a primitive raft, however, but a steel colossus that has a certain phantasmagorical aura surrounding it, as it seems not to be built, but to be miraculously building *itself*.

The author cannot see the workers who are putting together this steel giant as they are hidden from view, working "somewhere in the open womb of the giant [ship being built], in the darkness, in which the yellow spots of the electric lamps look like festive illumination" (3: 45). The womb-image seems to intimate that the invisible workers are "tinkering" with nature, creating their technical marvel in a kind of Frankenstein approach to creativity. The perfect participle in the phrase "vo *vskrytom* chreve" (in the *opened*, rather than *open*, womb; italics mine) points to some sort of "Caesarean section," or perhaps an autopsy, *vskryt'* also meaning 'to dissect a corpse'. One might even be tempted to speak of a second Wagnerian allusion--the Nibelung dwarfs hammering away at their Golden treasure in hidden depths, forcing Earth's womb to relinquish its treasures. As constructions mastering the Ocean, the ships being built in Belfast, are forcing another element—water--to relinquish its riches and power to *homo faber*. The mention of "intestines" (*kishki*) when describing the intertwined

cables (also more poetically likened to "lianas") lying exposed to an observing gaze adds ambiguity to the imagery.[23]

Enchantment with the beauty and even magic of industrial work seems to predominate, however. This reaction is perhaps unexpected from the Khodasevich who usually did not wax lyrical about progress (and even less about Progress); it somewhat baffles the reader until s/he realizes that such passages could be seen as satirical *pastiches* of the poetics of the Proletarian poets as parodied in Evgenii Zamiatin's *We* (1921). Having stated that he could not see the Belfast workers in the hull of the ship, but that he could hear them, the author continues: "The whole ship rings with the singing of innumerable electric drills. This sound is absolutely unique and cannot be rendered in words--it is penetrating and—enticing (*oboiatel'nyi*, 3: 45). It calls you to some *unknown destination* (*kuda-to*; my italics)–and then suddenly ceases all at once—on an unbearably emotional groaning note. And the small hammers striking the iron serve as musical background for the sound made by the drills" (3: 45). This passage is reminiscent of D-503's early diary notes in which Prolekul't poetics are

[23] In her intertextual approach to this essay, Russian critic E. Iu. Kulikova presents the womb imagery as an allusion to Baudelaire's poem "Une charogne" ("A Carcass"), which describes a female corpse decomposing on a Paris street. The dead woman's naked legs are "bared" and spread out (*vskryty*). The imagery of the ship under construction is undeniably "ambiguous," as the scholar states (95). Unlike Kulikova, I see Khodasevich's imagery in "anatomic" rather than "putrefying" terms.

parodied (in *We*)—and where he describes the cosmic ship *Integral* and its beauty in these terms of enchantment with his technical marvel of a creation: "suddenly I *saw*: the lathes; the regulator spheres rotating with closed eyes, utterly oblivious of all; the cranks flashing, swinging left and right; the balance beam proudly swaying its shoulders; the bit of the slotting machine dancing up and down in time to unheard music. Suddenly I saw the whole beauty of this grandiose mechanical ballet, flooded with pale blue sunlight" (*We*, diary entry 2, p. 4; italics by Zamiatin).

As we know, the cosmic ship Integral in *We* meant to conquer Cosmos, was grounded before it could reach either one of its two planned destinations—neither cosmic worlds (as the One State had prescribed) nor the world of Nature beyond the State's Wall (as the *Mephi* Rebels had planned). Its creator together with all his engineers were, after the defeat of the *Mephi* Revolution, turned into zombies by the One State's fantasy operation, wherefore most likely no new space ships will be built there for some time—ship construction needs imagination too. Arguably the Belfast scenery of ships under construction by clever engineers and disciplined workers could be alluding to the fate of the space-ship Integral in the Russian observer's mind—as another type of ship planned to conquer new

vistas (the ocean in this case), but destined to meet with unexpected twists of fate--as the Titanic did, anticipating the fate of the fictional Integral in *We*.[24]

The author of "Belfast" was hardly imagining that all the ships he saw being constructed in the Belfast shipyard were doomed to meet with catastrophe, but he was apparently still thinking of Titanic's fate and other natural/man-made disasters that no technology and no rational planning had been, or ever would be, able to completely overcome, however powerful the machinery and however well-calculated the route. And very possibly he was also thinking of ships that were indestructible and could be neither sunk nor grounded--ships found only in poetry.

It has been pointed out that Pushkin's poem "Osen'" ("Autumn," 1833) that ends with the image of a ship being built in exhilarating creativity is being evoked in "Belfast": particularly its last syncopated interrogative-line: "Kuda zh nam plyt'"("Where should we sail to?") seems relevant to Khodasevich's essay.[25] Pushkin's suggestive line that conjures up visions of the realms of endless fantasy is undoubtedly embedded in the *ocherk*. The *ocherk* was a genre Gor'kii liked and often favored, because it could combine "realistic" descriptions with grandiose dreams about future reality

[24] Gor'kii disliked *We* which he read in 1927. He saw in this satire the "anger of an old maid" (Primochkina 188).
[25].See Kulikova 98--99. The critic sees this famous final question as a personal query the poet poses to himself as he faced an uncertain future in exile and was beginning to fear creative impotence. In her interpretation, Khodasevich himself seems to be a "ship" sailing into the unchartered waters of unwelcoming alien lands

(as, e.g., the *ocherki* in his *Po Rusi* collection do, or his *Italian Fairytales*).[26] If the genre of the Gor'kian *ocherk* is celebrated here, this raises another interpretative question: perhaps the *ocherk "*Belfast" actually was meant to please Gor'kii, marking a concession to his dreams about a Future ushered in by almighty science and technology and a tribute to literature glorifying mankind's growing power over nature and its laws constricting human freedom?

In the *ocherk* "Belfast" we find the epithet "enticing" (*oboiatel'nyi*) and the evocative phrase "some unknown destiny" (*kuda-to*) evoking Pushkin's romantic dream journey to wondrous vistas—so, once more: could Khodasevich with the help of Pushkinian allusions be referring to the dreamland of Socialist Utopia reached by the maritime titans created now in Belfast but soon everywhere, Leningrad included? Were the polemics between the former collaborators perchance based on some misunderstanding? Did his former collaborator Gor'kii get so angry about "Belfast," as we shall see he did, because it was a Western harbor Khodasevich was praising so poetically, paying tribute to Belfast's current, and not to Leningrad's future, might?

[26] For a discussion of the ocherk "Kladbishche" in *Po Rusi*, which particularly clearly combines apparent realism with utopian dreams, see Masing-Delic, "Fedorovian Resurrecting"; for a discussion of the *Italian Fairytales*, often called "ocherki," see Masing-Delic, *Exotic Moscow*.

Remembering the Titanic

I see the phrase "unknown destiny" (*kuda-to*) as offering a vital key for our interpretation of "Belfast" and Pushkin's "Osen" with its question about "where to sail" as an important subtext. I do however believe that the destination of "Autumn" posed in the suggestive line *Kuda zh nam plyt'?* is very different from the "unknown destiny" evoked in "Belfast." In "Osen'," it is inspired *poetry* which is the "ship" that can take you *any*where without fail—if you are a poet. It is the construction of the ship of poetry that offers the inspired images of a ship setting sail into the vistas of endless potentiality in Pushkin's poem:

> And thoughts seethe fearlessly in my mind/ airy rhymes run forth to meet them, fingers cry out for a pen, the pen – for paper; one minute more, and verses will freely flow. So a ship slumbers motionless in still waters, but hark: suddenly all hands leap forward, they crawl up and down the mast, the sails are filled, they belly in the wind—the monster moves and cleaves the waves. //

It sails. Where then shall we sail? . . . [27]

Obolensky 110-111

In "Belfast," the issue of unknown destinations comes closer to D-503's failure to launch the space-ship Integral into a grand trajectory just as he was confident that he was in total control, than to Pushkin's vision of the ship of poetry envisioned in inspired rapture. In both Khodasevich's sketch and Pushkin's poem, the ultimate destiny is initially unknown, but in "Autumn" it is the poet who decides where he will go in the end after he has considered endlessly many options indicated in the blank space of the unfinished last line; in the case of the ships built at Belfast (or anywhere), their destinations are fixed, but the ships sometimes do not reach them, as was the case with the Titanic which was to reach New York in record time, but sank into the Atlantic. The iceberg with which the ship collided and the bottom of the ocean became the ship's (until then "unknown") destiny."

The "Titanic" was a "dream ship" in its own way—the apogee of what progress had been able to accomplish so far—but it was a solidly material dream-ship, a steel colossus, subject to the laws of physics. It was deemed

[27] The original Russian lines are: "I mysli v golove volnuiutsia v otvage, / I rifmy legkie navstrechu im begut, / I pal'tsy prosiatsia k peru, pero k bumage, / Minuta – i stikhi svobodno potekut. / Tak dremlet nedvizhim korabl' v nedvizhnoi vlage, / No chu—matrosy vdrug kidaiutsia, polzut / Vverkh, vniz—i parusa nadulis', vetra polny, / Gromada dvinulas' i rassekaet volny. // Plyvet. Kuda zh nam plyt'? . . .

unsinkable, but its journey ended on "an unbearably emotional groaning note" which "suddenly ceased all at once." In this already quoted passage (see above) conveying the enchantment of the "music of labor" that Khodasevich heard drifting up from the hull of the ship being built by its busy workers inside, the reference could well be to the noise made by Titanic's steel prow cutting into the iceberg and the silence that ensued as referring to the ship's and the passengers' sinking into the depth of the ocean from whence no sound can be heard. That passage also depicted workers busily caulking the life-boats of the ship under construction—those boats that in the case of the Titanic had proved to be playthings of the Ocean. Even for non-poets, "the very name [of the Titanic] conjures up thoughts of disaster and doom, of inevitable fate, of man's fallibility" (Eaton and Haas, 8). Its destination was set and, at the time of the disaster, seemed to be within close reach of its goal: it was the city of New York, its skyscrapers, like the Titanic a realization of civilization's triumph over its natural surroundings—but it met its destiny in the untamed elements of nature.

Khodasevich obviously does not envision repeated and frequent failures of the ocean liners he sees to reach their destinations, but he may be implying that something similar to the fate of the "Integral" in *We*, or that of the Titanic, would inevitably happen sometime again. He could be

suggesting that the old saying of man "proposing" (a triumph of progress), but God/Nature "disposing" (of man's grand plans), is still valid. The Unexpected did happen to the 'unsinkable' ship The Titanic that perished on its maiden voyage. Certainly, the narrator did not forget the Titanic during his tour; rather its absence among the pictures on the walls of the shipyard offices had made its ghostly presence more palpable in his mind. Arguably the vision of the collision of steel and ice and the screeching sound of that collision, the vision of people enjoying luxury one moment and sinking to their deaths in ice-cold waters the next is haunting the imagination of the author of the essay who, as we learnt from the essay "Progress." had devoted some thought to the issue of what progress contributes to human existence. As his example of airplanes supporting transport and communication but also becoming the purveyors of bombs suggests, giant ships can bring people to their destinations but also collide with icebergs and sink to the ocean floor.

Khodasevich had not forgotten the fact that the Titanic was built in Belfast, even though he decided not to bring up the topic with his guide. He speaks of the sunken ocean liner twice in the essay: first when he mentions that he did not see any pictures of the ship and therefore was not going to speak of it. The second time is toward the end of the essay when his guide

had taken him to a third ship, also under construction. Contrary to Khodasevich's expectations, "Vergil" casually mentions the Titanic saying that this third ship was a copy of the Titanic, but somewhat smaller. There was, in other words, no attempt at the shipyard to deny that the forces of nature—those very forces that Gor'kii was bent on subduing once and for all—were understood as real threats that deserved full consideration. True, it was not "polite" to speak of the Titanic and there was no picture of it in the offices, but there was no taboo either. Khodasevich's guide was not "goaded" by his foreign visitor to speak of the sunken ship but brought it up himself by mentioning the third ship as a smaller copy. He did not deny that the shipyard had been hit by catastrophe and also mentioned its current strained economic circumstances as an obstacle to new grandiose plans, such as building a larger Titanic. Ending on this sober note, Khodasevich possibly aimed at puncturing Gor'kii's belief that the "elevating lie" was more inspiring, and hence, more productive and progressive than a sober facing of hard facts. Titanic's defeat in the struggle with Nature was the kind of failure Gor'kii in the 1930s would say was soon to become virtually impossible in the Soviet Union once Mother Nature had been fully subdued. In the Socialist world of invincible Progress there would be super-Titanics that would never meet with irredeemable catastrophe. Summing up the

implication of "Belfast" then, it seems most likely that it conveys the notion held by Khodasevich since some time back: that progress was potentially beneficial when treated circumspectly, but that its dangers should not be underestimated, wherefore adulation of Progress was counter-productive. If Ivan Bunin, in his "Gospodin iz San Frantsisko" ("The Gentleman from San Francisco," 1915)—a text that must have been on Khodasevich's mind when writing "Belfast"--presented a symbolic ship of (Western) civilization blinded by its apparent success and hence heading for a catastrophe sooner or later, and Gor'kii painted pictures of Soviet Man's unstoppable Progress, Khodasevich stuck to his early vision of progress as something that could be positive when controlled by sober minds, but also as something that could be misused by devotees. Most importantly, in his view, it did not make mankind omnipotent, nor ever would.

The Epilogue

Gor'kii read "Belfast" (as surely Khodasevich assumed he would) and reacted "angrily" in a letter to the author (July 20th, 1925; "ia rasserdilsia," 15: 222). He rebuked Khodasevich for comparing the Belfast shipyard with Soviet industrial undertakings which still were just in their beginning stages. Even France and Germany had no shipyards that were comparable to Belfast's. He firmly rejected Khodasevich's critique of Soviet

accomplishments and his "false" comparisons. Khodasevich responded to Gor'kii's letter by writing that the problem he saw was that "in Russia there was no will to work" (Khodasevich, 4: 695) and this was the remark that made Gor'kii "maliciously" quote their last conversation in Sorrento in his last letter to his correspondent (from August 13th, 1925; *Pis'ma*, 15: 243--44) to which Khodasevich did not respond, severing their relations.

To be specific, Gor'kii wrote to Khodasevich that his addressee hardly had any reason to complain about Russian workers lacking the "will to work" since this kind of will was a "force creating progress" and he himself had stated when they last spoke on the topic that he was not "a lover of progress" (15: 243). In other words, why would Khodasevich be critical of Russian workers who, according to him, were lazy and hence did not serve progress, but praise English workers who allegedly were productive and thus did serve the progress so disliked by him? Gor'kii's sarcastic remark probably once more showed Khodasevich that further discussions between a critical observer and a "believer" were meaningless.[28]

Gor'kii did not engage in open polemics about p/Progress or other ideological issues with his former collaborator after their rift, but he would

[28]Khodasevich's biographer V. Shubinskii comments that "Gor'kii was insulted by Khodasevich's remark about the lack of will for work, as a devout Christian would be insulted if an atheist took it upon him to evaluate one of his fellow-Christian's piety and saintliness" (396). The "religion of Progress" was one that Gor'kii clung to, in 1925, and never relinquished.

denigrate him in private letters, above all his personality, less often his talent. In a letter to V. V. Veresaev (June 3rd, 1925), for example, Gor'kii wrote that he no longer could appreciate Pushkin, since the "grave-digger" (*grobokopatel'*) Khodasevich had been writing his "Pushkin's Poetic Economy" ("Poeticheskoe khoziastvo Pushkina") while staying with him in his Sorrento villa where every single day he had regaled him with his "discoveries." But "listening even to Orpheus every single day could become tedious" (15: 195). He added that Khodasevich was "getting at" the Bolsheviks in his émigré journalism (in Miliukov's newspaper *Rul'*) and that this was a task beneath the dignity of a "good poet" (*ibid*.). To Mariia Fedorovna he mentioned his annoyance with "Belfast" (July 13th, 1925) saying that "his 'friend' Khodasevich was writing in Miliukov's paper and that he did so "very badly, uniformedly and with noticeably strenuous effort," for example, "reproaching the Communists for not having built a Belfast in Russia yet" (15: 214). To K. Fedin (September 17th, 1925) he wrote about Khodasevich's eager declarations of "émigré loyalty" since his move to Paris (15: 270). In a diary note written soon after their rift, Gor'kii used the same expressions as in his letter to Fedin but in a more insulting tone saying that Khodasevich wrote for the Paris emigration "with a hoarse voice," apparently because he so vociferously sought émigré approval

wherever possible. He did also comment on the "silly little article" (*stateika*) "Belfast" that clearly still rankled him: it lacked any clear purpose (*ni k selu, ni k gorodu*) except for "reproaching Moscow in a pathetic tone" for not having built a Belfast shipyard yet (4: 685—86). In 1926, the tone was even sharper. To A. Voronskii, Gor'kii wrote (on April 17, 1926) that Khodasevich's essay about Esenin ("Esenin") was "disgusting" (*otvratitel'no*, *Pis'ma*, 16: 50).[29] Gor'kii's reaction is highly defensive and testifies to his awareness that his decision for Moscow was now irrevocable and that he had no choice but to "stick to his guns"; it also testifies to his inability to see an important facet of Khodasevich's writings--his irony. He apparently did not "get the joke" made in "Belfast," i.e., he did not register the implied irony of the sketch--that the Future will remain unpredictable and that no amount of progress will make mankind rulers of their destinies—in East *or* West. He saw only the "insult" to the Soviet labor that would save the world.

Khodasevich did present portraits of his former collaborator in his well-known memoir pieces (of 1937 and 1940) the latter published after Gor'kii's death; these, although no eulogies (especially the later one), and deploring Gor'kii's penchant for self-deception sought to understand his

[29] Cf. E. Waysband's article in this cluster.

need for "lofty illusions," creating a portrait of some complexity. In 1933, in the article "Nauchnyi kamufliazh" ("Alleged Science" 2: 274--83), Khodasevich however presented a quite negative picture. In a review of the editorship of the first book of poetry published in the series *Biblioteka poeta* founded by Gor'kii--it was Gavrila Derzhavin who was selected to open the series, obviously a poet close to Khodasevich's heart (as Gor'kii would know)—he also discussed the "Introduction" to the series written by Gor'kii. He did so in very negative terms. It is not impossible that this Introduction by Gor'kij, written in a triumphant tone, "continued" the discussion with his former collaborator that had angered him eight years before in Sorrento. Khodasevich, in his turn, fully displayed his famous *iazvitel'noe ostroumie* ("malicious wit," 2: 537). He attacked the principles of Socialist Realism as laid out by its "progenitor" Gor'kii, perhaps also remembering their fateful discussion.

Khodasevich attacked not only Socialist Realism, but also Gor'kii as a writer and thinker. Acknowledging that the latter had some "works that were valuable as fiction" (2: 279), he added that the same could not be said of their intellectual content and that, as a thinker, Gor'kii was "weak" (*ibid*.). As an example he quotes Gor'kii's "pet idea" (*ideika*, 280) that progress was humankind's "greatest invention" (*ibid*.) and that literature had to serve

it by depicting humankind's "struggle with nature and its conquest over the "despot" [that nature was],[30] including the "struggle with death" (2: 282). Part of Gor'kii's *ideika* was his insistence that Soviet poets should tell humankind that romantic love was not "romantic" at all, but part of the blind instincts of procreation that nature had endowed its creatures with in order to keep them "enslaved." The breeding instinct that was ruling the animal kingdom had resulted in the uncontrolled proliferation of numerous parasites (flies, mosquitoes, rats). In the human sphere, this instinct, which humankind too was ruled by, could be controlled, however, and one step toward mastery was to change the male view of women. Men should learn to regard women not as objects of desire, but as "comrades in the struggle for progress and other good things" (282). "Naivnaia boltovnia" ("naïve chatter") was Khodasevich's verdict on Gor'kii's "theoretical-philosophical" guidelines for young Soviet poets who were supposed to learn poetic techniques from the classics in the series *Biblioteka poeta*, while shunning the no longer desirable themes of nature worship and romantic/erotic love cultivated by the poets of yore. Writing his critique of Gor'kii's view on the paths to Progress (in 1933), Khodasevich perhaps felt that his warning against blind

[30] Nature was a "despot" who demanded that his "slaves" (humankind) offer up constant "prayers" to him. Such prayers used to be called "poems" in the past (2: 280).

faith in Progress in “Belfast” about eight years ago (in 1925) had not only been shown as valid, but even as “over-valid.”

It is known that Gor’kii read this review essay, but he marked only one passage in it—he always read pencil in hand. It was one in which Khodasevich predicted that Soviet citizens taking out the volumes of the series in their provincial libraries would not enjoy the poetry, but rather use the paper for rolling self-made cigarettes (replacing the newspapers that usually served the purpose). Gor’kii did not in any way comment on, or underline, or otherwise mark, the characterization of him himself as intellectually weak, gullible and naive. By marking only the passage about Soviet citizens using the pages of the *Biblioteka poeta* volumes for *tsygarki*, he may have indicated that this remark so fully expressed Khodasevich’s *non-progressive* cynicism about the “simpletons” he had ridiculed in “Belfast” and his total alienation from the “new” Russian-Soviet people that nothing else in the review deserved further comment, least of all the characterization of him himself as a “weak” thinker. “Soviet reality” was vindicating Gor’kii’s convictions about Progress by the “irrefutable” proofs

of Soviet accomplishments. Arguably, a reaction of this kind could be read into Gor'kii's disdainful "non-comment" (see 2: 537).[31]

This "epilogue" to their "colloquy"—curtailed like *Beseda*--reveals that beneath the discussion about progress and labor as the path to Progress, there were other equally, or even more, important issues separating the collaborators turned antagonists: the significance and function of art in a world where poetry and other forms of art seemed to have become irrelevant. For Gor'kii the issue was clear: he wanted contemporary and future art, literature above all, to become a hymn to Soviet Progress seen in utopian (or "religious") terms; Khodasevich believed *Poetry* should serve an undefinable, but indisputably higher, reality than that of either progress or Progress. Art was not to be the "handmaiden" of either. In the choice between gigantic ocean liners and Pushkin's ship of Poetry, he opted for the

[31] Gor'kii's faith in Mankind's growing power to overcome the challenges posed by nature seemed spectacularly vindicated sometime later when the ship "Cheliuskin" was crushed by ice-floes and sank in the Chukotka Sea (1934), but its crew, which had taken refuge on the ice was rescued by a series of airlifts involving significant risks for the pilots. Gor'kii saw this heroic feat as a justification for his faith in the New Soviet Man" (see the chapter in Shkapa's memoirs entitled "Podvig etot vozmozhen tol'ko v strane Sovetov" ("This Feat Could only Have Been Accomplished in the Land of the Soviets," 248—252). On May 18th, 1935, however, there was a reminder that irreversible disasters could hit Soviet technology also and this event did not escape Gor'kii's attention. The giant propaganda airplane (*agitsamolet*) named *Maksim Gor'kii* crashed during a demonstration of Soviet aviation's achievements when an accompanying plane collided with it. In the final chapter of his memoirs ("Poslednie vstrechi," 378—385), Shkapa writes that during their last meeting Gor'kii recalled that event with sadness (381), possibly especially poignantly felt since the plane bore his name.

unsinkable ship of dreams headed for the endless realms of the imagination, by the Symbolists referred to as *realiora*.[32]

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[32] Bethea believes that the relationship between Gor'kii and Khodasevich never was based on "literary affinity" (197), even though Gor'kii "raved that 'Khodasevich writes utterly amazing verse' and that 'Khodasevich, to [his] mind [was] modern-day Russia's best poet'" (253). Possibly Shubinskii is right suggesting that it was the "apparent intelligibility" (342) of Khodasevich's verse that appealed to Gor'kii.

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