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## BETWEEN LITERATURE AND RELIGION: SILVER AGE IDEAS APPLIED TO MODERNITY – POETIC OUTLOOK AS A TYPE OF RELIGIOSITY?

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**Abstract.** *Traditionally, the role of literature in Russia has been disproportionately large, because literature there served as ‘the only podium from which the nation can speak about its pain’.<sup>1</sup> Russian literary discourse thus absorbed almost all other discourses, including those of philosophy and religion. A merger of religious philosophy with literature came to be particularly visible during the Russian Silver Age, with its new religious search and change of cultural paradigm. Lev Shestov, a religious-philosophical thinker of the time, conventionally viewed as an irrationalist and a precursor of Sartrean existentialism, assigned a common religious experience to almost every hero of his philosophical-literary essays, including Russian classical writers and Western philosophers.<sup>2</sup> This experience, which Shestov regarded as invariably traumatic, leads – via catharsis – to a re-evaluation of values and ultimately to faith, and results in great artistic and philosophical revelations. Despite the problematic nature of such a treatment, it can nevertheless be methodologically useful because of the perception of literary production as growing from an essentially religious root. In this paper, we suggest applying this to major Russian poets of modernity, most notably to Joseph Brodsky,*

- 1 Hertsen, A. ‘O razvitiu revoliutsionnykh idei v Rossii’, in A. I. Hertsen, *Sobranie sochinenii v 30 tomakh*, vol. VII, Moscow, 1956, p. 198, transl. is mine.
- 2 See Papernyi, V. ‘Lev Shestov: religioznaia filosofia kak literaturnaia kritika i kak literatura’, *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* (electronic version), University of Toronto, Academic Electronic Journal in Slavic Studies, No 12, Spring 2005.

to see if poetic outlook is indeed akin to religious sensibility.

On the other hand, Freudian theories that deem artistic inspiration to be a sublimation of libido can be linked to the ideas of another religious-philosophical thinker of the Silver Age – Vasilii Rozanov – who placed human sexuality next to divinity. At the same time, another thinker of that epoch – Boris Vysheslavtsev – argued for the animosity of the Freudian approach to Russian cultural consciousness, and especially to categories of love, artistic creativity and religion.

The aim of this paper is to study the interplay between religious and poetic outlooks through the prism of these conflicting opinions in the framework of the correlation between religion and culture in the Russian context.

**Keywords:** Russian Silver Age, religious philosophy, poetic sensibility, Freudian theories, creative impulse, Joseph Brodsky

## Introduction

The Russian Silver Age, marked by the emergence of a new religious search, produced a wealth of thinkers whose works occupied a middle ground between religious philosophy and literature. Indeed, ‘Russian philosophical modernity has inhabited the edge between mystical, associative, “poetic” thinking and representative, categorizing “scientific” thinking’.<sup>3</sup> One of the best examples of this type of philosophising, and of this frame of mind is embodied by the works of Lev Shestov, whose writings are based simultaneously on Russian literary tradition and Western philosophical culture. These assign a common religious experience to almost every hero of his philosophical-literary essays, including Russian classical writers and Western philosophers.<sup>4</sup> According to his paradigm, this religious experience originates from despair and leads, through catharsis, to a re-evaluation of values and ultimately faith, facilitating great artistic and philosophical revelations.

Such a construction may be questionable, but suggests a methodologically inspiring idea of examining literary output as growing from an essentially religious experience. In the sequel, we shall see whether poetic outlook is indeed akin to religious sensibility, both in theory and in practice, when applied to major Russian poets of modernity – most notably to Joseph Brodsky. This examination will then open up to a broader discussion on the nature of creativity, culture and religion, and feature conflicting views between Freudian teaching and Russian thought of the Silver Age. Ultimately, it will shed some light on religious dynamics in Russian culture.

### 1. On the origins of poetic vision

To reason on this topic, we first need to define what is implied by poetic and religious sensibilities. Although these spheres clearly border on the irrational and resist

3 Clowes, E. W. *Fiction's Overcoat. Russian Literary Culture and the Question of Philosophy*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004, p. 13.

4 *Supra* note 2.

formalisation, they are nevertheless intuitively understood by most people, and it should therefore be possible to verbalise this understanding.

As Yuri Lotman stated, 'a starting point in the study of a poem is an appreciation of the paradoxical nature of poetry as such. If the existence of poetry had not been an undeniable fact, one could demonstrate quite convincingly that poetry cannot exist'.<sup>5</sup> In the same vein, Lev Shestov noted that 'we live surrounded by an endless multitude of mysteries. But no matter how enigmatic may be the mysteries which surround being, what is most enigmatic and disturbing is that mystery in general exists and that we are somehow definitely and forever cut off from the sources and beginnings of life'.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, Shestov essentially equated poetry and existence in that both are of a paradoxical nature, both are mysterious and beautiful, and the roots of both are forever concealed from us as humans. This premise may in fact carry a deep meaning and be more than accidental.

Such a perception clearly relies on a particular outlook – an outlook that sees beneath the everyday, that transcends the mundane. It is thus not surprising that Marina Tsvetaeva, for whom life was inseparable from poetry, recognised in Shestov a kindred soul, and wrote to him when in emigration, 'you are my greatest human treasure in Paris – even if you did not write books! But you would not be able to avoid writing them, you would think them up anyway. [...] I'll write to you from Vendée, and shall be happy to see on the envelope your special, distinct, unmistakable, or better yet, infallible handwriting (graphic impression of your genius). With kisses and love. M. Ts.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, as Polish writer Mikhail Grabovsky said about Nikolai Gogol, 'I do not know of a writer who would surpass Gogol in his ability to breathe poetry into the most ordinary object'.<sup>8</sup> By the same token, Mikhail Lermontov wrote in his diary, love-struck at the age of 15, 'Some people, like Byron, think early love is akin to the soul prone to fine arts, but I suppose this is the sign of soul that's got much music in it'.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, as Sergei Gandlevsky contemplated in an essay on Joseph Brodsky, 'a set of words, in order to become alive and turn into a poem, needs to release energy, to acquire temperature – oppositely charged poles, a conflict are necessary'.<sup>10</sup> For many poets, such a conflict is associated with despair and, charged with passion, serves as a source of poetic inspiration – 'Poet, you need more of a black grief!',<sup>11</sup> as Boris Ryzhii

5 Lotman, Yu. *O poetakh i poezii (Analiz poeticheskogo teksta, statii, issledovaniia, zametki)*. St Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 1996, p. 45.

6 Shestov, L. *Athens and Jerusalem*. <[http://www.angelfire.com/nb/shestov/aaj/aj\\_1.html](http://www.angelfire.com/nb/shestov/aaj/aj_1.html)> [accessed 20.01.18].

7 Tsvetaeva, M. '9 pisem M. Tsvetaevoi k Lvu Shestovu', *Vestnik russkogo khristianskogo dvizheniia*, 129 (3) 1979, Paris-New York-Moscow, (124-130) p. 125.

8 Grabovsky, M. Quoted in Yu. V. Mann, 'Gogol', in *Istoriia vseмирnoi literatury*, vol. 6, Moscow, 1989, pp. 369-384. See <<http://www.philology.ru/literature2/mann-89.htm>> [accessed 10.01.18].

9 Works by Lermontov, M. Yu. in 4 volumes. Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura Publishers, 1959. Vol. IV, Pp. 390–391.

10 Gandlevsky, S. 'Olimpiiskaia igra', in *Iosif Brodskii: Tvorchestvo, lichnost', sud'ba*. St-Petersburg: Zvezda, 1998, p. 118.

11 Ryzhii, B. 'Tak granit pokryvaetsa naleidiu...'. See <<http://www.vavilon.ru/metatext/ocherki/ryzhy.html>> [accessed 21.12.17].

wrote, expressing this peculiar (from a mundane view point) craving. On the other hand, as mentioned, Lev Shestov saw despair as an origin of philosophy (in contrast to the ancient vision, whereby philosophy was born of astonishment). According to him, despair follows a personal catastrophe, is a reaction to tragedy, and precedes a total rebirth of conviction, ultimately leading to faith and creative discoveries. It is, however, clearly not imperative that personal catastrophe is responsible for a profoundly religious outlook. Despair may equally result from an endogenous composition of personality, be a corollary of an intrinsically tragic world view, which by itself is not a guarantee of poetry. Furthermore, poetic sensibility may not need any specifically tragic roots to start blossoming with poetry. So if not despair, tragedy or catastrophe as such, what is it that characterises these sensibilities, poetic and religious, providing them with a common ground?

According to a description by Joseph Brodsky, 'in art, owing to the properties of the material itself, it is possible to attain a degree of lyricism that has no physical equivalent in the real world. Nor, in the same way, does there exist in the real world an equivalent of the tragic in art, which (the tragic) is the reverse of lyricism – or the stage that follows it'.<sup>12</sup>

Equally, Marina Tsvetaeva was able to find in poetry a different world in which intensity and freedom are boundless, and where all things are possible. For her, poetic experience was superior to real-life experience: 'I do not love life per se; it begins to be meaningful for me – that is, to gain sense and weight – only when it is transformed into art. If I were taken beyond the ocean – to Paradise – but forbidden to write, I would decline that ocean and paradise. I don't need things as such.'<sup>13</sup>

However, this supernatural intensity might be attributable to Romanticism or individual temperament rather than a general poetic trait. Still, the examples cited point to a common denominator being concealed in the specific outlook on life mentioned, which distinguishes between *byt* (the humdrum) and *bytie* (spiritual existence), the ability and striving of human spirit to ascend above the mundane to the sublime and metaphysical ('to breathe poetry into the most ordinary object', as already quoted).

To be sure, this outlook is not so much a desire to ennoble and aestheticise human existence, but a specific vision of the world in which beauty is dominant and spirit is primary. It can also be seen as an adjustment of sorts – within Brodsky's scale 'from tenderness to frenzy, all forms of life are an adjustment'<sup>14</sup> – an instinct of self-preservation; that is to say, of the preservation of the human being as a divine creation, a bearer of spirituality capable of profound feelings, of love, suffering, and self-sacrifice. In other words, what we consider a poetic outlook can be viewed as a 'spiritual adjustment' – in contrast to a philistine outlook that comprises a physical (material) adjustment.

And it is in this that the connection to the religious can be discerned.

12 Brodsky, J. 'A Poet and Prose', in *Less Than One. Selected Essays*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1986, p. 183.

13 Tsvetaeva, M. from the letter of 30.12.1925 to Anna Teskova. Cited in Ellendea Proffer, *Tsvetaeva. A Pictorial Biography*, Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1980, p. 31.

14 Brodsky, J. 'Razgovor s nebozhitelem' in *Forma vremeni. Stikhotvoreniia, esse, piesy*, in 2 vols, Minsk: Eridan, 1992, vol. 1, p. 223, transl. is mine.

## 2. Poetry and religion in Russian culture: the interplay between the earthly and the heavenly

From a religious perspective, or at least from a premise that presupposes the existence of a superior being, to accomplish the above 'spiritual adjustment' – that is, for a human spirit to sustain itself, adjusting its divine nature to its earthly existence – a certain ascendance to its supernatural origins is required. And it is precisely creativity – most notably poetry – that provides this return, albeit temporarily, to the Divine. In other words, when a human being assumes a creative role, that person approaches the ultimate Creator. Pushkin's famous poems 'The Poet' and 'The Prophet' describe this divine function of poetic creativity: 'But let the Word divinely drop // And on his harking ears fall lightly, // The poet's soul will rouse timely, // As though an eagle, woken up'. [...] And like a startled eagle round me // I gazed and saw the earth surrounded, // Hemmed in by sky. [...] "Arise, O sage! My summons hearing, // Do as I bid, by naught deterred; // Stride o'er the earth, a prophet, searing // The hearts of men with righteous word."<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, in the Russian cultural tradition, without an attachment to a higher reality – to the sublime – our earthly existence makes little (or no) sense. As David Bethea wrote in the context of love in Russian letters, a space in which puritanical attitudes prevailed after Pushkin's time, 'the fear was not so much sin, as in the Catholic and Protestant West, but cosmic indifference, meaninglessness'.<sup>16</sup>

The underpinning of this approach to existence is to be sought in mystical realism – inherent in the character of Russian thought – which distinguishes Russia from the West. The essence of it is in the hierarchical difference of both realities, empirical and mystical. Both are acknowledged, but empirical reality survives only because of its attachment to the higher – mystical, Divine – sphere. Earthly human life should be lit up and sanctified by the action of this higher reality. This passionate search for the sanctifying light to everyday existence, as captured in Tsvetaeva's 'the voice of the heavenly truth against the earthly truth',<sup>17</sup> has always been at the core of Russian religiosity and facilitated Russian acute inner intolerance of injustice, profoundly reflected in old religious verses (*dukhovnye stikhi*). By the same token, the primacy of moral and social aspects has been a marked characteristic of Russian thought and determined its distinctly anthropocentric character.<sup>18</sup>

The above principle of subjugating the earthly to the heavenly, of the supremacy of spiritual truth, lies at the core of Russian ascetics as well as such phenomena (combining pagan and Christian elements) as holy foolishness and monasticism (*inochestvo*). These

15 Pushkin, A. S. *Sobranie Sochinenii v 10 tomakh*, Moscow, GIKhL, 1959-1962, Vol. 2, pp. 179 and 150. Translations by Andrey Kneller <<https://sites.google.com/site/poetryandtranslations/aleksander-pushkin/poet>> and by I. Zheleznova <[http://www.poetarium.info/pushkin/eng\\_prophet.htm](http://www.poetarium.info/pushkin/eng_prophet.htm)> [accessed 16.01.18].

16 Bethea, D. 'Literature' in Nicholas Rzhevsky (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Russian Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 174.

17 Tsvetaeva, M. 'Zavodskie' (1922). <<http://www.goldpoetry.ru/cvetaeva/index.php?p=133>> [accessed 07.01.17].

18 Zenkovskii, V. *Istoriia russkoi filosofii*, Rostov-on-Don: Fenix, 2004, vol. 1, pp. 18-19.

should be taken not as disdain of flesh per se, but rather as a means towards transformation and sanctification of the world by the virtue of the Divine light. Interestingly, as Gogol noticed, Easter celebrations are nowhere so full of light as in Russia. This reveals also the motif of cosmology in the teachings of patriarchs of the Russian Church in their tendency to see the world as steeped in divine light.<sup>19</sup>

In this cultural tendency to sanctify the earthly by means of the heavenly, it is above all art – especially poetry, with its utmost spiritual density – that transforms the former into the latter. Hence Tsvetaeva's aforementioned words about the superior value of the artistic experience, and Brodsky's definition above of the difference between the two realities, with the highest degree of lyricism being achievable in one, but not the other. It is thus at this junction where artistic (in particular, poetic) creativity meets religion. It is the accommodation of a human attempt to ascend and attain that very (unattainable) highest degree of lyricism.

Furthermore, one can venture to assert that the 19th-century religious striving embedded in Russian literature, was transformed in the 20th century, with the coming of modernism and the 'death of God', almost solely into a creative impulse. As Joseph Brodsky wrote of his poetic peers, 'It is the last generation for whom culture constituted and still constitutes the main value out of those which man has at his disposal. These are people for whom Christian civilisation is the dearest thing of all. They invested a lot of energy in order to preserve these values, having neglected the values of the new world which is emerging in front of their very eyes.'<sup>20</sup>

### 3. Joseph Brodsky: a religious poet?

Although C. Milosz calls Brodsky 'a defender of the sacred in the age of faithlessness' and regards the Bible as the poet's main source, he also points out that 'Brodsky did not have a talisman of faith which would protect him from despair and the fear of death'.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, he notably calls Brodsky's intensity truly religious. Yet Milosz notes that death for the poet 'is always associated with a non-being'<sup>22</sup>, and this clearly has a bearing on Brodsky's entire outlook.

Still, when Dostoevsky gave us, through the mouth of his hero, a vision of humanity in a godless, atheistic state, it was a rather utopian picture of mutual love – to discharge the religious energy and love for the Supreme Being in earthly life: 'The great idea of immortality would have vanished, and they would have to fill its place; and all the wealth of love lavished of old upon Him, who was immortal, would be turned upon the whole of nature, on the world, on men, on every blade of grass. They would inevitably grow to love the earth and life as they gradually became aware of their own transitory and finite

19 *Supra* note 18.

20 Cited in Bondarenko, V. 'Brodsky – russkii poet'. See <<https://coollib.com/b/333600/read>> [accessed 30.11.17].

21 Milosz, C. 'Borba s udusiem' in Petr Vail and Lev Losev (eds.), *Iosif Brodsky. Trudy i dni*, Moscow: Nezavisimaja Gazeta, 1998, p. 244.

22 *Ibid.*

nature, and with a special love, not as of old [...]. Oh, they would be in haste to love, to stifle the great sorrow in their hearts'.<sup>23</sup>

It seems as if the passion and fervour of Brodsky's poetry is a tribute not only to his temperament, but also to this attempt to extinguish the great sadness and triumph over finiteness through a frenzy of inner intensity – by the immortality of poetry. Very much in line with the above premonition of Dostoevsky, he basically insists on passion being an attribute (and a prerogative) of the finite: 'You are insignificant because you are finite. Yet the more finite a thing is, the more it is charged with life, emotions, joy, fears, compassion. For infinity is not terribly lively, not terribly emotional. [...] it is the anticipation of that inanimate infinity that accounts for the intensity of human sentiments [...]. It is to suggest [...] that passion is the privilege of the insignificant. So try to stay passionate, leave your cool to constellations.'<sup>24</sup>

For him, his poetic gift is unambiguously a divine gift: 'I am returning your gift to you – I haven't buried it, haven't lost it in liquor; and if our souls had an image, you'd see that mine is just an imprint of your bitter gift, that it has never possessed anything else, and that it is, as well as the gift itself, turned towards you.'<sup>25</sup> As Yuri Kublanovsky aptly noticed during Brodsky's lifetime, 'He addresses the Creator directly, and conducts with Him an intense dialogue, imagining Him in his own unique way. A poet of such calibre as Brodsky cannot be an atheist par excellence, for he experiences such a strong inspiration, which sporadically lasts for many years. Undoubtedly, he feels that he encounters something supernatural in this respect. Through his experience he is thus given a metaphysical perception of the world and of the Creator.'<sup>26</sup>

Equally metaphysical and religious was Brodsky's perception of his love relationship with Marina Basmanova. Her famous betrayal, by his own admission, overshadowed for Brodsky even the dramatic developments of his trial, which seemed to him almost trivial in comparison. Both his love poetry and his personal recollections of this tragedy are indeed equally religious in their pathos. This can be seen as yet another corollary of the poetic outlook that governs a poet's perception of life. With regard to this, it is instructive that when some of Brodsky's friends who witnessed this period of his youth speak about this, their narrative turns into a banal description of yet another, rather predictable, love story, an unfortunate affair. In other words, they manage to separate the earthly from the heavenly in a rather philistine way, whereas the poet lives out such an experience as truly religious.

However, Fazil Iskander's formula for the difference between the religious and non-religious sensibility seems to be only partially applicable to the poet, or, for that matter, any poet. According to Iskander, 'psychologically, the attitudes to life by a believer and

23 Dostoevsky, F. *A Raw Youth*, Translated by Constance Garnett. See <<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks01/0100161.txt>> [accessed 17.12.17].

24 Brodsky, J. 'In praise of boredom', in *On Grief and Reason. Essays*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1997, pp. 110-111.

25 Brodsky, J. 'Razgovor s nebozhitelem', op. cit., transl. is mine.

26 Interview with Yuri Kublanovsky, in Polukhina, V. *Brodsky glazami sovremennikov*, St Petersburg: Izd-vo zhurnala Zvezda, 1997, p. 192, transl. is mine.



non-believer differ drastically. A believer, no matter how gifted, is much less inclined to prove himself at the expense of others than a non-believer. His ambition is directed vertically and is forever restricted by a loving admission that it is impossible to equal the Teacher. He is always striving upwards, but in the prior knowledge that he cannot reach to the top. And by his very nature he cannot strive for drastic and sudden changes in the life of mankind, because he cannot and does not wish to replace the Teacher. By contrast, an ambitious non-believer, not equipped with this lofty reference point above him, compares himself with others more often, and, having noticed his superiority, gets even more rooted within it'.<sup>27</sup>

Within the realm of their poetic gift, a poet struck by the Pushkinian Divine inspiration indeed follows this pattern and, in their prophetic guise, is acutely aware of the existence of a higher reality. However, once this inspiration has subsided, the poet is the same as any other mortal, and in some ways 'may be the most petty of all'.<sup>28</sup> This divine metamorphosis is particularly true in the realm of the perception of art as a sacred service, wherein an artist acquires a higher status and deems him or herself as belonging to the order of the chosen, with a special – again, Pushkinian – prophetic mission: to burn people's hearts with the Word. Paradoxically, though, this divine service is not marked by humility – rather on the contrary, especially in the 20th century. Hence constant feuds between the poets, and numerous examples of arrogance on their part, as well as attempts – such as in Anna Akhmatova's case – to tame her own vanity, her feeling of superiority.<sup>29</sup>

#### 4. Debates on the nature of the creative impulse

As was argued, literary and religious strivings thus grow from a common root of human spirituality, most profoundly manifested through the creative impulse. For Lev Shestov, this religious experience that led great thinkers and writers, via catharsis, to their artistic-philosophical discoveries was invariably rooted in despair. In other words, the literary is born out of our spiritual torment.

In this sense, Freudian theories constituted an opposing school of thought, suggesting that our creative impulse stemmed instead from the sexual impulse, and that it was a sublimated human libido that gave rise to great art. Russian Silver Age perception largely rebelled against this alternative interpretation, as it violated the above hierarchy of the earthly and divine. Indeed, Boris Vysheslavtsev, another Russian thinker of the Silver Age, in his book *Etika preobrazhennogo Erosa (Ethics of the Transformed Eros)* objected to Freudian teaching in theoretical terms, arguing that Freud's gravest error was in trying to explain the highest human faculties and abilities (the spiritual sphere) via the lowest ones

27 Iskander, F. *Esse i publitsistika*, <[http://www.kulichki.com/moshkow/FISKANDER/isk\\_publ.txt](http://www.kulichki.com/moshkow/FISKANDER/isk_publ.txt)> [accessed 15.01.18], transl. is mine.

28 Pushkin, A. S. 'Poet', *Sobranie Sochinenii v 10 tomakh*, Moscow, GIKhL, 1959-1962, Vol. 2, pp. 179, translation is mine.

29 This theme is all-pervasive in Akhmatova's oeuvre. See, for instance, the following poem, rather characteristic in this respect: 'Ty naprasno mne pod nogi mechesh...', <<http://www.world-art.ru/lyric/lyric.php?id=3554>> [accessed 12.12.17].

(instincts). Furthermore, he argued that the profound irrationalism of human nature is not amenable to the rationalist and naturalist means suggested by Freudian theory.<sup>30</sup> Calling this ‘descending’ theory a ‘profanation’, Vysheslavtsev writes with disdain that for Freud, ‘in essence, as for any naturalism and materialism, everything “lofty” and sublime is an *illusion* (a superstructure over the sexual foundation); religion, and love for the Almighty, are also just an *illusion* and a sophisticated form of sexuality (“Die Zukunft einer Illusion”). Then what is not an *illusion*? It is sexual drive and its normal fulfilment. This is, basically, in a nutshell, all the therapeutics and all the “morality” of Freud.’<sup>31</sup> Thus he concludes that for Freud, with his essential denial of the sublime sphere, sublimation is simply not possible.

He argues further that true sublimation is in fact in raising (ἀναγωγή) of the low to the high, thus creating a qualitatively new level of being. However, to understand this, one needs to have a hierarchical system of values and existential categories, so familiar to Christian ascetics or to ancient Greek philosophers, but of which ‘Freud and his school have no idea’.<sup>32</sup> Of a similarly negative opinion is Vysheslavtsev’s fellow-philosopher Semyon Frank, who talks of the ‘sexual materialism’ and ‘cynical outlook’ of Freudian conceptions.<sup>33</sup> In his words, ‘psychoanalysis in philosophical terms proved unable to cope with the trove of the concealed spiritual life which it itself discovered. The platitude of its rationalistic and naturalistic concerns is inadequate to the depth and irrationality of the spiritual material that it exposed.’<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, Nikolai Berdiaev too, who believed that ‘in Russian love there is something dark and torturous, unenlightened and often ugly’, in essence repeats Vysheslavtsev’s premise above when he writes that although erotic love is rooted in sex and gender, it nevertheless ‘transcends the sexual, it brings in a new element and redemption of the sexual’.<sup>35</sup> Even Vasilii Rozanov, in many ways Berdiaev’s opponent, rather than explaining ‘the sublime’ through ‘the low’, exalted the physical to the level of the spiritual by investing it with divine power, by connecting the sexual with the divine Logos.

This divinising – or, if you like, poeticising or romanticising – of existence in many ways lies at the core of Russian cultural tradition, and manifests itself most prominently in Russian attitudes to love, reflected in particular in the above polemics. It is echoed in Russian letters later in the 20th century as well. Thus, Andrei Platonov believes that ‘love is a measure of how much one is endowed with a gift of life. It is, despite conventional assumptions, least of all about sexuality.’<sup>36</sup> By the same token, Joseph Brodsky described love as ‘the most elitist of passions. It acquires its stereoscopic substance and perspective

30 See Vysheslavtsev, B. *Etika preobrazhennogo Erosa*, Chapter 7 ‘Soprotivlenie proizvola i sublimatsiia svobody’ (‘Resistance of self-will and sublimation of freedom’), Paris: YMCA-Press, 1931, pp. 186-190.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 189.

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 189-190.

33 Frank, S. ‘Psikhoanaliz kak mirosozertsanie’, *Put*, No 25, December 1930.

34 *Ibid.*

35 Berdiaev, N. ‘Razmyshlenie ob Erose’ in Viacheslav Shestakov (ed.), Introduction to *Russkii eros, ili Filosofija ljubvi v Rossii*, Moscow: ‘Progress’, 1991, p. 267.

36 Platonov, A. ‘Odnazhdy ljubivshie’ in *Kotlovan. Izbrannaja proza*, Moscow: Knizhnaia palata, 1988, p. 4.

only in the context of culture, for it takes up more space in the mind than it does in the bed.<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, Tsvetaeva's poet-centred definition of love directly unites it with the Divine: 'to love means to see the person as God conceived him, but his parents failed to materialise.'<sup>38</sup>

For Brodsky, the link between the poetic and celestial seems to be provided by language. Indeed, for him poetry is a form of organising language and thus restructuring time, which he sees as an equivalent of the Deity, or even absorbing it. In other words, for the poet, language is the supreme Deity that incorporates time itself within it, while time, in turn, encapsulates the divine. In this hierarchy, poetry is a form of transforming language, a 'game language plays to restructure time'.<sup>39</sup> Thus for Brodsky, who claims to have borrowed these ideas from W. H. Auden, the divine and poetic elements merge together. But even earlier, W. Blake believed that God was a poetic genius. The Bible was written as a multi-meaningful, metaphorical, deeply poetic book.

## 5. Dynamics of religion in Russian culture: a tragedy or beauty? Measure versus sainthood

However, the expected accord between the cultural and religious is violated in the Russian context, as Father Alexander Schmemmann maintained. He talked about a deep and barely redeemable rift between religion and culture in modern Russian history.<sup>40</sup> From ancient Greece, the notion of measure has become central to culture, thus highlighting the concept of boundary for any creative ideal. The founders of this cultural tradition understood the importance of humility and self-limitation in the face of that boundary. However, Russian culture virtually denied any boundaries, striving beyond limits in its maximalist pathos.

Generally speaking, such fanaticism in denying culture for the sake of other values often leads to the destruction of culture altogether, but in Russia this conflict was inherent in many Russian artists and took place within the culture itself, thus rendering it fragile and problematic, argues Schmemmann.<sup>41</sup> He sees the sources of this maximalism in Russia's adoption of Christianity from Byzantium, but without having the rich underlying culture accumulated over centuries. It is the latter that helped Byzantium to overcome the maximalist doctrines of Christianity in the course of a long historical period.

In the Russian case, however, culture and faith initially merged together, thus – as it were – intoxicating young Russian culture with a non-transcended Christian

37 Brodsky, J. 'Nadezhda Mandelstam (1899-1980): An Obituary' in *Less Than One. Selected Essays*, op. cit., p. 154.

38 Tsvetaeva, M. Notebook No 5, 1918-1919, entry of 3 October 1918. See <<http://tsvetaeva.lit-info.ru/tsvetaeva/zapisnye-knizhki/zapisnaya-knizhka-5.htm>> [accessed 15.01.18]

39 Brodsky, J. 'To Please a Shadow' in *Less Than One. Selected Essays*, op. cit., pp. 362-363.

40 Schmemmann, A. 'Beseda 11, Otritsanie kultury i imia religii'. See <<http://www.pravmir.ru/protopresviter-aleksandr-shmeman-otrissanie-kulturyi-vo-imya-religii/>> [accessed 20.10.17]

41 Schmemmann, A. 'Paradoksy russkogo kulturnogo razvitiia: maksimalizm'. See <<http://www.pravmir.ru/protopresviter-aleksandr-shmeman-istoki-maksimalizma-v-russkoy-kulture/>> [accessed 20.10.17]

maximalism. At its core, the emerging Russian cultural consciousness longed not for the trove of Hellenistic tradition, states Schmemmann, but for the actual exploit of Christ, felt in Jerusalem rather than in Byzantium.<sup>42</sup> Russian culture was thus centred on liturgy and, as is well known, concentrated around monasteries rather than universities, in contrast to the case in Western Europe. This resulted in a cultural rather than purely religious demand to turn away from the empirical, physical world. ‘All things beautiful in ancient Russian culture are at the same time a call for abandonment of this, earthly world,’ Schmemmann explains.<sup>43</sup> ‘Thus maximalism became the destiny of Russian culture and Russian cultural consciousness. Culture as “measure”, as “boundary” and “form” least of all inspired it in the past, as well as in subsequent times, when the direct link between Christianity and culture broke down.’<sup>44</sup> The reasons for this breakdown, which Schmemmann dates to the 1830s and 1840s, were twofold, incorporating the Western European influence and the pressure of authentically Russian traditions and experience.

The split of Western European thought into religious and anti-religious caused the role of religion to change from being an intrinsic cultural foundation to just a cultural object or theme. This led to Russian religious consciousness becoming hostile towards culture, which it perceived as increasingly acquiring anti-religious colouring. At the same time, the Russian folk tradition of a simple faith unpolluted by infectious rationalist and sceptical Western currents inspired Russian writers and summoned them away from what can be viewed as the artificially cultural to the truly and authentically religious. Schmemmann regards it as a paradox that after Pushkin, whose world was holistic, organic and harmonious, Russian writers of allegedly ‘religious consciousness’ sunk into a dark world of refusal and rejection of the earthly, in favour of the heavenly. ‘Thus, after Pushkin, Russian culture, as it were, gets suspended over an abyss,’ Schmemmann concludes.<sup>45</sup> Russian writers lost their literary brotherhood, their unity and their cultural continuity, and became consumed by doubt – not with respect to religion, but with respect to the existence of religious justifications of creativity.

In a certain sense, these thoughts of Father Schmemmann resonate with the perception of Russian literary history by the prominent contemporary Russian writer Andrei Bitov. Whereas Schmemmann talks of the rift between culture and religion in the Russian context, Bitov sees this between artistic culture and civilisation. As he wrote in his essay on Chekhov, only two Russian artistic heroes – Pushkin and Chekhov – were united by being truly civilised: ‘Otherwise Russian literature is brilliantly wild or wildly brilliant. Only Pushkin and Chekhov neatly frame this magnificent brew of genres and styles. Both neither preach, nor are aggressive. Neither of them confuse role with predestination. They are knights of dignity and knights of shame. And dignity and shame are the working instruments of a personality. There is absence of pathos, emotionality and naked idea. Even thought is concealed in such a clear exposition that it may not appear to be a thought at all, until you grow up sufficiently to be able to understand it. [...] The miraculous embodiment of the world’s cultural benchmark in a Russian (Pushkin) is

42 *Supra* note 42.

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Ibid.*

45 Schmemmann, A. ‘Beseda 11, Otrisanie kultury vo imia religii’, op. cit.

equivalent to the miraculous embodiment of civilisation in a first-generation member of the Russian intelligentsia (Chekhov). Nobility of spirit and honour; dignity and shame; that is to say, culture. These two cultural heroes were unique in their ability to transcend the typically Russian abyss between artistic culture and civilization.<sup>46</sup>

By the same token, Lev Shestov sensed Russian cultural distinctiveness vis-à-vis Western Europe in bold irrationalism inherent in the Russian perception of the world. Young Russian culture, in its relative lack of ancient cultural tradition, was not afraid to reinvent and rewrite everything and mark its own distinct path, fearlessly violating and misinterpreting the achievements of Western civilisation. As Shestov wittily put it, 'Culture is an age-long development, and sudden grafting of it upon a race rarely succeeds. [...] In a short time we were swallowing in enormous doses those poisons which Europe had been gradually accustoming herself to, gradually assimilating through centuries. [...] A Russian had only to catch a whiff of European atmosphere, and his head began to swim. He interpreted in his own way, savage-like, whatever he heard of western success. [...] And the more impossible his dreams, the more eager he was to believe them real. How disillusioned with Europe the westerner Herzen became, after living for years on end abroad! Yet, with all his acuteness, it did not occur to him that Europe was not in the least to blame for his disillusionment. Europe had dropped miracles ages ago; she contented herself with ideals. It is we in Russia who will go on confusing miracles with ideals. [...] As a matter of fact, just because Europe had ceased to believe in miracles, and realised that all human problems resolve down to mere arrangements here on earth, ideas and ideals had been invented.'<sup>47</sup> Even the period of the 1860s, 'with its loud ideas of sobriety and modest outlook, [...] was a most drunken period. Those who awaited the New Messiah and the Second Advent read Darwin and dissected frogs',<sup>48</sup> Shestov writes.

These diverse accounts of Russian cultural incommensurability to any form of Western European paradigms, despite their sympathetic tone, conceal a certain degree of regret, if not altogether bitterness. Yet the results of these peculiar Russian cultural developments brought about a qualitatively new form of artistic creativity understood not as an intellectual game, but as a self-sacrificial, almost religious, service, requiring a 'total perishing, in all seriousness',<sup>49</sup> using Boris Pasternak's words. Art in the Russian context has become martyrdom, the stakes of a poetic word equated, quite literally, with life and death; a poet has then come to play a role of a martyr and secular saint, performing a perpetual heroic deed, *tour de force*, *podvig*.

In this vein, one can, in the Russian context, equate the artistic and monastic, in the sense of the ascetic tradition. The latter is named by Sergei Averintsev as an important distinguishing factor in the list of invariants of the traditional Russian consciousness.

46 Bitov, A. 'Moi dedushka Chekhov i pradedushka Pushkin' in *Chetyrezhdy Chekhov*, Moscow: Emergency Exit, 2004, p. 9. Transl. is mine.

47 Shestov, L. *Apotheosis of Groundlessness*. See <[http://www.angelfire.com/nb/shestov/all/all\\_2.html](http://www.angelfire.com/nb/shestov/all/all_2.html)> [accessed 26.11.2017].

48 Shestov, L. 'All things are possible' ('Apotheosis of Groundlessness'). Op. cit. See <[http://www.angelfire.com/nb/shestov/all/all\\_23.html](http://www.angelfire.com/nb/shestov/all/all_23.html)> [accessed 16.10.17].

49 Pasternak, B. 'O, znal by ia, chto tak byvaet...' (1931). See <<http://www.kostyor.ru/poetry/pasternak/?n=8>> [accessed 09.12.17].

Indeed, Russian ascetic tradition is a seemingly fruitless, peculiar striving for a spiritual tour de force, almost for sainthood, but without using such lofty rhetoric. From any materialistic, positivist, pragmatic point of view, such striving certainly looks irrational and enigmatic. Averintsev refers to the memoirs of the well-known Russian liturgist N. D. Uspensky,<sup>50</sup> who recalls the events of his youth when his famous teacher 'Alekssei Afanasievich Dmitrievsky, deprived during the Soviet times of any means for existence and basically starving to death, was spending his last strength and last days of his life for passing on his knowledge, completely selflessly, to the then youngster Uspensky, and was touchingly and almost comically angry if there happened to be even the slightest break in their lessons – for there was so much to teach in so little time.'<sup>51</sup> This is, Averintsev exclaims, what our scholarly continuity, our teaching and apprenticeship are like. 'It's not only that the teacher is performing his exploit, his *podvig*, giving it the efforts which could be used for his own survival. It is also the fact that the student, who is still very much a child, is fully aware that the difficult hours spent next to his stern teacher do not promise anything in terms of his practical life, except the threat of persecution. However, knowing this, he still goes to the lessons. And Russian culture, the culture of Saint Stephen of Perm, continues through him its stubborn life, resisting the institutional order, as a blade of grass growing through asphalt'.<sup>52</sup>

This means, in particular, that 'the role of a personal, that is to a certain extent solitary, "isolated", enthusiastic striving, which does not fit into any given institutional-corporate context, is obviously large'.<sup>53</sup> This also goes some way to elucidate the Russian concept of art as martyrdom, where most sacred and most immortal lines (or, for that matter, scores or paintings) are, as it were, 'written in blood'.

In post-Soviet Russian history, following the collapse of ideological strictures and the ensuing globalisation that brought about new cultural paradigms, the question of cultural continuity looms large. Will the old Russian traditions ultimately die out under the pressures of capitalist, consumerist values, facilitated by the newly acquired freedoms? Will the ascetic world view come to an end, and liberated creativity simply fade away? These were the anxious premonitions of the 1990s in Russia. However, a decade later, Sergei Averintsev wrote defiantly, 'This is the way it was. Now we are told that this will be no more; that the feature of almost sainthood in Russian culture, suspicious for severe adherents of the faith and funny for people without any faith, has forever become a thing of the past. Forever. Well, we shall see about that, if we are still around. But we shall not forget to bow down in front of each and every one of the elders, who yesterday alone, secluded, singlehanded, just by the strength of their personality, defended, in the face of fear and indifference, the tradition of Russian ascetics, the tradition of St. Stephen.'<sup>54</sup>

50 See Uspensky, N. 'Iz lichnykh vospominanii ob A. A. Dmitirevskom', in *Bogoslovskie trudy*, vol. 4, Moscow, 1968, pp. 85-89 (quoted in Averintsev, S. *Sviaz vremen*, <<http://www.fedy-diary.ru/html/042011/11042011-05a.html>> [accessed 18.12.17].

51 Averintsev, S. *Sviaz vremen*, op. cit.

52 *Ibid.*

53 *Ibid.*

54 *Ibid.*

## Conclusion

This young and ‘savage’ culture of the nation which was the last to join, so belatedly, the refined sisterhood of Christian countries, thus managed to develop a unique cultural tradition in which art became a martyrdom, perpetuated by real devotees who operated on the boundary between life and death. The results of this unique tradition of personal exploits are also of unique power – of a might that is congruent with the religious, and that mysteriously comes back to poetic creativity, traditionally separated from religion in the Russian context, to endow it with the truly religious force. This can be regarded as a paradox of religious dynamics in Russian culture.

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## TARP LITERATŪROS IR RELIGIJOS: SIDABRO AMŽIAUS IDĖJŲ TAIKYMAS DABARČIAI – POETINĖ IŽVALGA KAIP RELIGINGUMO IŠRAIŠKA?

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**Santrauka.** *Literatūros vaidmuo Rusijoje visada buvo didžiulis. Čia literatūra buvo vienintelė erdvė, kurioje tauta galėjo išsakyti savo skaudulius. Taip Rusijos literatūrinis diskursas įtraukė į save beveik visus kitus diskursus, tarp jų filosofinį ir religinį. Religinio ir filosofinio diskursų susiliejimas su literatūriniu ypač išryškėjo rusiškojo literatūrinio sidabro*



amžiaus metu per naujas religines paieškas ir kultūrinės paradigmos kaitą. Levas Šestovas, to meto religinės filosofijos atstovas, paprastai laikomas iracionalistu ir Sartro egzistencinės minties pirmtaku, suteikdavo beveik kiekvienam savo filosofinių literatūrinių esė apie rusų klasikus ir vakarų filosofus herojų religinę traktuotę. Tokie išgyvenimai, kurie Šestovo nuomone visi be išimties sukelia traumas, per katarsį suteikia galimybę iš naujo įvertinti vertybes ir, galų gale, net atrasti tikėjimą, pasiekti didį meną ar filosofines išvalgas. Nors toks patirties konstravimas ir sukelia klausimų, jis gali pasitarnauti metodologiškai aiškinant literatūros kūrinių formavimąsi iš religinių šaknų. Šiame straipsnyje toks metodas taikytas analizuojant moderniuosius rusų poetus, ypač Josifą Brodskį. Taip pat bus bandoma surasti poetinės vizijos religinę atjautą.

Froido teoriją apie meninį įkvėpimą, atsirandančią kaip libido sublimavimas, galima sieti su kito rusų sidabro amžiaus religinio filosofo Vasilijaus Rozanovo, kuris žmogiškąjį seksualumą lygino su dieviškumu, veikla. Tuo pat metu Borisas Vyšeslavitsevas, tos pačios epochos mąstytojas, tikino, jog Froido požiūris priešiškas rusų kultūrinei savimonei, o ypač tokioms kategorijoms kaip meilė, meninė kūryba ir religija.

Šio straipsnio tikslas – ištirti religines ir poetines sandūras per konfliktuojančių požiūrių prizmę ir jų santykį su religija bei kultūra Rusijos kontekste.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** rusų literatūros sidabro amžius, religinė filosofija, poetinė pajauta, Froido mokymai, kūrybinis impulsas, Josifas Brodskis.

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