

## QURRAT AL-'AYN AND THE IMAGE OF ASIA IN VELIMIR CHLEBNIKOV'S POST-REVOLUTIONARY *OEUVRE*

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One of the more striking aspects of the Eastern theme in Velimir Chlebnikov's *oeuvre* is his tendency to couch depictions of oriental cultures, as well as the relationship between East and West, in terms of love relationships.<sup>1</sup> This paradigm may also be observed in his treatment of Asia as a continental entity, a collective of cultures he sees moving towards internal cohesion and freedom. His earliest considerations of Asia in this light were articulated in 1916 in 'Pis'mo dvum japoncam' (TV: 604-606), with two follow-up essays, 'Indo-russkij sojuz' and 'Azosojuz', both composed in 1918 (see Chlebnikov 1990), expanding on the utopian propositions initially outlined in the open letter. Over this same two-year period a striking image of Asia personified as a beautiful female consort begins to take shape in his poetic imagination, reaching its full expression in the poems that make up the *sverchpovest* 'Azy iz uzy'. This image must have been of particular consequence for Chlebnikov because it demanded the refashioning of his own lyric persona into a figure "worthy" of such a consort. The two personae that emerge are ultimately carried over into various works he composed when he came face to face with Asia – initially in Azerbaijan and subsequently in Persia in the spring and summer of 1921.

The present study undertakes three tasks. The first is to review the major critical accounts of the origin and genesis of this image and to assess their adequacy. The second is to determine what role the real and legendary biography of the Iranian religious reformer Qurrat al-'Ayn played in the

evolution of Chlebnikov's depiction of Asia. The third is to consider how our findings concerning Qurat al-'Ayn might enhance our understanding of the poet's own self-image and our reading of texts that lie on the margins of Chlebnikov's orientalia.

### *The Female Face of Asia*

The earliest of the two poems that elaborate the image of Asia as the poet's own consort is the short lyric, "O, esli b Azija sušila volosami...", probably written in 1919:<sup>2</sup>

О, если б Азия сушила волосами  
Мне лицо золотым и сухим полотенцем,  
Когда я в студеное купаюсь ручье.  
Ныне я, скромный пастух,  
Косу плету из Рейна и Ганга и Хоанхо.  
И коровий рожок лежит около.  
Отпиленный рог и с скважиной звонкая трость.  
(SS2, II: 42; cf. TV: 103)

A more elaborate version of the same image is developed in "O, Azija! Sebja toboju muču!", the central text with which we are concerned:

О, Азия! Себя тобою мучу,  
Как девы брови я постигаю тучу,  
Как шею нежного здоровья –  
Твои ночные вечеровья.  
Где тот, кто день свободных ласк предрек?  
О, если б волосами синих рек  
Мне Азия обвила бы колени  
И дева прошептала бы таинственные пени,  
И, тихая, счастливая, рыдала,  
Концами кос глаза суша.  
Она любила, она страдала –  
Вселенной смутная душа.  
И вновь прошли бы в сердце чувства,  
Вдруг зажигая в сердце бой,  
И Махавиры, и Заратустры,  
И Саваджи, объятого борьбой.  
Умерших снов я стал бы современник,  
Творя ответы и вопросы,  
А ты бы грудой светлых денег  
Мне на ноги рассыпала бы косы,  
"Учитель, – ласково шепча, –

Не правда ли, сегодня  
Мы будем сообща  
Искать путей свободней?"  
(TV: 471; cf. SS2, II: 113)

These poems, and others that belong to the same constellation (chiefly those brought together in 'Azy iz uzy') have received a good deal of attention in the critical literature (see, *inter alia*, Parnis 1967; Mirsky 1975: 8-23; Vroon 1983; Duganov 1976: 427-428 and 1990: 133-137; Tartakovskij 1992: 9-94), but one of the questions that has not been answered, or at least that remains in dispute, concerns the sources for the image described above. One of these has been identified in Chlebnikov's own earlier orientalia, namely, the *sverchpovest* 'Deti Vydry'. The Otter's daughter stands out as a particularly important "prefiguration" of Asia, as Solomon Mirsky has pointed out, because of significant allusions, both mythological and literary, in her depiction. In the fifth section of the *sverchpovest*, Mirsky argues, the Otter's daughter indirectly expresses the desire to be like Aphrodite Aphro-gēneia, "born of the sea's foam" ("Pochodit' by ja chotela [...] / na večno jun[uju] izmennic[u]"; TV: 448) and Chlebnikov himself reinforces this association by linking her image earlier in the *sverchpovest* to that of Botticelli's Venus ("Doč' Vydry okutana volosami do nog"; TV: 432).<sup>3</sup> In this guise she frees Prometheus from his chains. In an authorial aside – something like a stage direction – Chlebnikov compares the Otter's daughter to the Circassian maiden in Puškin's 'Kavkazskij plennik' when she frees the Captive in similar fashion. The Pushkinian subtext is critical as a bridge to the "Asia" poems because it represents the Circassian woman as a maiden in a comparable posture and attitude – at the feet of her beloved, with complaints on her lips and tears in her eyes ("Umolkla. Slezy i stenan'ja / Stesnili bednoj devy grud'. / Usta bez slov roptali peni. / Bez čuvstv, obnjav ego koleni, / Ona edva mogla dochnut"; "K ego nogam ona sklonilas': / [...] / Sleza nevol'naja skatilas'"; Puškin 1957: 123, 126).<sup>4</sup> We thus see the emergence of a complex female image combining the motifs of beauty, love and liberation, all of which are exploited in later works that foreground the image of Asia. The Caucasian setting of both the Promethean myth and the romantic *poëma* additionally recommend them as subtexts to a poem set on defining the essence of Asia.

In his analysis of 'Azy iz uzy' R.V. Duganov, like Mirsky, defends the centrality of the Prometheus myth, but he comes to this conclusion, not via the link to 'Deti Vydry', but through the actual persona of Asia in Greek mythology, identified by some ancient sources as Prometheus' wife (also noted in passing by Mirsky). That fact, combined with the poet's foregrounding of the theme of freedom, leads him to the conclusion that

[в] основе поэмы лежит миф о Прометее и его жене Азии. Путем актуализации всей истории развития прометеевского мифа от Гесиода и Эсхила до Шелли и Вячеслава Иванова и поэтической интеграции на этой основе некоторых образов западных и восточных мифологий современные события представлены в поэме как осуществление древнего мифа об освобождении закованного богборца. (1976: 428)<sup>5</sup>

Both the image of the Captive and his Circassian paramour, on the one hand, and that of Prometheus and his spouse, on the other, enrich our reading of the Asia poems. At the same time they have their limitations. In the case of the Pushkinian subtext the liberated protagonist's commitment to his Circassian paramour does not prevent him from abandoning her (and the Caucasus as well!); she, in turn, refuses to accompany him once she has freed him, and after his departure she commits suicide. In the case of Prometheus there is no myth that would place his wife Asia in the role of a liberator, leaving us to rely exclusively on 'Deti Vydry' and Puškin's poem to confirm the general Promethean prototype. It should also be noted that Asia in Chlebnikov's poem is represented less as a liberator than a consort with whom the lyric persona will seek freedom. Thus the Pushkinian and Promethean allusions, for all their merits, cannot fully account for the image that dominates Chlebnikov's "Asia" poems.

Among the various other female figures that are associated with Asia – including the "rabyňa [...] s rodinoj carej na smugloj grudi", the "devuška s mečom", the "povitucha mjatežej – starucha" and the "boginja prorican'ja" (TV: 467) – one whose image deserves further exploration is Qurrat al-'Ayn, a brilliant nineteenth-century Persian religious reformer, theologian and poet.<sup>6</sup> Her name occurs in at least seven different texts composed between 1916 and 1922, four of which also deal explicitly with oriental themes. She is not only associated with Asia by virtue of contiguous references, but certain physical details in the depiction of personified Asia are also associated with her (see Tartakovskij 1992: 79-82). A case may also be made that she is implicitly present in a number of other important texts. Thus her candidacy as a model for personified Asia deserves further scrutiny.

### *Qurrat al-'Ayn: Life and Legend*

Qurrat al-'Ayn's name is associated first and foremost with an Iranian religious movement founded by Sayyid 'Alī Muḥammad Shīrāzī, known as the "Bab", signifying "door" or "gateway". A few words should be said about the major cultural and metaphysical underpinnings of the movement.<sup>7</sup> It arose at a time of growing conflict within the framework of traditional Shi'ite Islam

between the Uṣūlī theological school, which dominated both religious and political life in mid-nineteenth-century Iran, and various oppositionist groups, of which the most prominent was the Shaykhi school. Clerics associated with the Uṣūlī school, the guiding force behind institutionalized Islam, tended to encourage traditional adherence to *sharī'a* (Islamic canon law), of which they were the principal interpreters and administrators, making them influential and powerful figures in both the religious and secular arena. Adherents of the Shaykhi school were much more mystically and eschatologically oriented, looking for signs pointing to the reappearance of the twelfth and last Imam, the messiah or "Mahdi" who would establish a new dispensation in place of the old *sharī'a* and usher in a new world of peace and justice. It was within the context of Shaykhi theology and piety that Sayyid 'Alī Muḥammad proclaimed himself initially the forerunner of the Mahdi, or "gateway" to the Truth, and subsequently the Mahdi himself.

Because of the extraordinarily repressive measures taken by the Iranian authorities against the Babi movement, including the destruction of documents pertaining to its adherents (see Root 1981: 50), many important details of Qurrat al-'Ayn's biography are unknown. The documented facts are themselves enmeshed in webs of myths spun around her because of her legendary status within that movement. She was born Fāṭima Zarrīn Tāj Baraghānī, surnamed Umm Salma, in 1814 in the city of Qazvin, an important commercial center in northwestern Iran. The daughter of Mullā Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ, a *mujtahid* (Doctor of Islamic Law) of considerable wealth and standing, she was raised in an atmosphere of privilege and given a thorough grounding in theology, jurisprudence and literature by her own father and uncles, all of whom were scholars of religious law. Such an education was highly unusual for a woman in nineteenth-century Iran and can be attributed both to her father's indulgence and to her own intellectual precocity. At the age of thirteen or fourteen she was married to her cousin, Mullā Muḥammad Baraghānī, son of her father's brother, Mullā Muḥammad Taqī. In 1828 the couple moved to Karbalā', one of the sacred Shi'ite cities in Iraq south of Baghdad, where she remained for the next thirteen years while her husband continued his religious education. During this time she gave birth to two sons (a third was born later, in Qazvin).<sup>8</sup> At the same time she continued her own education. It was of considerable consequence that her husband pursued his studies under the tutelage of a conservative cleric of the Uṣūlī school, whereas Fāṭima pursued hers in religious circles dominated by Shaykhi scholars.

In 1841 the family returned to Qazvin, but she did not abandon her intellectual activities and stayed in contact with representatives of her mentors in Karbalā', in particular Sayyid Kāẓim Rashtī, a major representative of the Shaykhi school, with whom she regularly corresponded. He is the one who first called her Qurrat al-'Ayn, "Consolation of the Eyes", the name

that would most often be associated with her in later years. Needless to say, her continued association with members of the Shaykhi "opposition" led to greater and greater strains on her marriage. Her intellectual interests and aptitude – her own father recognized that she would have qualified as a *mujtahid* had she been a man – fostered her own sense of independence. In 1844, three years after returning to Qazvin, she decided to leave her husband and family and return to Karbalā', hoping to continue her education under Rashtī's tutelage. She arrived to learn that he had just died, but decided nonetheless to remain in Karbalā', establishing herself in the Rashtī household and renewing her association with his disciples. The master had designated no successor, but had hinted that after his passing they might anticipate the coming of a new dispensation, to be announced by one already in their midst. Qurrat al-'Ayn is said to have intuited the advent of this new Imam. She composed a letter pledging her allegiance to him and entrusted it to a fellow Rashtī disciple who was about to set out on a quest for the Promised One, asking him to convey it to the new Imam. The letter was ultimately delivered to Sayyid 'Alī Muḥammad, who had only just proclaimed himself the Bab, and he immediately acknowledged her as one of the "Letters of the Living", the eighteen disciples forming the inner core of his own followers.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the rest of his life they communicated in writing or through emissaries, but were never destined to meet.

Over the course of the next three years Qurrat al-'Ayn's fame as a teacher and proselytizer of the Babi cause spread beyond Karbalā' and the other holy Shi'ite cities, to the growing consternation of local religious authorities. As a representative of the radical wing of the Babis, she believed that the Bab's appearance signaled the beginning of a *fatra*, a period of time between that dominated by one Divine messenger and by his successor, and during this transition period it was incumbent on true believers to divorce themselves from the old order, preparing the way for the new dispensation. In practical terms this meant, among other things, throwing aside the chador (she was the first woman in modern Persian history to do so), demoting devotional prayer to an optional rather than obligatory religious exercise, separating oneself ritually from non-believers, and more generally abrogating the *sharī'a*. Dismayed fellow Babis were offended by her radicalism and by rumors about her ostensible promiscuity, the consequence of her appearing without a veil in the presence of men who were not members of her immediate family. They appealed to the Bab to censure her, but he did just the opposite: he commended her on her views and actions and sealed his approval by dubbing her "Ṭāhira", "the Pure One", stressing the moral irreproachability of her conduct.

In 1847, following a stormy period that included temporary detention by the civic authorities and a brief sojourn in Baghdad, she returned to her home in Qazvin. She was accompanied en route by as many as thirty

followers, among them several mullas. She refused to be reconciled to her husband on the grounds that he was an "unbeliever", and in the course of her brief stay she continued to proselytize on behalf of the Bab. In Qazvin she was confronted again with accusations of sexual immorality as well as heresy. Only two months after her arrival the murder of her father-in-law by a disaffected Babi in 1847 forced her to flee the city under suspicion of complicity in the act.

Over the next four years the government undertook severe measures to suppress the Babi movement, which had spread rapidly and in places given rise to popular revolts against local clergy and government officials. The Bab was himself arrested and interrogated in 1845 but subsequently released. In 1847 he was imprisoned once again, and in 1850 executed by a firing squad along with his closest follower. Qurrat al-'Ayn initially fled to Teheran, where she found refuge in the home of a fellow Babi, Mirzā Ḥusayn 'Alī Nūrī Bahā'ullāh, who was ultimately to declare himself the Bab's successor. In 1848 she participated in a major gathering of Babis in Badasht, where her radicalism once again expressed itself in ways designed to shock. Not only did she unveil in public, but at one meeting she donned men's clothing, and at another, brandishing a sword, declared, "[...] the time for prayer and liturgy is over. Now is the time to prepare for the battlefields of sacrifice and dedication" (Amanat 1989: 326). She is also reputed to have defended the right of women to divorce their husbands and even to have several husbands, rights enjoyed only by men under the *sharī'a*.

In 1849, a few months after the Badasht meeting, Qurrat al-'Ayn was arrested and taken to Teheran, where she spent the next three years under house arrest. The attempt made on the life of Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh in 1852 led to a ruthless extermination campaign against the Babi community in Teheran and across Iran. Qurrat al-'Ayn is reported to have been called before the Shah, who, apparently impressed by her beauty and intelligence, offered to release her if she renounced her allegiance to the Bab. She refused categorically to do so. In September 1852 she was sentenced to death, but because the execution of female prisoners was countermanded by the *sharī'a*, she was executed in secret. According to the most reliable accounts she was taken out to an isolated garden late at night and strangled; her body was thrown into an abandoned well.

This brief overview of Qurrat al-'Ayn's life, based on the most recent and trustworthy accounts available, is necessary as a backdrop for assessing the role that legend and fiction played in her posthumous representation, including in Chlebnikov's *oeuvre*. Her fame outside the Middle East, including Russia, rests largely on her association with Babi doctrines coinciding with certain revolutionary ideas that were beginning to transform the political and cultural landscape of mid-nineteenth-century Europe, among them gender equality, universal brotherhood, cross-cultural tolerance, and opposition

to political and clerical authoritarianism. We must remember that the earliest reports on the Babi revolts and their suppression, originating with the diplomatic community in Teheran, appeared soon after the revolutionary year of 1848, and therefore they were interpreted as part of the same revolt against the established order, i.e. as manifestations of socialism, communism, anarchism and even sexual license (Momen 1981: 5). These initial reports were eventually tempered by more detailed and objective assessments of the Babi movement, but they left their mark, attracting those already inclined to radicalism and repulsing those who sided with the established order.

Qurrat al-'Ayn's name was brought to the attention of the broader European public little more than a decade after her death. The first monograph on the Babi movement was composed by Mirza Muchammed Ali Kazem-Bek, an Azerbaijani scholar whose life path – geographically speaking – is surprisingly similar to Chlebnikov's own.<sup>10</sup> His *Bab i Babidy. Religiozno-političeskie smuty v Persii v 1844-1852 gg.* appeared as a separate book in 1865, and was followed up almost immediately by a French translation published in installments in the prestigious *Journal Asiatique* (Kazem-Bek 1866). The other major treatment of the early Babi years constituted the better part of a highly influential monograph by le Comte de Gobineau, *Les Religions et les philosophies dans l'Asie centrale*, which went through three editions between 1865 and 1900. Interest in the Babi movement enjoyed a revival toward the end of the century, with new studies by French, English and Russian Orientalists, chief among them Edward Browne, Clément Huart, A.L.M. Nicolas, Aleksandr Tumanskij and Baron Viktor Rosen, and lesser figures such as Georgij Batjuškov and S. Umanec.<sup>11</sup> Literary adaptations of documentary and scholarly studies also appeared in the half-century following the Babi insurrection and, not surprisingly, some of them focused specifically on Qurrat al-'Ayn. The earliest of them is a long narrative poem by the Austro-Hungarian poet Marie von Najmájer, *Gurre-ül-Eyn: Ein Bild aus Persiens Neuzeit in sechs Gesängen*, published in 1874.

The author most responsible for familiarizing the Russian public with the name of Qurrat al-'Ayn and the story of the Babi movement is Izabella Grinevskaja, a popular but now largely forgotten poet, dramatist, essayist and translator. Her most famous work was *Bab: Dramatičeskaja poëma iz istorii Persii*, published in the spring of 1903 and staged at the Theatre of the Art and Literature Society (Teatr Literaturno-chudožestvennogo obščestva) in January 1904. The play excited considerable commentary in the press, with reviews appearing in most of the major Petersburg newspapers and "thick" journals (see I. Š. 1910), and was even read with approbation by Lev Tolstoj (see his letter to her of 22 October 1903, first published in 1912, in Tolstoj 1954: 206-207).<sup>12</sup> A highly fictionalized account of the rise of the Babi movement,<sup>13</sup> it covers the period from 1837 to 1850, i.e. up to and including the execution of the Bab. Grinevskaja's principal offense against historical



veracity is that she presents Qurrat al-'Ayn and the Bab as young lovers, when in fact they never met and there is no hint of eroticism in their relationship. Her scenario is as follows. 'Alī Muḥammad and Qurrat al-'Ayn are both residents of Shiraz, she the member of a wealthy clerical household and he her "moločnyj brat", the son of her wet-nurse with whom she was raised as a child. They are in love with each other, but her father refuses to permit their marriage because of his low social standing. Around the same time that Qurrat al-'Ayn's father forbids any further meetings between them, 'Alī Muḥammad himself has begun to have visions convincing him of his divine calling. He follows her father's judgement and withdraws from her, declaring their eternal spiritual betrothal. The second act is set five years later (1842), when 'Alī Muḥammad returns to Shiraz; she seeks him out, and, inspired by his teachings, throws off her chador and asks his blessing to spread the new gospel of love and equality he is preaching. The following two acts, set in 1848 and 1849 respectively, cover developments in the Babi movement itself, including the incarceration of the Bab in Tabriz. In the last act he and Qurrat al-'Ayn meet one last time, and the play closes with a scene in which she mourns his execution.

#### *Qurrat al-'Ayn in Chlebnikov's Oeuvre*

Grinevskaja's play deserves special attention because it appears to have been the most influential text that Chlebnikov consulted.<sup>14</sup> The publication of the anonymous *Otzyvy pečati o dramatičeskoj poëme 'Bab'* (St. Petersburg, 1910) may have piqued his interest in the first place (he was living in St. Petersburg at the time). The two earliest texts that mention her name date to 1915-1916 and 1918 respectively. The second edition of Grinevskaja's play was published between these dates (it appeared in the first half of December, 1916). Even more significant is the fact that the play was staged for a second time in Petrograd in the spring of 1917, very close to the time that Chlebnikov arrived in Petrograd from Char'kov (between May 12 and 18, 1917: see N. Chardžiev's commentary to Chlebnikov's correspondence with M.V. Matjušin in Chlebnikov 1940: 482). It premiered on April 10 at the Narodnyj dom imeni Nikolaja II (later renamed the Kommunal'nyj teatr) and was a singular success.<sup>15</sup> We do not know whether Chlebnikov actually attended a performance, but his interest in the theater is well documented, and we know from his autobiographical tale, 'Oktjabr' na Neve', that he attended the theater around this time as well,<sup>16</sup> so his familiarity with Grinevskaja's play, either first or second hand, in book form or on the stage, seems more than probable. Not coincidentally, 'Oktjabr' na Neve', Chlebnikov's autobiographical account of the inter-Revolutionary period in Petrograd, also makes mention of Qurrat al-'Ayn (see below).

What may be the earliest reference to her is a cryptic note in the so-called "Dnevnik" that reads simply, "19 avgusta [1916 g. – R.V.] čital pis'ma persijanki" (SP, V: 334). What text Chlebnikov is referring to is not known, nor is the identity of the "persijanka", but this is the same epithet applied to Qurrat al-'Ayn in another text composed around the same time. In 'Predloženiija', a heterogeneous group of utopian propositions and apothegms compiled by N. Stepanov and dated indiscriminately between 1914 and 1916, Chlebnikov writes:

В мелком Ламанше может быть воздвигнут морской, выходящий из воды, памятник Гуриэт Эль Айн, сожженной на костре персианки. Пусть чайки садятся на него вблизи парохода, полного англичан. (SP, V: 160)<sup>17</sup>

The cryptic reference is remarkable for a number of reasons. The first concerns the placement of the monument. Chlebnikov situates it offshore, opposite the tiny fishing village of La Manche (inundated and destroyed, incidentally, in 1966) on the east coast of Newfoundland. He does so following his own suggestion in 'Predloženiija', namely, that a person's place of birth and the location of the monument honoring him or her should be located on opposite sides of the planet. Qurrat al-'Ayn was born in Qazvin, at 50° longitude east. A point several kilometers off the coast of La Manche would be at 50° degrees west – precisely on the opposite side of the globe in the northern hemisphere. The longitudinal line, however, extends over both the sea and land masses (including Greenland and South America), yet Chlebnikov chose specifically to situate the monument to Qurrat al-'Ayn in a place rising out of the sea. This suggests that she belongs to the same lineage as the Otter's daughter in her guise as Aphrodite/Venus and as Prometheus' liberator.

Chlebnikov's proposal is also noteworthy for the fact that he anachronistically juxtaposes the figure of Qurrat al-'Ayn and English seafarers, as though she somehow symbolized Iranian resistance to British colonialism. In fact the issue of British colonial pressure on Iran was, to the best of our knowledge, of no interest or consequence to the Persian martyr, moreover she was executed by Iranian, not colonial, authorities. After the October Revolution, when Russian troops withdrew from Iran and the country was effectively occupied by British forces (see Ivanova 1957 and Achtamzjan 1967), Chlebnikov returned briefly to this theme, but "corrected" his error. The propaganda piece, 'Ot Kairy do Kal'kutty' (SS2, II: 144), where the poet's anti-British, anti-colonial views are set explicitly within the new revolutionary context of 1920, makes no mention of Qurrat al-'Ayn.

The proposal is remarkable, finally, because it erroneously presents Qurrat al-'Ayn as having been burned at the stake. Here we see the first ex-

ample of the “legendary” as opposed to historical martyr. I have found no Russian source that could account for this particular fiction (and Grinevskaja’s *Bab*, as we have noted, does not take up the story of Qurrat al-'Ayn’s death), but its ultimate source may be traced to Gobineau, who reports that Qurrat al-'Ayn was suffocated in her own living quarters, after which her body was placed forthwith on a pyre of straw carpet pads and cremated (Gobineau 1900: 299). His history, which is a primary source for most late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian historians of the Babi movement, would certainly have been accessible to Chlebnikov as well. But even so, he would have had to deliberately misread the text to conclude that she was “sožžennaja na kostre”, and may have done so almost automatically, so in response to the profoundly influential image of Jeanne d’Arc’s martyrdom.<sup>18</sup> Oblique confirmation of this hypothesis may be found in a letter to Grigorij Petnikov in which Chlebnikov compares himself and his fellow “Presidents of Planet Earth” to a nameless “mučenica, neumolimaja v svoeje vere i krotosti podnjatych glaz” (SP, V: 313).

A second reference to Qurrat al-'Ayn may be found in ‘Oktjabr’ na Neve’ (1918), one of Chlebnikov’s autobiographical tales of the period between the February and October revolutions:

Я особенно любил Замоскворечье и три заводских трубы, точно свечи твердой рукой зажженных здесь, чугунный мост и воронье на льду. Но над всем – золотым куполом – господствует выходящий из громадной руки светильник трех завод<ских> труб, железная лестница ведет на вершину их, по ней иногда подымается человек, священник свечей перед лицом из седой заводской копоти.

Кто он, это лицо? Друг и<ли> враг? Дымописанный лоб, висящий над городом? Обвитый бородой облаков? И не новая ли черноокая Гурриэт эль-Айн посвящает свои шелковистые чудные волосы тому пламени, на котором будет сожжена, проповедуя равенство и равноправие? Мы еще не знаем, мы только смотрим.

Но эти новые свечи неведомому владыке господствуют над старым храмом (TV: 547).

Here the fiction of Qurrat al-'Ayn’s immolation is repeated, but a number of new elements are introduced. For the first time she is identified explicitly with the cause of social equality.<sup>19</sup> She is placed in what one might term a “liminal” setting, a situation involving the appearance of a new god (whose image in the sky is produced by the sooty clouds of smoke) and a new religion, represented by a priest. The question is whether the god is benevolent or whether he will prove to be a tyrant. At this moment of transition from one religious order to another, represented respectively by the church cupola and the smokestacks, the poet is not prepared to answer the question.

Lastly, the passage refers to two physical features that will hereafter be associated with Qurrat al-'Ayn – her remarkable eyes and her beautiful hair. Although most accounts of her life refer to her extraordinary physical beauty as well as her intelligence and rhetorical skills, specific physical attributes are rarely mentioned. The reference to her eyes may be nothing more than a response to her very name, which almost all sources identify as meaning “consolation of the eyes” (variously translated as “utecha očej”, “uslada glaz” and “svet očej” in Russian sources).<sup>20</sup> Chlebnikov’s reference to her hair – and perhaps her eyes as well – points for the first time directly to Grinevskaja’s play, which includes the following two verbal portraits. The first is drawn by Aiše, one of her female attendants:

Роскошнее твоих в Иране нет волос,  
Черней и больше глаз, искали бы напрасно.  
(Grinevskaja 1903: 26)

and the second by her beloved ‘Alī:

За ними [дверями истины] вижу я небесный, чудный свет.  
Мерцает он в глазах твоих прекрасных, чистых.  
Мерцает он в твоей улыбке неземной,  
В чертах твоих, в кудрях твоих волнистых,  
И меркнет перед ним и ясный свет дневной.  
(1903: 30)

Chlebnikov’s reading of Grinevskaja’s play may have influenced these and two subsequent descriptions of Qurrat al-'Ayn that stress the beauty and expressiveness of her eyes, while simultaneously linking her image to the cause of revolution. In ‘Ladomir’ (1920) Chlebnikov writes:

[...]  
Пылает целый материк  
Звездой, пламени красней.  
И вы, свободы образа!  
Кругом венки ресницы тайн,  
Блестят громадные глаза  
Гуриэт эль-Айн.  
(TV: 287)

In ‘Azija’ (1920) the poet gives his most expansive description of her eyes, and once again reiterates the fiction of her death at the stake:

А здесь глазами нег и тайн,  
И дикой нежности восточной

Блится Гурриэт эль-Айн,  
Костром окончив возраст непорочный.  
(TV: 467)

Yet another poem of the same period politicizes Qurrat al-'Ayn in the same fashion, but with a change in the poet's tone and in the implied status of his heroine:

Видите, персы, вот я иду  
По Синвату к вам.  
Мост ветров подо мной.  
Я Гушедар-мах,  
Я Гушедар-мах, пророк  
Века сего и несу в руке  
Фрашокéрети (мир будущего).  
.....  
Клянемся волосами Гурриэт эль Айн,  
Клянемся золотыми устами Заратустры –  
Персия будет советской страной.  
Так говорит пророк!  
(SS2, II: 132)

This poem assumed its final shape either at the end of 1920 or in 1921 (see SS2, II: 533-534; Tartakovskij 1992: 153), after Chlebnikov's arrival in Baku and close to the time when he announced that he had found the key to the laws of time (December 17, 1920). If we read a literal meaning into the first line, we might also conclude that it was written after the poet's plans to visit Persia as a member of a Red Army expeditionary force had already been confirmed, or perhaps when he was already underway. In any case the poem marks a transition in the presentation of Qurrat al-'Ayn in two respects. First, it places her on the level of a prophetess equal in status to Zarathustra, one whose name seals the vow made by the lyrical persona. Second, her name now occurs in conjunction with an utterance by one who claims unambiguously to be a prophet of similar rank.

The next poem (chronologically speaking) to mention Qurrat al-'Ayn realizes this complex picture to the fullest extent. In 'Truba Gul'-mully' (titled 'Tiran bez Té' in TV) the poet arrives in Iran, greeted by his "fore-runners" – the prophets of Persia – as a priest and seer. In the opening section of the poem he assumes the form of a dervish whom the people – indeed, the very landscape – claim as their own. The sole exception is the "deva Irana", who looks at him through her black chador, a symbol of her own captivity.<sup>21</sup> In the second section he takes the form of a wounded swan which has fallen to earth.<sup>22</sup> The image of the bleeding bird lying on the ground immediately gives rise to another conceit: the bird's blood becomes the red gardens of

Iran, and the white wings – the snow-covered mountains. The poet, in effect, becomes the Persian landscape he is describing. It is against the background of this metamorphosis that Qurrat al-'Ayn's image is evoked:

Пастух очей стоит поодаль.  
 Белые очи богов по небу плыли!  
 Пила белых гор. Пела моряна.  
 Землею напета пластина.  
 Глаза казни  
 Гонит ветер овцами гор  
 По выгону мира.  
 Над кремневой равниной, овцами гор,  
 Темных гор, пастись в городах.  
 Пастух людских пыток поодаль стоит,  
 Снежные мысли,  
 Белые речки,  
 Снежные думы  
 Каменного мозга,  
 Синего лба,  
 Круч кремневласых неясные очи.  
 Пытки за снежною веткой шиповника.  
 Ветер – пастух божьих очей.  
 Гуриэт эль-Айн,  
 Тахирэ, сама  
 Затянула на себе концы веревок,  
 Спросив палачей, повернув голову:  
 “Больше ничего?” –  
 “Вожжи и олово  
 В грудь жениху!”  
 Это ее мертвое тело: снежные горы.  
 (TV: 351)

The scene of her martyrdom dominates here, but now Chlebnikov has the basic scenario right (she was indeed strangled), though obviously it is embellished.<sup>23</sup> The link between her and the prophet is underscored by the fact that she, too, assumes the dimensions of the Persian landscape, sharing, moreover, the same metaphor: her lifeless body is likened to the snow-capped mountains, as was the bleeding body of the swan who represents the prophet (cf. Markov 1962: 161). What is new here is Qurrat al-'Ayn's reference to her bridegroom as she taunts her executioners. The fact that this unnamed man has faced torture and execution suggests very strongly not only that he is also a follower of the Bab, but is the Bab himself.<sup>24</sup> Chronologically this would make sense – the Bab was executed in 1850, and Qurrat al-'Ayn in 1852 – but biographically it would not: Qurrat al-'Ayn and the Bab, as we

have noted, never met, moreover she was married to her cousin, a militantly anti-Babi cleric.

Izabella Grinevskaja's dramatic *poëma*, however, provides the necessary fictive model for the relationship Chlebnikov seems to be projecting. At the end of the first act, facing inevitable separation from her beloved, Qurrat al-'Ayn says to 'Alī Muḥammad:

Али, ты мой жених, ты муж мой, властелин.  
Нет воли у меня... Я воли не имею,  
Она в твоей руке. Как Бог, как Бог один,  
Ты будешь управлять всегда моим желаньем,  
Твоя на веки я, и мыслью, и дыханьем  
Твоя, о мой Али, мой муж, мой господин.  
(1903: 31)

'Alī Muḥammad in turn calls Qurrat al-'Ayn "žena moja po duchu... / Moja... na vek moja" (1903: 32). An eternal spiritual marriage or betrothal is suggested here, based not on physical attraction, but on commonness of purpose and endless mutual devotion.

This model of the male prophet and female disciple is reiterated and underscored most strikingly in Chlebnikov's last reference to Qurrat al-'Ayn in 'Doski sud'by', where he writes:

Разве Тах<и>ре, или Хурриэт Эль Айн, не напомина<е>т Магдалину, когда она затягивала на своей шее веревку? и вороны<, > крутившиеся над Бабом, когда он был расстрелян на стенах Тавриза<, > не напоминали ли вороны стаи Голгофы?  
(SS1, III: 492; cf. DS: 30)

The mention of Mary Magdalene in the context of Qurrat al-'Ayn's willing submission to martyrdom cannot have been intended to underscore the fact of martyrdom itself, as has been suggested (Tartakovskij 1992: 82), because Mary Magdalene was not martyred. As the second half of the above passage makes clear, moreover, martyrdom is the principal factor linking Christ and the Bab, not the two women. But there are other critical parallels that link them. Like the Magdalene, Qurrat al-'Ayn was her teacher's most important female disciple. Qurrat al-'Ayn's devotion to the Bab mirrors Mary Magdalene's devotion to Christ, particularly as it is portrayed in the Western literary tradition by Petrarch, Anselm and others (see Haskins 1993: 192 ff.). Both women, additionally, were ardent proselytizers for their faith. The Magdalene bears the epithet "Equal to the Apostles" ("ravnoapostol'naja") in the Eastern Orthodox tradition and is even reputed to have witnessed before the Roman Emperor Tiberius (Bulgakov 1993, I: 277). Qurrat al-'Ayn was an equally ardent proselytizer – Tumanskij even refers to her as a "ženščina-

apostol" (*Kitabe Akdes* 1899: viii), and she is reported to have testified to her faith in the Bab before Iran's "emperor", Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps the most striking similarities between the two women, however, have to do with certain attitudes, physical features and postures that are brought out in Grinevskaja's play. In the long and rich tradition of medieval and renaissance painting, as well as in the written tradition of the West, Mary Magdalene is conflated with the woman who "anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair" (John 12: 3), with Mary, the sister of Martha, who "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying" (Luke 10: 39) and also with the repentant sinner who "stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair" (Luke 7: 38).<sup>26</sup> In this pose (and others as well) she is invariably depicted with long loose hair, with the artist drawing allusions thereby to representations of Aphrodite/Venus (Haskins 1993: 236 ff.). We have already seen how Grinevskaja stresses this aspect of Qurrat al-'Ayn's beauty. Her play also contains a critical scene in which Qurrat al-'Ayn prostrates herself at the Bab's feet's after hearing him deliver one of his sermons:

*Хурет (не спуская глаз с лица Али, который стоит бледный с потупленным взором, опускается перед ним на колени. Несколько глухо но решительно):*

Из дома в дом пойду и речь, что отзвучала,  
Я сестрам расскажу... Им силы в грудь волью.  
Томящимся в стенах, покинутым, забытым  
Слова покажутся росой в знойный день.  
Путем их поведу, надеждою увитым,  
Под сень святой любви и веры вечной сень...  
О, Баб! На подвиг мой мне дай благословенье!  
(1903: 62)

The link to Mary Magdalene, in particular her role as a witness to Christ's crucifixion and participant in preparations for the ritual anointing of his body, is further exploited in the last act. Following the execution of the Bab and his closest follower, Qurrat al-'Ayn addresses her companions in words that are clearly intended to evoke the gospel accounts of Christ's death:

Там у позорного столба  
Лежит он, бездыхан... Свершилася судьба.  
.....  
Как агнец кроткий Баб! ...У ног его Агга!  
.....  
Теперь мы к ним пойдем. О, женщины Ирана,  
В крови они лежат. Их кровь из каждой раны  
Мы оботрем чадрой,



Ланиты их омоем  
 Рососою наших слез,  
 И пологом покроем  
 Из роз, ширазских роз.  
 (1903: 147)

This completes our composite sketch of Qurrat al-'Ayn. When we now return to our core texts, "O, esli b Azija sušila volosami..." and "O, Azija! Sebja toboju muču...", we clearly see that Chlebnikov has fashioned his consort, Asia, in the very image of the Persian martyr as Grinevskaja represents her, i.e. as a new Mary Magdalene. She is a female disciple who is endlessly devoted to her teacher, in this case the poet himself.<sup>27</sup> She sits at his feet and shares with him her griefs and joys, and as a sign of her love and devotion looses her hair over his feet. Most importantly, she expresses the desire to join him in his quest for freedom. One freedom in particular is mentioned in her lover's query, "Gde tot, kto den' svobodnyh lask predrek?"<sup>28</sup> The answer to that question is the legendary Qurrat al-'Ayn herself, whose rejection of the chador was interpreted not only as a rejection of patriarchal and clerical authority, but also as an invitation to free love.<sup>29</sup>

These findings not only alter our perceptions of Chlebnikov's orientalism, but also have interesting implications for our understanding of his lyrical persona and for our reading of other poems. If the major prototype for Chlebnikov's beloved Asia is, in essence, the Qurrat al-'Ayn of Grinevskaja's play, then the Bab must be one of the prototypes for his own prophetic "I" in the post-Revolutionary works, particularly those composed after he had announced his discovery of the laws of time in December, 1920 (see, in this connection, Vroon 1996 and 1997).<sup>30</sup> This conclusion in turn suggests that the influence of Babi scriptures and teachings on Chlebnikov's post-Revolutionary writings needs to be explored in greater depth. Some preliminary observations on that score by M. Kiktev (1989) and Tartakovskij (1992: 261-281) show how promising such an investigation might be.

Beyond that, we should be alert to the covert presence of Qurrat al-'Ayn in other works, both within and outside the corpus of texts dealing with the Orient. Three examples should suffice to demonstrate this point. In "Poët" the *rusalka* adopts precisely the same role and pose that Qurrat al-'Ayn does both in Grinevskaja's play and in her "role" as personified Asia (cf.: "U nog ego rydala rusalka. Ona, / Nejasnym želan'em polna, / Ostavila šum kolesa / I prišla k nemu, slychala č'i / Pesni večera ne raz"; TV: 268). This suggests that there is a significant connection between the *rusalka* as a symbol of "transrationality" and Asia as a symbol of liberation and love. Perhaps a key to the hidden link between the two figures is to be found in the poem "Ja videl junošu proroka..." (TV: 148; SS2, II: 190), which speaks of an "eternal

betrothal” between the poet and his own Persian princess, the “rusalka Zor-gama”.

“Vesennego Korana...” (TV: 114; SS2, II: 47), a poem situated on the margins of Chlebnikov’s orientalism, is another site where Qurrat al-‘Ayn’s presence makes itself felt. In this poem the poplar tree, a “theologian of the Koran of spring”, awaits the “emissaries” of a spring rainstorm. Once its leaves have caught the raindrops, the tree spreads the water over the field below to the sound of a thunderclap. Henryk Baran has identified Tjutčev’s ‘Vesennjaja groza’ as the principal subtext of the poem (Baran 1981: 10-11). If we examine the poem against the broader context of Chlebnikov’s oriental interests at the time of composition, we may also see the shadow of an allegory, the same one employed by ‘Alī Muḥammad, the future theologian of a new Koran, when he addresses his beloved Qurrat al-‘Ayn in Grinevskaja’s play:

Я ждал тебя, как лист под жаркими лучами  
Ждет чистую росу. Я по тебе скорблю.  
Я днями долгими и долгими ночами  
Все вижу пред собой тебя, Хурет мою!  
Я без тебя, Хурет, что лодка без кормила,  
Что рыба без воды: ты жизнь моя, мой свет!  
Ты все, моя душа, ты мысль моя, ты сила,  
Ты воздух для меня... Ты, ты, моя, Хурет.  
(1903: 29)

Но все в мо<е>й душе, как в капле серебристой,  
Дрожит еще твой лик, как солнца ясный свет.  
(1903: 125)

and by Qurrat al-‘Ayn in her response:

Хотела-б я греметь, как буря,  
И вдруг умолкнуть пред тобой,  
Носиться тучей по лазури  
И пасть к ногам твоим росой.  
(1903: 125)

Our last example constitutes a kind of coda to the “Qurrat al-‘Ayn” theme in Chlebnikov’s post-Revolutionary *oeuvre*. It is a late work, “Detusja!...”, written only a few weeks after he returned to Russia from Persia:

Детуся! Если устали глаза быть широкими,  
Если согласны на имя “браток”,  
Я, синеокий, клянуся  
Высоко держать вашей жизни цветок.

Я ведь такой же, сорвался я с облака,  
Много мне зла причиняли  
За то, что не этот,  
Всегда нелюдим,  
Везде нелюбим.  
Хочешь, мы будем брат и сестра,  
Мы ведь в свободной стране свободные люди,  
Сами законы творим, законов бояться не надо.  
.....  
Много мы лишних слов избежим.  
Просто я буду служить вам обедню,  
Как волосатый священник с длинною гривой,  
Пить голубые ручьи чистоты.  
И страшных имен мы не будем бояться.  
(SS2, II: 219; TV: 151)

The addressee of the poem, as we know, was Julija Samorodova, a woman whom the poet befriended in Kislovodsk, but it seems that their relationship is meant to mirror that of Qurrat al-'Ayn and the Bab, now fully mythologized in the poet's consciousness as one founded on agape rather than eros. Indeed, the purity of their relationship is signaled by the penultimate line, with its allusion to the nickname the Bab bestowed on his disciple: Tāhira, "the Pure One". Among the many parallels are her "širokie glaza" (cf. Qurrat al-'Ayn's "gromadnye glaza"), their sibling relations (we recall that 'Alī is represented as Qurrat al-'Ayn's "moločnyj brat" in Gri-nevskaja's play), their common link to the divine, and above all, the poet's conviction that he and his beloved have the right to live by laws of their own making. The poem may thus be read as the confirmation of a new dispensation, one that resolves the uncertainty expressed three years earlier in 'Oktjabr' na Neve'. In that story, observing the priest who stands with his gigantic candelabrum before a menacing face of factory soot, Chlebnikov asks: "Kto on, èto lico? Drug ili vrag?" and wonders if Qurrat al-'Ayn may once again have to sacrifice herself to a tyrannical god. Here he reassures her that the new god is indeed benevolent, he himself is the priest, and his beloved has nothing to fear.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Among the more memorable are 'Medlum i Lejli', 'Šaman i Venera', Vishnu and his female consorts in "Menja pronosjat na slonovykh...", Razin and his

Persian princess in 'Razin' and other poems, the poet himself and "rusalka Zorgama" in "Ja videl junosu proroka...", and the Japanese samurai and Russian *njanja* in 'Perevorot v Vladivostoke'. These and other pairings have been examined in the by now considerable number of critical studies devoted to the Eastern theme in Chlebnikov's works, including three book-length monographs (Mirsky 1975, Tartakovskij 1987 and 1992) and several articles and sections of books, chief among them Loščic and Turbin (1966); Stepanov (1975: 103-111); Ivanov (1971); Parnis (1967 and 1976); Vroon (1974, 1980 and 1983); Vroon and Hacker (2001); and Baran (2001).

- <sup>2</sup> The poem is dated 1916 in SP (V: 61) and TV (103) but 1919 in the most recent *Sobranie sočinenij* (SS2, II: 42). Given its obvious affinity to "O, Azija! Sebjā toboju muču..." and other poems known to have been composed in 1919-1920, as well as the fact that it was one of several manuscripts conveyed to Roman Jakobson by the poet in the spring of 1919 (see the editor's commentary in SS2, II: 509), 1919 would seem to be the more probable date.

- <sup>3</sup> Clear allusions to Botticelli's paintings occur in other works as well (see Arenzon 1991). P. Tartakovskij's skepticism about the legitimacy of this one ("ėta iskusstvenno vystroennaja cep' vidimych asociacij"; 1987: 162) finds a ready answer in an adjacent "stage direction" from 'Deti Vydry' – one not cited by Mirsky – that reinforces the allusion to Botticelli's "Birth of Venus", which, as we may recall, depicts her standing in the cup of a scallop. Chlebnikov's aside is a particularly apt response to the incautious critic: "Doč' Vydry берет v morskiju rakovinu vody i l'et za vorotničok učenomu" (TV: 432).

- <sup>4</sup> Mirsky also notes that the rhyming pair "peni"–"koleni" links the two poems (1975: 17). "O Azija..." echoes other passages from Puškin's poem as well, among them those that describe the protagonist's dedication to freedom ("Svoboda! On odnu tebja / Eščē iskal v pustynnom mire"), the Circassian maiden's long, flowing hair ("I černoj padajut volnoj / Ee vlosy na grud' i pleči") and her love, which also brings suffering ("Ty volen, – deva govorit, – / Begi! No vzgljad ee bezumnyj / Ljubvi poryv izobrazil. / Ona stradala"; Puškin 1957: 109, 126, 127).

- <sup>5</sup> The Mirsky/Duganov hypothesis has been questioned on the grounds that "authoritative sources" such as *Mify narodov mira* (Moskva 1982) identify Asia as the mother rather than wife of Prometheus (see Tartakovskij 1992: 17-18). It should be noted, however, that Herodotus is the primary source for the identification of Asia as his wife (see his *History*, Bk. IV, Par. 45), and Chlebnikov, as Henryk Baran has clearly demonstrated, exploited his *History* (especially book IV) in several works (Baran 1978).

- <sup>6</sup> Here and below in transliterating her name and other proper nouns from the Persian and Arabic I follow Amanat (1989) in using the system adopted by the International Journal of Middle East Studies, but words that occur most frequently are given without diacritical markings (e.g. Bāb, Bābī → Bab, Babi, and so on), as are toponyms with established English spellings (Tehe-

ran, Baghdad, etc.). In bibliographical citations the transliteration system used in the source is retained.

7 The account that follows is drawn in almost all particulars from Abbas Amanat's magisterial study of the Babi movement in Iran (1989).

8 The testimony is conflicting on this score. Amanat reports that she had three sons – two born in Karbalā' and one in Qazvin (1989: 299). Others write that she had two sons and a daughter (Root 1981: 56; Stümpel 1998: 129).

9 According to Batjuškov she occupies the sixth position (1897: 14); cf. Root (1981: 58-59). She was the only woman among the eighteen.

10 Born in Derbent in 1802, he moved as a young man to Astrakhan. In 1827 he received a post as lecturer at Kazan' University, followed by a professorship at the same institution in 1836. He was invited to St. Petersburg University in 1837, where he founded the Department of Eastern Languages. He is regarded as the "father" of modern-day Near Eastern Studies in Russia (see Rzaev 1985: 5).

11 A survey of these sources may be found in Momen (1981: 3-65).

12 The Brokgaus-Efron encyclopedia entry on Grinevskaja reads in part:

Наибольшее внимание из произведений Г<риневской> возбудила стихотворная "драматическая поэма" в 5 действиях 'Баб' (СПб., 1903). Она посвящена истории возникновения и распространения персидской социально-религиозной секты бабидов. Пьеса страдает длиннотами, но широко и интересно задумана. В тех местах, где пламенный реформатор излагает свое благородное учение, в пьесе чувствуется настоящий подъем. Пьеса шла в СПб. с шумным успехом. (1905: 631)

In 1912 Grinevskaja wrote a sequel to the play, *Becha-Ulla: Poëma-tragedija v stichach iz istorii Persii...* (1912), this one dealing with the Bab's successor.

13 Its radical departure from the basic historical facts known about her and the Babi movement was duly criticized in reviews of the play – see, for example, Umanec (1903) and Vejnberg (1903).

14 Both the editors of the most recent *Sobranie sočinenij* and P. Tartakovskij mention the play in their commentaries on Chlebnikov, without, however, considering how it may have influenced the poet (see SS2, II: 534 and Tartakovskij 1992: 263).

15 The play was "vostorženno prinjata vsej buržuaznoj pressoj, razduvšej ee v krupnoe chudožestvennoe sobytie" (Mokul'skij 1933: 15).

16 He claims to have attended a performance of *Don Juan* at the Mariinskij Theater (TV: 546).

17 In almost all the places where Chlebnikov mentions Qurrat al-'Ayn, he transcribes her name "Гурриэт эль-Айн". I have not encountered this particular transcription in any Russian sources; the closest approximation, "Туппер-уль-Айн", is found in A. Tumanskij's introduction to the Russian translation of the *Kitabe Akdes* (1899: viii). Gobineau transliterates the name

similarly in Latin characters ("Gourret oul Ayn"); other variants include "Kurret el Ayn" (Polak 1865), "Qurratu'l-'Ayn", (Browne 1891/1975, 1893), "Gurret-ül-Eyn" (Najmájer 1874), "Куррет-уль-Айн" (Batjuškov 1897), "Курретуль-Айн" (Kazem-Bek 1865), "Хурет-Аль-Айн" (Grinevskaja 1903), and "Хурет-ул-айн" (Umanec 1903).

- 18 The role of rumor and hearsay concerning Qurrat al-'Ayn is well illustrated by the varying reports concerning her death. Browne's informants report that she was strangled with a bowstring (1891/1975: 313); Chlebnikov's comrade R.P. Abich, commenting on 'Truba Gul'-mully', claims that she was buried alive (see his notes in SP, III: 320); the editors of the most recent *Sobranie sočinenij* write that she was strangled with her own hair (SS2, II: 534). The account that comes closest to Chlebnikov's belongs to Marie von Najmájer. In her *Gurret-ül-Eyn. Ein Bild aus Persiens Neuzeit...*, she has the Persian martyr walking into the flames of her own free will (Najmájer 1874: 199-200). In the book's "Nachwort" she claims to have based her depiction on an account of the execution by Jakob Polak, a European medical advisor to the Shah, who avows that he witnessed the event personally. In fact Polak makes no mention of the form of execution, merely noting that "die schöne Frau duldet den langsamen Tod mit übermenschlicher Stärke" (Polak 1865, I: 353).

It is highly unlikely that Chlebnikov drew his depiction from Najmájer's (he did not know German), but one very curious case of subliminal suggestion may account for his error (which he was later to correct). One of the sources he may have consulted was S. Umanec's study, *Sovremennyyj babizm (Raskol v magometanstve)* (1904). In his description of the travels of the Bab's successor, Mīrzā Ḥusayn 'Alī Nurī Bahā'ullāh, Umanec mentions on a number of occasions his sojourn "v S.-Žan-d'Akr" (17, 34) (modern day Acre), a reference that may have subconsciously planted the seed for the superimposition of Jeanne d'Arc's fate on to Qurrat al-'Ayn's in Chlebnikov's imagination.

- 19 Among the other works Chlebnikov wrote in 1918 is a brief article entitled 'Osvoboždennaja ženščina', published in the rare and virtually inaccessible Astrakhan newspaper *Krasnyj vojn* (regrettably it has never been republished – see Parnis 1980: 109). The theme is clearly related to the image of Qurrat al-'Ayn, whose notoriety stemmed first and foremost from what would now be termed her nascent feminism.

20 One of the myths built around her name is that it was given her on account of her exceptional beauty (see, for example, Kazem-Bek 1865/1985: 114). In fact it is a "common Arabic term of endearment sometimes given by the religious teachers to their favorite students" (Amanat 1989: 298).

- 21 He writes, "Tol'ko 'moj' ne skazala deva Irana, / Tol'ko 'moj' ne skazala ona. / Čerez zabralo tusklo smotrela, / V černom šelku stoja poodal'" (TV: 349). The fact that he mentions the collective "deva Irana" who cannot celebrate the arrival of the prophet because of her "imprisonment" behind a chador is clearly an index of Qurrat al-'Ayn's influence as an image of liberation. Even more explicit, in this regard, are lines further along in the poem, where the

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poet-prophet describes the veils as simultaneously prisons and symptoms of a fatal disease:

Смертельной чахотки,  
 Белой чахотки  
 Забрала белеют у черных теней.  
 Белые прутья на черные тени спускались – смерти решетка.  
 (TV: 353)

Cf. also 'Novruz truda':

Поодаль, как будто у русской свободы на паперти,  
 Ревнивой темницею заперты,  
 Строгие, грустные девы ислама.  
 Черною чадрой закутаны,  
 Освободителя ждут они.  
 (SS2, II: 192; cf. TV: 139 with its alternate reading 'Черной чадрую')

For other examples, see Tartakovskij (1992: 229-230).

<sup>22</sup> Not coincidentally an early "progenitor" of the prophet, the shaman in 'Šaman i Venera', is also likened to a dying swan (see TV: 235-236).

<sup>23</sup> Chlebnikov's poetic account is probably based on oral sources. Living in Baku, he had ample opportunity to meet with local Babis, of which there was a sizeable community (see Umanec 1904: 41).

<sup>24</sup> In his study of the Babi movement Kazem-Bek repeats the allegations of his principal informant, the court historian Sipihir, to the effect that Qurrat al-'Ayn developed a romantic relationship with one of the Bab's closest followers, Mullā Muḥammad 'Alī Bārfurūshī, who was executed in 1849 (Kazem-Bek 1865/1985: 118-119; see also note 29 below). While we may assume that Chlebnikov was familiar with this source, the reference seems scarcely sufficient to support the image of him as her "ženich", particularly in view of the fact that the same source speaks of her marriage to Mullā Muḥammad Baraghānī (1865/ 1985: 113).

<sup>25</sup> Stepanov reproduces the commentary of R.P. Abich, who reports:

Наср-Эд-Дин [sic] предложил ей стать его женой. Она дерзко отклонила предложение, говоря, что презирает человека, уподобляющегося животному, имеющему 500 жен. (SP, V: 319-320)

This account is most probably based on oral anecdotes – in any case I have found nothing comparable in other written sources, though some do attest to a meeting between Qurrat al-'Ayn and the Shah before her execution (Browne 1891: 313; cf. Root 1981: 95-96).

- <sup>26</sup> For a concise review of all the texts dealing with Mary Magdalene in the gospels, see Join-Lambert (1989). A representative sample of the hundreds of paintings and other graphic images depicting Mary Magdalene may be found in Duperray (1988; 1989) and Haskins (1993).
- <sup>27</sup> One recalls, in this respect, that Mary Magdalene uses just this word – “učitel’” when she first recognizes the Christ (“Ona že obraščijsja glagola emu: ravvuni, eže glagoletsja učitelju”; John 20: 16).
- <sup>28</sup> In another earlier variant the line reads more abstractly, “Gde tot, kto den’ inoj predrek?” (SS2, II: 113).
- <sup>29</sup> Citing his primary Iranian source, the court historian Sipihir, Kazem-Bek reports:

Описанию свидания Курретуль’-Айн с Хаджи Мохаммед-Али персидский автор придает романтический характер. Его рассказы сопутствуют двум влюбленным – этим проповедникам социализма и коммунизма до утверждения царства Баба – до той поры, покуда они не разлучаются вследствие преследования... Покуда царство Баба еще не объемлет весь свет, – будто говорили они, – покуда не будет новых правил духовной и гражданской жизни, от имени Баба все бабиды свободны от шариата; все между ними общее: и имущество и жены.  
(1865/1985: 118-119)

Kazem-Bek also cites the evidence of eyewitnesses who claim that Qurrat al-‘Ayn merely insisted that, being free from the *sharī’a*, babis should follow their conscience, do good, avoid evil and, since all are brothers, share with each other in a brotherly fashion (119).

- <sup>30</sup> The Bab’s name appears in poems of the Baku period (see in particular “B” and “My deti strany sovetovannoj”; SS2, II: 145, 454). Writing to his sister from Baku in 1921 (the letter is misdated by a year in SP, V: 315) he speaks of himself as a new Muḥammad, as did the Bab. In another letter to his sister written upon his arrival in Persia he reports that he has begun to study the Bab and is planning to present a lecture comparing the Bab and Jesus Christ (SP, V: 320). In ‘Truba Gul’-mully’, as A. Parnis notes, he presents himself in the role of the Mahdi, the same role ultimately assumed by the Bab (TV: 672), and in the closing lines of ‘Truba Gul’-mully’ (TV: 358), it may be more than coincidental that the oarsman who rows Chlebnikov across the bay at Enzeli is one “Ali-Magomet”, bearing the same surname as the Bab. In his ‘Doski sud’by’ and related texts he mentions the Bab several times as well (see Grigor’ev 1983: 128; 1986: 84; DS: 88, 111; cf. SS1, III: 492).



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