The Cultural ‘Text of Behaviour’: The Moscow-Tartu School and the Religious Philosophy of Language

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Abstract. This paper is focused on the major contributions of the two main schools of semiotic thought in Russia during the 20th century. It considers cultural mythologies of behaviour as the focal point of the Moscow-Tartu school and then proceeds to the pre-semiotic school of Russian thought, which dealt with the philosophy of the (divine) Name(s). Both traditions are linked by a common preoccupation with the human sign-vehicles-cultural, artistic, literary and religious. Russian semiotics of culture (the author’s life & biography considered as a peculiar kind of a sign-text) and Russian religious philosophy of language (philosophy of the Name) are the most unique scholarly offerings to have originated within the Eastern-European tradition of semiotics.

Keywords: Russian semiotics, Lotman, semiotics of behaviour, religious philosophy of language, Losev, Florensky, Bulgakov.

INTRODUCTION

The Moscow-Tartu School of semiotics emerged in the 1960s with Yuri Lotman as one of its main leaders. (See Lotman, Yuri/Juri: 1974, 1975, 1984, 1990, 1994, 1997, 2009). Other prominent members were Viacheslav Vs. Ivanov, Boris A. Uspensky, Vladimir N. Toporov, Mikhail L. Gasparov, and Alexander M. Piatigorsky (See: Uspenskij et al., 1973; Waldstein, 2008; Nekliudov, 1998; Ivanov, 1976; Halle, 1984). The group followed the tradition of Russian Formalism, later combined with Czech Structuralism, and focused their efforts on the (broadly understood) semiotics of culture, striving to develop an all-inclusive synthetic method of cultural analysis. Their objects of analysis were the various possible historical languages of culture as “secondary modelling systems” with regard to verbal language. According to Lotman, ‘secondary modelling systems’ constitute all cultural systems with exception of natural language. In the obvious spirit of the linguistic turn prevalent in those days, verbal (natural) language was perceived as a “primary modelling” system, thereby marking art, literature, cinema, myth & religion, music or dance as “secondary.” Since the early ’60s and through the ’70s the Moscow-
Tartu school remained more or less within the strategic limits of the traditional Structuralist approach (including intensive contacts with some of the Western colleagues, notably Roman Jakobson).

The Moscow-Tartu school, in a way, was integrated into what is known today as the “Narratology of Culture,” a scholarly practice encompassing the entire spectrum of narrative theory, from Russian Formalism to French Structuralism, and from Mikhail Bakhtin to contemporary poststructuralists. It deals with traditional forms of narrative, such as literature (novels, short stories, memoirs, epic poetry), but also with its new forms (film, music and theatre), studying any cultural ‘text’ that functions as a narrative message between sender and receiver.

The ‘Lotmanian’ approach to the analysis of Russian cultural history endeavours to study personal behaviour and its semiotic ambiance (Andrews, 2003; Nöth, 2006; Ioffe, 2007). Analysis of cultural sign systems explicates creative patterns of personal conduct pragmatics, exemplified by various cultural icons of a given epoch. Accordingly, culture is analyzed as a unique type of text, embracing the secondary modelling systems of non-verbal nature. Moreover, Lotman suggests dealing with a person’s ‘cultural biography’ as if it were a common sign-system, a *sui generis* codified ‘text.’ By coming to terms with this historical phenomenon, certain, specific considerations can be formulated with regard to unique cultural types, such as ‘codes of conduct,’ ‘reputation,’ and a ‘writer’s biography.’ All these characteristics are unified by their direct relation to the way the creative construction of an author’s personal image is being accomplished (self-built). These various creative ‘literary masks’ were very popular with various groups of Russian writers and artists.

In her short pioneering work *The Concept of the Text and Symbolist Aesthetics*, Zara G. Mintz expressed her belief that within the Russian Symbolist movement, reality itself was endowed with qualities of the literary text *per se*. The Universal Text, according to her, is embodied in the “texts of life” and in the “artistic texts” of the Symbolist authors. The Unity of Text is juxtaposed to the infinity of its particular manifestations, a phenomenon that has much to do with the symbolist worldview as a whole. The Symbolist picture of the world proceeds from two dialectically divergent tendencies. One of them establishes a system of antitheses organizing the world in terms of space, value etc. The other is directed to reconcile opposites and establish a universal isomorphism between all the manifestations of life or “the world is full of correlations” (Alexander
Blok quoted in Mintz, 2004: 98–104). It is this very concept of the world as an “art-like” textuality what explains the origin of the symbolist idea of “life-building.” (Mintz 2004: 98-104.)

The semiotics of peculiar forms of artistic ‘masked behaviour’ may frame this discussion of the Moscow-Tartu school. One theoretical text by Lotman and Piatigorsky, devoted to the “Signs of culture” (“Tekst i funkciya” 1968) describes the primary semiotic rules that manage paradigmatic cultural fashions and correspond to behavioural multifunctions. The expanse of operational semiosis may vary considerably among self-conscious individuals engaged in the aesthetic creation of their specific ‘life-texts.’ The Moscow-Tartu scholars believe that the semiotics of behaviour must involve some way of creating a “behavioural text,” that on the one hand functions as a meaningful sign in relation to any other text, and on the other, provides astute recognition of certain empirical phenomena as sign constructions. According to Lotman and Piatigorsky, there are two models of semiotic behaviour, pro-creational and analytical, which allow the semiotics of behaviour to vary considerably among different cultural personalities (Lotman and Piatigorsky, 1968). The semiotic nature of one’s behaviour depends therefore on the culturally suggestive way in which a certain type of ‘text’ is perceived by most of the potential audience regarding a particular cultural hero. In the ‘real time’ of this ongoing behaviour, the ‘reception’ and ‘perception’ turn out to be as meaningful as the ‘action’ itself. The way the mask is received by the audience is as important as the author’s original intention. The main question therefore is whether the ‘mask’ and its creator can be received adequately and correctly (Lotman and Piatigorsky, 1968).

These methodological and theoretical considerations caused the Tartu semioticians to deal more closely with the complex types of aesthetic and social functions characteristic of authorial biographies of major Russian authors. In his seminal paper on literary biography in cultural context, “Typology of Interrelations between Text and the Author’s Identity” (1992), Lotman emphasized Pushkin’s important role in creating the highly influential type of author’s biography foreshadows a vast number of topics in Russian cultural history. According to Lotman who studied Pushkin’s personal behaviour and biography from the viewpoint of its sign foundation, a poet’s part in setting the example for a ‘new’ way of life in cultural communication, is highly important. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the influence of Pushkin who went on to create his
biography with the same kind of a constant focused effort that he put in his literary work. Lotman dealt with the writer’s right to biography that, according to him, was earned by Pushkin and accepted by early 19th century readers. He meant, first of all, a common recognition of the ‘word as act,’ and also the idea that a meaningful thing in literature is not necessarily the verbal stratum of an author’s work, but rather his biography (Lotman, 1992). This idea forced Pushkin to abide by what he preached through his art, while simultaneously placing him in the context of the deeply-rooted national tradition. This especial semiotic condition set the writer apart from all other artists, and granted him to the right to possess a biography that he conceived equivalent to hagiography, a conception prompted the post-Petrine view that writers were in a privileged position, reserved for saints, preachers, holy men, and martyrs.

In the same essay, Lotman stresses the primary importance of the author’s biography for a coherent understanding of the literary artefact and all its possible manifestations. This critical tradition of studying ‘biography’ alongside ‘literary every-day life’ appears to be quite significant. Based on the early 19th century material, Soviet semiology provides definitive observations on behaviour patterns and on the complex nature of the author’s strategic manoeuvring on the arena of his public and private life alike. The figure of Pushkin appears most substantial for this purpose since, according to Lotman, the poet was paying as much attention to working out his public biography as to his literary writing.

**DISCURSIVE STUDY OF BEHAVIOURAL TEXTS**

Arguably, the first contemporary Western scholar to address the problem of discursive interaction between the ‘verbal text’ and the ‘events in life’ was Paul Ricoeur. In his essay “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text” (1973), Ricoeur examines general scholarship on viewing the text as a full-fledged ‘event’ occurring in physical life. In this sense, the French philosopher comes quite close to the tradition of Russian semiotics. Ricoeur points out that “an event” is inevitably “an act of vocal expression” and even an act of speech in the way John Austin or John Searle would see it, which seems coherent with some of the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work, at the time, was not known to Ricoeur (Bakhtin’s work was not translated until the late ’60s).
Ricoeur proposes considering a statement or an act of speech a “living meaning” or, as Bakhtin would put it, as a valid *event*. It is important to stress that according to Ricoeur, any event shares the properties of a text in so far as it is discursive. Setting aside the old structural genre division into narratives and myths Ricoeur, as an underground pioneer of narratology, announces the unitary character of narrative: the cyclical form of a myth is not any less ‘narrative’ than the classical construction of literature with identifiable authors. In this regard, Ricoeur’s views seem to correspond to Yuri Lotman’s, which establish the connection between the conceptual apparatus of an object of culture, culture as an object, and virtual constructs associated with the latter, such as ‘text,’ ‘memory,’ and ‘behaviour.’ Ricoeur makes the claim that an act of speech fully assumes the status of actual life - in other words, the verbal-aesthetic becomes an integral component of the living, systematic world order, suitable for historical description. Ricoeur claims that by speech-act meaning, it is necessary to understand not just the sentence in the narrow sense of the propositional act, but also the illocutionary force and even the perlocutionary action, in the measure that these three are codified in the speech-act, gathered into paradigms, and consequently, identified and reidentified as having the same meaning. Here Ricoeur imbues the word meaning with a wide scope of acceptation which covers all the aspects and levels of the intentional exteriorization that “makes the inscription of discourse possible” (Ricoeur 1973).

In a way different from Ricoeur, the Moscow-Tartu scholars were probing the semiotic limits of what was labelled ‘mythological consciousness’ that in turn structures the world-picture of their hermeneutic interest. In the early ’70s, cultural texts and the juxtaposition of myth and narrative attracted the attention of Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspensky. In their collaborative work “Myth – name – culture” (1975), they defined this opposition as “descriptive vs. mythological narrative.” In the first case (descriptive narrative) the scholars speak of metalanguage (a category or element of *metalanguage*). In the second (mythological description), they refer to *metatext*, i.e., a text serving a metalinguistic function for the subject at hand, where the object being described and the text that describes it belong to one and the same language. According to them, that mythological description is fundamentally monolinguistic, dealing with the same ranks of objects. Whereas, at the same time, non-mythological description is definitely polylinguistic: the reference to metalanguage is
particularly important as a recognition of a different idiom (be it a language of abstract constructs or a foreign language, what is really important here is the actual process of translation and interpretation).

Lotman and Uspensky arrived at a ‘motivated’ understanding of sign-world as purely nominal, with unusual types of logical dependencies and subject-definitions. They described the structure of non-mythological thinking postulating the existence of several “classes” of sign-consciousness. In mythological world there exists a unique type of semi-osis which coincides with the process of “nomination” (giving names to things). A sign in the mythological conscience is similar to its own ‘name,’ and the overall meaning of a personal name in its outmost abstraction comes down to myth per se.

The ‘imagological’ concern of the scholars that can be deduced from this theoretical point is deeply rooted within the Russian religious tradition, and outside the scope of this paper. Once described in such nominalistic terms, myth evidently recalls the philosophical issues of ‘onomatodoxy’ and ‘sophiology’ (associated with the writings of Pavel Florensky, Alexei Losev and Sergius Bulgakov). In what will follow I shall show how the ‘divine name’ polemics actualises the historical debate on the essence of any name, whether it is ‘built in’ the ‘thing’ or arbitrarily attained by the creative cognition within human language. The name of God here functions as a sort of semiological black hole, something that escapes scientific analysis (if to keep the onomatodox intention and perceive full energetic identity between God and His ‘name’). The sign-cover of that Name is therefore not arbitrary and moreover, not really human-given and thereupon contradicts the main foundations of semiotic theory from Ferdinand de Saussure to Charles W. Morris and Charles Sanders Peirce.

Lotman and Uspensky (1975) formulate the somewhat similar issue of mythological names and naming process by stipulating that a mythological conscience can be in fact perceived as non-semiotic in its essence. In the sphere of personal names, according to these scholars, there occurs an amalgamation of word and what it denotes. This particular feature is quite characteristic of the majority of mythological views that propagate assemblage of the name and what is being named. It might be justly observed that this mythological view is at odds with the standard science of semiology.
One of the founding members of the Moscow-Tartu school of semiotics, a UCLA professor Viacheslav Vsevolodovich Ivanov, related the semiotic tradition of his age to the preceding intellectual epoch, namely to the work of Pavel Florensky (Ivanov, 1976). The Moscow semiotician pointed out that even in the early days of Russian philology, when the work of Ferdinand de Saussure was not yet available in Russia, Florensky was the first to explicate the groundbreaking idea that special relationship exists between what is being symbolized and the form of symbolization. Florensky was then working on implementation of a unique scholarly program that aimed to create a dictionary of universal symbols: so called Symbolarium. This venture anticipated some major semiotic studies of the 1960s and 1970s exercised by the Moscow-Tartu school. Florensky was also one of the first to correlate between the notions of form, number and sign, in particular in his treatise “Number as a form” (on this see especially Loren, and Kantor, 2009).

Following Nikita Struve Thomas Seifrid has stressed a certain paradox within Florensky’s protean thought that insists on indeterminate, antinomian nature of language and reality. This paradox is the product of Florensky’s “psychological fragility and divided worldview which hesitates between scientism and mysticism” (Seifrid, 2005: 102). According to Seifrid, Florensky treats language as a reification of the order underlying the cosmos that is capable of providing proto-realizations of transcendence. Florensky’s theory of word would correspond to the hidden tradition of Russian idealism that views the word as “a sort of un perplexed realization of the self” (Seifrid, 2005: 103). This Florenskyan identification of human sign-vehicle with, so to say in Moscow-Tartu fashion, the primary sign-system, brings it closer to Lotmanian semiotics of culture which championed author’s behaviour as a common public sign of primary importance. As Seifrid maintains, Florensky’s thought resembles that of Roman Jakobson, whose understanding of language is “sustended by the vision of a non-arbitrary quasi-mathematical or geometrical order underlying life’s phenomena or at the very least the products human culture” (Seifrid, 2005: 103).

As Charles Lock once noted, Florensky’s views on the nature of being are “remarkably close to Peirce’s denial of intuition” (and, therefore, to the ideas on representation of materiality) (Lock, 1993). What is common for both thinkers according to Lock is the “insistence that ideas occur and change only when signs move into material contiguity.” In gen-
eral, Florensky perceived the symbol as “a being that is greater than itself”; a symbol is “something that manifests in itself that which is not itself, that which is greater than itself and is nevertheless essentially manifested through itself.” Therefore, “a symbol is an essence the energy of which is joined, or commingled, with the energy of another essence” (Bychkov, 1993: 70).

RUSSIAN RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE -SUB SPECIE SEMIOTICA

As well as for Florensky, the medieval Byzantine hesychast doctrine was crucially important for the theoretical interests of Aleksei Losev and Sergius Bulgakov, who devoted many pages of their works to elaborating their philosophical attitudes toward language and its basic unit – the word (on this see Ioffe, 2008). By doing so, they entered into a fierce argument that evolved in Russia during the first 15 years of the 20th century, and which was centred on the controversy of imiaslavie, a term that might be translated into the scholarly lingua franca as ‘onomatodoxy.’

Actively interfering on behalf of the persecuted imiaslavtsy, Losev, Bulgakov, and Florensky strove to lay down a solid conceptual foundation that would prove the overall validity of onomatodoxy and describe the elemental language units (i.e. words and names) in the light of this religious current. It is obvious that the “dialectics of name,” mentioned so frequently and so ambiguously by Losev, constitutes the epicentre of his entire philosophy of language, taken in its broadest possible sense. According to Losev, ‘name’ is life, for example, an absolute imperative: the complete modality of human existence. The name of a thing represents the very essence of the communication between man and material reality. Losev writes at length about the fundamental existential solitude of the man who has no name. From Losev’s perspective, the resulting deafness – the blind inability to distinguish between linguistic signs – is equivalent to losing an intrinsically human mental capacity or even going completely out of one’s mind. Making a concession to his contemporaries, the philosopher claims that he is practically the first, if not the first Russian author to start a serious analysis that is neither merely linguistic (probably referring to scholars such as Baudouin de Courteney and Leo Scherba), nor phenomenological (possibly referring to Gustav Shpet and the neo-Humboldtian school; on this see Ioffe, 2008-a; also Plotnikov, 2006).
Rather, he took what he referred to as a fully dialectical approach, the purpose of which was to describe word and name as an instrument of social interaction while revealing its public domain.

Jacques Derrida, had he been able to read Russian, would have certainly regarded Aleksei Losev and his works on the theory of name as an example of Western logocentrism. Indeed, the infinite spirit of the word-as-name permeates Losev’s works; the word is self-sufficient and meaningful in and of itself, and, naturally, no profound thinking, from Losev’s perspective, can be possible without the use of words. According to Losev, wordless thinking is almost an oxymoron – a pitiful, impossible enterprise, dooming one to be deaf and blind, estranged from the outside world. To the disappointment of contemporary anthropologists, this question by no means concerns neurological operations with cognitive perception of the image-icon mechanics of sense creation. Losev, despite selflessly devoting nearly eighty years to the creation of multi-faceted and rather obscure contributions to many areas of the humanities, nevertheless left no coherent theory of “image,” not even in his multi-volume speculations on the aesthetics of antiquity (Kusse, 2004).

Returning to the theme of Derrida, it is worth mentioning Losev’s approach to sound (phoneme). While admitting that sound is exoteric to man at all times and that names are understood in combination with their phonic manifestation, Losev tries to demonstrate that in its essence, name has nothing to do with sound. This is an obvious example of the traditional and familiar tendency of the cultural, historical, and linguistic valorisation of speech elevating it above and beyond writing, which Derrida, as a fervent champion of writing, would not have favoured.

According to Losev, the name’s sound-form represents only its outermost rigid layer. That is, of course, the phoneme: the phonic representation of a distinct, intentional, and recognizable unit of speech. A phoneme may be grasped just as an empty form, a membrane consisting of exterior covering and nothing more. For Losev a word consists of elements that affect hearing. The phoneme of a name is a combination of spoken sounds grouped into concrete qualitative categories of meaning. But the phoneme, as Losev reiterates throughout his text, does not represent the actual essence of a name (podlinnaia sushchnost’ imeni). It cloaks another concept – that of sememe. According to Losev, the full structure of the significance of a name is considerably more important than the phoneme. He finds it necessary to point out that a name is not a random
combination of mechanical sounds but something incomparably more substantial.

This context emphasizes the role of a verbal etymon which in Losev’s writing represents a kind of primal, primordial seed of a word. The etymon constitutes the word’s elemental phonetic substance which acquires its initial sense in a process of crystallization that is not dependent upon phonetic differentiation. The actual life of a name-word begins when this elemental substance starts to gain new denotations, connotations, and other semantic accretions. The etymon, according to Losev, is something formally shared in all the destinies of a given word. The analysis of a word outside the traditional linguistic connection with its phoneme represents the main goal of his philosophy of the name.

Dictionaries, from Losev’s perspective, give a list of the main sememe variants – concrete ways of understanding various meanings, all of which can be boiled down to a multi-faceted semantic foundation of the word, contained in the symbolon, that is, its symbolic sememe. The resulting eidos simultaneously represents an external appearance, form, face, or logical appearance. All of the above are, in a certain sense, rooted in the general meaning of the visual entity, springing from the verbal semantics of seeing, and assuming a special type of cognitive vision (myslitel’noi zritel’nosti) and inductive intuition. According to Losev, anything that can be regarded as a common nucleus for all of the various significations of a word should be considered its symbolic sememe. At the same time, the pure noema of a word is nothing other than its additional cognitive weight. Losev’s idea of noema is based on his reading of Husserl and his critical response to the German philosopher’s understanding of the concept.

According to Losev, the noema of a word depends neither on sounds, nor on the experience of some psychic perceptions, but instead flows directly from human thought: from the capacity for understanding (Losev, 1997: 61). It is worth pointing out that Losev’s system does not seem to apply to modernist lexicon, for instance the radical language of zaum’ (transreason) of Futurism and Dadaism, or the creation of poetic neologisms, puns, and Joycean portmanteau-words, since the associative-phonetic response to these experiments is only possible through careful attention to the glossolalic phoneme, uttered in a sensuous and artistic manner. This, in turn, correlates with and guides the recipient’s mental process, powerfully giving shape to the resulting noema. Losev’s reflections on the subject of noema seem to make sense in the context of Real-
ism, which he valued so highly, and poses problems for the interpretation of modernist and avant-garde literature, including that of his contemporaries.

Despite all objections to the contrary, Losev is interested in formulating a general foundation for interpreting various connotations of any given name. The stability of the semantic field and the constancy of its significance, as described in Filosofia imeni, can be a key to grasping his basic linguistic standpoints. In order to understand the milieu which prompted the creation of the above work, it is important to consider the question of ‘inner muteness,’ a tragic loneliness and primitive anti-religious ideology which creates a conscious need for a philosophy of the name. According to Losev, the noema of a word, its condensed message, should indicate that which can be easily derived from the word’s core semantic root. In a certain sense, the existence of a valid and functional name implies a real communicational (socio-practical) context for discernment, decipherment, and subsequent establishment of meaning.

The idea of a name depends, according to Losev, on the one who actually uses the name, that is, whoever applies this discursive idea in practice. Losev identifies this moment as one of the causal nodes of the materialization of a word, which is a fundamentally functional element of human life. This structure of the incarnation of the essence of a name, with an external agent defining this essence, appears rather encoded and presents a model of semiotic behaviour and semiosis in its simplest and most obvious form. Losev’s overall view of positivism and Structuralist semiotics was negative. It is, for example, widely known that Losev’s engaged in an active polemic against Lotman’s ideas. Losev disagreed with the persistent use of the term structure by the followers of the Tartu School in the general spirit of the scholarly developments in France at the time in response to Levi-Strauss’ work.

Losev provided his own detailed interpretation of the term in order to point out the contradictory usage of the Moscow-Tartu School. Losev, most curiously, shared a general antagonism for Yuri Lotman’s philology with another prominent thinker of his generation: Mikhail Bakhtin. The latter allegedly gave the following response to the question of whether or not he would participate in a certain public debate in the role of Lotman’s opponent: “Of course I will. I am no structuralist, to say the least” (Bakhtin qtd in Reid, 1990: 325–338).
Yuri Lotman’s son Mikhail observes that when *Lectures on Structural Poetics*, which laid the foundation for the Moscow-Tartu School, came out in 1964 followed by the regular issues of *Studies in Sign Systems*, it became immediately clear that they had provoked a hostile response not only from the functionaries of officious philology, but also from many serious authors (M. Lotman, 1995). Both Losev and Bakhtin regarded the ideas of the Moscow-Tartu School of Semiotics with mistrust, not to say hostility, so that the reigning political climate was far from being the only problem. In his polemics with the Moscow-Tartu school followers (and semioticians in general), Losev wrote, among other things, that each sign can have an infinite number of meanings, that is, be a symbol. This was written in the context of the fact that, from what he could tell, Charles Sanders Peirce had identified seventy-six types of signs. Losev responds to this claim with a question that, although asked with obvious irony, is still far from superfluous: “Would it not be better to talk about ‘studies in symbolic systems’ instead of ‘studies in sign systems?’” (Losev, 1982: 237).

As Haci-Halil Uslucan has recently noted (2004) the dialogical, communicative principle is nothing but a core element of the Peircean semiotics, which has deep implications to meaning-construction, subjectivity and the self, as well as communication. The scholar notes that Peirce’s conception of sign is related to the idea of the human being as a sign, where the self is both an interpreting subject and an interpreted object.

Losev insists that a thing is not exactly what is denoted by a name, not identical to the name. Equating the idea of a thing and its *noema* with its name, the Soviet philosopher wonders, what is then the difference between the *noema* and the *idea* of a word? What is the difference between the name as *noema* and the name as *idea*? We now may have come closer than ever before to a clarification of this distinction. *Noema* implies the metaphysical existence of a thing, and the *idea* implies the metaphysical existence of a thing. But the *idea* of a thing implies only the pure otherness of the thing as such and nothing more. The *idea* of a thing is the very thing itself, only transposed into the metaphysical realm. The thing here is not altered in any way and none of its features are lost. The entire object, down to its subtlest characteristics, is transposed into the metaphysical realm. The *idea* is nothing but the other of a thing, something different from a thing. This is not a case of complete and absolute oneness and resemblance but of equality with its metaphysical manifestation.
According to Losev, the name of a thing/object is a clearly understood, recognized entity, revealed in the mind, so to speak. Delving more deeply into the complex worlds of the so-called *energems*, Losev continues to elaborate on the new postulates of his language philosophy. For example, he intriguingly describes the conception of a name in the consciousness of an individual. A word appears as an independent, separate element, a kind of ‘thing’ within a ‘thing’: a word-self distinct from the human-self. Elaborating upon the idea of ‘stimulus,’ Losev connects it with the initial potential of *any-thing* (and with the *name* as its unique derivative), brought to life by the energetic abilities of thought.

Losev seems to treat the concept of the name as central to his philosophy of language. The term *idea* gives way to the term *eidos* – a quintessential parameter used to determine the modifications of *any-thing* that has a name. The expression and representation of the *eidos* follows from the thing named. Always inseparable from the object (the thing it denotes), the name (in the metaphysical realm), according to this conception, can be compared to a projection of the physical thing. Nearly every stage in the life of a name is given its own designation in the form of a convenient Greek term, such as *phoneme, sememe, noema, eidos*, whose meaning serves to further clarify the nuance of the aspect being represented. This progressive path inexorably leads Losev to the protagonist of the language philosophy he is constructing – the *Logos*. It is possible that the purpose of the *Logos* theme is to indicate some dialectical synthesis, in which a number of independent and contradictory elements, denoted by the above Greek terms, are joined together to create a unity based on the universal physical/chemical/biological principle of the unity and struggle of opposites (*edinstvo i bor'ba protivopolezhnosti*), upon which Dialectical Materialism is based. According to Losev, the work of signification can be also understood as being related to this very principle, moving from the simplest forms to the more complex. This leads to a more harmonic understanding of any given whole as a complex and divided system containing some struggling elements that may be directly strictly incompatible. We may note that this attitude was widely explored by Marxist and post-Marxist philosophers of all sorts.

Throughout *Filosofija imeni*, Losev repeatedly and in various ways asserts that a word, is unchangeably and absolutely ‘the thing understood,’ that is, a distinct substantive object, correctly perceived by the mind through the decipherment of its semiotic message. Needless to say, some
questions arise in connection with modern literature, where far from all
given names-words-symbols representing things are always automatically
understood by the audience or reader. It is interesting to consider how
Losev would have defended the main postulates of his philosophy of the
name in the face of many bright works of modern and avant-garde art,
especially those of his contemporaries. It appears, however, that Losev
was remarkably indifferent to what a notable semiotician Roman Jakob-
son called ‘the newest Russian poetry.’

SERGIUS BULGAKOV AND HIS THEORY OF THE NAME-AS-
WORD

Father Sergius Bulgakov, another eminent Russian philosopher writing in
in post-revolutionary Yalta in 1919−20, arrived at the subject of the
Name-as-Word in a manner similar to that of his younger contemporary
Alexei Losev. Both thinkers became preoccupied with the theory of sig-
nification through their participation in the onomatodoxy movement,
which was condemned by the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox
Church. Bulgakov was deeply involved with the debates surrounding on-
omatodoxy as its semi-official defender.

At first sight, Bulgakov’s work is much different from Losev’s in
terms of both terminology and the arguments presented. One can say
that Bulgakov’s reasoning follows a more characteristically “European”
philosophical style, to use a broad aphoristic statement (Evtuhov, 1997).
It also employs various impressionistic maxims, associated with the pro-
gressive shift in the humanities happening at the time. Father Sergius
opens his book with a broad discussion on how, from his perspective,
one should conceptualize the idea of “word.” Bulgakov is concerned
here not with genesis, but with substance – a sort of foundation shared
by all living language systems at nearly any stage of their historical devel-
opment.

Bulgakov is concerned with the “sound per unit” (udel’no-zvukovaia
massa), the intrinsic meaning of a word, and its essential denotations, in-
dependent of the iconic grapheme or gesture. In this regard, the philoso-
pher is especially interested in the idea of the “word as object.” How can
one talk about the conceptual substrate of a “word form?” What is “es-
sential and constant” (glavnoe i neizmennoe) here? Bulgakov approaches Lo-
sev’s perspective (we can be quite certain that the two Russian authors
had no familiarity with each other’s texts) by claiming that a verbal sign falls under the communication principle and is in one way or another connected with the imperative of understanding and ‘reading.’ Based on the communicative, dialogically-active (echoing Bakhtin) nature of a word, it cannot be examined and understood solely in the context of the discourse on signs. In other words, initially, the purely semiotic analysis of Charles S. Peirce, Charles W. Morris, and Ferdinand de Saussure satisfies neither Losev nor Bulgakov, although Losev would finally turn to Peirce’s ideas on the nature of sign. And since the word is not simply a sign, it can be regarded as *sui generis* of energy (or a cluster of energy like *energema*). In accordance with this principle, even a word that has not yet been uttered and, therefore, has not yet been understood – in other words, a word still ‘unheard’ and ‘unrecognized’ – nevertheless retains its intrinsic energetics without turning into a lifeless template of a sign, preserving its energetic charge in a kinetic form, which cannot be depleted as long as the communicational cosmos within which it continues to exist.

The full-fledged existence of a word is made up, according to Bulgakov, of the “sound images of individual letters as such, outside of the unity of form” (*Filosofiia imeni*, 29–30). The conditions necessary for the life of a word require not as much the letter form, but rather, the imminent meaning content, endowed with universally accepted external characteristics. From this standpoint, the word ‘water’ is a valid word, while, say, ‘wtaer’ is not, or at least not until this latter spelling for some reason gains conventional semantic acceptance in some living language system. Father Sergius is ready to admit that one and the same word can have dozens of different semasiological connotations (including literary, metaphorical and subjective ones), not always reflected in the formal dictionary form. In this way, one and the same *thing* (a term important not only to Immanuel Kant, but also to Losev) can have dozens of different descriptive designations, each representing a different way of understanding it. Bulgakov very accurately notes here that the process of word formation is a true art and according to him words are not to be invented, they are born by themselves out of the irrational abyss from which the most needful and enduring words flow (*Filosofiia imeni*, 29–30).

At the same time, Father Sergius denies the existence of a word consisting on the root alone (which does not clarify his position on the concept of ‘inner form’), as well as the existence of an absolutely isolated dictionary word, never used in everyday speech. Bulgakov talks about the
sum of factors that lead to the original birth of a word, presenting and analyzing various specific theories. One of the interesting questions to be asked here is: How can thought be rendered without the use of language? Much like Losev, Bulgakov claims that mental thoughts cannot exist without words, just as words cannot exist without specific meanings. From the perspective of Bulgakov’s system of thought, the obvious absurdity of trying to prove the opposite can be demonstrated with the well-known statements “God does not exist” or “God is dead.” The very mentioning of the “God” concept – the introduction and the use of this term – already suggests an implicit, a priori, set of assumptions about Him, as well as about which qualities are pertinent to him and which are not. To make the statement possible, the formula in this modality should be expanded: “God is not God, and he does not exist,” while the opposite is true: “If God exists always, He is eternal and ineffable.” Into the same category falls the absurdity of the statement “the dead person has risen to life,” since the dead cannot become alive. In order for the dead to become alive, the following should be true: “The dead person is not dead,” and only then will the “dead” rise and walk. In the context of his general philological metaphysics, Father Sergius links the nature of the word with universal symbolism. In his discussion of the role of the word within the philosophy of symbolism, the name represents a repository for universal energy – a type of multidimensional cosmic-divine Symbol. In connection with this, Bulgakov identifies the problem of metaphor, the infinite multiplication of the word, the merging of different denotations, and the word’s nuclear fragmentation. Thus, Bulgakov, unlike Losev, in some way admits and accepts the word’s polysemy, as well as its potential fluidity, and the evolution of connotative meaning depending on each individual usage.

The decisive factor in the manifestation of the word is the birth of phonic symbols of meaning, that is, the process whereby a particular sound combination comes to be endowed with a specific semantic significance. Bulgakov reiterates his belief that ideas or thoughts are not possible without words. In fact, nothing at all exists without them. If something is, there is a word for it. All speech inherently depends on the assumption of definite sense, inevitably involving mental activity – a capacity that animals do not fully possess. This leads directly to the problem of consciousness, another major anthropocentric concept, addressed by
contemporary philosophers such as Merab Mamardashvili and Aleksandr Piatigorsky.

According to Bulgakov, the germinal word is definitely antigrammatical, lacking the precision of an established part of speech, and “as the Symbol of the Universe, is not invented by man but manifests itself within him” (Filosofiia imeni, 57). Curiously, the essence of the noun, for Bulgakov, is the pronoun. Fr. Sergius believes that the pronoun represents “the silent mystical gesture that is ever-present in a name: the original A.” It is precisely the object’s natural genus, with its variable phonic guise, which constitutes the main axis of word formation. He offers a characteristic argument that “the name always represents a hidden proposition, an undeveloped sentence.” The philosopher suggests that a name always poses a question about itself, as a thing of substance, and answers it affirmatively. In Bulgakov’s view, the name is intrinsically predicative – active in the same way that a verb is – and predication is prior to naming. Much like in quantum mechanics, an object signifies a kind of condensed inner essence of an action, where the nature of a phenomenon precedes its name. Just as the ‘quality of being wooden’ comes before ‘tree,’ ‘being a snake’ precedes ‘snake,’ and ‘being human’ precedes ‘human.’ Bulgakov speaks often and with conviction about the impossibility of a phenomenological distinction between a proper noun and a common noun, since at root there is always the energy of the idea of the predicate’s action – the concrete potential of the sign. As we can see, Bulgakov’s vision here approaches that of Losev, with his discussion of the energy dynamics of the name.

The philosopher offers an intriguing explanation as to the illusiveness of material existence when it is severed from man, its namer. Thing can be named only through human and inside human, as there are hidden names for all things. A man is a microcosmic being that gives birth to all words and names (Filosofiia imeni, 59). According to Bulgakov, the existence of objects in any physical environment, in space, and in other worlds is not entirely real and, in some way, secondary, conditional, and dependent upon the existence of man; that is, the man-signifier of all things’ names. Unlike Losev, who generally tends to use the term thing, Fr. Sergius prefers object. It is worth mentioning that Bulgakov regards the noun as arguably the most fundamental form of language and speech. In this context, his thoughts on the initial nature of nouns – their formation and the validity of their definitions in relation to other parts of
the sentence – are noteworthy. Bulgakov criticizes Kant for neglecting linguistics and for failing to give proper attention to the concept of *langue*. From his point of view, this lack of sign-language study in the *Critique of Pure Reason* represents a weak link or “systemic *aporia*” in the general worldview of the great German thinker. He attempts to demonstrate that nearly all of Kant’s achievements and the ‘signature’ discoveries expressed in his categories, were, in fact, foreseen and pioneered by language itself, and that the entire structure of Kant’s argument follows the basic grammatical structure of a language. In summarizing Bulgakov’s position, it should be noted that he is unable to fully transcend a strictly modal perception of the linguistic universe. For example, he offers the phrase “fried ice is hot,” insisting that it can only conditionally be considered a sentence, as a genuine sentence would require not only a bare form, but also definite, meaningful content.

Not without some disappointment, one may be compelled to observe the obvious fact that Bulgakov does not take into consideration the aesthetic dimension, in which the establishment of meaning takes place through unconventional and non-traditional grammar. Much like Losev, Bulgakov, it seems, is not quite ready to include the artistic domain in his study. It appears that both philosophers’ theories on the nature of the name of a thing could be applicable only within the pragmatic, empirical, as well as in strictly religious dogmatic spheres. When it comes to arts and metaphorical writing, their main postulates are of little use, and, what is more, not always entirely clear and logical. This is because the very *modus operandi* of the aesthetic universe is in many ways distinctly different than the empirical-phenomenological axioms that Bulgakov and Losev embrace as their worldview.

**CONCLUSIONS**

It is apparent that both Russian schools of semiotic thought were preoccupied with the idea of human sign vehicles, be it cultural, artistic, literary or religious. One may assume that both schools of Russian sign-theory championed cultural communication as a valuable process. Both the Moscow-Tartu school and the lingual-religious movement were profoundly interested in grasping various human perceptual modes, which suggests a certain revision of the traditional ontology of perception that occurs in human mind.
The recognizable differences in methodology and research goals of the two main schools of Russian semiotic thought epitomize the complicated intellectual trajectory in the intellectual history of Russia. Though a reputable scion of the strictly scientist legacy of Russian Formalism, it is equally rooted in an alternative Russian tradition of sign/word analysis: the religious philosophy of language.

References


