

Apophaticism of Soviet Culture

Philosophical Aspect of Song by M. Matusovsky*

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Abstract—The article deals with the concept of “apophaticism” which is relevant not only for theology but also for philosophical and philological knowledge. The linguists are interested in apophaticism of the language, which primarily refer to vocabulary. During the last decades of hermeneutics development, the literary scholars also actively referred to apophatic tradition. The need to develop the idea of Russian poetry as an apophatic one is long overdue and it requires new approaches and works. The object of this article is the Soviet times and the thaw period with its binary formations; and the song “Moscow Nights” by M. Matusovsky is in the center of linguistic and philosophical research. Much attention is paid to text fragments with verbal negation.

Keywords—*apophaticism; poetics; philosophy; Soviet song; thaw period; Matusovsky*

I. INTRODUCTION

Today, the thaw period is perceived in the context of binary oppositions and this is vividly described in the book by Peter Weil and Alexander Genis dealing with the 1960s which has already become a classic one. The authors describe one decade of the Soviet reality from the point of view of contradictions prevailing in that time in culture of everyday life, these are: firstly, the official rejection of religion and faith and, in opposition thereto, restoration of temples and secret conducting baptismal rites [1]; secondly, freedom of speech which was punishable after all and can lead to “literary legal trials” of many famous writers (the Sinyavsky-Daniel case); thirdly, scientists became new heroes in society and literature, they believed in science more than in reality which was quite often bitter and far from ideal. All these contradictions on which the Soviet reality of the thaw period was built, may be called apophatic ones and hardly explainable in the terms of common sense and logic.

The apophatic way of knowing reality is associated with Leibniz's Principle of Sufficient Reason [2]. In this paper we refer to the concept of “apophaticism” and apophatic tradition not in theological but philosophical and linguistic sense. Justification of the apophatic method of cognition and definition of the divine essence has been given long ago in the works of Dionysius the Areopagite. But that's not to say

that this concept did not become widespread in the philosophical circles. As for the Russian tradition, it was A. F. Losev who most actively referred to the apophatic method. Over the last decade of development of philological science and humanities knowledge in general, there appeared a number of articles analyzing apophatic principles of Russian literature and poetry, in particular [3]. However, much attention has been paid to poetic texts of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The object of our article is the Soviet song “Moscow Nights” being a vivid example of manifestation of the apophatic element in culture of the thaw period.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The linguists engaging in philosophy of language fundamentally separate the world view into linguistic and conceptual one. The latter is often defined as propositional discursive one. Such separation is justified not only from linguistic but philosophical and literary points of view, especially when we have dealing with a work of art, a poetic text, which metaphorically has semantic tension. On the one hand, we understand many things at the language level perceiving and deciphering lexical units, for instance. On the other hand, to know only vocabulary (meaning of words) is not enough to understand a state of language or implied sense, not saying of metaphors or other expressive means. Here we recall the famous theory of Wilhelm von Humboldt about the “spirit of the people” which is embodied in the language but as if not translatable. This especially becomes apparent when teaching students Russian as a foreign language. For example, a student can master grammar and enrich his vocabulary but cannot enter the language situation; first of all, this occurs due to the sphere of concepts. Here let us to cite an astute observation of the linguist M.Ya. Bloch: “<...> the lower mental stature of a person, the farther his world view from the language one, in the sense that the propositional discursive part together with the mental one, gaining more independence of the language, overmasters the latter” [4].

Here we do not discuss intellectual qualities of a person but speak about the national image of the world, the cosmic psycho-logos (we take this concept from G.D. Gachev, a philosopher and a scholar in culture studies). Besides, in a work of art, especially in a poetic one, we can face to “unclarities” or apophatic elements which are sometimes

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difficult to explain even to a native speaker (that's why there is a joking phrase "translate from Russian into Russian"). So, how to make such translation and by which means can we interpret such unclarity in the text? What parts of the text shall be considered as apophatic ones? Let's start to answer the second question.

III. RESULTS

The philosophers and literary scholars studying apophatic problems of texts (mostly poetic ones [5]) first of all refer to images of stillness, silence and infiniteness. The linguists emphasize a number of lexemes with the prefix "un": untold, unexplainable, unknown, etc. In Russian, the apophatic effect can be also expressed through verbal negation, although it is probably not as strong as in German and French where "not" is placed after the verb, not before it [6]. In this respect "Moscow Nights", a famous song of the Soviet period to the lyrics by M. Matusovsky, which was very popular in the 1960s, is an illustrative example. This song was included into repertoire of artists going abroad for tour (each repertoire was subjected to be approved by the USSR State Concert Agency [7]); and even now this song retained its relevance and importance, especially for foreigners. Thus for instance, this song is learnt by students during the whole term and performed at the traditional open lesson-concert at the Russian University of Peoples' Friendship (the concert is held by the Pre-University Courses and Russian Language Departments). However, despite this song seems to be simple, it has several apophatic "unclarity" requiring clarification. Below is the text of the song:

No rustling's heard in the garden,
All remains quiet till the dawn,
If you only knew how dear to me,
All these beautiful Moscow Nights.

River's moving and not moving,
As it's made of lunar silver.
Song is heard and it's not heard
In these quiet Moscow nights.

Why you, darling, turn a sideways gaze
Bowing low your head?
It's so hard to express and not to express
Everything that is deep in heart.

But the dawn is getting to be visible.
And, my darling, please, be so kind,
Ever not forget all these summer nights,

All these beautiful Moscow Nights. [8]

The first stanza does not cause any special difficulties in perception of the text: a listener can easily imagine a quiet summer evening. But in the second stanza there are phrases that need to be explained not only to a foreign student but also to oneself.

The phrase "river's moving and not moving" seems to be clear: river does not move when there is no wind and at the same time it moves, for instance, due to the boat sailing on the river. However, if this were so, then the poet would have used "now ... now" when constructing the phrase, i.e.: the river's now moving, now not moving. Certainly, there is no talk about any boat or waves, and it is the poet who creates apophaticity of the moment which is increasing and confirmed by the third line of the second stanza:

Song is heard and it's not heard

In these quiet Moscow nights

So, is anybody singing somewhere these quiet nights? But why the song is not heard if the evenings are quiet? But the author does not say any word about this. The song may stop to sound and then sounds again but there is no confirmation of this in the text. Apophaticism of the situation is confirmed by love confession expressed latently: how can the heart express and not express itself? This is typologically close to the well-known poem by Tyutchev:

How can the heart express itself?

How can the other understand you?

Can the other understand what is inside you?

The uttered thought's a lie -

When blowing up, you trouble the keys,

Be fuelled by them - and be silent [9]

Besides, the researchers of F. I. Tyutchev's works note the special apophaticism of his poetics which is expressed in lexemes: "invisible, unheard, ineffable, stranger, unguessed, deaf, foggy, elusive, approachless, unnamed, wonderful, gloomy, impossible and so on" [10]. But Matusovsky managed to do this even not at the level of heart thoughts but at the level of language: it's so hard to express and not to express. This is associated with such kind of silence when stillness is semiotically meaningful and means much more than words. Love motive, which is implicitly expressed, also creates an apophatic effect: there is a request, not confession:

But the dawn's already getting visible.

And, my darling, please, be so kind,

Ever not forget all these summer nights,

All these beautiful Moscow Nights

A girl seemed to share these summer nights with a lyrical hero but there is no any hint of vulgarity and even eroticism here. What attracts a listener in this song? Maybe, unspoken words and attraction to unknown (here this is consequence of

something not said which is created by verbal negation) influence on a listener and sink him into border liminal state.

IV. CONCLUSION

So, coming back to the beginning of the article and discours about two types of the world view — linguistic and conceptual, let us summarize: apophatic moments in the language are transferred to conceptual cognition. This is clearly recognized and traced by the example of literary and poetic texts which make the researcher think in an archetypal imaginative manner. This in particular makes it difficult to translate and decode the text both for a person of a different national world view and to a native speaker.

A translator or a researcher needs to ask himself how this translation is made and what he is doing at this moment. A. V. Smirnov, a well-known philosopher, just thinks about this in his article “Philosophy of Translation and Translation of Philosophy” [11]. However, this issue is a subject of a special study and in this paper we tried to point out the moments of apophaticism in the Russian song (“Moscow Nights” to the lyrics by Matusovsky) and somehow interpret them.

When linguists, literary historians and philosophers write of philosophy of translation and peculiarities of transferring one system to another, there’s usually no doubt that it is referred to two different languages. The researchers, above all, pay attention to cultural and conceptual peculiarities and seek for expressive means to convey their idea or interpret a fragment of text, etc. in another language. A language embodies the national model of the world and, certainly, this should be taken into account by a translator; a translation at its core is an interpretation and immersion in another national image of the world [12]. However, philosophers also ask the question of equal significance of two elements (the desired and the new ones) and a possible eventual result when translated. For example, the academician A.V. Smirnov says the following: “I suppose that the only answer this question is that they have the same meaning” [11]. But what’s interesting is that a researcher in his works emphasizes not only two elements marked by him as L with indices “S” and “R” (Spanish and Russian languages) but also the translation process itself and the moment thereof marked by an arrow. What does this arrow mean? Is the process of translation automatic one or does it have a different, for instance, ontological nature? Asking these questions, A. V. Smirnov refers to the concept of “universal language of thought” as well as intuitive forms of thinking which the translator’s inquiring mind has. However, that’s not good enough for a researcher who sees in this arrow just “a pure form” subjected to be specifically interpreted. Such a pure form, according to Smirnov, implies coherence which is a sign of “healthy” thinking and meaningfulness: “Only coherence enhances meaningfulness; thus, trying to cut the threads of coherence for the sake of the desired “accuracy”, a creator of an artificial language makes it unviable” [11].

Through the example of analysis of Matusovsky’s poem, we realized that a native speaker can far from always explain some facts in his native language and this is especially

evident regarding interpretations of metaphors in a poetic text which we used to perceive as transferring properties of one object to another. Whether this is so simple in regard with the means of artistic expression; and whether even known lexemes in certain linguistic conditions are clear for us. The well-known specialist of antiquity and a folklorist O. M. Freidenberg writes that a myth lies behind a metaphor (a metaphor is a “fragment of myth”), and literature, as one of the systems, takes up power of myth and folklore at a certain stage of development thereof [13]. Thus a dialectical triad of myth - folklore - literature is being built allowing us to look at the last element thereof from ontological positions.

The literary scholars are mostly used to perceive much in literature, and literature itself, from historical, biographical and positivist points of view; but if we take into account E. Golosovker’s theory of Imaginative Absolute which is the driving force of culture and a certain Spirit thereof, the issue of interpreting a work and a translation thereof into another language/system acquires a different character. Here each sign is considered as a possible text (semiotic approach). In this regard, the question of a literary critic’s responsibility regarding understanding a metaphor and potential meaning thereof arises. But where does such multiplicity in interpretation of a text come from? Here we again refer to A. V. Smirnov’s terms — “an arrow” and “a pure form”: “A translation passes through the stage when something is formed in a translator’s mind that we cannot express discursively, i.e. comprehensively” [11]. We would venture to call it as imaginative force or imaginative moment which is central one at the moment of a work translating (an “arrow”) and comprehending thereof. It is the imaginative instinct containing basic codes, ideas, cultural archetypes and moralized concepts [14] which is important for a researcher’s comprehensive thinking: “A researcher can be a skeptic or a relativist; he may consider truth to be some kind of “approximation” or some “X” at a certain stage of development of science and civilization, etc., but at the same time it is a prompt to Imaginative Absolute and the eternal truth will be certainly an incentive to his creative scientific work and his cultural act if he is a real researcher”[5]. Thus, not only a metaphor or a certain fragment of the text, etc. but also the facts of folklore and myth require additional comments since the latter were perceived as reality of culture from positivist point of view: “When reading myths, the mind rarely looks inside a wonderful mechanism driving the world of mythology because it knows nothing of this mechanism” [15]. Probably, the Matusovsky’s text should be considered in the context of folklore tradition since the topos in the poem is a river and time is a borderline between a night and a new day. This allows us to draw a parallel with the Russian lyric song where the action thereof takes place at the dawn but this topic is a subject of another philological study, and the issue of folklore in the poet’s creative work remains open.

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