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SUBJECTIVISM IN ARTISTIC CONSCIOUSNESS¹

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Summary. Subjectivism has a lot of varieties. Classic subjectivism (George Berkeley, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Ernst Mach) assumes that the world is the aggregate of sensations. With time the problem of credibility of sensations becomes less important, and signs systems, first of all, the language, come to the fore as the demiurge of an individual's internal world. With the help of the language an individual creates both external and internal world (including sensations themselves). In the culture of XX–XXI centuries subjective idealism on the whole and solipsism in particular have become the metaphor of loneliness, alienation of man from public institutions.

Keywords: subjectivism; argument to sensations; language; text; mind.

The founders of subjective idealism and agnosticism started from the assumption that sensations are the primary reality any individual encounters. Berkeley's classic subjective idealism uses the argument to sensations: the world is locked inside an individual consciousness due to sensations, making it impossible for an individual to go beyond their border, sensations themselves having no external or internal grounds. Sensations are not defined as a substance, but their real cause is viewed as incomprehensible. A human being is born with sensations, and they are not defined.

As time passes, semiotic systems, first of all, the language, take the primary role

in creating the inner world of an individual. With the help of the language an individual shapes both his inner and outer world, including sensations. This approach originates from Wilhelm von Humboldt's theory, who in controversy with G. W. F. Hegel's point about evolution of philosophy as full-based doctrine of Spirit as the quintessence of the world, argued that there is a primordial mediator between subject and object, and between Man, Universe and God, and that is the language. Therefore the process of spiritual self-grounding and self-study primarily takes place in the sphere of *the language*. Language constructions form the initial field for "philosophizing", as they link an individual to his life. Thought cannot embrace purely

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physical “non-language” reality on the same grounds as Kantian reason cannot conceive a thing in itself (“non-language reality” = “a thing in itself”).

Thus, Humboldt introduces the third component in the classic dichotomy “thought – reality”, namely, the language. The new version of subjectivism can be derived from the well-known Humboldt’s idea of language circle: “Every language draws about the people that possesses it a circle whence it is possible to exit only by stepping over at once into the circle of another one. To learn a foreign language should therefore be to acquire a new standpoint in the world-view hitherto possessed, and in fact to a certain extent is so, since every language contains the whole conceptual fabric and mode of presentation of a portion of mankind” [8]. Hence, not only sensations lie between an individual and the world, but also languages. Language is a prison for spirit, an individual is locked inside the language, language prevents going into the outer world. But if a prisoner can leave his jail, a man is not able to get out of the language prison.

The idea of the language system dominance over its users, dictatorship of its rules and impossibility to go beyond it has been developed in the subsequent philosophic studies. For example, in the views of the followers of structuralism, by analogy with the language that generates all products of speech activity, there emerged a concept of a priori unconscious structure similar to the language that generates all products of socio-symbolic and human activities (kinship relations, rituals, forms of art, etc.). All products of sociocultural creativity were viewed as sign constructions, manifestations of some form of language, or texts. A primeval ritual, a scientific treatise and an advertising commercial are compared to speech that consists of meaningful signs. The meaning of a sign arises not by itself, but due to its being incorporated in some system (similar to the language system), and any cultural sign

cannot exist outside this system. Through this “speech” it is possible to get to the “language” structure – systems of signs and symbols. Meanwhile, the structures appear as generating models that determine a researcher’s mode of thinking. So, although a man can have illusions about his freedom and sovereignty, in fact, every cultural phenomenon is based on the Structure similar to a language one; we exist within its framework, it organizes our lives.

Attempts are made to study mechanisms allowing structures to exercise influence. For example, R. Barthes, looking at the innocent at the first sight phenomenon of “writing”, could identify social mechanism of oppression, a powerful institute of compulsion in this way similar to any other social establishment. All products of social language practice, all sociolects developed by generations, classes, parties, literary schools, printed media, etc. throughout the history of society, can be viewed as a huge warehouse of different kinds of “writing”, from which an individual must borrow his “language”, and along with it the whole system of values, senses and attitudes to reality [1].

The enforcement action of the structures can be explained in the framework of L. Hjelmslev’s connotative semiology [7], with the help of such notion as “connotative sense”. Thus, any language represents a combination of the explicit and implicit, denotative and connotative levels; at that what is implied can under certain circumstances become explicit, and the explicit can plunge in the connotative “subtext”.

Thus, the discipline marked the transition to sign systems that people use being unaware of them, and, what is more, in many cases are controlled by them.

The vast majority of illusions or false ideas that have been recognized as the most tragic experiences of a modern man have the language nature. If previously the main delusions of people in the process of cognition of the world were connected



with sensual perception – the flat Earth, the Earth as the center of the Universe, – today the most acute delusions and sensations are down to the ideological constructions, distorting the ideas about the role of State in the class society, the illusion of common equality before the law and the truthfulness of mass media, so they are connected with sign systems, texts, and the language. This state of affairs has influenced philosophy.

Presumably, Gadamer's works most likely marked the point since that the language (text) started to claim the position of primary philosophic reality. Previously, the main opposition in philosophy had been that of matter and consciousness (subject and object). After Humboldt the classic dichotomy "thought – reality" was supplemented with the third component – the language. Nowadays the main opposition is the opposition of author and interpreter (thought) to text (language). Or it could be put even narrower: "interpreter – text". That means that the focus of philosophic studies has been shifted from the world as such to the text that is self-sufficient and possesses some substantiality, and the emphasis is on the activities of a subject – an interpreter.

Tragic illusions are so vivid and meaningful for a modern man, so eyeball visible that there is no need to be a philosopher in order to identify them. In particular, they are represented in the framework of artistic study of the world – in literary works.

Fiction has many ties with scientific, critical, documentary and philosophic literature. Literature is one of many ways in which language can be used, as well as philosophy, but these are two different ways. As word, language is the reality of thought, the development of literature is closely connected with the development of theoretical thinking, though not identical with it. Long ago Lessing made a shrewd observation that the power of literary image consists in the expression of action and impression produced by an object. Figura-

tiveness of verbal art is based on indirect reflection of the world perceived through the sphere of feeling and thought [10], so the role of literature as universal poetic cognitive medium cannot be overestimated. Literature is more than other arts able to ponder over life. The fact that among all language phenomena the work of fiction is most relevant to interpretation and so lies very close to philosophy, has been pointed out by H.-G. Gadamer [5]. The main force of literary image consists in some kind of poetic dialectics, an ability to confront and correlate diverse, often fragmented phenomena, depict one through another.

The phenomenon of existentialism (a modification of subjective idealism) is well-known in the history of philosophy as probably the only school having achieved universal acknowledgement in the XX century philosophy, in which an artistic method was as important as a scientific one. At the end of the 1960-ies it entirely passed to the sphere of belles-lettres, and to the pages of fiction novels and TV screens.

In this case we are dealing with philosophers drifting towards literature. But movement is also possible in the opposite direction – from literature to philosophy. Philosophic study of the world by writers is a traditional characteristic of Russia. It dates back as far as the beginning of the XIX century, when autocratic reaction to the Decembrists Rebellion lead in the 1820-ies to the exclusion of philosophy from university curricula and persecution of professors, that continued till the middle of the century. It was during that period that philosophy fled from the university lecture halls to numerous circles arising in Moscow and St. Petersburg, political journalism and literature [2]. And that time was described by R. V. Ivanov-Razumnik as one of the brightest periods in the history of Russian ideological development [see: 9]. We often use such expressions as "Tolstoy's philosophy" or "Dostoevskiy's philosophy", as though to confirm their right to express philosophic ideas.



“In our literature-centered culture philosophic reflection, critical consciousness and traditions are absent not because of the seeming absence of philosophy itself, but because of its very literary character, its dependence on literature. That is why we did not have the rigid division or gap that is characteristic of the Western society. There were not even two equal areas that could compete” [15].

Thus, philosophic study of reality in Russian literature has long history. However, the moods and philosophic ideas growing in the literature of the late XX – early XXI centuries are of a totally different character.

As an example we have looked at the works of an up-to-date Russian writer – Victor Pelevin. The following factors determine this choice. Pelevin is one of the brightest and most read authors of the last decade. He has been awarded many literary prizes. French Magazine put Victor Pelevin on the list of the world culture’s 1000 most powerful people (besides Pelevin, on this list Russia is represented by film director Sokurov). This writer has become a fashion in all spheres of society, from first year students to professors, and from businessmen to freelance artists. The genre of Pelevin’s books has been defined as “pop-metaphysics”, but nevertheless, metaphysics is something more than what mass culture has to offer. The main subject of Pelevin’s novels is the illusive character of reality and other worlds. In all his works one can find “the emphasis on reproduction of consciousness and especially unconsciousness, generating quaint distorted combinations of real and make-belief things” [6].

In the novel «Generation P» [12] the reality of public authority is challenged – there is no state or government as such, it is a mere illusion. The action is set in the Yeltsin’s time. A poor graduate of Literature Institute Vavilen Tatarskiy manages to get a job in an advertising company with the help of his connection. He is climbing

up the career ladder thanks to his natural talent and “stimulating thinking” drug visions, until finally hits the top – TV advertising. But finding himself in Ostankino, Vavilen all of a sudden for himself and for the readers realizes that television is a misinformation rather than information medium. For example, political leaders – Berezovskiy, Yeltsin and others – are not more than pictures on the screen. The main character also starts creating presidents and deputies with his powerful computer. As time goes, reality, advertising texts and comic situations with computer politicians get more and more interwoven in his mind with drug hallucinations from Sumerian mythology. At the end of the novel Tatarskiy is conferred the title of the husband of the great goddess Ishtar and together they go through the service of marriage on top of Babylon Tower, after which his personality is being copied and circulated through the media, turning him to “tatarskiy” with small “t”. He appears to be the creator of all human fortunes, almost a god, with the “rod” in his hands – a mobile phone with the only button on the keyboard. The author implies that Tatarskiy has something to do with the divinity, when an advertising commercial character shouts, “Kandahar sure beats it!” One cannot help thinking: maybe, that war had also been created? It is not clear who is the true governor of the world.

“Generation P” conveys a philosophic idea of the tragedy of human personality in a modern society and the pressure of virtual television reality on human mind as it programs thinking and behavior. A man is being convinced – and gets convinced. All the surrounding things – Che Guevara, Christ, supermodels or democracy – are as much brands as Coca Cola, Nokia or US dollar. Reality is being imposed on a person in its rational, sign form. The world is created not by feelings, but by intellect, and somebody else’s intellect at that. Thus, we are dealing with modern rational, sign subjectivism.



In the story “Omon Ra” [13] the history of Soviet cosmonautics is presented as an enormous sadistic fake. The story of the Lunar mission that lead to numerous human losses turns out to be a thoughtful stage play. Why does the State need it? Lieutenant colonel Urchagin from the aviation college says, “a man ready to commit a heroic deed, although invisible, is what the country needs as he feeds its main strength”. The State in “Omon Ra” is a grand mystical construction; thanks to all-penetrating deception it erases all sides of an individual personality, making it a unit in a system or simply fuel.

“Absurdity becomes the norm of life” [3]: the action is set in the aviation college named after Maresyev, where students undergo legs amputation in the name of Motherland and then study to be pilots; in the text there is a casual mention of the infantry school named after Alexander Matrosov, where final examinations are accompanied by bursts of machine-gun fire, and of military and political academy named after Pavel Korchagin, the graduates of which were paralyzed and blind invalids.

One of the key moments for understanding the novel is the scene with the cardboard starship, hanging on the wall of the pioneer camp canteen. Omon and his friend Mityok decide to find out if there is anybody inside. There appeared a play-dough man. When designers constructed the rocket, they started with that man. He was shaped, sat in the chair and then tightly plastered with cardboard. But the most interesting thing is that there was no door. On the outside the manhole is painted, but inside in its place there is a wall with some clock-faces. The absence of a door, confined space plastered with cardboard, – all these things involuntarily provoke associations with totalitarian system, depriving a man of his freedom. Some commentators argue that Pelevin criticizes the Soviet society as totalitarian. Probably, the point is different. Pelevin is more likely to call

every society totalitarian [4], as it takes away individual freedom. Liberation is only possible in the world of imagination.

In the world of total unfreedom the primary concern of the main character is liberation at all costs. So at the end Omon, bound to ritual mactation, suddenly realizes that reality is just a nightmare imposed on his imagination. The outer space that he has fancied does not exist, in fact, the outer space is the space of myth created by official ideology. There is only the alternative space – a microcosm, the world of an individual creating history inside himself and for himself. But the most tragic thing about it is that if the world around is generated by individual consciousness, then, due to its limitedness, every version of the Universe will be similar to the previous one (“some packages of rice, a pack of pasta stars and frozen chicken wrapped in cellophane”).

In the novel “Chapayev and the Emptiness” [11] we can see quite mature poetic solipsism, when the main character Peter the Emptiness lives between two worlds as a patient of a mental hospital and a Civil War hero. And in the novel not only the existence of both realities is doubted (which of them is true remains unclear: the Emptiness considered real the world of revolutionary Russia and believed that mental house is just a fantastic dream, but Chapaev tries to make Peter see the unreality of both worlds), but also the reality of subject himself. The reality of thinking Me is questioned, as this Me has no place to exist: if all I am thinking about is an illusion, I cannot but be a part of this illusion.

The novel is built as a series of interchangeable fragments describing the Emptiness’ life in two make-belief realities: post-revolutionary Russia where the struggle of some metaphysical forces takes very strange forms, and up-to-date Russia where he is put to a mental hospital. These are the two dimensions of the same personality, the unitary whole. The character lives in both plains at the same time.



By means of comparison he reveals the reason for being and “the design” of the world around. And the character himself is inclined to consider real things that most logically should be described as delirium. At the end of the novel checking out of the hospital he refuses reality as it turns out strange and inappropriate for him, and takes refuge in the illusion of insanity.

Let’s look at the story “The ninth dream of Vera Pavlovna” [14]. Here we can see an apparent allusion to the novel “What is to be done?” by N. G. Chernyshevskiy, in which the author of “the theory of rational egoism” gave a recipe for “a good life” that will lead one to success and prosperity. Vera Pavlovna from Pelevin’s story is a charwoman who reveals existential mystery and starts to rule the reality. Her dreams come true, but for this major social changes have to take place. Vera becomes the center of the world, everything is going on inside her, and, in fact, the world is she.

We have already mentioned the change of the main philosophic opposition “thought – reality” to “thought – text (language)”. In Pelevin’s story this opposition is interpreted literally, the character becomes the world first, and then a text. Post-structuralism dogma “There is nothing outside the text” expressed by Jacques Derrida is transformed to the structure “Text = the World = Vera”, and, what is more interesting, The World = Text = Vera = Text of “The ninth dream of Vera Pavlovna” [17]. In “The ninth dream” we can find mentions that Vera has read Blavatskaya, Ramacharaka, Freud, Nabokov, Yesenin, Sholokhov, Sologub, etc., seen Fassbinder and Bergman, heard Verdi, Bach, Mozart and Wagner. So, Pelevin draws an analogy of a poetic text with the infinite text. Everywhere we can find the idea of text penetrating real life. Text becomes as though the story char-

acter, it sets the structure and bounds of a person’s life.

“Existential mystery” has made Vera the last to go beyond those bounds, identify herself as the center of the world as if temporarily becoming the text. But in reality Vera does not rule the world. Having desired paintings and music she received all this, but in return – haunting obtrusive olfactory and optic visions. A plaything imagined itself a player. A slave is set free, he swiftly runs away, but as soon as the master snaps his fingers he will be immediately captured and chained again: having finished her existence in one reality, created by her own will and meaningless, Vera is sentenced to existence in another artificial reality claiming on discovery of the recipe of happiness, and wakes up as Vera Pavlovna in the novel by Chernyshevskiy “What is to be done?”. One “what is to be done?” algorithm is changed to another one, but this is all repetition, endless and meaningless, as endless are fractal iterations “A priest had a dog...” [16]. A surrealistic story ending is based on the principle of ill perpetuity.

The main conflict of the works under consideration is the conflict between reality and its representation. Does the world really exist? The writer uncovers the deception of mass culture and lies of the authority. The main modern mythologem – television, advertising and PR – are myth media and translators, and a myth themselves. And to myths Pelevin is ruthless. All that a person sees, knows and wants is imposed on him by somebody else – culture, advertising or authority. All things around are total deception, history and culture mystification, simulation of human existence. Pelevin does not simply protest against Soviet power, western lifestyle or inhuman social reality, he is opposed to the illusive and absurd nature of the world as such, and to reality in general.



Art depicts the way out of the sign illusions captivity as “an individual riot”. People as a mass prefer living by illusion, there are those who deliberately choose illusion and do not find it necessary to go beyond it in search for the truth.

Individual riot is aimed not at the system but at the particular characters of its creators. Even a naïve mind can understand the lack of self-sufficiency and independence of such constructions.

Pelevin’s poetic world is an endless row of nest cages, and the situation is tragic as a rebellious character makes a transition from one cage to another, but this transition marks not his liberation but only a higher level of comprehending reality, which, however, does not bring any relief. A man in the traditional humanistic sense as an absolutely self-determined individual is almost “next to nothing”; a man is a desperate creature raging inside his cage.

And in this sense artistic thinking on the irrational level moved further than the refined forms of philosophic reflection managed to do. The problem of limitedness of human consciousness is handled from no less tragic point of view as that of Berkeley, Hume and Kant. But in the XX–XXI centuries culture subjectivism in general and solipsism in particular have become the metaphor of people’s loneliness and alienation from social institutes. This tendency can be explained by a number of reasons. Particularly, one explanation is that the structure of society (both being and consciousness) is getting so complicated that a person is not able to comprehend it as a whole and experiences constant doubt if what he observes is a true state of things. Individual consciousness is incapable of reflecting all the diversity of social being and social consciousness. It happens so because in everyday life we deal with the particular knowledge of the world and the society. The lack of realistic philosophy – generalizations,

giving an adequate picture of a complex structure, – is quite evident.

Scientific philosophy denies self-sufficiency and absolute limitedness of the language and other sign systems. It is important that in the problem under consideration two aspects should be identified, ethical and ontological, – what is a sign by nature and with what purpose we use it. In order to solve the problem it is necessary to find out why language and other sign systems appear, what tasks they solve and what functions perform. Language is the consequence of matter – the world whose reality is being challenged, as it appears not just inside human mind, but in interaction of consciousness with the surrounding world and other people.

The activity of language inside human consciousness is colossal. Actually, it is its role to integrate in the consciousness as a single whole all levels, forms and kinds of intellectual, emotional, volitional cognition of the world of an adult homo sapiens. It is impossible to imagine human cognition of the world outside the language. And one of the universal abilities of the language is the ability not only to reflect the real world, but give its false reflection; moreover, create artificial, illusive models of the world. It is possible to convince a man of everything with the help of the language, the word.

But this activity of the language is first of all the activity of matter rather than spirit (in the language spirit is merged with matter, and it is because of that that it is capable of influencing not only individual but also mass consciousness). The ability to lead people to deception is not the only (nor is it primary) function of the language. The very nature of the language, as well as the nature of sensations, does not consist in confining individual consciousness inside itself; it is to open and extend it by linking it to the consciousness of other



people and the world around. Only with the help of the language can an individual transform the world on a larger scale and penetrate into other people's minds.

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