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## About a Mortal Plot in N. Gumilev's Works: “The Severed Head”

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*The article considers the plot about “the severed head” used by N. Gumilev due to the influence of French authors – Ch. Leconte de Lisle and Ch. Baudelaire. The translations of “The Malay Pantums” by Leconte de Lisle and “The Martyr” by Baudelaire made by N. Gumilev demonstrate the attention of Gumilev to this theme, they influenced one of his last poems “The Strayed Tram” from the collection “The Pillar of Fire”. The roots of the plot about “the severed head” in “The Strayed Tram” according to the author of the article is connected with the texts by Ch. Leconte de Lisle and Ch. Baudelaire. Literary and art subtexts (Leconte de Lisle, Baudelaire, Moreau, Doré, Redon, Beardsley etc.) enrich the plot stratum of “The Strayed Tram”, open its new meanings. The methodological basis of the research is determined by the unity of historical and literary, phenomenological, comparative and structural approaches.*

*Keywords: mortal plot, French subtext, poem translations, N. Gumilev, “The Strayed Tram”.*

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### **Introduction.**

#### **Statement of the problem**

In this study, we turn to the texts created by Gumilev “under the sign” of French culture. We are interested in the plot of the “severed head” that was used, as we believe, under the influence of the French authors – Ch. Leconte de Lisle and Ch. Baudelaire. Gumilev translated “The Malay Pantums” by Leconte de Lisle and “The Martyr” by Baudelaire, which had the specified plot as the central one. We assume that these translations had an impact on one of the last

poems-wills by Gumilev “The Strayed Tram” from the collection “The Pillar of Fire”. This is one of the most mysterious texts of the poet, it has been repeatedly studied in literary criticism. Among the most striking interpretations, let us name the work by E. Rusinko (1982), I. Meising-Delik (1982), R.D. Timenchik (1987), L. Allen (1989), Iu. L. Krol’ (1990), Iu B. Zobnin (1993), E. Slivkin (1999). It is important to demonstrate that the origins of the plot of “the severed head” in “The Strayed Tram” are associated with the texts of Leconte de Lisle and Baudelaire.

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### Methods

The methodological basis of the research is determined by the unity of historical and literary, comparative and structural approaches.

### Discussion

#### "The Malay Pantums" by Ch. Leconte de Lisle in Gumilev's translation

Gumilev translated "The Malay Pantums" by Ch. Leconte de Lisle (1919), but the translation was not published, but stored in the Russian State Literature Archive in L.V. Gornung's Fund (Gumilev). "It contains numerous translations by Gumilev from different languages including French, which the public is not familiar with. These are not original texts: we mean the materials that... Luknitsky found in the holders of "World Literature" and copied before the Publishing House was eventually close" (Latstsarin, 2012). In 2011 "The Malay Pantums" was published in the article by K.S. Korkonosenko in "The Western Collection of Works" (devoted to the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of P.R. Zaborov) (Korkonosenko, 2011).

The plot described by Leconte de Lisle is extremely common for the romance and post-romance literature: a savage girl, who betrayed her beloved one and died from his hand (different versions of the heroine's death are possible). The poetry of the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries partially returns to this theme. In "The Pantums" the choice of "the narrator" as a deceived aboriginal although is not traditional for the European literature of the 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, but is quite reasonable for the author of the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, who sought to comprehend the oriental mentality (a kind of "mystification" at the level of the plot), and turn an exotic character into a lyrical hero. The love triangle *aboriginal – European – aboriginal* is typical for almost any "exotic" text, from masterpieces to popular literature, but beginning from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the emphasis had been

shifting, that is why not a white, but a deceived "savage" becomes the centre of Leconte de Lisle's narration.

The end of the text is predictable: the second part of "The Pantums" contains a detail that brings out that the hero is going to cut off the head of his beloved, the beautiful neck of the heroine: "Voici des perles de mascate / Pour ton beau col, ô mon amour!" (Leconte de Lisle) ("Here are the Mascat pearls / For your beautiful neck, my love!"; "Dors, les mains derrière le cou" ("Sleep, your hands behind your head (*literary: behind your neck*)") (hereinafter, the interlinear translation is ours – E.K.). In the first case, Leconte de Lisle uses the word "col", the main two meanings of which are "a collar" and "a bottleneck; a neck, narrowing". Of course, in the context "ton beau col", the concept of "a neck" becomes the prevailing one – "прекрасная шея" (the beautiful neck) of the sweetheart. In the second case, the main direct meaning is taken: "le cou" (neck). But in the Russian translation it is better to say "hands behind one's head", therefore the word "neck" is somewhat moved aside, but in the original text by Leconte de Lisle it is quite clear. Gumilev weakens the association even more, mowing the meaning aside, he writes, "руки раскидав слегка" (having sprawled her hands) (Gumilev). But in the first case the image is even strengthened by comparison, "Убор тебе, о красота, / На шею стройную, как ваза" (Gumilev) (Italics is ours. – E.K.).

In the final part, the action takes place at the background of the raging sea with an easy Malay boat carrying the hero-killer Prao drowning in its depths, who made a kind of "a coffin" for the head of his beloved from the mast. The hero admires the face of the dead: "Ô mornes yeux! Lèvre pâlie!.. / Voici sa belle tête morte! / Je l'ai coupée avec mon kriss... / Elle saigne au mât qui la berce... / Son dernier rôle me poursuit" (Leconte de Lisle) ("Your dim eyes! Pale lips!.. /

Here is her wonderful dead head! / I cut it off with my Malay knife... / It is bleeding on the mast that became its cradle... / Her last groan is following me"). Gumilev translates very accurately, only missing the comparison with the cradle: "О бледный рот и взор застылый!.. / Вот голова моей любимой! / Я крисом сам ее отсек... / По мачте кровь ее струится... / Последний хрип ее со мной" (Gumilev).

The cradle in "The Malay Pantums" serves as a tomb, bringing together two opposing concepts. Such a ratio of images was created by T. Gautier in the poem "The Toys of the Dead": "Berceau que la tombe a fait creux!" (Gautier, 1989) ("The cradle like the grave is created hollow!"). Translating "The Toys of the Dead" by Gautier, Gumilev sharpened the contraposition of the later verse: "И гроб обидел колыбель" (Gautier, 1989).

It is no coincidence that Leconte de Lisle calls the mast "a cradle": being a pole, it becomes "a ladder for the soul" of the murdered heroine, the beginning of her new life. M. Eliade wrote that "in some Malay tribes they stuck poles into graves ... thus offering the dead to leave the grave and ascend to the Heavens" (Eliade). The Malays also stored the heads of their enemies on the poles, "they treated heads as if they were still alive, and as if it was still the vessel of the soul" (Davie).

The love for the dead in "The Malay Pantums" appears to be stronger than the love for the alive:

C'était le destin, je t'aimais!  
Que je meure afin que j'oublie!  
L'abîme s'ouvre pour jamais

(Leconte de Lisle).

Таков был рок, ведь я любил.  
Пока я жив, забыть нет силы.  
Провал бездонный зев открыл

(Gumilev).

The image uniting beauty and death makes the hero to give up life and choose the depths of the sea as the symbol of his eternal love.

In the final part Leconte de Lisle draws a poetic scene reminiscent of the images at the paintings of French symbolist painters G. Moreau, G. Dore and O. Redon, who used the stories of Orpheus, his death, and of John the Baptist and Salome ("Orpheus", "Salome", "Salome by the Pillar" and "The Phenomenon" by Moreau, "The Head of Orpheus" by Redon, "The Death of Orpheus" by Dore). We can also recall on the drawings by O. Beardsley for "Salome" of Oscar Wilde. "The interest of symbolism for this biblical image is evident both in the West and Russian art. In Russia, it was strengthened by the influence of Wilde and Beardsley" (Bonami, 2014). The motif of severed heads in the art of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was also described by Jean-Paul Reverseau (Reverseau, 1972).

It is the motif of the severed head that is important both in "The Malay Pantums" by Leconte de Lisle and in the paintings by Moreau and Redon: the dead head gets a mystical meaning. In "The Phenomenon" by Moreau, John's eyes are looking at Salome, and streams of blood flow down his long hair. The severed head is floating in the air, surrounded by the bright light. The painting was exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1876, and Leconte de Lisle could have been remembered the image. It is impossible to draw a direct parallel between the "Malay Pantums" and the paintings mentioned, but of course, images and motifs frequently met in the works of French artists of those years could not have been not experienced and conceptualized by poets.

#### **"The Martyr" by Charles Baudelaire in Gumilev's translation**

In the poem "The Martyr" by Ch. Baudelaire translated by Gumilev the theme of love of the murder to his beheaded victim

is given quite clearly. The severed head of the heroine no being the reflection of the lyrical "self", nevertheless is at first described as looking with sightless easy into the eyes of the reader:

... qui nous enchaînent les yeux  
la tête...  
Sur la table de nuit, comme une renoncule,  
Repose; et, vide de pensers,  
Un regard vague et blanc comme le  
crépuscule  
S'échappe des yeux révoltés  
(Baudelaire, 1899).

In Gumilev's translation:

... голова –  
На столике ночном, как ренонкул  
огромный,  
Лежит; и уж без дум глядят  
Открытые глаза, роняя смутный,  
темный,  
Как будто сумеречный, взгляд  
(Baudelaire, 2001).

Baudelaire demonstrates a kind of "confrontation" between the reader and the dead heroine: eyes to eyes. Gumilev in his translation does not focus on the reader's eyes (literally: "the head which attracts our gaze, our eyes"), while Baudelaire provides the clash of sights – the attracted eyes of the viewer, and the mindless eyes of the heroine looking back ("Un regard vague et blanc"). At the end, asking the unknown hero a rhetorical question, completely hidden in the text, the author assumes that the killer could have been tête-à-tête with the dead head:

... par tes tresses roides  
Te soulevant d'un bras fiévreux,

Dis-moi, tête effrayante, a-t-il sur tes dents  
froides  
Collé les suprêmes adieux?  
(Baudelaire, 1899).

... И голову за косы  
Держа в трепещущих руках,  
Запечатлел ли он последние вопросы  
На ледяных твоих зубах?  
(Baudelaire, 2001).

In the poem by Baudelaire there are no reflectances, no twins, but mutual looking at each other occurs twice: at the beginning and the end of the text the severed head "looks" in the eyes of others. Perhaps this detail was important for Gumilev and drew his attention to "The Martyr". If we return to the "Malay Pantums", we will see a similar image: the hero of Leconte de Lisle admires the beautiful head of his murdered lover, as if not realizing the deadness of her face. He looks in her dull eyes, and thus appears the reflectance of images (tête-à-tête). This mirror position combines both texts translated by Gumilev.

#### **"The severed head" in "The Strayed Tram"**

R.D. Timenchik notes that "the obsession with beheading was initially associated with the tram theme" (Timenchik, 1987). This idea can be extended by comparing "Berlinskoe" by V. Khodasevich and "The Strayed Tram". In "Berlinskoe" the tram becomes a mirror opening a new (dead) face of the hero. And Gumilev's lyrical "self" finds itself face-to-face (like in the mirror) with its own dead twin. Among the flashing paintings the greengrocers appears, where they sell severed heads, and in "Berlinskoe" the "inanimate" head of the hero is seen above the surface of the table. The effect is enhanced by the movement of "the strayed tram" in Gumilev's

poem and "many trams" in Khodasevich's poem. The mirror seems to flash rapidly, revealing a terrible picture: in Gumilev's poem the tram "rushes", "flies", without stopping for a second, and in "Berlinskoe" the contours of objects blur in water, thus giving some surreal hint to the images seen. According to Iu.I. Levin, multiple reflections create "a sense of unreality of what is really happening, and what really exists (seen through) and what is reflected in this unreality are both equated ("underwater" metaphors are also implemented with this very purpose)" (Levin, 1988).

The image of Orpheus seen by L. Szilard in Khodasevich's poem (Szilard, 2002), may serve as an explanation of the severed head in "The Strayed Tram": a vision of "the dead head" opens the inevitable determination of each poet for the fate of Orpheus. The reference to "a slippery box" with heads creates memories of the French Revolution, as the tram in Gumilev's poem rushes "across the Neva River, the Nile and the Seine", and the two countries – Russia and France – are united by terrible historical events (See: Slivkin, 1999).

In "The Strayed Tram" there is an executioner ("в красной рубашке, с лицом, как вымя"), the colour of his shirt is ochre only combined with a sign: "кровью налитые буквы / Гласят: 'Зеленая'" (Gumilev, 1988). In the poem "Sudan" from the collection of works "The Tent" the executioner will also appear in the same clothes "Толстогубый, с лоснящейся кожей, / Черный, словно душа властелина, / В ярко-красной рубашке палач" (Gumilev, 1988). Let us note how the mystical origins in "The Strayed Tram" are enhanced: an ornamental executioner from "Sudan" loses his effective appearance – from a thick-lipped, sleek black man he turns into a faceless image of Death.

"The negative assessment of blood (even shed) is the only case in Gumilev's works",

L. Allen notes. "Gumilev was not confused by red, the colour of blood. This colour has always fascinated him, having some hypnotic effect on his imagination" (Allen, 1989). And its combination with green, and not even the colour, but its essence (it is the name of the grocery store), partly displaces the accents. In the poem "Childhood", the poet wrote, "Людская кровь не святее / Изумрудного сока трав" (Gumilev, 1988). The juice of grass in "The Strayed Tram" is replaced with the human blood, moreover, with the blood of the poet himself. Substitution of cabbage for the human head is made, apparently, by association with another tale by Hauff "The Dwarf Nose". This was mentioned by R.D. Timenchik, Iu.L. Krol', S.V. Poliakova.

It is no coincidence that the hero of "The Strayed Tram" sees his own death. Herewith, let us give a comment. In our studies of Gumilev's works we analyzed the features of the "sea fantasy" in his lyrics and examined in detail "the sea story" in "The Strayed Tram" (see: Kulikova, 2009; Kulikova, 2009a; Kulikova, 2011). Critics and researchers of the poet's works mentioned the motifs of ghost ships Gumilev's lyrics, noting similarities with the fantastic images of Edgar Allan Poe, symbolic dreams of Ch. Baudelaire, impressionistic images of A. Rimbaud, stiff and "courageous" verses by Rudyard Kipling. This topic was mainly covered in the microcycle "Captains", collections "Romantic Flowers" and "Pearls".

We believe that it is necessary to expand the usual scope of Gumilev's "sea fantasy", "extending" the topic of ghost ships and, in particular, "The Flying Dutchman" up to his last verse book "The Pillar of Fire". The legend of the Flying Dutchman inscribed in Gumilev's lyrics hides a special spatial continuum behind it – a world of ghosts and death; without dipping into it, realizing its mysterious border one cannot go on any voyage. The existence of the ghost world

is provided by the nature of water belonging to the before-times chaos and rhythmic origin of the world. The water element is the element of the arche, allows to appeal to the legendary and mythological European stories of maritime wanderings, and these are not only the legends of the Flying Dutchman, but also the story of Odysseus, Lorelei, etc. The intertextual background of the keynote of sailing among Acmeists is as saturated as the motif of travelling, but it has its own characteristics and its own dynamics.

The affinity of experiences of Gumilev's lyrical hero with the fate of the captain and the sailors of the ghost ship makes him look at his own dismembered body. The association with "The Drunk Ship" by A. Rimbaud may be also noted. In the first stanza of the poem the death of the sailors is described: they were killed by "redskins": "Des Peaux-rouges criards les avaient pris pour cibles, / Les ayant cloués nus aux poteaux de couleurs" (Rimbaud, 1988) ("Screaming redskins made them a target, / Having nailed them naked to painted poles"). The death of the sailors in Rimbaud's poem rhymes with deadly premonitions of the lyrical hero of "The Strayed Tram" to some extent. Both poems have executioners and victims, either nailed to poles (as the captain in "The Story of the Ghost Ship" by Hauff) or "guillotined" ("Голову *срезал* палач и мне").

The captain and crew of "The Flying Dutchman" are dead (some of them were beheaded during the battle). These are not people but ghosts who know what death is, and who saw their dead heads. The combination of this motif with the "tram" motifs of beheading in Russian literature allows you to see the peculiarities of contamination of death of the lyrical "self" repeatedly shown by Gumilev, and fatal, "wrong" last trip on the flying tram. Normally journeys in Gumilev's

lyrics are described as a necessary spiritual experience for the poet, without which his work would not exist, but in "The Strayed Tram" the way beyond time and through space is scary and deadly. E. Vagin calls the poem a striking surreal synthesis of the past cultural epoch, murderous modernity and tragic premonitions of the near future" (Vagin, 2000).

"The Strayed Tram" is the text, which in some sense accumulates all the creativity of Gumilev, and therefore finds a lot of responses, provokes readers and literary critics to various interpretations. One cannot state that the plots of "The Malay Pantums" by Leconte de Lisle and "The Martyr" by Baudelaire are direct invariants of "The Strayed Tram", but we can outline Gumilev's interest in processing of the plot of "the severed head", since 1919. Of course, in the 20's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the use of associations connected with the revolution, executioners and victims seemed natural. However, the French background, the translation work became the material for the poet to build his own work: the motif of the victim (the heroine with the severed head) was transformed into the legend of the lost hero, close lyrical "self" of the author.

## Results

Thus, we have outlined Gumilev's interest in the plot of "the severed head" in the works by Leconte de Lisle and Baudelaire. We believe that it is no coincidence that he uses it in one of his most brilliant poems, "The Strayed Tram". Translation of French authors shows the attention Gumilev paid to this subject. It seems as the Russian poet "considers" the motif, "tries" it, using it first in the borrowed verses, and finally creates an image in his own text considering the lyrical hero to be a victim, imagining his own death. Literary and narrative implications (Leconte de Lisle, Baudelaire, pictures Moreau,

Dore, Redon, Beardsley, etc.) enrich the plot for Gumilev's poem, but without them, we think it would be impossible for him to give the stratum of "The Strayed Tram", opening its hidden meanings. This does not mean that the general background of "The Strayed Tram", its works of these authors are allusions or quotations scope and depth.

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## **Об одном смертельном сюжете в творчестве Н. Гумилева: «отрубленная голова»**

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*Рассмотрен сюжет об «отрубленной голове», использованный Н. Гумилевым под влиянием французских авторов – Ш. Леконта де Лиля и Ш. Бодлера. Сделанные Гумилевым переводы «Малайских пантунов» Леконта де Лиля и «Мученицы» Бодлера демонстрируют внимание Гумилева к этой теме. Они оказали влияние на одно из его последних стихотворений – «Заблудившийся трамвай» из сборника «Огненный столп». Истоки сюжета об «отрубленной голове» в «Заблудившемся трамвае», по мнению автора статьи, связаны с текстами Леконта де Лиля и Бодлера. Литературный и художественный подтексты (Леконт де Лиль, Бодлер, картины Моро, Доре, Редона, Бердслея и др.) обогащают сюжетный пласт «Заблудившегося трамвая», открывают в нем скрытые смыслы. Методологическая основа исследования определяется единством историко-литературного, феноменологического, компаративного и структурного подходов.*

*Ключевые слова: смертельный сюжет, французский подтекст, стихотворные переводы, Н. Гумилев, «Заблудившийся трамвай».*

*Научная специальность: 10.00.00 – филологические науки.*

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