

Vengeful Animism

On Maxim Komar-Myshkin's *Vladimir's Night*

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Vladimir's Night is a hybrid of a children book, an exceedingly gory martyrdom and, perhaps, a twisted political treatise. Here, Vladimir (Putin, although the name is never mentioned), is both a little child and a political leader vacating in his summer mansion. Before falling asleep he imagines seeing faces in the wood veneer of his bedroom cabinet. The faces move, a mouth opens up, and out of the closet flow animated mundane objects, soon to be joined by over-lively friends hailing from Vladimir's drawer, his bag and from the outside. What begins as merry frolicking between boy and objects soon turns violent; Vladimir is molested, tortured and finally murdered by them.

The fictive Russian author and artist Efim Poplavsky (1978-2011), always maintained that he was neither an artist nor an author. His pseudonym, Maxim Komar-Myshkin, connotes in Russian a mouse and a mosquito, and he perceived his work through the attributes of these animals: the mosquito, parasitically feeding on the blood of “big” and “real” humans (be them powerful politicians or venerated cultural personae), and the mouse, feasting on leftovers and stashed goods and connoting infiltration and dirt. Both mouse and mosquito suggest a nuisance rather than a major threat (yet, given the right circumstances, they can become deadly), and both are domestically present even as they strive to remain hidden and invisible. Poplavsky thus described whatever he was discreetly producing as “private dreck.”

While 'Myshkin' obviously nods to Dostoevsky's protagonist in *The Idiot*, Poplavsky's *nom de plume* is a triple homage to the Russian writer Daniil Kharms. 'Maxim' is a Russian name, but it happens to have a Hebrew meaning: 'charming' (and Kharms reputedly chose his own pen name to echo the English 'charms'); Myshkin is the name of the protagonists of one of Kharms minute stories, and 'Komar' is derived from 'Komarov,' a character in another. Komar-Myshkin was deeply influenced by Kharms's funny and horrifying sense of the absurd, epitomizing for him two seemingly incommensurate states: an exhilarating, defiant and irrational autonomy through art, and an all-encompassing sense of realistic terror and doom of an author who suffered persecution in Stalin's USSR and perished in a prison hospital in 1942.

Soon after Komar-Myshkin immigrated to Israel in the late 90s, he founded the *Buried Alive Group*, a tightly knit collective of ex-soviet young artists, actors, musicians and writers. Here again

the name is telling, for it conveys not only the rather morbid sense of humor typical of the group but the schizophrenic spirit of its activities. *Buried Alive* were resolutely alienated from the local Israeli cultural scene towards which they felt inherently superior, yet they were also experiencing the tremendous hardship and insecurity stemming from their seclusion. For *Buried Alive*, the Moscow unofficial artists of the 60s and the 70s were thus not only a main source of artistic influence (*Vladimir's Night* is akin in form to the earlier albums produced by artists such as Ilya Kabakov and Viktor Pivovarov); they saw themselves as continuing the autonomous, intimate and publicly unrecognized existence that typified the Moscow circle: a self-sustaining artistic scene devoid of hierarchies or material value, based entirely on personal friendship and passionate commitment. For Poplavsky, however, the name also conveyed the actual fear explored in Edgar Allen Poe's tale *The Premature Burial*, colored by the acute paranoia he suffered from.

It was only two years before he committed suicide that I have met Poplavsky. At the time, I was working on a film the Israeli minister of foreign affairs, Avigdor Lieberman, and needed help researching Russian texts and interviews. I was struck from the start by the contrast between Poplavsky's sober irony, and his fits of conspiratorial suspicion and anxiety, which I was all too soon to learn, indicated greater suffering than I imagined. For Efim Poplavsky believed that Putin had a personal vendetta against him, and that even though he was anonymous, unemployed, and had left Russia more than a decade ago, he is a pertinent target for assassination attempts. In fact, for a long span I was certain this fear was a long-winding joke, and once I realize it was not, I could not eke from him any details as to the reasons or the signs for this threat – although I know these were ubiquitous and clear to him. *Vladimir's Night*, in that sense, was Poplavsky's secretive artistic retaliation: animism literally employed to avenge a nemesis.

Poplavsky's notion of animism was highly indebted to Freud, but, much like Breton and Dalí, he was interested neither in the progressive speculations Freud employed (relegating animism to the arcane and the primitive), nor in the therapeutic horizon and scientific claims of psychoanalysis. Rather, he was enthralled by the radical potentials he saw Freud as releasing as to the power of the uncanny and of animism to destabilize the very form (he would say “the body”) of art. In this sense, the unlikely hybrid presented in *Vladimir's Night* was for him conveying that existence as being more than one, disavowing the border between the imaginary and the real, never classifiable, always disorienting, in other words: truthful. We can perhaps glimpse that experience of reality through one image in the book: that of the soul, that leaps out of Putin's body not in its traditional incarnation as a butterfly, but rather as a mouse-mosquito chimera. It will be

recalled that Freud mentions the soul when he discusses the trope of the *doppelgänger*. Like many uncanny motifs, Freud suggests, the double is the monstrous return of something that was once consoling: the soul as a perfect double, immune to physical agony and, ultimately, immune to death. That the soul would turn into a blood sucking mongrel is thus not only euphoric and horrific; it also posits the author himself as rising from within Putin's body, presenting an aporia by which we cannot tell whether the artist is an alien exterminating its host, or whether, in some way, Vladimir was Maxim all along, identification was ludicrously at play, and the act of revenge was also suicidal.