

Liberation Theosophy: Discovering India and Orienting Russia between Velimir Khlebnikov and Helena Blavatsky

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“**H**ELENA BLAVATSKY WAS THE ONLY ONE WHO TRAVELED TO INDIA in search of what it means to be a Russian” ‘Одна Блавацкая поехала в Индию чтобы узнать, что такое быть русским.’¹ The statement seems particularly incongruous in a pamphlet titled *A New Lesson about War* ‘Новое учение о войне,’ composed in 1916 by the futurist poet and philosopher of history Velimir Khlebnikov (184). Why would Khlebnikov invoke Blavatsky, the founder of a spiritual movement called Theosophy, in a meditation on worldly violence framed by the First World War and the impending October Revolution? And why would he single out India, geographically and historically distant from Russia’s upheavals in the twentieth century, as a locus for discovering Russian identity? Khlebnikov’s own account of a journey to India, composed simultaneously with *A New Lesson about War*, provides a tantalizingly complex answer to this enigma.

Unlike Blavatsky, Khlebnikov never actually visited India. As if taking advantage of this fact, his short work of lyric prose “Есир”—translated by Paul Schmidt as “Yasir,” which means “captive” or “slave” in Arabic, Tatar, and other Turkic languages—takes significant liberties with the conventions of cartography and chronology. Set at a conscious remove from Russia’s metropolitan centers and the author’s present, it recounts the travels of Istoma, a seventeenth-century fisherman from a “half-wild . . . crescent-shaped island” ‘на полудиком острове . . . в виде полумесяца’ on the estuary where the Volga falls into the Caspian Sea (103; 187). A transformative encounter with an ascetic called Krishnamurti, who bears the same name as Blavatsky’s internationally renowned acolyte, prompts Istoma to venture across the breadth of Eurasia in search of an idea that would

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“bring liberty to all oppressed people” ‘дать свободу всему народу’ (107; 191). Wandering through the Indian subcontinent, he finally discovers this principle encoded in the nondualistic metaphysics of Advaita Vedanta, founded by Shankaracharya (or Shankara) in the eighth century, which regards the self as indistinguishable from the world and human existence as a journey through successive veils of illusion, or maya. Not coincidentally, “Shankara’s science of love,” as Blavatsky testifies, inspired the foundational tenets of the Theosophical movement as well (54, 55, 89, 91).

In narrating his own quest for Shankara’s philosophy, Khlebnikov abandoned the initial Russian title “A Fisherman’s Tale” ‘Ловецкий рассказ’ for one that privileges the languages of Russia’s vast Asiatic empire, stretching from the Caspian to the Pacific. The term Khlebnikov chose for the new title, *yasir*, foreshadows the extraordinary heteroglossia of the account that follows, saturated with Tatar dialects of the lower Volga and Turkic languages of Central Asia, on the one hand, and classical Sanskrit, on the other. The conspicuous correlation between the protagonist’s unusual itinerary and the languages that permeate and ultimately overtake his native Russian makes it impossible to interpret the text as merely another instance of the poet’s well-known proclivity for “oriental” themes and motifs.² On the contrary, “Yasir” illustrates Khlebnikov’s critical stance toward an undifferentiated concept of the Orient by staging a series of dialogues between Russia’s imperial borderlands and the mysterious East of the European imagination.

Khlebnikov’s imaginary journey challenges not only the cartographic and historical separation of Russia’s Orient from that of Europe but also their conceptual estrangement in contemporary postcolonial critique. “Britain’s overseas colony,” which Edward Said classified as an Orient “categorically different” from Russia’s land-based “contiguous empire” (*Culture* 10), remains invisible in the

many recent explorations of Asia’s constitutive role in the formation of Russian identity.³ Breaking through this binary division, “Yasir” reveals a multifaceted dynamic of contact and continuity between the two. Blavatsky’s disciple Krishnamurti motivates Istoma, the fictional alter ego of Khlebnikov, to contemplate Russia’s fluid Asiatic peripheries, while the Volga-Caspian frontier animates the Russian reception of Advaita thought. Though it is evident from *A New Lesson about War* that Theosophy mediated the poet’s access to Indian religious philosophy, “Yasir” demonstrates that Blavatsky’s movement also came to represent more than a source of exotic metaphors for him. Khlebnikov’s discovery of India from the margins of the Russian Empire reveals the unique historical and political sensibility that he brought to Blavatsky’s insights on “Shankara’s science of love.” Plotted in the trajectory of travel and woven through the polylingual fabric of the text is a remarkable alignment between two premises of liberation: the spiritual emancipation promised by Theosophy and the anti-imperialist goals of the unfolding October Revolution.

Khlebnikov’s reinterpretation of Leninist internationalism through Blavatsky may not be as eccentric or isolated as it seems. Historians are paying increasing attention to the crucial role spiritual and ethical communities played in mobilizing political resistance against colonialism. Partha Chatterjee, for example, documents how the recuperation of classical Sanskrit texts by diverse religious groups in British India facilitated the conceptualization of nationhood outside the dominant colonial paradigm (76–115). Leela Gandhi’s study of Indo-British “affective communities,” which are motivated by a shared rejection of colonial difference and animated by “the yearning for an other-directed ethics and politics” (7), can be used to frame Khlebnikov’s novel utopian alliance formed at the intersection of Russia’s and Britain’s imperial peripheries. Khlebnikov’s imagined community of trans-Asiatic

wanderers, however, is more ambitious in its polylingual and interreligious scope.

To understand the radical potentials of such a community in Khlebnikov's time and assess its value for the politics of resistance today, we need to consider "Yasir" in relation to the contentious place of Asia in the Russian imagination.

Russia's Orient and Khlebnikov's Discovery of India

In Russia the cartographic and conceptual separation of Europe and Asia is freighted with existential anxiety. The lack of a physical frontier between the metropolitan centers of Saint Petersburg and Moscow and the vast imperial territories stretching east heightened the nation's ambivalence about its cultural identity. Haunted by the Mongol occupation of Kievan Rus between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries and marked by Russia's reverse expansion since Ivan the Terrible's time, the Asiatic plains beyond the Urals represent a unique geographic other that might have contaminated the body politic with alien racial elements and infused its soul with chaotic, rebellious violence. Peter Chaadayev's famous *Philosophical Letters* of 1836 epitomizes this anxiety. Blaming Russia's indeterminate location between Europe and Asia for its marginality in world history, Chaadayev calls the nation a "blank space" 'пустота' overtaken by the nomadic steppe (41).

A rich body of recent scholarship illustrates that for well-nigh three centuries—ever since Peter the Great opened a "window to the West" and resolved to put Russia on the map of the modern world—the definition of Russian identity has involved staving off its troublesome Asiatic subconscious (Bassin; Frank; Wolff). For example, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century geography texts, examined by Mark Bassin, construct elaborate models of naturalized difference between "European" and "Asiatic" Russia by invoking

the continental divide of the Urals or the ecological opposition between maritime Saint Petersburg and the isolated, landlocked steppe. Such spatial hypotheses, in turn, metamorphosed into theories of the historical and cultural separateness of Russia's metropolitan centers—settled, civilized, with a trajectory comparable to Europe's—from the eastern periphery, a nomadic, prehistoric terra incognita. Conscious distancing from Asia persisted even in militant movements such as Slavophilism, which sought to separate the nation's destiny from the universalized telos of European modernity (4–8).

On the cusp of the twentieth century, Russia turned its gaze toward the East, which had been virtually expunged from the national consciousness. The geopolitical source of the newfound interest might be traced to Russia's increasing presence in Central and East Asia following the failed alliance with European powers in the Crimean War (1853–56). Its strategic ascent in the Pacific led to confrontations with Japan and culminated in the infamous naval defeat of Tsushima, in 1905, which occurred simultaneously with a failed revolution in Saint Petersburg. Framed by these catastrophes, the Russian preoccupation with Japan, and to a lesser degree China, has garnered far more scholarly attention than the remarkable appearance of India in the geographic and cultural consciousness of the same period (Lo Gatto; Nivat; Mirsky 36–48; Ram, "Poetics" 210–11; Vroon and Hacker). Khlebnikov himself identified Tsushima as the defining moment that transformed him from a poet to a philosopher of history. Critics interpret Khlebnikov's transformation as "a turn from pan-Slavism to pan-Asianism" or as the genesis of an expanded Euro-Asiatic "continental subjectivity" (Cooke 140; Ram, "Poetics" 216–17).

Khlebnikov's continental subjectivity subversively appropriates the geopolitical logic of the Great Game, the contestation over the Eurasian heartland between Russia and Britain in the late nineteenth century.

As strategic territories deep in Central Asia came into Russian hands, India started to emerge as an important locus in the imperial imagination. K. P. Pobedonostsev, the foreign minister of Alexander III, envisioned India as the ultimate destination of Russia's eastward march (576). In cultural discourse, however, the Indian subcontinent remained conspicuously dissociated from political intent. Following the opening of the Suez Canal, in 1869, a proliferating corpus of travel accounts began to feature India as a "cradle of civilization" 'колыбель цивилизации,' whose mystical appeal was marketed in "volumes of ancient Hindu wisdom decorating shop windows in Petersburg" 'книги о древней индусской мудрости в витринах Петербургских магазинов' (Tartakovskij 23).

The Theosophical Society anchored the Russian obsession with India. Maria Carlson has extensively documented the society's role as the chief purveyor of "ancient Hindu wisdom" to a heterogeneous community of academics, translators, and gifted writers and artists. Key figures of the movement—not just Blavatsky but also her follower Annie Besant and Besant's young protégé Jiddu Krishnamurti, who bears the same name as Istoma's fictive interlocutor in "Yasir"—achieved cult status among people who were at the forefront of the modernist revolution in Russian art and letters (188–205). Theosophical concepts derived from Vedanta philosophy resonated with the symbolists' quest for the noumenon, the futurists' transrational language, and the visual nonobjectivism of Kazimir Malevich and Vasily Kandinsky (Bowl; Douglas).

An unexplored political dimension, however, also underlies the remarkable appeal of Theosophy in Russia. The reason Indian spirituality held greater promise there than among the movement's primary audience, in the English-speaking world, becomes clear when the Russian fascination with India is juxtaposed with a coeval shift in nationalist philosophies of history. In contrast with

nineteenth-century Slavophiles, whose vocabulary of authentic, non-Eurocentric identity derived from Orthodox belief, fin de siècle thinkers programmatically embraced the non-Slavic, non-Christian East. For academics such as Nikolay Danilevsky, Konstantin Leontiev, and Vladimir Lamansky, as well as eschatological millenarians such as Vladimir Soloviev, identifying Russia with Europe was a destructive act of self-colonization that could only be reversed if Russia reclaimed its historically repressed Asiatic face (Banerjee, "Trans-Siberian Railroad" 26–29). In the aesthetic repertoire and political lexicon of many modernists, therefore, a genealogical nostalgia for the steppe fed the enthusiasm for Indian religious philosophy. Ivan Bunin, for instance, attributed his "love for India, the mysterious East and spiritual cradle of humanity," to his "organic ancestral ties to the Orient." During the revolution the symbolists Valery Bryusov and Aleksandr Blok invoked the Buddha as a composite metaphor of poet and moral preceptor alongside the steppe horseman. While denouncing the "bourgeois mysticism" of previous generations, the futurist movement—of which Khlebnikov was a founding member—and its avant-garde offshoots nevertheless declared that their affinity for "ancient India" was an instrument for overcoming "our servile subservience to Europe" (Bowl 171).

Britain's overseas colony was more attractive than Japan or China because it offered an additional potential for redeeming the Asiatic element of national identity. While sharing the status of an ancient non-European civilization with Russia's Far Eastern neighbors, India was untainted by the specter of the Mongol past. It represented a purer Orient that ameliorated the history of self-colonization and obscured Russia's imperial enterprise on the steppe.

For all Russia's purported self-orientalization, therefore, its perception of India differed little from the Europeans'. Geographic distance from the steppe froze the

Indian subcontinent in an a priori antiquity of “ancient Hindu wisdom” and made it conceptually indistinguishable from the British orientalist mode of “holding [India] at arm’s length as a mere object of beauty” (Spurr 59). The paradox is more than apparent in two oppositional figurations of the East in the work of Vladimir Soloviev, a philosopher and poet at the vanguard of the Asiatic turn who exerted tremendous influence on several generations of modernists. “Panmongolism”—the title for a poem of 1894 and an essay of 1899—posits, in a Nietzschean idiom, the death of European Russia’s chimera of civilization at the hands of its own repressed eastern past, personified by a yellow horde led by the Japanese. In contrast, the poem “Ex Oriente Lux” (1890) depicts the regeneration of the nation on a pilgrimage to India. Soloviev literalizes the famous image from Goethe, analyzed by Said in *Orientalism* (19), of humanity gathered on the banks of the Ganges.

Khlebnikov’s engagement with India differs fundamentally from that of his intellectual predecessors and coevals. Instead of relegating it to a distant space and time unsullied by anxiety about Russia’s Asiatic heritage, the poet treats Britain’s overseas colony as a potent medium for delving into his nation’s foundational history of imperial violence. In a letter to his fellow futurist Aleksey Kruchyonikh, Khlebnikov speaks of undertaking a pilgrimage to India not to discover its timeless spirituality but rather “to take a look at the Mongol world” ‘заглянуть в мир монголов’ (qtd. in “Есир” 425).

While some Russian bohemians made “pilgrimages” to Western art capitals, the Holy Land, and even North Africa (Bowl 178), for Khlebnikov nomadism was not so much a fashionable cult as an inescapable existential condition. Instead of pointing elsewhere, his arc of displacement follows a cyclical course inward, beginning and culminating in the multiethnic, multilingual, and multireligious borders of the Russian Empire.

Like Istoma in “Yasir,” he was born on an island near Astrakhan. After spending many years in Saint Petersburg—where he moved in 1907 to study mathematics and linguistics, including a year of Sanskrit—he joined a Red Army contingent sent to Azerbaijan and Iran to assist local uprisings. During this “final pilgrimage” to Asia, Khlebnikov introduces the wandering holy man into his work as an important template for the self.⁴

The peripatetic ascetic without a fixed home, a stock element of the orientalist imagination then and now, acquires an urgent autobiographical dimension in Khlebnikov’s political quest. Indeed, the fictional Krishnamurti first connects the borderlands where the poet was born with the distant subcontinent he never visited by revealing the parallel forms of imperial power that operate in both spaces. Far from remaining a passive object in the ahistorical landscape of the mysterious East, therefore, the holy man in “Yasir” evolves into a catalyst for three radical objectives. The first is to imbue the contact between Britain’s colony and Russia’s eastern frontiers with an unprecedented epistemic potential. Krishnamurti’s momentous advent in Istoma’s life—which reverses the conventional trajectory of the Western traveler arriving in the timeless East—shocks the fisherman into admitting that his people belong to a global community of the enslaved. The second objective is to use Istoma’s newfound consciousness to question the dichotomous cartography of the East and the West, mediated by European imperialism and internalized by the Russian national imaginary. The third and most significant aim, encoded in the protagonist’s own peregrinations across Asia, is to liberate subjectivity from territorial boundaries and conceive of an alternative ontology generated from constant movement between multiple imperial peripheries.

These objectives are visible even in the opening sentences of “Yasir.” Istoma’s crescent-shaped habitat on Russia’s Islamic

borderlands, poised between land and water and sheltering both animals and humans, already embodies an elemental liminality: “Not far from the line of surf, on the crescent-shaped half-wild island of Kulaly, among the drifting grass-covered dunes where a herd of wild horses once roamed, stood a fisherman’s shack” ‘Недалеко от черты прибой, на полудиком острове Кулалы, вытянутом в виде полумесяца, среди покрытых травой с песчаных наносов, где бродил табун одичавших коней, стояла рыбацкая хижина’ (103; 187). Combined with the title, a linguistic interpellation the reader encounters before the narrative, Krishnamurti’s Sanskrit greeting, “Om,” disrupts the naturalized affiliation between language and national identity: “‘Om,’ he whispered, bending over a stalk of blue flowers. The swan of time, Kala-Hamza, fluttered above him, over his grey head. He was very old. The two men understood each other” ‘Аум, тихо прошептал он, наклоняясь над колосом синих цветков. Лебедь времени, Кала Гамза, трепетал над ним, над его седыми кудрями. Он был стар. Оба поняли друг друга’ (106; 190).

Even though Krishnamurti takes the form of Kalahamsa, the Vedic personification of eternity, when he first communes with the protagonist, the sage initially disappoints Istoma by refusing to dispense timeless, mystical revelations. Instead, the holy man becomes an agent of historical consciousness. He recounts “news” ‘новости’ about resistance movements against the Mogul Empire on the distant Indian subcontinent and describes the terrible repercussions suffered by spiritual leaders who assumed a political role in them. Istoma spends a night haunted by tales of Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of the nondenominational movement of seekers, or Sikhs, persecuted peasants who mounted armed rebellions against Emperor Aurangzeb in the seventeenth century under Tegh Bahadur and Govind Singh; of the Sufi mystic Kabir (1440–1518), with whom Nanak is said

to have traveled among the hovels of the dispossessed; and of Shivaji (1627–80), the leader of a successful guerrilla army that wrested an autonomous state from the Moguls. The “news” strikes a surprising chord of empathy in the Volga fisherman. Krishnamurti’s foreign language and exotic stories, paradoxically, are the first steps toward historicizing the predicament of Istoma’s own community.

The fisherman begins to follow the ascetic, who feeds stray dogs and frees a swan destined for slaughter. Noticing his persistence, the Indian predicts, “[Y]ou will see my homeland soon” ‘Ты скоро увидишь мою родину’ (191). As if in fulfillment of this prophecy, Istoma is captured by nomads and carried eastward into the steppe. The first phase of the journey exposes him to layers of belief systems and ways of life that have accumulated over the vast territories into which Russia’s eastern frontier dissolves and over which Russia has laid imperial claims since the time of Ivan the Terrible. He wanders through Tatar villages, relics of the Mongol occupation that still claim autonomy from the tsar; receives hospitality from Old Believers, who broke away from the Orthodox Church in the seventeenth century and fled state persecution; and witnesses the seamless blend of shamanic, Buddhist, and Islamic rituals of tribes who refuse to be assimilated into the settled, civilized ways of the nation: “A snake slipped silently over an inscription, ‘There is no God but God’ [the Shahada, the Islamic confession of faith]. . . . An old Kalmyk drank bozo, the black vodka of the Kalmyks. Then he performed the ritual libation of the steppe God and poured sacrificial spirit into the sacred cup. ‘May Genghis-Bogdokhan have mercy on me!’ he said solemnly” ‘Да змея бесшумно сколизила по надписи “Нет бога кроме бога.” . . . Старый Калмык пил бозо—черную водку Калмыков. Вот он совершил возлияние богу степей и пролил жертвенную водку в священную чашу.—“Пусть меня милует Чингиз Богдо Хан,” важно проговорил он’ (108; 193).

A turning point in the journey comes when an intrepid Sikh called Kunby joins the nomads' caravan and eventually leads Istoma to the Indian subcontinent. The fisherman spends the next five years in the company of itinerant holy men of various denominations. India does not fulfill his expectations of a destination, however. Instead of regaining an identity, he learns that all forms of territorial, religious, or ethnoracial belonging are ephemeral and therefore meaningless. Wandering through India opens his eyes to Krishnamurti's credo of Advaita Vedanta. Shankara's school of thought posits the self (*atma*) as indistinguishable from the world spirit or universal essence (Brahma). According to Vedanta, life is a journey whose objective is to dissociate the self from all worldly indices of identity and reunite with the Brahma: "All is vanity, all is deception. . . . And whatever you can see with your eye, whatever you can hear with your ear—all that is universal illusion, *maya*; universal truth cannot be seen by the human eye or heard by the human ear. That truth is Brahma, the universal soul" 'Исчезнуть, исчезнуть. . . . И то, что ты можешь увидеть глазом, и то, что ты можешь услышать ухом,—все это мировой призрак, Мая, а мировую истину не дано не увидеть смертными глазами, ни услышать смертным слухом. Она—мировая душа Брахма' (114; 200).

As if replicating the *atma*'s circular trajectory, Istoma's meanderings eventually bring him back to his birthplace on the Volga-Caspian estuary. The familiarity of home, however, fails to stir feelings of joy in the traveler. The narrative ends elegiacally: "Stopping sorrowfully before the familiar waves, Istoma moved on. Where?—he did not know" 'Трустно постояв над знакомыми волнами, Истома двинулся дальше. Куда?—он сам не знал' (115; 201).

While my summary does not fully convey the unusual form and rich texture of "Yasir," it reveals the discursive oscillations

between travelogue and historiography, philosophical exegesis and mythopoesis, autobiography and speculative fiction through which Khlebnikov reimagines Russia's relation to Asia. We can explore the rhetorical and ideological dimensions of this new consanguinity by setting Istoma's journey against three constellations of texts: the Theosophical inspirations for the narrative; Khlebnikov's extraliterary efforts to articulate the links between empire, historiography, and national identity; and a manifesto, composed simultaneously with "Yasir," that offers a radical cartography of the postrevolutionary future.

Politicizing the Mysterious East

Entering Istoma's world not with promises of transcendental wisdom but with news of liberation movements organized by disenfranchised minorities, Krishnamurti provides the first clue toward assessing Khlebnikov's unique mode of engaging with Theosophy's Indian sources. Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986) was an impoverished Brahmin boy whom Blavatsky's disciple Annie Besant elevated to international prominence. Discovered on a lonely beach near Adyar, the headquarters of the society in India, he was anointed the figurehead of a new movement called "Star of the East." On a tour through Europe and the United States in 1911—the moment of Khlebnikov's immersion in Sanskrit—Besant presented the young man as a syncretic embodiment of Christ and the Buddha, generating much doctrinal debate in the Russian press (Carlson 97). What has not been examined, however, is the Russian response to the profoundly political role that Theosophists were beginning to assume in the distant Indian subcontinent. The turbulent years of the First World War led not only to the Russian Revolution but also to the coalescence of the nationalist movement in British India. Besant's work on behalf of women and untouchables, which provided a powerful

basis for her alliance with Gandhi, inspired thousands of her followers to join the Indian National Congress (Vohra 131).

The fictional rendition of Krishnamurti indicates that Khlebnikov was keenly aware of Theosophy's transformation from an esoteric spiritual fad into a dynamic field of political activism. Krishnamurti's stories of the Mogul Empire's brutal suppression of rebels might be read allegorically as a testimony of the British administration's intensified reprisals against Indian nationalists. Representing the arrival of barbarity—or should one say history?—in Istoma's seemingly idyllic world, the emissary of Theosophy transforms Russia's and Britain's Orient from magical to real places. The real Krishnamurti's appearance in the Russian media coincided with a profound shift in Khlebnikov's perception of himself, which Raymond Cooke describes as the metamorphosis of a futurist "warrior" into a contemplative "prophet" (140).

The primary index of this transformation is the poet's increasing and eventually all-consuming preoccupation with history. His experimental method, however, eschews the conventional frame of causality in favor of simultaneity, correspondence, layering, and repetition. Through mathematical matrices and algorithms, Khlebnikov connects contexts and periods that are not usually examined in a continuum. Numeric logic rather than geographic or historical proximity links large power structures from different eras and parts of the world. Europe's presence in the East is integrated with Russia's expansionist activities on its Asiatic margins, while modern imperialism is correlated with preexisting patterns of dominance and subjugation (Ivanov 105). Krishnamurti's iconic figure, transposed from the twentieth century into the seventeenth and superimposed on the contested landscape of Astrakhan, provides a powerful example of Khlebnikov's spatiotemporal permutations.

Borderlands such as the lower Volga region, which bear layered traces of multiple pe-

riods and regimes of violence, are particularly significant for Khlebnikov's meditations on time. Istoma's native region features prominently in both "Preceptor and Disciple" 'Учитель и ученик,' an essay published in 1912 in the form of an ascetic's conversation with his acolyte, and *A New Lesson about War*, in which Blavatsky is named as an important intellectual predecessor of the author. In both works, correspondences between geopolitical shifts are used to advance the hypothesis that the British inherited and replicated structures of social and political oppression from Mogul institutions ("Учитель и ученик" 288), just as Russia in the Great Game reenacted the sixteenth-century invasion of Kazan, the legendary last bastion of the retreating Mongol Empire, not far from the estuary where "Yasir" is set (Новое учение о войне 185).

An equally powerful counternarrative, however, balances the overlapping networks of violence in the two Orient. The close conjunction in "Yasir" between Krishnamurti and a historical personage from Astrakhan exemplifies the way in which the narrative of resistance to imperial power unifies the genres of Khlebnikov's work. Immediately after Istoma and the Indian sage first meet, they hear "Razin's name rippling in whispers through the market town" 'Имя Разина прошло шепотом по городу' (105; 191). Stepan Razin was a seventeenth-century Volga pirate who was publicly beheaded in Moscow after leading a failed separatist movement. An important character in many of Khlebnikov's poems (Vroon, "Velimir Khlebnikov's 'The Seashore'" and "Velimir Khlebnikov's 'Razin'"), Razin provides the point of departure for a lengthy meditation on India's past and present in "Preceptor and Disciple." By adding up the constituent numbers of the years in which Razin staged his uprising, Khlebnikov arrives at 317, the tentative date of the Buddha's enlightenment (285). This number is then placed on a matrix with 1526, marking the victory of the first Mogul emperor, Babar,

in the battle of Panipat (290). The corresponding number on the opposite side of the matrix, significantly, is 1857, when Hindu and Muslim soldiers of the British East India Company staged the infamous Sepoy Mutiny (291).

A New Lesson about War schematizes the First World War, during which the poet was briefly and unwillingly conscripted—he calls himself a “yogi” enslaved by military discipline (Vroon, Introduction 1)—in a numeric frame that positions Razin close to the founder of the Theosophical movement. Razin’s proximity to Blavatsky seems counterintuitive at first, since her most famous works—*Isis Unveiled* (1877), *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), and *Keys to Theosophy* (1889)—are purported transcriptions of messages from mahatmas, or “great spirits,” who have little to do with worldly events in the past or present. Her Theosophical writings contain no direct references to Russian or Indian history, even though Blavatsky was an American of Russian origin who traveled extensively in Russia and India. An exception is the lengthy account of her first journey to her spiritual destination, *From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan*, comprising live dispatches from British India that were serialized in Russian translation in a popular weekly between 1879 and 1886 (Zirkoff xxx). The Russian version of *Caves and Jungles* was republished in book form in 1912 (xxxix), precisely when Khlebnikov was studying Sanskrit and beginning his quest for a new philosophy of history.

Transcending the Orient

There is no critical commentary on Blavatsky’s lengthy account of a self-defined “quest to know myself” in India (17). Yet even a cursory glance at *Caves and Jungles* reveals its remarkable convergence with Khlebnikov’s imaginary journey. The Theosophist meanders away from well-trodden sites toward “caves and jungles” as forgotten as Istoma’s impoverished borderlands. She privileges popular mythol-

ogy and folk memory over macrohistorical events, pitting germs of wisdom gleaned from accidental encounters with itinerant holy men against knowledge painstakingly compiled by academic orientalists. Like the poet, Blavatsky frequently abandons the vivid realism of her travelogue for mythopoeic or allegorical modes encoding the “hidden,” “figurative” dimensions of her journey (9).

The political immediacy with which the Theosophist frames every aspect of her spiritual exploration identifies *Caves and Jungles* as an important source text for “Yasir.” Blavatsky credits a Krishnamurti-like figure, Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824–83), with inspiring her journey. Dayananda, a renowned scholar of Advaita Vedanta, spearheaded a reformist movement called the Arya Samaj. Monism provided the epistemic and moral basis for its grassroots activism against the caste system, illiteracy, and the oppression of women. On arriving in India and witnessing this mahatma’s activities firsthand, Blavatsky begins to apprehend the contemporary significance of Shankara’s ancient credo (16–37).

Dayananda was also among the pioneering figures of the late nineteenth century who explicitly aligned anticolonial resistance with the recuperation of non-Western systems of knowledge (Vohra 103). Blavatsky wholeheartedly embraces his dictum, gleaned from Shankara’s writings, to “know thyself” ‘atmanan biddhi’ as the first step toward emancipation from the ego. A return inward and into one’s own past, she contends, also constitutes the political act of “freeing the self from its own myths inherited from the colonizers” (20–21). Not coincidentally, the first insight that Khlebnikov’s Volga fisherman gains in India is a street mystic’s chant: “Be yourself, by yourself, by means of yourself, penetrate the depths of yourself” ‘Будь сам, самым собой, через самого себя, углубляйся в самого себя’ (“Yasir” 112; “Есир” 198).

Among the exemplars of self-knowledge that Blavatsky cites are Nanak (209–38), Ka-

bir (381–85), and Shivaji (60–69, 130–32), the same historical figures that Krishnamurti introduces to Istoma at their first meeting. Dating back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—the period of Razin’s uprising—they play a vital role in forging the Theosophist’s close relationship with Dayananda. Blavatsky interprets the Arya Samaj as a modern manifestation of the spiritual movements that contributed to the demise of the Mogul Empire. Blavatsky’s idea of reincarnated resistance, although diametrically opposed to Khlebnikov’s mathematical logic, betrays an approach to history startlingly similar to his. Their shared fascination with the Sikh community is a case in point. *Caves and Jungles* devotes a chapter to the Sikhs’ transformation from a peaceable group of peasants, united under Nanak’s ecumenical teachings, into a band of rebels fighting the oppressive regime of Aurangzeb. This history from the Mogul period leads Blavatsky to predict that Sikhs, who make up a large contingent in the British Indian military, will one day turn against the world’s greatest imperial power (234–35). In “Yasir” a Sikh takes on the important task of conjoining Russia’s Orient with Britain’s. A traveling merchant called Kunby, who identifies himself as a disciple of Nanak, serendipitously arrives in the steppe to turn Istoma toward the Indian subcontinent. Recognizing a fellow spirit, the Volga fisherman declares, “I too am a Sikh” ‘Я тоже Сикх’ (112; 197).

A similar impulse of merging with the other, also motivated by Shankara’s teachings, underlies Blavatsky’s refusal to perform the role of the typical visitor from the West. Positioning herself as an archaeologist of lost knowledge, the Theosophist declares in the first chapter of *Caves and Jungles* that she will be looking for the “India unknown to its conquerors” and producing a narrative that dismantles “systematized portraits of the eternal Orient” (12, 9–10). Blavatsky’s project thus does not end with the discovery of Advaita as a philosophy of the historical present.

Her ultimate aim is to offer a new epistemology of the East that explicitly contests with the European imagination and intellect. She derides “guidebooks and travelogues” on the grounds that “everything they contain is refracted through the commercial and political interests of Europeans come to India’s shores, obscuring her real vistas and her heart” (4–5, 10–11). Indeed, to understand Advaita Vedanta, Blavatsky turns not to the pioneering Sanskrit scholars William Jones and Max Muller but rather to indigenous oral sources, from Brahmins such as Dayananda to impoverished yogis and street mystics. Whatever the merit or accuracy of her interpretations, the most remarkable feature of the Theosophist’s engagement with “ancient Indian philosophy” is her condemnation of oriental studies as an instrument of empire.

Blavatsky’s knowledge of Indic languages is superficial at best. Nevertheless, she is not afraid to challenge professional philologists on the grounds that commercial and political aspirations drove the European “discovery” of Sanskrit and resulted in the “blind objectification” of Indian languages and history (92–102, 113–18). Blavatsky insists that her narrative be read as an antidote on two levels, that of the phenomenal world of experience and that of an allegory recounting her “inner” quest (9–10). She warns that throughout the narrative the “superficial meaning” of words and concepts offered by orientalist will challenge her own rendition of their “true meaning” (23). The nonobjectivism of Advaita, which inspires her critique of signification, also seems evident in the layering of language and meaning in “Yasir.” In the light of Blavatsky’s indictment of Indology, Khlebnikov’s obsessive “search for the authentic meaning of words” takes on an urgent political purpose (Cooke 67–103).

Even more germane to Khlebnikov’s search is the criterion that Blavatsky sets for accessing the “deeper truth” behind the languages of India (185). She is convinced that authentic meaning is available only to those

who organically belong to the East (484). Assuming such an identity for herself, however, is more than a rhetorical gesture. As she approaches the customs desk at Bombay carrying American identification, Blavatsky defines herself as a “Russian savage” to the British officer (12). Her performances of the oriental subject, related with ironic relish throughout the work, always coincide with literal or metaphoric encounters with one of two groups whose authority derives from their expertise in “understanding” India: imperial administrators and Western Sanskritists. When Blavatsky calls herself a Russian savage, she seems to consciously appropriate British discourse about Russia during the Great Game (Malia 92, 98). In the debates with professional orientalist, however—none of whom she met personally—*Russian* and *savage* are further separated to indicate the internal schism between European Russia and its Asiatic empire. Unlike many of the Russian modernists cited earlier in this essay, Blavatsky introduces a second level of colonial difference in situating herself. When she most crucially asserts her mastery over language and meaning, she invokes negative stereotypes of the slit-eyed, broad-faced, flat-nosed Asiatic, culled from Russia’s internal discourse of otherness, as referents of her own body. At one point she states militantly that her ancestors were not Slavs but Kalmyks (50).

Khlebnikov also claimed Kalmyk origins in a remarkable deconstruction of his own image as a Russian citizen and national man of letters. Between the start of the First World War and the Revolution, he composed a series of short biographical sketches, the most detailed of which is “Questionnaire” ‘Анкета’ (1914). The анкета, or “survey,” is a Russian institution with a long history. Dating back to the nineteenth century, when it was used to catalog and regulate the non-Russian demographic of the empire, the survey became a powerful instrument of the Soviet government and remains a part of the Russian

identification system to this day. Characteristically, Khlebnikov radicalizes the form and the ideology of the questionnaire. He transforms the putative document of authentication into a lyric reconfiguration of the self and its confessional form into a conduit for relocating the national subject to the imperial Asiatic frontier.

Combining the stylized diction of the survey with flights of fancy, Khlebnikov constructs an elaborate tropology of his birthplace. In terms that both invoke and subvert the paradigmatic opposition between European and Asiatic Russia, he transforms the natural barriers of the Volga River and the Caspian Sea into polymorphous, dynamic bridges between them. Khlebnikov repeatedly refers to his birth on Khanskaya Stavka (Khanate Headquarters), a half-submerged island on the Volga-Caspian estuary similar to Istoma’s “crescent-shaped,” “half-wild” Kulaly. The porous liminality of his native place finds its counterpart in the poet’s own body, with “Kalmyk blood” ‘Калмыцкая кровь’—the most repressed part of Russia’s genealogy—coursing through its veins (“Questionnaire” 141; “Анкета” 58). The Kalmyks are also the first community from Russia’s Orient to embrace the protagonist of “Yasir.” As mentioned earlier, the chief of the Kalmyks inducts Istoma into their complex shamanic-Buddhist-Islamic worldview through a shared rite of intoxication.

Blavatsky’s and Khlebnikov’s invocations of the Kalmyks parallel each other in an unusual way. Whether through the Theosophist’s visage, Istoma’s drinking from the common pot of “black vodka,” or the blood in the poet’s veins, the body, rather than abstract categories of shared space and history, constitutes the basis of the authors’ identification with the nomadic tribe. This incarnation of the speaking subject radically intervenes in the normative relation between mobility and knowledge. Mary Louise Pratt eloquently describes the European, usually male traveler

assuming the enunciative position of a disembodied eye or I, whose claim to universal authority relies on its difference from the concrete spaces and people that it observes and records (59).

The strategy of embodying the traveler and the travelogue as the geographic, religious, and ethnic other also reveals the mediating role an iconic ur-text plays between Khlebnikov and Blavatsky: *Journey beyond Three Seas* (Хождение за три моря), the travelogue of Afanasy Nikitin, a fifteenth-century merchant from Tver on the northern Volga who arrived in southwestern India via Astrakhan and Iran in the company of Central Asian merchants. While Blavatsky explicitly cites Nikitin's account in the introduction to her narrative (3), his voice permeates the medium of "Yasir." Like Khlebnikov, the fifteenth-century merchant speaks in an extraordinary amalgam of Russian, Arabic, Farsi, and diverse Central Asian languages and invokes Allah far more often than he does the Christian God (Banerjee, "By Caravan").

Nikitin's journey from Russia to the Indian subcontinent is crucial for understanding how Khlebnikov augments and ultimately transcends Blavatsky. Even though *Caves and Jungles* cites the fifteenth-century account, the extraordinary metamorphosis of the merchant's linguistic and spiritual persona has no real place in the Theosophist's quest for authenticity. Blavatsky's critique of philology as an imperial enterprise is revolutionary in itself. But her vision cannot accommodate the multiethnic, multireligious, polylingual community, moving through the vast stretch of Eurasia, that guided Nikitin across the "three seas" and shaped his subjectivity.

In contrast, "Yasir" relies on the merchant's range of movement and transculturation. Although Khlebnikov faithfully reproduces Nikitin's panoply of Islamic tongues, what distinguishes the poet's fictional travelogue is these languages' interaction with classical Sanskrit. The language of a shared

Muslim other disrupts the hegemonic construction of two national identities, those of Orthodox Christian Russia and Hindu India, and opens them up to other spaces and voices.

Liberation Theosophy

Through a ritual that makes Krishnamurti indistinguishable from the Kalmyk chief, Khlebnikov celebrates the liberating potentials of this trans-Asiatic polyphony. In Astrakhan, the sage performs "a marriage pouring the Ganges water into the dark Volga, . . . just as for many centuries camels have borne on their backs water from the two rivers to intermingle" "Совершается обряд свадьбы двух рек, когда рукой жреца вода Ганга проливается в темные воды Волги . . . Как ежегодно привозят верблюды священную воду Ганга чтобы они присоединялись" ("Yasir" 107–08; "Есир" 191). Soon afterward, the nomad instructs Istoma in the worship of wind that flows across Eurasia. The elemental conjoining of wind and water, carried in the caravans of traders such as Nikitin, dissolves the naturalized barriers between European Russia and its Asiatic territories and between Hindu and Islamic India. The elements also define the ultimate destination of the traveling subject: the "blank space" 'пустота' of Kalmyk cosmology (115, 195), identical with *moksha*, liberation from earthly existence, in Advaita philosophy.

The journey does not end with this revelation, however. Having penetrated "the silver fabric of deception" 'серебристая ткань обмана' (113; 199), the Volga fisherman evolves into an author composing "the greatest book of blank pages, the book of nature written in the clouds" 'лучшая книга, белые страницы, книга природы среди облаков' (114; 200). The worldly contents of this book might be discerned in a manifesto that Khlebnikov conceived simultaneously with "Yasir." Under the title "Indo-Russian Union" 'Индо-русский союз,' the manifesto lays out the epistemic

and political impact of the imagined dialogue between Russia's contiguous peripheries and Britain's overseas colony. As Harsha Ram notes, the manifesto re-Orients the international dimension of the October Revolution. What was expected to unfold first toward the capitalist West is turned toward "a continuum of spaces in the East" ("Poetics" 224).

Proposing the establishment of a new political entity called the Asiatic Union of Socialist Republics (ASSU), spanning China, India, Persia, Russia, and Afghanistan, "Indo-Russian Union" rebels against the mere resignification of the nation as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Khlebnikov's imagined federation would be a "zone of free movement" across Asiatic territories estranged by geopolitical frontiers. The literal u-topia, or "no place," of ASSU can be interpreted as a terrestrial realization of the "blank space" inhabited by Istoma at the end of his journey. It is not surprising, therefore, that Astrakhan—"a place that united the Aryan world and the Caspian world, the triangle of Christ, Buddha, and Mohammed"—defines the core of a new map that is predicated on contact rather than containment of spaces and populations (341–42).

Mobile communities of the past and future, which blur not only territorial, linguistic, and religious boundaries but also the lines between commerce, spirituality, and politics, generate the critical geography of Khlebnikov's "Yasir" and incarnate its credo of liberation. Forged from asymptomatic couplings between the two Orients, the worldview embodied by this work might have seemed radically progressive in early-twentieth-century Russia. This perspective resonates in our age, however, bracketed by decolonization and globalization, when bodies, texts, ideas, and images seem to flit instantaneously across vast and unlikely spaces. The meandering of Blavatsky's and Khlebnikov's enunciative positions between the Volga and the Ganges—a deceptively blank space shaped by linguistic, ethnic, and religious contact—reveals the vi-

olence inherent in static, homogeneous conceptions of national identity.

NOTES

1. This and all other unattributed translations are mine.
2. The early scholarship on Khlebnikov's relation to "the Orient" (Loščic and Turbin; Mirsky; Tartakovskij) is conspicuous not only for its lack of critical engagement with the term but also for a kind of geographic totalization—whereby Japan, China, Persia, and India exist on the same tropological and ideological plane as Central Asia or the Caucasus. The only full-length essay on "Yasir," which pays particular attention to the story's "Oriental" sources (Drews 154), operates in the same paradigm. In contrast, Vroon and Ram offer finely nuanced, historicized commentaries on the contexts previously conflated under the term *Orient*. This essay, examining a text that has received little scholarly attention, seeks to add an essential dimension of comparison that also engages the author's own critique of the concept.
3. While critics across the disciplines are paying increasing attention to Asia's constitutive role in iterations of Russian identity, scholars of literature and cultural history have been using postcolonial theory creatively to model a nationally specific orientalism. As Harsha Ram notes, however, "read[ing] Said as a synecdoche of postcolonial criticism as a whole" significantly limits these scholars' enterprise. Discussions of the relations between Europe's and Russia's Orients, consequently, remain focused on what Ram calls "mimetic-representational" influences instead of extending into discussions of ideological and rhetorical formations ("Between 1917 and 1947" 832).
4. The unusual convergence of mysticism and political consciousness in the fictional figure of Krishnamurti is also evident in Khlebnikov's lyric imagining of Qurrat al-Ayn, a radical Islamic mystic who led anticolonial uprisings in Iran and Azerbaijan (Vroon, "Qurrat al-Ayn").

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