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Andrei Bitov's "Armenia Lessons": Culture and Values

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...and what is the use of a book,' thought Alice, 'without pictures or conversations?'

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

The times are connected only by that which always was, that which does not have time and that which is common to all times.

—Andrei Bitov, "Armenia Lessons"

"Armenia Lessons," written in 1967-69,¹ is a brilliant, original, extraordinarily powerful essay/meditation/travelogue on culture and values. Soviet scholarship has given the work more attention than has Western. Expressions such as "brilliant book,"² great stylist and psychologist,³ "profound and outstanding work,"⁴ and "a lesson for contemporary prose"⁵ pepper the discussions about Bitov's travel essay.

Contemporary Soviet writer Andrei Bitov is the author of short stories, the widely acclaimed novel *Pushkin House*,⁶ travelogues, philosophical

¹Andrei Bitov, *Uroki Armenii* [Erevan, 1978]; Andrei Bitov, "Uroki Armenii," in Andrei Bitov, *Obraz zhizni* [Moscow, 1972], pp. 167-285. In discussing this work, I shall also refer to "After the Lessons," a final short section of the work that is not included in *Obraz zhizni*, but is contained in later publications of "Uroki Armenii": Bitov, "Uroki Armenii" [Puteshestvie v nebol'shuiu stranu] in Andrei Bitov, *Sem' puteshestvii* (Leningrad, 1976), pp. 390-98; Andrei Bitov, *Uroki Armenii* [Erevan, 1978], pp. 172-83; and Andrei Bitov, *Kniga puteshestvii* [Moscow, 1986], pp. 427-31. The final section of "After the Lessons," "Reminiscences of Agartsina [Three Years Later]," also appears in Bitov's *Georgian Album* [Gruzinskii al'bom] [Tbilisi, 1985], pp. 15-19. My page references to *Armenia Lessons* are to the Erevan edition since certain other key sections to the work are not found in the *Obraz zhizni* edition.

²Genrikh Mitin, "Narodnoe i lichnoe," *Literaturnaia Armeniia*, 10 [1973]: p. 102.

³Georgii Kubat'ian, "Nauka puteshestvii i nauka liubvi," *Literaturnaia Armeniia*, 6 (1970): p. 87.

⁴The Editors, "S raznykh toчек zreniia," *Literaturnoe obozrenie*, 10 [1973]: p. 45.

⁵Igor' Zolotusskii, "Poznanie nastoiashchego," *Voprosy literatury*, 10 [1975]: p. 24.

⁶Andrei Bitov, *Pushkin House*, trans. Susan Brownsberger [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987]; Andrei Bitov, *Pushkinskii dom* [Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis, 1978]. One other Bitov work has appeared in English, the collection entitled *Life in Windy Weather: Short Stories*, ed. Priscilla Meyer, trans. Priscilla Meyer et al. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis, 1986).

essays, film criticism, and scholarly articles on literature. "Armenia Lessons," one of his best works, is an impassioned cry for the preservation of culture in contemporary life.

Bitov's observations are divided into eight large "lessons," each of which contains several titled sections. In the course of his Armenia lessons, Bitov's narrator, Andrei Bitov, describes, in first person, his experiences and his thoughts about Armenia, about culture, and about life. His are observant eyes and open ears, as he leads the readers through his ten-day adventure in the unfamiliar terrain of Armenia.

Bitov's epigraph to "Armenia Lessons," taken from an early variant of the first chapter of Pushkin's "Journey to Arzrum," is worth quoting in full since it contains, in embryonic form, themes that are central to my analysis of "Armenia Lessons." Pushkin writes:

... The slight, solitary minaret attests to the existence of a settlement that had disappeared. [The minaret] rises harmoniously among piles of stones on the bank of a dried-up stream. An interior staircase has not yet collapsed. I climbed up [the stairs] onto a landing from which the voice of a mullah no longer resounds. I found there several unknown names that had been scratched on the bricks by officers who were passing through. Vanity of vanities! Count *** followed me. He inscribed on the brick a name dear to him, the name of his wife—the lucky man—and I [inscribed] my own.
Love yourself,
My dear, lovable reader.⁷

The solitary minaret, built as a place of worship, still stands as a present-day reflection of a culture that has died out. Time has allowed it to remain. People in the present, however, desecrate the age-old monument by scratching their names into the bricks. The quotation ends with Pushkin's admonishment to his readers to love themselves. Each of these themes—the existence of past culture in the present, lack of respect for culture, and the importance of loving oneself—is played out in a major way in "Armenia Lessons."

From the time of his arrival in Erevan, Bitov is impressed with the ties that bind Armenians to their national cultural heritage. What immediately strikes him is the alphabet. It remains the same now as it had been 1,500 years ago when it had been invented, once and for all, by Mesrop-Mashtots, one person, a genius, who was, writes Bitov, like God in the days of creation.⁸ The sounds of the alphabet, Bitov notices,

⁷Andrei Bitov, *Uroki*, p. 3.

⁸Bitov does not explain this phrase, but knowledge about Mesrop-Mashtots, venerated as a saint by the Armenian church, clarifies his statement. Mesrop-Mashtots, a member of the Christian Church, invented an alphabet (ca. 404 or 406 A.D.) for the dual purpose of spreading Christianity (bringing God's word to the people) and of giving Armenians a sense of national identity. For more on Mesrop and the Armenian alphabet, see David Marshall Lang, *Armenia: Cradle of Civilization* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970), pp. 264-67. In its very origins, then, the language Bitov is describing contains a spiritual dimension.

correspond to the graphic depiction, and the letters reflect the life, landscape, and feelings of Armenia. Thus, for Bitov, the same combination of the firm and the flexible, the toughness and the gentleness, that he senses in the air, the landscape, the buildings, and the people of Armenia, he perceives in the Armenians' alphabet and in their speech. He admires them for preserving, unchanged, that piece of culture that reflects their national characteristics so precisely. In an analogous manner, Russia's ancient alphabet seems to him to reflect Russia's landscape, architecture, and personality.⁹ Bitov points out the dangers of introducing reforms which may be good from the point of view of efficiency and economics, but which tamper with the natural unfolding of a nation's culture. He brings up the reform of the Russian alphabet which, although advantageous for the promotion of literacy, was not, he says, equally advantageous for the preservation of culture. As an example, he writes that *War and Peace*, without its hard signs, is not the same *War and Peace* that Tolstoy had written, although, he humorously adds, the elimination from the novel of the hard sign considerably reduced the number of pages. Language, he reflects, must be preserved, just as are nature and historical monuments.

Bitov is impressed with the Armenians' sense of the continuity of history: "the impression that in Armenia there is no beginning of history—it has always been. And during its eternal existence it has consecrated each stone and each step."¹⁰ All Armenians have read the works of Leo, a historian of Armenia. All can tell Bitov details of history and of the history of culture whereas Bitov realizes that among Russians he knows, only his deceased grandfather had had that ability.

Bitov's description of one place that preserves culture through the ages, the Erevan Matenadaran Repository for ancient Armenian manuscripts, is powerful. He admires, he writes, the building for its simplicity, taste, and elegance. It is what it is. It serves its purpose without calling attention to itself. Everything is done with taste, notices Bitov. He admires a sculpture that is in the process of being chiseled. Its shapes, human forms, emerge naturally from the stone, thereby preserving the "natural integrity of the stone."¹¹ He lovingly describes the display of books, some more than one thousand years old: a biography of Mesrop-Mashtots, written by one of his disciples; a schoolboy's notes, one thousand years old, about botany, with a little flower drawn in the margin; and an ancient sketch of the heavens.¹² Although these manuscripts are ancient, Bitov comments on the sense of life, "simple and clear," that emanates from them.¹³

⁹Bitov, *Uroki*, p. 10.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 20.

¹¹Ibid., p. 24.

¹²Ibid., p. 25.

¹³Ibid., p. 26.

Bitov visits ancient Armenian temples and is struck by the simplicity and purity of the lines of the structures. At a friend's house, he opens, at random, a book about Armenian history on the genocide of Armenians in the late nineteenth century. The book, issued by Armenia's Academy of Sciences, preserves the unpleasant part of Armenia's past.¹⁴ The episodes documented in the materials are of the brutal murders, rapes, tortures, burnings, and sufferings that Armenian men, women, and children had endured. This, too, is part of the nation's past that the culture carries with it into the present.

Wherever he turns, Bitov sees that the Armenians accept themselves—with their particular past and their particular national features—as they are. Bitov sees Armenians flock, from all over the world—Metropolitan Opera singers, French popular singer Charles Aznavour, writer William Saroyan, Australians, Poles, Syrians, Lebanese—to see their ancestral home. Bitov explains that people accept their national identity not because one nation is better than another, but because it is theirs, just as your mother, no better or worse than thousands of other women, is special precisely because she—and no one else—is the one that gave birth to you.¹⁵

At his friend's house he notices a historical atlas of Armenia and as he turns the pages quickly, from past to present, the little colored circle that represents Armenia becomes smaller and smaller. By turning the pages the other way, the circle becomes wider and wider. Bitov is telling us that one's perspective grows broader if one includes the past in one's purview of the present.

In the same way, he does not begin to understand the city of Erevan until he broadens his perspective by exploring the surrounding expanses. He complains that the modern convenience of an airplane deprives people of the understanding of a new place that would come from seeing its border and experiencing the countryside, bit by bit, instead of being plopped down, by airplane, in the middle of "the book," without having "read" the beginning.

His visit to the arch of Charents imparts to him a sense of the harmony of perfect creation. The lines, the simplicity, the sense of infinity, a feeling of the "music of the spheres," of creative soaring, of majesty, penetrate his every pore as he gazes at the panorama that spreads out before him and above him. He is reminded of his Armenian friend's definition of a master: "The creation must be loftier than his hands. He'll

¹⁴The book which Bitov cites [*Uroki*, p. 36] as *Genotsid armian v Osmanskoi imperii* (*Sbornik dokumentov i materialov*) (Erevan, 1966) was edited by M.G. Nersisian. Although he does not cite the Nersisian page numbers, the sections Bitov quotes are: Bitov, *Uroki*, p. 36/Nersisian, p. 91; Bitov, *Uroki*, p. 38/Nersisian, pp. 95, 91, 97-98; Bitov, *Uroki*, pp. 38-39/Nersisian, p. 484; Bitov, *Uroki*, p. 40/Nersisian, p. 285; Bitov, *Uroki*, pp. 40-41/Nersisian, pp. 185-86.

¹⁵Bitov, *Uroki*, pp. 44-45.

take the clay into his hands—and it will flutter out of his hands."¹⁶ Bitov feels himself soaring and quotes, without identification of the source, a line of poetry: "The heavenly flight of angels. . . ."¹⁷ The line he quotes is from Pushkin's poem "The Prophet." The theme of the poem is the divine inspiration that is given a poet.

At Lake Sevan, Bitov perceives the precision of lines and colors, of lines and light; the perfection of the landscape exactly as it is. At a monastery, over a thousand years old, the wind reminds him of the wind in Chekhov's short story, "The Student" (Student), which, writes Chekhov's narrator, had been exactly the same wind that had blown in the times of Riurik, Ivan the Terrible, and the Biblical Peter.¹⁸ As he does in another of his short stories, "Life in Windy Weather" (*Zhizn' v vetrenuiu pogodu*), Bitov uses the image of the wind to designate creativity and spirituality. Incidentally, after the Chekhov passage, without citing the source, he quotes one of Mandelstam's Armenia poems.¹⁹

Bitov's visit to the "expanse" surrounding Erevan, his visit to the ancient monasteries and his feelings of the holiness and infinity of these ancient monuments and their close ties with their natural surroundings put him in touch with the eternal values preserved in these particular monuments. At these moments, he writes, he is also in touch with the boundlessness of nature's beauty and with the eternal verities preserved in the great monuments by creative masters of his own culture, Pushkin, Chekhov, and Mandelstam, one of whom was speaking about the divine inspiration of the artist; another, about the collapse of time between Biblical times and the present; and the third, about Armenia, the place where he is experiencing the ties between past and present culture. Bitov ends this section with lines reminiscent of Mandelstam: "Great poetry is always concrete. And there are no images."²⁰

He had come to Armenia with certain ideals [images] of what Armenia would be like. When he looked for these (for instance, Ararat, which everyone had told him he would find spectacular, and which, for him, was a great disappointment), he could not find the essence of Armenia. When he stopped anticipating and started to experience what he himself was experiencing, he began to grasp the true nature of the essence of Armenian culture, that delicate, quiet, unassuming attunement to the essential, eternal values of life. For Bitov, finally, the best word to describe Armenia is "authentic" ("podlinnyi").²¹

¹⁶Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁹In an article on "Armenia Lessons," George Kubatian writes that Bitov cites Mandelstam's cycle of Armenian poems three times. Georgii Kubat'ian, "Nauka puteshestvii i nauka liubvi," p. 88.

²⁰Bitov, *Uroki*, p. 66. On this point, see Kubat'ian, "Nauka," p. 86.

²¹Bitov, *Uroki*, p. 71.

About halfway through his journey, Bitov begins to speculate about the nature of ideals. He wonders where they come from, since by their very definition they are not a part of the world in which we live. He concludes that there must exist, within us, an ideal world that forces us to compare our lives with the ideal life, that forces us to experience shame and pangs of conscience when we do not measure up to that ideal. He wonders where and how an image had arisen in him "of some heavenly country, a country of real ideals."²² He realizes that that country had always been there, right there, no matter where he had been: "This was a country where everything was what it was: a stone was a stone, a tree was a tree, water was water, light was light, a wild animal was a wild animal, and a human being was a human being."²³

In the course of his explorations and his experiences in Armenia, Bitov comes to realize, little by little, what it is that he has been learning from Armenian culture. He has been learning that authenticity rests in breaking down everything into its simplest elements. Only in this way can one reach the essence of any object or any experience in life. Life's deepest meaning emerges, naturally, without calling attention to itself, without fanfare, without self-aggrandizement, without ostentatiousness. It comes from people, objects, history being exactly what they are and accepting exactly who they are. It comes from "being attentive." Bitov, in a section of his language "lesson" entitled "Allusion," had explained that the Armenian word "ush" is not "ear" (the Russian word for ears is "ushi"), but "being attentive." The opposite, he says, is not "inattentive," but idiot.

As the Armenian lessons proceed, we, the pupils, together with Bitov, the teacher, learn that culture consists of "being attentive." He titles the subsection "Allusion," perhaps because it is an allusion, at the beginning of his journey, an allusion quietly waiting to show him what is being alluded to—if he is attentive and not an "idiot" (apush), which in Armenian is the opposite of being attentive. And it is appropriate here to recall Mandelstam's thought about Armenia in his "Journey to Armenia" [Puteshestvie v Armeniiu]: "To see, 'to hear,' 'to understand'—all these meanings coalesced at once into a single semantic bundle."²⁴

²²Ibid., p. 70.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Osip Mandelstam, "Journey to Armenia," in Osip E. Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*, ed. Jane Gary Harris, trans. Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis, 1979), p. 350; Osip Mandel'shtam, "Puteshestvie v Armeniiu," in *Literaturnaia Armeniia*, 3 (1967): p. 87.

Mandelstam's travelogue first appeared in *Zvezda*, No. 5, 1933. It next appeared in *Literaturnaia Armeniia*, 3 (1967), with material added to and omitted from the *Zvezda* version. Also see O. Mandel'shtam, "Zapisnye knizhki. Zаметki," *Voprosy literatury*, 4 (1968): pp. 180-204. Much of this material relates to "Puteshestvie v Armeniiu."

The publication history appears in Jane Gary Harris' commentary affixed to the translation of Mandelstam's prose, Osip Mandelstam, "Journey to Armenia," *Prose and Letters*, p. 669. For more on Mandelstam's travelogue, see Jane Gary Harris, "The 'Latin Gerundive' as Autobiographical Imperative: A Reading of Mandel'shtam's *Journey to Armenia*," *Slavic Review*, 45 (Spring 1986), pp. 1-19; Carol Avins, *Border Crossings: The*

From the quality of being attentive, from being oneself, Bitov realizes, emerge the self-respect, dignity, simplicity, harmony which mark off the truly great human beings, the highest, noblest creative acts of which people are capable, the lasting created products—architectural monuments, letters of the alphabet, churches, city buildings, books, paintings. The creators of these created objects, created once and for all at one particular time, were not creating with any ideal in mind. The creations were a reflection of the creators, being who they were. In being utterly true to themselves, the creators lost a sense of themselves (i.e., they had the courage to let go of the ego that tried to shape the material according to a certain image and were able to let themselves be guided by their creative impulse; in other words, "the clay fluttered out of their hands") and thereby gained access to the "heavenly flight of angels," to the eternal values of truth, authenticity, and love that transcend any one era and that join age to age.

Bitov does not limit his discussion to high culture. Culture, he claims, exists in any realm of life. There is, for example, a culture of food and of eating, he explains. He observes, while in a Erevan bazaar, that the people of Armenia treat their food with respect. Two plums fall, for instance, from a pile of fruits, and the people's attitude toward those plums is dignified. People respect the value of the earth and the value of the labor that went into growing the plums.²⁵ In the same way, writes Bitov, one should respect the culture of food in Leningrad. Because of the legacy of starvation during the Leningrad siege, many old Leningraders, still, to this day, find it difficult to throw away a moldy stale crust of bread. Their respect for bread constitutes culture, says Bitov, and one should respect such a culture, just as one should respect bread.²⁶ With his friend, Bitov eats some Armenian bread, lavash (which he compares to an ancient manuscript),²⁷ and he sees that the friend treats the bread with respect.

This brings Bitov to a key passage in "Armenia Lessons," to his discussion of the definition of culture. He does not tie it to education, for the most highly educated person, for Bitov, can be uncultured, and an illiterate person can display traits of what he defines as culture. He defines it as "the capacity to respect." "The capacity to respect the other, the capacity to respect what you do not know, the capacity to respect bread, land, nature, history, and culture; consequently, the capacity for self-esteem, for dignity. . . the capacity not to gorge oneself."²⁸

West and Russian Identity in Soviet Literature 1917-1934 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), Chapter 12, "Narrowed Borders. Osip Mandelstam, 'Journey to Armenia' (1933)," pp. 148-156; and Nancy Pollak, "The Obscure Way to Mandel'stam's Armenia," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1983.

²⁵Bitov, *Uroki*, p. 75.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., p. 76.

²⁸Ibid., p. 77.

For Bitov, the uncultured person is a glutton. No matter how much he has consumed, he will never be free of the insatiable craving for more. He will always plunder. He will always eat to excess. He can never have abundance, he can never be satisfied, for he will always need more, and more, and more.

What happens when there is a lack of respect for culture Bitov illustrates in a series of incidents scattered throughout "Armenia Lessons." One such episode reads like a replay of a scene in the epigraph, excerpted from Pushkin's *Journey to Arzrum*. Pushkin had described scribbles that modern visitors had made on the bricks of the ancient minaret. Bitov speaks of a similar incident in which he finds tourists' scribbles at Geghard, one of the most awe-inspiring sacred churches of ancient Armenia. Bitov explains the tourists' disrespectful behavior by their being overwhelmed by, unaccustomed to, and untrained for the experience of majesty. They feel uncomfortable. "[The] sight of true grandeur and beauty is as irritable to the untrained eye as is harsh light or sound, and all reactions that follow from this are Pavlovian. . . ." ²⁹ Bitov explains the existence of plundering by barbarians in the same way.

Vivid aspects of the contrast between the cultured and uncultured person emerge in the final "lessons" of Bitov's book. He describes an interview he has with an urban planner/"city builder" (*gradostroitel'*). The urban planner speaks of his goals (ideals), of the necessity of building for the future, of the necessity of building a sculpture that will stimulate curiosity in passersby to find out more about the sculptor. He speaks about "architecture as a means of educating people." ³⁰ The planner will, he says, fashion what the city looks like, what people will think in the future, and the way in which people will perceive the city's "look." But, Bitov points out to him, the distinguishing feature of Erevan is its lack of one coordinated look. Since it has existed for so many centuries, it has evolved its own unique character precisely because it is time that has shaped it.

The urban planner, to Bitov, does not understand the delicate nature of authenticity. He wants to impose his own will, under the guise of ideals, upon the shape of the city. He wants to control the reactions of future spectators of art.

Bitov declares that one of the few examples he knows of one person's will being imposed upon the shape of a city is the case of Peter the Great and Petersburg. The urban planner's face lights up at the comparison. Bitov explains, later, to an acquaintance, that he was not necessarily bringing up the example of Peter in a positive light, but that the urban

²⁹Ibid., p. 115.

³⁰Ibid., p. 132.

planner did not even care to understand what he had meant. He had had his own ideas, and he had wanted to impose them upon his environment. "The environment," says the urban planner, "is a means of education." ³¹

After the interview, Bitov walks down the street upon which the urban planner had declared that people would see the new structures and would be inspired to ask questions about them. Bitov finds no inspiration there, and he resents the idea of being told what and how to think about something. It is only when he wanders along some century-old side streets that he feels himself in the presence of authenticity. None of these streets had been planned to teach anyone anything. The buildings had been built for the purpose of housing people, yet simply because genuine life went on there, Bitov feels inspired. There is no pretense, but rather, he finds there a respect for the continuity of life and for the unfolding of life in all of its multifarious, complicated, chaotic shapes and moods.

Do we appreciate, questions Bitov, what has come to be "without our participation, the great harmony and art of nature and time?" ³² Bitov could be making a thinly veiled political allusion, as he argues for a society's evolution rather than [as in the case of Peter the Great and the Soviet regime] for revolution. ³³

Bitov writes, "The great textbook of harmony is given away to us by life, free, gratis. And we should remember that if we rip out all the pages, we won't have anything to study from." ³⁴ Immediately after this sentence follows a quotation, unidentified, from one of Mandelstam's Armenia poems. ³⁵ In the narrow streets of Erevan, Bitov found authenticity, the same authenticity which Mandelstam, identified as "the poet" by Bitov, had found. Bitov, Mandelstam, and the old quarter of Erevan had tapped into the qualities that last and that provide continuity from one age to another.

Bitov is speaking about much more than one particular person or one particular culture or particular time or particular place. He is sounding a warning to modern man not to violate the very earth upon which we stand. In this instance he begs for human beings to be attentive to, to respect nature, the land, evolution, and the ability of time to impart its own shape to the world. Otherwise, he points out, human beings will lose the wisdom that comes from the ability to include not just one's own perspective on life, but the perspective of many generations. Life, he

³¹Ibid., p. 134.

³²Ibid., p. 153.

³³Particularly important, in this respect, are pp. 147-49 in Bitov, *Uroki*.

³⁴Ibid., p. 154.

³⁵The poem is called "Oh, Nothing Do I See, and My Poor Ear Has Gone Deaf" (*Akh, nichego ia ne vizhu, i bednoe ukho oglokhlo*), and appears in O. Mandel'shtam, "Armenia," No. 111, "Akh, nichego ia ne vizhu, i bednoe ukho oglokhlo," in O. Mandel'shtam, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1 (Washington: Inter-Language Literary Associates, 1964), pp. 137-38.

writes, when it organizes itself, cannot create an imperfect form. Trees, he says, do not have imperfect arrangements of branches.³⁶

The affirmation of his ideas about culture Bitov finds in a visit to an “elder,” as satisfying and uplifting as the immediately preceding interview with the urban planner had been unfulfilling and disappointing. Bitov describes the characteristics of the elderly Armenian painter Martiros Saryan. He does not name him, but from his description it becomes clear that he is speaking about Saryan.³⁷ What impresses Bitov about Saryan is his youth, spontaneity, and enthusiasm about life, despite his chronological age of ninety. He is simple, direct, and dignified. According to Bitov’s definition, he is cultured. With the unsophisticated straightforwardness of expression of a child, the artist worries about the existence of the atomic bomb and the possibility of the annihilation of humanity. He says, simply and directly, that if people on earth do not join together, then everyone will die.³⁸ An old man, he speaks with a freshness that characterizes a young person. [Bitov thinks to himself that although Saryan is ninety years old, he is younger than Bitov is.]³⁹ He talks about space, the cosmos, as the future hope of mankind.

During the visit Bitov contemplates the nature of Saryan’s art and of painting in general. He realizes that for him, the definition of painting is “movement.”⁴⁰ If the movement is beautiful, the painting will be beautiful.⁴¹ The reader realizes that as in other works—“Life in Windy Weather” in particular comes to mind—Bitov connects aesthetics and ethics. Without the genuineness of the person, he believes, the resulting art cannot be genuine. One of the things he notices with Saryan is that when he paints a pear, he paints a pear as it is. He does not want the pear to become something else. And in painting pear after pear, at some point, the general nature of the pear will emerge, on its own, together with the nature of the creator of that pear, the person who created that pear.⁴²

Bitov’s conclusion to his “lessons” is appropriate: “. . . life dictated its own precision. . . . That’s the thing, that life has but a single precision—that precision which is, and all the rest is imprecise.”⁴³

³⁶Bitov, *Uroki*, p. 152.

³⁷Martiros Saryan (1880-1972). Illustrations of and information about Saryan can be found in *Album Sar'ian*, compiled by Aleksandr Abramovich Kamenskii (Moscow, 1968) and *Martiros Saryan*, compiled by Sh. Khachatrian (Leningrad, 1975).

Genrikh Mitin was the first to confirm, in print, that the painter to whom Bitov is referring is Saryan. Genrikh Mitin, “Narodnoe i lichnoe,” pp. 103-4.

³⁸Bitov, *Uroki*, p. 167.

³⁹Ibid., p. 165.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 167.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., p. 158.

⁴³Ibid., p. 171. Bitov frequently uses the words “accuracy” (“tochnost'”) and “accurate” (“tochen”) in “Armenia Lessons.” These words are common Bitov words in other works too, but they are used particularly frequently here.

The concluding section, “After the Lessons,” contains Bitov’s speculations after the completion of his journey. He is interested in the interrelationship of life and art. He comments, as he had in comments and in private correspondence, that a person writes in order to get to know what he had not known before. In Bitov’s words, in “Armenia Lessons,” “. . . if a person writes, then he himself gets to know what he had not known before. That is his method of cognition—writing.”⁴⁴

In addition, he talks about the absorption of his past experience into his writing. As soon as he has completed his book, he declares, the author ends up in the world which he had described, and he starts realizing that in his own life he lives through events which he had described in his book.⁴⁵ The book, then, had anticipated his personal experience.⁴⁶ Thus, the boundary between book and life is erased.

The final section of “After the Lessons,” “Recollection of Agartsina (Three Years Later),”⁴⁷ pursues the themes that Bitov has been addressing throughout his cultural journey through Armenia. He remembers his visit to an ancient monastery, Agartsina, where he had found himself dissolved into the world in which he had always lived. He had tapped into the roots of his own creative powers. The world expanded before his eyes. He lost a sense of his own presence and felt his own presence melt into the rest of the world.⁴⁸ There were no boundaries between him and the rest of the world. The temple, writes Bitov, itself showed signs of “having submitted itself to the idea of dissolution in creation.”⁴⁹ Never, writes Bitov, had he ever experienced such an absence of pride, such humility in the “builder.”⁵⁰ Instead of calling attention to his own structure, the builder had directed attention to the place “so that we would perceive *where* it [the temple] was standing, where we live, the reflection of God’s face in his own creation.”⁵¹

With the principle of “dissolution in creation,” Bitov brings us back, once again, to the principles he has been enunciating all along. Only with the respect he had for himself could the builder of the temple have been humble enough to lose himself and thereby gain access to the eternal. At the point at which “the clay fluttered out of his hands,” then, the depth, power, and breadth of seeing life from multidimensional

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 174. This thought repeats almost word for word Bitov’s statements, in letters, about his own writing process.

⁴⁵Bitov, *Uroki*, p. 175.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 174.

⁴⁷“Vospominanie ob Agartsine,” in Bitov, *Uroki*, pp. 178-83.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 180.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 182.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid.

perspectives shines through, and only at this point is it possible to gain access to the "reflection of God's face in his own creation." These, for Bitov, are the true products of an authentic culture. And these products are the sacred manifestations that tie one genuine human being to the sacred and therefore to the qualities of the genuine and the sacred in every other culture and time that has ever been and ever will be. This "dissolution in creation" comes about for Bitov when he gains respect for himself.

The experience brought him, figuratively, to his knees.⁵² Life was reduced to its most basic elements. He must begin again from the beginning. He must learn the language anew. He must pronounce the first word, once he has gained this broadened, deepened dimension in his life. And, for Bitov, the first word is "world" (*mir*).⁵³ "... th—is is the world. It is whole. It is everything. Everything is before me. The world—is everything. The world opened up before me. I froze at the threshold. I stood rooted to the spot, in the doorway. The gateway to the world. The gates of the world. I stand at the threshold. It is I who is standing. It is I."⁵⁴

The interrelationship of the individual person, Bitov, with authentic culture, with the capacity to respect the other, brings Bitov to a respect for himself. By the end of "Armenia Lessons" we have come full-circle from the beginning. The Pushkin words quoted in Bitov's epigraph had been: "Love yourself/My dear lovable reader."⁵⁵ In a typical Bitov merging of endings and beginnings, Bitov says, in another context, in the beginning of "After the Lessons," "I had thought that this was the end. Not at all. Right here is where everything begins."⁵⁶

Bitov writes, "... there is no new and old in the world because *everything* in it [the world] is now."⁵⁷ Authenticity lasts, and the eternal connects one age to another. Bitov writes, "The eternal has no history. History is only for the transient. Biology has a history, but life has none. The state has a history, but a people has none. Religion has a history, but God has none."⁵⁸ Particular human beings, particular governmental structures, particular religions are time-bound, but the fundamental, quintessential essence of life, of a people, and of God is eternal. ■

⁵²Ibid., p. 183.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵A.S. Pushkin, "Puteshestvie v Arzrum," as quoted in Bitov, *Uroki*, p. 3.

⁵⁶Bitov, *Uroki*, p. 172.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 175.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 35.