TWO KINDS OF VAGUENESS: ‘EUROPEANNESS’ IN TIM PARKS AND NASTASIA GOSTOVA

Irina Kabanova

The two texts to be compared here have already attracted critical attention. Tim Parks’s ninth novel *Europa*¹ was on the Booker Prize shortlist for 1997. Anastasia Gosteva’s first publication ‘Samurai’s Daughter’² was awarded one of many Russian literary awards, the *Znamia* magazine prize for the best 1997 debut in fiction.

I intend to focus on the concepts of Europe as they are manifested in both texts explicitly and implicitly, in spatial forms. I shall argue that though vastly different, British and Russian views of Europe in the 1990s are equally vague in the dictionary sense of the word: ‘not explicit, imprecise; not clearly perceptible or discernible; indistinct’.³ Methodologically, this paper owes most to the works of Y.M. Lotman and the Tartu school on the semiotics of space,⁴ as well as to Caren Kaplan’s *Questions of Travel. Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*.⁵

The front cover of Parks’s novel carries a picture of a classical beauty with a golden Eurostar on her bare shoulder. Whether she is meant to represent Zeus’s or the narrator’s lover, this visual image merges the two central themes of the novel, those of passion and Europe. The girl’s heavily made-up face suggests sexuality; her expression is serene; her eyes are closed or lowered. Is this the face of modern Europe? Is its glamorous perfection not disconcerting owing to the red hues of the picture and its asymmetrical composition? It is the back cover that shows the same beauty with her eyes open. Her wide-eyed gaze turns out to be the cold heavy stare of someone who knows all about lies, betrayal, cowardice and death.

Parks uses the epithet ‘wide-eyed’ several times. If only as a translator of Roberto Calasso’s The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony⁶ Parks is sure to be well aware that ‘wide-eyed’ is the meaning of the name of the pre-Greek chthonic deity Europa, and also the standard Greek epithet to describe the moon. Europa presided over the cosmos through which the moon traversed; she stood for the idea of unity and integration. Europa was the night deity, and the night darkness blurs the contours of things, night suppresses the tired mind’s rational powers, invites sexual desire, transforms reality. It is in this ‘nocturnal’ way that reality is transformed in Parks’s novel.

The novel is an account of forty-eight hours in the life of the narrator, Jerry Marlow, during which time he goes through the nadir of his personal crisis and recovers for a fresh start. Parks ironically gives him the name of a famous Conrad narrator. But whereas Charlie Marlow was a noble knight of European civilization courageously exploring the heart of darkness, Jerry Marlow, the product of a more egalitarian epoch, is an anguished, self-loathing foreign language lector at the University of Milan. He is travelling with his colleagues to the heart of united Europe – Strasbourg – in order to appeal to the European Parliament about a case of discrimination against foreign lecturers in Italy. His real motive, though, is not to fight for his job, but to come closer to his ex-mistress. Eighteen months after their affair broke up, she still governs his mental landscape, filling it with remorse, pangs of conscience, cravings for lost intensity and despair at the futility of their passion. The stream of con-