

The Theme of the Other in the Post-Soviet Context

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It just so happened that for a number of post-Soviet philosophers who approached Levinas' work, their encounter with his philosophy had turned into something bigger than a mere introduction to the ideas of one of the venerable Western thinkers. Due to certain peculiarities of previous development, Emmanuel Levinas could have been approached as a participant of internal discussions, or, in other words, as an "acting persona" of the drama of philosophy's self-consciousness. In my article, I would like to concentrate on these peculiarities of the reception of Levinas' philosophy in the post-Soviet context. The following points must be examined with regard to this:

1. The discovery and comprehension of the theme of the Other in Soviet philosophy in the 70s and 80s of the 20th century.

2. Typological comparison of Levinas' views with the views of G. S. Batyshchev, who represents the above-mentioned period in the Soviet philosophy, and in whose works the theme of the Other seems to have found its utmost realization.

3. Certain peculiarities of comprehension of Levinas are thought within the context of contemporary post-Soviet and, more particularly, Ukrainian philosophy.

1. The history of Soviet "philosophy of humanity" between the 1960s to 1980s includes a certain intrigue. In general, this philosophy was developing on the grounds of Marxism. However, this Marxist current very often was not just the result of enforcement, but rather it was a part of a common tradition that still had creative potential. In this respect, it's important to note a considerable level of originality peculiar to a number of philosophical ideas that appeared at that time in Moscow,

Kiev, Leningrad, and Tbilisi. It was not about a dispute between the hardcore Marxists on one hand, and passionate dissidents following the Western examples on the other. Perhaps one of the most interesting goals in the study of Soviet philosophy is to discover those distinctive ideas and views that originated then.

One of the most important changes that appeared in our philosophical environment at that time was precisely the tendency to move away from a monologue-paradigm that was typical of late-Soviet Marxism. Perhaps, the main methodological foundation of a monologue-paradigm was the late Marxist's concept of human activity that bound together the subject-object dichotomy, as well as the pathos of a self-asserting subject, and also a reduction of inter-subjective relations to totalizing (as Levinas would've put it) forms of social activity. It is only natural that any alternative to this approach could appear in such marginalized areas as history and semiotics of culture, science, logic, psychology, and ethics. It could also arise in the form of an open or hidden polemics with the above-mentioned Marxist concept of activity. It is worth mentioning that the author of one of most consistent versions of the theory of the activist essence of humans, Genrikh Batyshchev,¹ became an original thinker of a dialogical nature after his disappointment in Marxist activism. I shall return to him shortly.

What was the reason that caused late-Soviet philosophical thought and culture to turn to the Other? Certain things should not be underestimated. Those are the publication of Bakhtin's earlier texts² (his idea of "polyphony" etc.), the letters of Alexey Ukhtomskiy³ and his notions of "the dominant on the face of the Other" and of "the merited interlocutor"; also the diaries of famous Russian writer Mikhail Prishvin⁴ with his understanding of artistic creation as *raz-licheniye*, or "distinguishing" even between non-human creatures. There was also, of course, a concealed influence of twenti-

¹ See: Батищев, Г. С., Деятельностная сущность человека как философский принцип in *Проблема человека в современной философии* (М., 1969), 73-144.

² See: Бахтин, М. М., *Проблемы поэтики Достоевского*, М., 1972, 470.

³ See: Ухтомский, А. А., *Письма in Новый мир* (1973, № 1), 251-266.

⁴ See: Пришвин, М. М., *Записи о творчестве in Контекст'1974: Литературно-теоретические исследования* (М., 1975), 312-359.

eth century West-European thought that was making its way to our thinkers, becoming intertwined with their own ideas. However, I think it is important to emphasize that the dialogic paradigm of the late-Soviet period also had its own sources of inspiration. During the Thaw, a romantic spirit had been awoken and opened new expanses for young people, as it happens in the beginning of the spring time, when one realizes anew how far the outlook can reach. This spirit instilled in these young people a longing for something different in all possible meanings: a longing for tourism and traveling, for cultural and spiritual history that they were discovering zealously. The oxygen that was coming from free communication was gradually enriching the Soviet humanities, including philosophy. Step by step, such themes as culture, freedom, and love were losing their exclusive character for Soviet readers. Gradually, philosophical discourse was acquiring more and more ethical and pedagogical features. And that made it different from its previous era when epistemology, aesthetics, and theory of activity were more dominant.

The above-mentioned changes were not strong enough from a methodological view, and our philosophical vocabulary was quite poor when compared to that of the West. However, the key points of real philosophical thinking did exist. Young philosophers were especially interested in the changes that occurred on philosophy's way from the Marxist cultivation of so called "dialectical unity" to the acceptance of *otherness* of the Other. Gradually, all these changes would result in the inevitable shift from the monologue understanding of human activity, as well as from the Marxist's in its Soviet interpretation of human reality in general.

Among those scholars who made a contribution to the affirmation of a dialogical paradigm and the discovery of the theme of the Other were such people as Vladimir Bibler, who was working on the idea of a "mindful dialogue" as a foundation of creative thinking.⁵ Renaissance historian Leonid Batkin defined that period as "the culture of communication of cultures". Yuriy Lotman, a well-known semiotics and literary studies scholar, introduced the concept of culture's poly-linguistics, as well as an opposing

⁵ See: Библер, В. С., *Мышление как творчество. (Введение в логику мысленного диалога)*, М., 1975, 399.

“auto-communication” and “message”, “aesthetics of identity”, and “aesthetics of difference”.⁶ However, the most representative in this respect is the work of the philosopher from Moscow Genrikh Stepanovich Batyshchev (1932-1990).

All of his adult life Genrikh Batyshchev worked at the Institute of Philosophy in Volkhonka, where he experienced a difficult yet dynamic professional development. In his spiritual development he went from following typical Marxist atheism to becoming interested in Eastern spiritual practices and later in Orthodox Christianity. As a philosopher, he initially was working on the concept of active essence, but later developed his own original concept of “deeper communication”. It is worth noting, however, that during his evolution, Batyshchev had always possessed strength and an originality of philosophical thinking. Those were quite unusual qualities in his environment at the time.

All this made Batyshchev’s position as an employee of a Soviet institution very vulnerable and he could not often publish in the capital’s publishing house. His main work was published seven years after his death.⁷ Moreover, Batyshchev belonged to the type of philosophers whose nature of reflection always compels them to battle with language. His numerous neologisms are not easily deciphered. They are difficult even for a Russian-speaking reader. Hence the difficulties with translation. So it is not a surprise that Batyshchev is less known in the West, unlike Merab Mamardashvili or Evald Il’yankov. That too is a valid reason for drawing our attention to this philosopher of the late Soviet era.

So the question is: what are the similarities between Batyshchev and Levinas, these two philosophers whose ideas and destinies differ so much?

2. It is impossible for me to assert that Batyshchev was absolutely unfamiliar with Levinas. However, even if he were to a certain degree informed of Levinas, that fact did not influence his theory of communication. His main sources were Marx, Bakhtin, along with the canonical classics of world literature, and Soviet psychology and pedagogy. That’s why it is truly

⁶ Cf.: Каган, М. С., Мир общения: Проблема межсубъектных отношений, М., 1988, 319.

⁷ Батищев, Г. С., Введение в диалектику творчества, СПб., Изд-во РХГИ, 1997, 464.

remarkable how close Batyshchev and Levinas are in their treatment of one key moment: their assertion of the asymmetric nature of inter-subjective relations and the priority of the Other, regarded as the beginning of the ethics.

According to a Moscow philosopher, prior to all reciprocity, a subject faces a moral alternative: either to reach self-assertion at the expense of the Others (the beginning of so-called self-centrism (cf. *conatus essendi* in Levinas' interpretation); or to admit the Other's dominance over oneself (*druhodominantnist*'; cf. Levinas' "height dimension" peculiar to the Other).⁸ According to Batyshchev, it is only in the latter's case that there is a possibility of spiritual and moral awakening in a human being.

Batyshchev develops his teaching of *druhodominantnist*' in polemics with his philosophical teacher Mikhail Bakhtin.⁹ According to Batyshchev, Bakhtin's concept of a dialogue does not include all the necessary warnings against a possible reduction of a dialogue to a formal agreement about equality of all possible positions.¹⁰ In order to avoid this danger, a philosophy of dialogue needs to connect pluralistic ideas and "the vertical of values" beyond which any dialogue loses its spiritual sense. It becomes possible just by giving the priority to the Other; or, in other words, by employing the idea of *druhodominantnist*' which unites both the inter-subjective communication and its value direction. In this respect, Batyshchev's *druhodominantnist*' strongly resembles Levinas' asymmetric address to the Other. So, it is quite remarkable that these two thinkers share the same understanding of this aspect of "the thought on the Other". Based on this shared understanding, we can speak of other similarities between Levinas and Batyshchev. These are:

⁸ Левинас, Э., *Тотальность и Бесконечное* in Левинас, Э., *Избранное : Тотальность и Бесконечное* (М.; СПб., 2000), 217.

⁹ See: Батищев, Г. С., *Диалогизм или полифонизм? (Антитетика в идейном наследии М. М. Бахтина)* in *М. М. Бахтин как философ* (М., 1992), 133.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

- Their rejection of the idea of the subject’s self-assertion (Levinas’ *conatus essendi* and Batyshchev’s model of “atomized subject of activity”).
- For both thinkers, philosophy of the Other is rooted in a religious foundation. For Levinas it is a Judaic tradition¹¹ and for Batyshchev it is Orthodox tradition with significant elements of Russian cosmism. A few years ago, a Cambridge scholar Phillip Blond published a collection of essays dedicated to the most prominent philosophers of the past few centuries and titled *Post-Secular Philosophy*.¹² It narrates about the type of philosophy which stemmed from secular rationalism and yet sought its own way to God. Among the book’s chapters is one on Levinas: “God and phenomenology”. Had Blond known about Batyshchev, I believe there would’ve been an essay on him as well. It seems important that the Russian version of the newest philosophy of the Other, philosophy of communication, has a tendency to become post-secular. Obviously, this tendency rests on a metaphysical foundation, for both Levinas and Batyshchev believed that the Other makes us look up.
- Persistent resistance to the System’s tendencies to swallow human individuality and the latter’s world of communication. Resistance to the attempts of Sameness to swallow the Difference. This motif is characteristic for Levinas, for whom Sameness, or *le Même*, is an ontological structure that not only conquers difference but also subjugates it to power. Therefore, to know something as “the same” means to deprive it of true originality, to step closer to owning it. In a fashion similar to Levinas, Batyshchev warns of the danger to “freeze

¹¹ See: Левинас, Э., *Трудная свобода. Очерки по иудаизму* in Левинас, Э., *Избранное: Трудная свобода* (М., 2004), 329-341.

¹² See: *Post-Secular Philosophy / Between Philosophy and Theology*, ed. by Phillip Blond, London; N.Y., 1998, 365.

in self-sameness”¹³ meaning that it is crucial to preserve one’s ability to listen to the Others’ voices and to protect them from “self-measurement”. However, contrary to the author of *Totality and Infinity*, Batyshchev does not include in his warnings against the System the entire Totality. Because of Batyshchev’s tense ontology, his understanding of Totality acquires positive features of Harmony and World-Order. Batyshchev strives to preserve this positive existential-cosmic perspective.

- Both thinkers are strongly ethically oriented. It is well-known that Levinas perceives ethics as primary philosophy, *philosophia prima*, calling it metaphysics’ star path.¹⁴ With regard to Batyshchev, we can say that he also envisages the theme of the Other as being both an ethical and metaphysical category, adding the pedagogical aspect to it, as well. He was among the most popular philosophers in the pedagogical milieu: his articles published in *Uchitel'skaya Gazeta* (teachers’ newspaper) were quite popular in intelligent circles of the USSR.
- Philosophical interest oriented towards the future, towards new generations. It is evident in Levinas’ concept of *la fécondité*,¹⁵ also in his analytics of temporality; in his demand for comprehension that excludes maieutics.¹⁶ The common ground of all of this is his insistence on the primacy of the Other, as opposed to “the Same”. Batyshchev, in this respect, was entirely oriented toward the future, which is evident from his anthropology of childhood. He understood childhood as a “poorly discovered country”.¹⁷

¹³ Батищев, Г. С., *Введение в диалектику творчества*, 36, 325.

¹⁴ Левинас, Э., *Тотальность и Бесконечное* in Левинас, Э., *Избранное: Тотальность и Бесконечное*, 72.

¹⁵ Ibid., 258-260.

¹⁶ Ibid., 103, 106.

¹⁷ Батищев, Г. С., *Введение в диалектику творчества*, 38.

His analysis of the “unchangeable values of childhood” still remains quite remarkable.¹⁸

It is only natural that despite all of these similarities, there were striking differences between Batyshchev and Levinas. Among the most important ones, I would name the following:

- Batyshchev’s cosmology versus Levinas’ anthropology. We know that according to Levinas the Other entails the other person. Batyshchev, on the other hand, is focused on the endless Universe with all of its known and unknown manifestations of life and spirituality. In this respect, we can say that Batyshchev is a follower of Russian cosmism. He was one of the earliest opponents of anthropocentrism in Soviet philosophical scholarship.¹⁹ According to Batyshchev, interpersonal relations remain imperfect and finite, unless they are oriented towards the meta-personal and non-human Others. Therefore we can emphasize Batyshchev’s ecological dimension, contrary to Levinas’ “humanism of the other person”.
- The differentiation between ontology and ethics. Levinas reduces ontology to egology of the present, characterizing ethics as a rupture with the order of Being. Contrary to that, Batyshchev is an ontological thinker. His ethics remains a part of the world-order. It emphasized one more time Batyshchev’s proximity to the Russian philosophical tradition, which predominant ontological character has been noted by many scholars.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., 38 - 44.

¹⁹ See: Батищев, Г. С., *Нравственный смысл диалектики. (К критике антропоцентризма)*, in *Диалектика и этика* (Алма-Ата, 1983), 104 -114.

²⁰ See, e.g.: Франк, С. Л., *Русское мировоззрение*, in Франк, С. Л., *Духовные основы общества* (М., 1992), 478 - 485, 490.

These are the lines along which we can compare Levinas and Batyshchev.

To the question whether there were attempts to address the theme of the Other in late- Soviet Ukrainian philosophy, I would only answer that I myself do not know of any that took place prior to the middle 1970s. A younger generation of our philosophers of that time looked for inspiration to the above-mentioned Russian thinkers: Batyshchev, Bibler, Bakhtin, Ukhtomskiy and others.

3. As we have seen, the tendency of addressing the Other that had yet formed during the Soviet period embodied essential trends of our native philosophical thought and culture. Levinas, in this respect, turned out to be an expected author. And I must say at once, it could be even dangerous. Apparent proximity might hide for us a deeper originality to Levinas' thought, its specific sources and intentions. Well, the respect to *otherness* of the Other is demanded in that case by the real presence of Levinas' philosophy as it is.

The next reasons that have led to Levinas' significance in our philosophical discourse are intertwined with the realities of our time.

First of all, post-Soviet space is, paraphrasing Borges, a garden of cultures that are drifting apart. When compared to the Soviet times, we are now going through a painful experience of getting to know what alienation means. We encounter alien individuals, religions, and cultures. This experience either provokes hatred towards the Other, or results in a nostalgic feeling over the time when everyone was of your own kind. Levinas and the philosophy of the Other in general help us to understand an important thing: how to respect the otherness of the Other and the distance that separates us. And justly due to it, to build positive and meaningful relations with the Others.

Secondly, it is evident that we are moving now in a direction that is quite opposite to our past. In contemporary Ukraine we can observe a surge in egoistic moods, closeness, and intolerance. Those trends have a

clear sociological confirmation.²¹ The current motto of our days is hard pragmatism and cupidity. In this situation, Levinas reminds us about human generosity and kindness. And by doing that, he brings us back to the best cultural traditions. Perhaps, this aspect of our addressing Levinas is the most crucial now.

²¹ See, e.g.: Магун, В., Руднев, М., Жизненные ориентации населения: сравнение Украины с другими европейскими странами in Украинское общество в европейском пространстве / Ed. by Е. Головаха, С. Макеев, Киев, 2007, 236-237, 247, 258, 271; Паниотто, В., Динамика ксенофобии и антисемитизма в Украине (1994–2007), in Социология: теория, методы, маркетинг (2008, № 1), 197-213.