

GURO'S SONS

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Now that *The Poor Knight* (*Бедный рыцарь*) is at last available to the public, the reader of Guro is struck even more by a pervasive, indeed, obsessive theme throughout her writing. This is Guro's maternal preoccupation with youth, and especially with adolescent males. In addition to the many passages *about* such young men, the narrative perspective or actual voice in her writings is frequently that of one of these youths. In this essay I will be discussing four categories of what I shall term Guro's "sons": "little camels", "knights", actual imagined sons, and finally, royal youths. I shall begin by examining together the first two of these subgroups.

*1. Little camels and knights*

On the whole, there is a large degree of interpenetration and convertibility among the four categories of youths, as this passage from *The Poor Knight* demonstrates:

Вытянул шею белый верблюд и понесся (поплыл) к облакам зари,  
что уплывали жемчужною радостью.  
Улетел в небо рыцарь земли (Гуро 1988: 158).

Within the same brief selection we find two nouns which each furnished the title of a major work by Guro, "верблюд" and "рыцарь", used interchangeably. The connection is further reinforced by the fact that the subsequent sentences in the text ("В нем развевались нежные прутики...") are directly and indirectly echoed in *Небесная проталина* from *The Little Camels of the Sky*. The same phenomenon may be observed in reverse in a passage from *The Little Camels of the Sky* ("Когда он уже слег...") in which Don Quixote is referred to as both a "рыцарь" and a "бедняк"— an evident parallel with the title of Guro's last work, *Бедный рыцарь*.

The motif of the camel, usually "little camel" (верблюжонок) can be found in Guro's diary (1988: 43), in *An Autumn Dream* (*Осенний*

сон 1912: 15), in *The Little Camels of the Sky* and in *The Poor Knight*.

With very rare exceptions, Guro uses this motif — and related imagery of gangly, long-necked and long-legged animals such as cranes, herons, and giraffes — to depict young male dreamers/visionaries who may be either shy or bold, but are usually physically awkward and socially inept, solitary, mistreated by others, and deeply responsive to the beauty of nature. In spirit and in physical appearance, these youths are, as it were, budding Don Quixotes. In keeping with their quixotic natures, Guro often describes them in affectionately disparaging terms such as “смешной”, “безумный”, “разиня”. Nonetheless, these young men remain, like Quixote, “knights”, the promoters and protectors of sacred dream (мечта):

Поклянитесь однажды здесь, мечтатели...

Поклянитесь мечте и вечной верности

гордое рыцарство безумия!

И быть верным своей юности

И обету высоты (Гуро 1914: 16).

The last phrase “верными... юности/ И обету высоты” points to another essential element of the little camel/knight configuration. These “верблюжата” are, after all, “небесные” — Guro continually associates youths (and youth in general) with the sky as a place of and metonymic emblem for/ radiance, purity, unattainability, warmth and energy (sunlight and storms). In addition, she maintains the traditional association of the sky with “heaven”, as a spiritual source, a homeland beyond, a “родной теплый край” (Гуро 1914: 12).

While there is a great deal of fluid interchange between the notions of “camelhood” and “kighthood” and between the representation and representatives of these and others of the four categories, distinctions can be made within a group and between groups. For example, Guro occasionally employs the term “little camel” in contexts that do not imply a young male human. This is true of the furry “молодые светлые духи” of *Газетное объявление* (Гуро 1914: 5) who seem quite similar to the familiar terrestrial animal, except for their “святое сияние” and their being “небесные” (Гуро 1914: 5). The “небесность” is very much emphasised in two other passages, this time from *Бедный рыцарь*, which describe El'za's awaiting her “незримого сына”:

У него была нежная, мечтательная, верблюжая шея. Чистый из неба его лоб... хотелось ей целовать его и жалела, что он

бесплотный. Видела она в очертаниях облаков как бы его виски, его лоб нежно обнажившуюся длинную шею. И не жаль было, что он сейчас не воплотился... (Гуро 1988: 134)

Я видела тебя в весеннем небе, моя гордая радость. Резьба мебели уже уходила в тень. Мечтательного верблюда на неизреченной ясности чистого неба чертило облако (Гуро 1988: 136–137).

In both the citations, the “мечтательный верблюд” seems virtually identified with meteorological phenomena — clouds, though in both quotes there is also a strong suggestion of Виля’s co-presence. Passages such as these point to the rich fluidity of identity and rich ambiguity as to real/empirical vs. imaginary/ethereal that is so often found in Guro. Depending on the context, the little camels may be viewed as humans, spirits, real or imaginary animals, or clouds.

And even when the human dimension seems predominant, distinctions can be made among the little camels. Thus, though as readers we are aware that the “poor knight”, Виля, shares common elements of “camelhood” and “knighthood” with the artistic dreamers of *Небесные верблюжата* — such as his gangly physical appearance, love of beauty, and exposure to cruel treatment by others — we are also aware of differences. Виля is, after all, a spiritual and moral instructor, which means that the implicit content of *Бедный рыцарь* and its unusual adult/child “power dynamic” give the work a largely serious tonality. On the other hand, the little camels in the work of the same name tend to be poets or dreamers rather than explicitly spiritual forces, and they are often depicted with greater humour and playfulness.

## 2. Sons

In Guro’s first extensive major publication we encounter an imaginary situation that was to be varied and repeated over and over in her subsequent writings: “Мать потеряла сына, она сламывается от рыданий” (Гуро 1909: 69). Not long after this, we find Guro speaking in her diary of an imagined son:

Тебя ведь нет, собственно!

...Нет, а его создала так до последней мелочи, что он уже есть (Гуро 1988: 26 — diary entry for November 1909)

Sons — and maternal feelings of compassion and longing for a son who is suffering or in some way separated from his mother — form an *idée fixe* in Guro’s writings after *The Hurdy Gurdy* that

culminates in the absolute centrality of the theme in *The Poor Knight*. The existence or non-existence of “моего незабвенного единственного сына” (Гуро 1912: 5) in the dedication to *An Autumn Dream* was to trouble “Гуроведы” for decades, though Guro herself wrote in *The Little Camels of the Sky*: “У меня нет детей, — вот, может, почему я также нестерпимо люблю все живое” (Гуро 1914: 121). In the same volume, in fact, we find the curiously formulaic “создание” of a son, followed by the denial of actual maternal kinship, re-enacted a number of times:

Это был мой сын, мой сын, мое единственное, мое несчастное дитя. Это вовсе не был мой сын, я его и не видала никогда... (Гуро 1914: 37).

Да это же был мой сын, мой сын!... Нет! но того из мальчиков земли, с кем это сбудется, — я люблю, как сына (Гуро 1914: 38).  
 Это же было мое дитя, мое бедное, выброшенное из дома в тюрьму, дитя!... Нет! но дерзкою неженку, барченка, умеющего говорить правду, я люблю больше героев... (Гуро 1914: 39).

I want to conclude this section of my discussion by quoting from what is for me perhaps the most beautiful and compelling of Guro's many depictions of imaged sons — that in the “Я хочу изобразить голову белого гриба...” passage near the conclusion of *The Little Camels of the Sky*. Here Guro creates a poetic portrait that fuses imagery derived from close observation of nature with fantasy and a use of *остранение* in a way that is both believable and deeply moving:

(Я хочу изобразить) И моего сына, с тех пор, как он стал похож на иву длинным согнутым станом, а поникшей мило прядкой волос на лбу — на березу, а светлыми глазами на молодую листовенницу вонзившуюся в небо. Только он еще добрее ивы: на нем вместо коры нежность — и светлее листовенницы. Он смеется над собой. Его прикосновение благословляет вещи (Гуро 1914: 120).

### 3. *The royal youth*

I want to turn finally to the remaining group of Guro's sons, the royal youths. Just as with the earlier mentioned interconnection between the themes of the little camel and the knight, so this last motif may be related to the other archetypes of youth. There is, it seems to me, a rather natural and obvious link between Guro's notion of knighthood and that of royalty — the young men in both groups may be considered noble and “избранные” and both groups serve others. But the-

re are subtle connections with other subgroups as well. For example, the son and royal youth categories may be linked, as in this suggestive phrase from Guro's diary for June 12, 1910: "Мы стояли, как будто ждали королевского сына..." (Гуро 1988: 48) A frequent aspect of both the "royal youth" and the "son" themes is that the lad is awaited or longed for. With both there is also almost invariably a further suggestion of a prohibitive distance thwarting closer association or recognition between the youth and others, especially a maternal figure of narrator.

The royal youth appears in a number of subtypes. The first presented by Guro is quite spiritual, as we see in the Christ-like "Король" who is described as "явленное дитя звезд" (Гуро 1909: 23) in *Песни города* from *The Hurdy Gurdy*. This "spiritually royal" type has heirs or kindred in Guro's more godly "sons" who like Christ do not refuse the cup of suffering<sup>1</sup> — such as the Baron in *Осенний сон*, and Виля and the "журавлинный барон" in *Бедный рыцарь*.<sup>2</sup>

The "журавлинный барон", who is associated with "весенняя отважная любовь" and wishes to proclaim his joy "по весеннему небу" (Гуро 1988: 157) forms a link with yet another subspecies of royal youth, the messenger of spring.

Quite distinct from the Christ-like king whom we saw earlier in *The Hurdy Gurdy*, this second king, first described in "Да будет", seems largely a personification of the natural forces and arrival of spring:

...Издадека, издадека говорят, приезжает король!  
...Это ты, такой зеленый май? А мы надели новые ленты и пришли его встречать. Мы поджидаем кое кого к ужину, а пока мы посидим на речке, на майской речке! Это ты? Такой зеленый май!  
(Гуро 1909: 75-76).

We find a quite similar passage immediately following the "белый верблюд" section from *The Poor King* which I quoted earlier:

В зеленом лесе звучит весть — "Это сын мой золотой!" воскли-

<sup>1</sup> "Там его Чаша, и он не скажет. — Да, минует меня!" (Гуро 1909: 24).

<sup>2</sup> Though the latter appears similar to Виля, it seems to me unlikely that the two are identical, since Guro's formulation: "Кто-то" бредил над сугробами светлой "нелепостью" (Guro 1988: 157) seems rather too imprecise to fit with the other descriptions of El'za's young disembodied instructor.

цает она. "Это облегчение мира! Это сын мой с зеленой веткой!" Потихоньку кто-то идет в воздухе и любит все живое. Мимо всех вещей (сквозь все вещи, через все) идет незамечаемый никем. И никто его не видит и не знает о нем. Пробирается во все живое, как тепло весны и благословение (Гуро 1988: 159).

Here, as in the "журавлинный барон" passage from the same work, the spiritual and vernal/seasonal overtones seem more fused. Though there is no explicit identification of the son here as a royal figure, the generic resemblance is unmistakable. Still another instance of a royal youth associated with vernal greenery is the prince, carrying a basket filled with "прелестные растения" from *Осленок* in *The Little Camels of the Sky*:

Бежит осленок — повода закинута на шею. На нем сидит принц — и в глазах несет Весну (Гуро 1988: 159).

I would suggest that an immediate prototype of all of these royal harbingers of spring "с зеленой веткой" is to be found on the opening page of the first part ("Весна-красна") of Remizov's *Посолонь*, a book that was much admired by Guro.<sup>3</sup> As Remizov remarks in a footnote, his protagonist, the "беленький монашек", is a "вестник Солнца. Монашек ходит по домам и раздает первые зеленые ветки — символ народившейся Весны" (Ремизов 1978: 393). Yet another link and possible influence here is with the "knight" (*рыцарь*), St. George (Egorij) in the *Бабье лето* section of the same work:

В белом на белом коне в венке из зеленой озими едет по полю Егорий и сыплет и сеет с рукава бел жемчуг (Ремизов 1976: 341).

Still another variant type of the noble or royal youth recurs in *The Little Camels of the Sky*. Neither disembodied spirits nor personifications of vernal energy — these young men with their noble or royal titles are invariably submitted to ironical mockery; though both the titles and the mockery serve, as well, to underscore their "избранность". In that they are innocent and bungling visionaries like

<sup>3</sup> According to Michail Matjušin (1976: 144), the influence of Remizov's short 'folk' works, such as *Медведюшка*, that were first published in "Золотое руно" and other journals and which were later collected together in *Посолонь* and *К морю океану* is particularly palpable in Guro's contributions to the first "Садок судей", but can be gleaned in later Guro as well.

Don Quixote, they can be seen as yet another variant of the little camel/knight motif. Thus we find the “дворянчик/барченоч” of *Жил-был еще один мальчик..* (38), the “г-н Маркиз облаков” who is also described as “смешной верблюжонок” (43), the “принц” in *Солнечный сон* who denies being clumsy (56), the “лучинный воин! Принц!... герой из моченой пакли!... в толпу насмешников” (98) and one final king — this monarch being perhaps the most vulnerable and least “sovereign” of all Guro’s royal youths:

Эх, отколотил бы тебя, да жаль, и вдобавок ты—король, это для тебя, собственно, и небо и земля... Знаешь, что, дам-ка я тебе шлепка прямо из милосердия, а то прстоишь ведь, так, король, до самого Покрова (Гуро 1914: 53).

With this “мямля”, “длинная простофиля”/king we are brought back full circle to the little camels with which we commenced.

#### 4. Conclusions

Guro begins one of the passages in *The Little Camels of the Sky* with the words: “Воображаю себе дорогого мальчика, желанного...” (Гуро 1914: 24). As we have seen, throughout her mature writings Guro continually imagined and re-imagined dear and desired youths, presenting them in a number of archetypal guises and motifs which she often interrelated. Whether or not she referred to these young men directly as *sons*, always she saw them through the eyes of maternal affection, for as she wrote in her journal:

Что надо выразить? Мир в окраске материнской нежности, материнского тепла. Флюид любви. Флюид геройства и юности, искренно неловкую обнаженность юности, — до дня... (Гуро 1988: 46).

#### ЛИТЕРАТУРА

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