

◆ ZINAIDA VOLKONSKAYA ◆

Princess Zinaida Volkonskaya was born in 1792 into one of the richest and most distinguished families in Russia, and married into another one. Her father, Prince Beloselsky-Belozersky, was a landowner and connoisseur, and her stepmother came from a wealthy family of industrialists; Volkonskaya's husband was a diplomat and courtier. Volkonskaya spent much of her youth abroad; her first language was French, and this was also the language in which she produced her earliest literary works. Settling in Moscow in the early 1820s, Volkonskaya became the moving spirit of one of the most brilliant Moscow salons; she also began making a serious study of Russian, and from about 1824, started to write in the language. The author of poetry, prose fiction, and travel memoirs, Volkonskaya also wrote the libretto (in Italian) and music for an opera, *Giovanna d'Arco* (1821); her tutelary genius was Madame de Staël, to whom she had addressed a paean on the occasion of the latter's visit to Russia in 1814. In 1829, Volkonskaya, who had converted to Catholicism, was pressurized by the sectarian policies of Nicholas I's government into leaving Russia. She spent the rest of her life in Rome, devoting herself to religious philanthropy (she was to join the Franciscan Tertiaries) rather than to writing, though her drawing-room remained a social centre for Russian expatriates, such as Nikolai Gogol. She died in 1862. Her Roman villa survives as the British Embassy.

The Dream: A Letter

I have read your letter, my dear Gulyanov.^o And imagine where I read it: in the house under whose roof I was born, my father's house, that haunt of elegance, where I grew up in the shade of Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Italian works of art, my youthful gaze becoming schooled to ideal forms. The pictures, antique bronzes, marble sculptures, are all as dear to me as brothers, as friends, belonging as much to my father's family as I do myself. And imagine, too, the trembling reverence with which I approached the Mummy, with its outer garment all decked in the ancient script, calling to mind as I did your studies of the Hieroglyph! For long I gazed in incomprehension, with the same rapt attention and blind admiration with which an unlettered, but pious, villager will drink in the eloquency of the Eastern prophets; sharing, too, his feeling when he quits the temple, I made my

departure from the pagan relics of mysterious Egypt. Withdrawing to my room, I began musing; but then, I am sorry to say, I fell asleep over your friends the hieroglyphs.

... And now I find myself sitting on a purple couch in the Ancient Greek style; my son is with me. A lamp burns over my head; above it rises a verdigrised bronze of the Ephesian Diana, her arms spread out; a little way off is the Medici Venus, in the full glory of her charms and her modest coquetry; all around are bas-reliefs, inscriptions, urns for tears, tears which have long dried up and vanished, as the cause of them has; here is the Medusa with her petrifying glance, her parted lips, and her snaky locks, and there a Faun in ecstasy, crowned with vines, with a merry, tormented face. Looking at him, I wonder aloud: 'Why should it be that inner joy is always mingled with sadness?' But suddenly I see a figure approaching: it is dark and upright as an ancient, dried-up tree-trunk; it has neither arms nor legs, yet the form is surely human. The vision pauses; but surely those are fingers gently putting back the narrow, dark veil; a sweet aroma fills the air... Suddenly there is a flash of light... It is glancing off those large rings, with their black stones in settings of such pearly whiteness they resemble coals on snow. But now the veil falls to the ground: before me stands a majestic woman, dark of complexion and strange! 'Fear not,' she says, 'I have come to converse with you.' Then, turning to me, she adds: 'Often your curious gaze has rested on the many-coloured signs which figure my mysterious covering. Often indeed did you ponder their secret meaning; yet that meaning remained closed to you and all others; now I shall reveal it to you. But you should expect no long and intricate tale of some tempestuous life; no, my days were spent in contemplation, I lived peacefully as water flowing over the moist lotuses. See that Isis in the mirror, with her silver face: she is the very image of my life, the reflection of my earthly existence. My father belonged to the sacred Caste; he dwelt with four other priests on a quiet, lonely river-bank opposite a noisy city,^o a city which I never visited. But do not ask me at what time, and in what place, I made my home on this earth. Now that I have lived out my days, everything is grand and infinite to me, without name or boundary. Only what was imprinted on my spirit remains with me now. My father would speak never a word to me of my mother—and I never saw the person who gave me life.^o Like a stream running out of its native source, I flowed ever onward, never returning whence I came. Surrounded by old men from my earliest days, I grew like a pink lily in the shade of sycamores; at an early age I became used to grey hairs, to soft, weighty words; I loved old age as I loved hope, sweet sleep,

and peaceful evenings. From afar I would glimpse the merry youths and maidens at their games and dances; I could not understand why they should move about so quickly, speak and sing so eagerly: for after all, they were not honouring the immortals. Wherefore, I asked myself, those words, those movements, those sounds? I felt pity and horror, looking at their insane joy. All I knew of youth was what I heard the old men recall of theirs, and how pleasant those recollections seemed to me, like the sound of the holy harmonies as a sacred procession approaches; but a worldly youth I supposed worse than the sun beating down on the bare desert, worse than a lashing sandstorm.

'O, I thought, will the roses of my youth never fall? Will the green, fresh leaves never drop from the tree of life? How long I would have to wait before the time of wisdom and peace should come upon me! And then I began to look for ways in which I might anticipate my longed-for old age, and make the years of my bloom, which to me were so threatening, run forward. In the temple, before the image of the fearful god,⁹ the enemy of smiles and cheerfulness, I would bow down, and compose my pent-up yearning in a cycle of melancholy songs, so that no one should distract me from my stern thoughts of death, the best guide on the path to wisdom. I would crown my locks with the leaves of the banana, a tree dedicated to the making of coffins. Now I remained day and night in the dwelling of my parent; I was determined to wait there until the old age I had so long desired overtook me. When I had cast away the transient garment of youth, I would go forth again into the light, clad now in the robe of divine wisdom. And then, I would tell myself at such times, my words would cut themselves into hearts as deeply as the magic signs carved on the pyramids; but, like those signs too, their meaning would remain closed, except to initiates. And now hear the tale of what I did during the long period of my novitiate! From my earliest youth I had, under the supervision of my father, often practised writing the many-coloured hieroglyphs on the walls of the temple and on the shrouds of the dead; and now I decided to make ready my own last garment. I began to spend all my days in painting those signs.'

And here the daughter of Ancient Egypt unwrapped her many-coloured *epitrachilion*¹⁰ for us, and, running her dark-complexioned finger over the bright signs with which it was covered, said: 'This circle signifies the sun; it is dark as the morning of my youth was dark for me... For my sun did not once shine out, being covered with a dark cloud to the end of my days! These secret signs, marked lower down, are symbols of the heat in my soul, which never burned free under an open sky; the wind of the outside world

never fanned this inner heat; it burned quietly, as the holy, pure fire of all-powerful Ptah¹¹ burns under the silent vaults of the impenetrable temple; and, like that fire, my sacred flame lit and transfigured the feelings and thoughts in my soul. Look: here I have represented the sacred gaze of the god of gods; it is fixed on each one as he walks about the earth, it follows him as he goes amidst the multitude, in the storm of the vanities; as it looks on mortals, this gaze also studies the universe, counting the moments and the centuries... But the firmament of Ptah's gaze is eternity. Look at me, eye of the stern divinity! Look at the maiden who, crowned by leaves of the tree of death, walks her lonely path, striving to approach you!

'And here below is the snake, winding her two-headed coils; in her you see a power higher than all powers, save those of the gods. Death, like that snake, long writhes near her prey; scarcely has she chosen the spot where her venom will be unleashed, than corruption overtakes all that is living. But the earth sloughs its skin; and thus death, taking unto herself what is spoilt, is transformed into eternity.

'Yet the powers of life in nature are perpetually bubbling next to the powers of death—bubbling in excitation, as the noisy waters swirl over the wide-jawed Crocodile. How swiftly this monster swims; the populous bank is soon behind him, giving way to new banks where he may wreak his destruction; but not for long is he away; his eye can never have enough of gazing, and his hunger is never sated.

'And here I have drawn the temporary dwelling of man; under this his fragile covering he hides from the vast spectacle of nature, complacent in his own insignificance. What is a great building, what is the shadow of the Pyramids, compared with the extent of the firmament?

'The triumph of man lies, rather, in the word! This sign here shows the opening of the lips; from this hot spring rush thoughts, feelings, anger, prayers, passions—all flowing in a torrent of picturesque words—making man as much a creator as the gods. He at one and the same time imagines, confers form, describes, inspires, and rules over life and nature.'

But here the strange maiden fell a-trembling. 'Our conversation', she said, 'is drawing to a close. I must return to my narrow sycamore grove, to the skiff in which I roam the abyss of eternity...' Uttering these words, she hid from my curious orbs a thousand other signs, whose meaning I longed to learn, and gently wrapped herself in her dark shroud once more—and once more the aromatic scents filled the air beside us.

'Young man!' she continued, looking at my son. 'Sink yourself in study, and may the Genius of Egypt be with you! May you rise from the earth like

an obelisk, and like the obelisk, may you hold your secret within you—the secret of deep feeling and learning; do not communicate it to any but initiates, for the sounds of your heart and thought must not strike on unresponsive ears. These sounds must only ring out when other, sibling, sounds rise in response to them. Bear in mind my life of solitude, remember this my last garment, and follow me; live within yourself, keeping the sacred flame cherished in your soul. And may your youth be crowned by fresh and pure lotus! And may your life be decorated in imperishable colours! And may all the lineaments of that painting be noble, agreeable, and pure, and may your soul breathe the air of these colours as the heavenly harmony does!’

And then her face was once more hidden from us; she began to withdraw into the distance—and at that moment, everything vanished...

Forgive me, my dear Gulyanov, for occupying you at such length with my delirious fancies; forgive me, if my dream should contradict your opinions of the Hieroglyph in some manner which I do not suspect. For what system does not vanish in a dream, where imagination alone triumphs over the mind, over Logic and Reason? In very truth I was not thinking of you, nor of Champollion,^o at the time when I conversed with the Mummy come to life. But in my waking hours, as you well know, I am always in agreement with you, recognizing that you are my one true guide to the labyrinth of signs; I resign all my own suppositions about the Hieroglyph before the power of your genius.

Forgive this *amatrice* of antiquity her fantastical aberrations, and be always persuaded of her most cordial feelings for you.

Princess Zinaida Volkonskaya

(1829)