Theses Towards A Semiotics of Russian Culture

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1. The study of Russian culture from a semiotic perspective may take two directions. On the one hand, the researcher may utilize the broad achievements of semiotic studies and describe Russian culture on their foundation. The other approach implies a certain dissatisfaction with existing semiotic studies of culture and a desire to find a basis for other methods and approaches in the material of Russian culture. Our approach is precisely the latter. We propose that the study of the material of Russian culture from this angle may provide new impetus to the general methodology of the semiotics of culture. The dynamism, instability and persistent internal contradictions of Russian culture cause it to be a sort of historical and theoretical proving ground, leading both to unavoidable losses and, at times, prophetic insight into this inherently experimental field of study.

2. One of the points of departure for the semiotic coding of Russian culture is its interim position. This is the view not only of the scholar, but also of the culture itself. The latter fact is manifested, firstly, in the unusually large role of self-evaluation. For Russian culture, its view of itself is more primary and more basic than its view of the outside world. The category of authoritativeness, its degree and its sources, plays a primary role in Russian culture. Thus, the center of attention is shifted from "what" is said to "by whom" it is said, and from whom the latter received authority for this utterance. It is precisely this shift in the source of authoritativeness that is the basic cause of the restructuring of the entire ideological system. Thus, depending on whether the source of a truth is divinity, reason, practical
knowledge, personal or class interests, and so on, the entire remaining system of values is restructured. This arrangement brings to the fore gnoseological questions, and problems regarding the theoretical basis of theory itself. At the same time, there is a direct conflict between impulses which originate outside the boundaries of a socio-cultural model, and which appear not to exist from the model’s point of view, and those which originate in the internal structure of the cultural world. One side embodies the element of stasis and represents the ideological foundation for the edifice of the given culture. The second is, as it were, an introduction of chaos into the system—the impulse for the destruction of the existing structure and the basis for the creation of a future structure. 1 The position of the scholar in this model may be denoted by the term which Iurii Tynianov used as the title for one of his articles: “Interim” (“Promezhutok”). The interim is the collision between that which is ceasing to be and that which is coming into existence. In this situation, chaos—the dynamic principle—is a creative source, a source which is singularly difficult to analyze inasmuch as it consists of transition, the uniformed, that which may be delineated as the distance between “no longer” and “not yet.” 2 Such an object is easier to analyze empirically than theoretically, but at the same time it is especially important for theoretical analysis. Therefore, the methodological interest in the study of Russian culture is connected with the difficulty in creating a model of that which “is no longer” and “is not yet.”

For a Russian scholar of our epoch interest in such an approach is not accidental. Ours is the time of the “interval.” It seems as though reality has set itself the task of having a laugh at the expense of the structuralist scholar, breaking all his cleverly conceived models. But just as for a child the breaking of toys is a point of departure from the world of dolls and toy cars into the world of people and conflicts, thus the mercilessness with which contemporaneity destroys our favorite ideas is a constructive source for the creation of new ideas. “Le roi est mort, vive le roi!”

3. Russian culture perceives its history as a chain of explosions; and even if the researcher discovers that each such explosion was preceded by a long period of gestation and foment, and that the explosion itself is real only from a certain perspective within the framework of the language in which we choose to describe it, it is nonetheless for its contemporaries an undeniable reality. Events such as, for instance, the baptism of Rus, the Petrine reform and the October revolution may be described as the unavoidable result of a continuous, gradual, quantitative accumulation, but for the people who experienced these events they shook the old world “to its foundations” and led to the creation on its ruins of something completely new, the “new heaven and new earth” of the Scripture. The very word “new” runs through all of Russian culture with importunate repetitiveness. “The wise man does not disregard the laws of Peter,” (“Mudryi ne spuskats ruk zakony Petrovy,”/ Kohim my stali vdrug narod uzhie novyi”)—wrote Kantemir in his first satire, characteristically combining the words “new” and “suddenly,” that is, describing a revolutionary explosion. In “Anzhelo,” Pushkin describes moral cleansing with the words: “And a new man you shall be” (“I novyi chelovek ty budes”). “The star of new America” (“Ameriki novoi zvezda”) (In these cases the italics are mine—Yu. L.) appeared to Blok in a Russia transformed by revolution. To this one might add the multiple repetitions of the word “new” in geographic names in Russia in general, and in that which was created after Peter and the October revolution in particular; cf. also the utterance of the Moscow police chief about the Moscow fire, which caught Pushkin’s attention: “I’ve served for many years, but such a thing has never happened. . .” (“Skol’ko let sluzhu, a takogo ne byvalo”) or Korolenko’s words that every year in Petersburg something happens with the weather that “the old-timers can’t remember [having happened before]” (“Chego ne pomnii starozhil’y”).

In these last cases the very attempt to imagine events which occur in Russia as regular becomes a source of the comic. The irregularity of a Petersburg flood (in fact a quite regular event) is made significant against the background of the emphasized regularity of the Petrine state system. In this way, irregularity itself (chance) is understood as the result of the superposition of two mutually independent regularities. Emphasis on the notion that whatever existed up to the time of a revolutionary transformation was bad or “chaotic,” or a general negation of everything from the preceding era, is also connected with this phenomenon. Thus, the Petersburg myth erased entirely any notion of a previously existing tradition of city-building and created the mythical conception of: “A new city, beauty and wonder of the northern lands,/ From the darkness of forests, from marshes and swamps/Rising magnificently, proudly.” (“Novy grad, polnochnyh stran krasa i divo,/ Iz t’my lesov, iz topi blat/ Voznessia pyshno, gordesivo.”) [Pushkin]. This mythical model was solidified by moving the symbolic center of the state, for instance from Moscow to Petersburg during the reign of Peter the Great and from Leningrad to Moscow in the 1920s.

Renaming is an analogue of moving the capital and is broadly perceived as the destruction of the old and the creation of something new in its place. In this way the history of Russian culture from this perspective may be conceived of as a hierarchy of renamings, as the change of old names was per-
ceived as the destruction of the “old world,” and the introduction of new ones as the creation of “a new earth and a new heaven.” One might juxtapose this with the ritual destruction of monuments and all the symbols of the “old world,” from “Begone, O God!” (“Vydybai, Boţhe!”)—the shout with which the Kievan threw the statue of Perun into the Dniepr—to the mocking inscriptions composed by poets in a competition (Demian Bednyi won first place) for a monument to Alexander III in Petersburg.3

This entire chain of namings and renamings is in reality a ritual depiction of the chain: birth—death—rebirth. Rebirth is connected with the image of the new and the young which is characteristically reflected in toponyms of the sort “New Novgorod” (“Novyi Novgorod”), which are connected with the notion of the death of the old and birth of the new city or the transmission by an old city (i.e. Moscow), of its function to a new city (i.e. Petersburg).

Compare:

And before the new capital,
Moscow did bow her head
As before a new tsaritse
A widow clad in purple.

(“I pered novoiu stolitsii/ Glavoj sklonilasja Moskva/ Kak pered novoiu tsaritseii/ Porfironosnaia vdoa.”) [Pushkin, “The Bronze Horseman”]. In essence, Peter’s transfer of the capital to Petersburg was merely a continuation of numerous such attempts in different geographical areas by various statesmen in Russian history. The history of Petersburg, bypassing Muscovite aspirations, reached out to ancient Kievan aspirations for a capital with egress beyond the borders of the state. The striving of the periphery to become part of the center and amalgamate with it was replaced by the rush of the center to become part of a boundless periphery. The entire process may be imagined as a conflict between centrifugal forces with their boundary—the point of the center—and the centrifugal, which strive to lose their borders entirely, strive towards boundless universality. The rhythm of these movements forms the dynamic curve of Russian culture. The period in which we are now living may be characterized as an unstable balance of centrifugal and centripetal tendencies which is already reaching its limit and portending a new centrifugal explosion (a new universality), which is, perhaps, again fated to assemble the historical space of Eastern Europe in completely new forms, which the careful historian cannot permit himself to predict. The erasure of all the boundaries of social and cultural structures, the confusion of addresses and self-characteristics is related to this.

As has already happened many times in Russian history, customary definitions are losing their meaning, borders are being swept away, before our

very eyes. Nascent phenomena which are just beginning to assert themselves are eagerly using old names and old emblems which do not correspond to their current reality. The map of culture is becoming still more confused. Declarations, which in the preceding period so often turned out to be deceptions, are now, as a rule, self-deceptions. All trappings of terminology are being sloughed off like dried skin from the body of a newly born culture. Meanings do not have words, nor do words have meanings. The time when new structures of meaning will converge with bounded terminological coverings has not yet arrived. We may again repeat the word found by Tynianov—“interim.”

4. There sleeps a ship unmoving in the motionless damp
But lo!—sailors suddenly rush out, crawl
Up, down—and the sails have filled, full of wind,
The giant has moved and cuts the waves.
It sails. Where should we sail? . .

(Tak dremlj nedvizhim korab’ v nedvizhnoi vlage,
No chu!—matrosy vdrug kidaetsia, polzut
Vverkh, vniz—i parusa nadulis’, vetra polny;
Gromada dvinnulas’ i raskekat volny.
Plyvet. Kuda zh nam plyt’? . . )
(Pushkin, “Autumn. A Fragment”)

The new is born with an explosion. Within these very words lies the idea of fundamental unpredictability, but the historical study of the explosion, any attempt to make sense of it as a moment of dynamic development, implies an abundant generation of diverse hypotheses which, in the words of Pasternak, “predict the past.” These retrospective predictions are by no means something that a historian can turn away from, as from recurrent historical errors. In history the present acts upon the future, not only directly, but also through the past. A retrospective look from the moment of the explosion to that which preceded it may recontextualize the entire path of history and, again, affect the future. The past never ends, and for this reason the future may be reborn again and again in unexpected and varied forms. The past is predictable in the same measure as the future. For this reason, in part, it is illusory to counterpose the historian and the philosopher-utopianist: “retrospective prediction” stands in symmetrical relation to “prediction of the future.” The universal revolutionary myth of a closed, rigid, unmoving world of the past and a dynamic and inherently romantic world of the fu-
Thus, the social role of Russian literature was supported by two foundations. One belonged to literature itself and demanded creative genius from the author. This point of support also retained its force for the reader, who had become acquainted with literature in translation; on it is based artistic significance of a Pushkin, Chekhov or Dostoevskii. The second point of support should not be considered something less significant and unworthy of high artistic assessment, but it has been fully valued only at the fringes of Russian culture. This is what Saltykov-Shchedrin called a "slave's language"—the ability to carry forbidden themes and ideas to the reader through all the obstacles of censorship. Beyond the limits of the censor's bans the value of these hints has disappeared. There is a special quality to this situation, however: these two aspects have never been completely walled off from each other, and an author's bravery often coincided with the artistic worth of his creation. However, without bearing this in mind it is impossible to understand Saltykov's attack on poetry as a genre, as well as the irritation that "pure art" aroused in the democratic reader. Outside this context the democratic poets' venomous parodies of Fet's brilliant poetry remain absolutely incomprehensible.

One may not say that the democratic poets entirely lacked aesthetic sense, but they relegated it to playing a supporting role. Hugo, describing in one of his poems a hungry young girl who wanders the streets of Paris, writes (citing from the Russian translation): "... She never/ deigned (my italics—Y. L.) to notice/ the Rotterdam tower, nor the Louvre, nor the Pantheon." Chernyshevskii took essentially the same position when he wrote from the Peter and Paul Fortress that he could not appreciate the opinions of subtle connoisseurs of art because he had long since stopped spending time with such people. The repetition of the very same words is not accidental: Gogol's "It is boring to live on this earth, gentlemen! ("Skuchno zhit' na etom svete, gospodi!")" in "Tale of the two Ivans," and Fedia Prostakov's "It is boring, shameful and boring! ("Skuchno, stydn, skuchno!")" in L. Tolstoi's The Living Corpse. This combination of shame and boredom becomes a leitmotif for the relationship between the thinking Russian man and the reality which surrounds him.

5. What we have said underscores the special status of semiotic signs within the limits of Russian culture. Based on "alien discourse" (chuzhaia rech’) and on the structural significance of point of view, literature offers itself up as a testing range for “registration ranging” of semiotic notions. Its meaning is always likened to a multi-stage translation, a unique chain of boxes in boxes. This distinctive feature was in part forced and it is not accidental that
Saltykov-Shchedrin called it "slave's language." Art by its nature is the overcoming of barriers—freed from difficulties it withers. Therefore, it is no accident that conditions which are fatal to other forms of activity in the case of art often paradoxically lead to a flowering: This will not surprise us if we remember that necessity is the mother of invention, and that climatic difficulties have often been a stimulus for technical progress.

Matters are further complicated by the fact that art is inseparable from the life of the artist and, therefore, while considering how surmounting some barrier creates an impetus for growth, we cannot help feeling bitter when we think of the high price the artist must pay. As soon as progress rises to the level of involvement of the individual, the human fate of the artist or scientist, the problem of perfecting evolutionary mechanisms obtains a new criterion—the price to be paid, bearing in mind that today general notions of “progress,” “tribe” and “class” are indivisible from the individual, with his personal pain and personal value.

The relationship of Russian culture to Western culture is defined not only by a changing rhythm of isolationism and westernizing, but also by more complex features of a dynamic process. Both Russian Slavophilism and Westernizing were different aspects of a specifically Russian culture. Showing their connections to one European or universal process or another will more likely confuse matters than clarify them. Today borders within world culture have been fundamentally altered. The process of the unification of world culture is an irrefutable fact, but, in accordance with the laws we have already noted, this process dualistically joins within itself the unity of a single system and the inability to erase the individuality of its parts (in the realm of political life this can be seen in the simultaneous intensification of economic unity and political nationalism).

The creation of a unified, but simultaneously heterogeneous world system in contrast to the optimistic hopes of the utopianists of past epochs (compare the poetic prophecy of Victor Hugo, which turned out to be so far from reality: “temps futur, visi ou sublime...” — “Future times, shining visions, peoples have crossed the abyss, wars have become a distant memory...”) promises a rapid, though also internally contradictory, development of cultural processes. The intersection of many diverse structures is becoming the basic impetus for cultural progress. Historically the catalyst for the quickening of cultural development was a clash with new “uncultured” worlds. The notions of “unculturedness” (nekul’turnost’) and “being outside culture” (vnekul’turnost’) should be permanently removed from scholarly dictionaries and replaced with “other culturedness” (inokul’turnost’). If the traditional semiotic process was turned towards the space of a single language and represented a closed model, then today, apparently, the time has come for a fundamentally open model. The window of the cultural world is never shuttered.

Culture is an open window. The historical fate of Russian culture is to be always both Russian and more than Russian, to strive to escape beyond its own bounds. This makes theoretical study of Russian culture not only part of, but an essential testing range for, the theory of world culture.

Notes

1. The dependence of the entire system of evaluations on whether or not our point of view is inside or outside the boundaries of our object lies at the heart of Maeterlinck’s drama “Beyond the Boundaries.” The viewer and several characters, who are on one side of the stage, know about a tragedy which has occurred on the other side of the stage, and still live in idyllic peace. The viewer is given, as it were, two points of view: the internal, happy view, based on ignorance, and the external, tragic point of view, which is based on knowledge of what has happened beyond the stage.

2. Within Romanticism this embodiment of “between” was personified in the person of the Demon who had fallen both from the world of angels and from the vulgar space of folkloric evil spirits, the embodied essence of the “interim” (promezhutok).

3. In addition to Demian Bedny’s, and along with other entries, the Leningrad satirical journal “Hippopotamus” (“Beiemoth”) offered: A commode, on the commode there is a hippopotamus. / On the hippopotamus there is a pig. / On the pig there is a skull-cap. The ritual mocking of fallen ideals is one of the most persistent archaic methods; cf. the numerous examples in Fra-Zer’s “The Golden Bough.”

4. N. V. Gogol’, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii (Moscow, 1952), vol. 8, p. 278.