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CYCLES, LAYERS, FRAGMENTARINESS, CREATION MYTHS, AND THREAD, OR WHY IS BITOV'S MAN IN THE LANDSCAPE?

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Abstract

Andrei Bitov addresses questions of man's purpose, of human imperfection, of how the human being fits into the landscape. Pavel Petrovich, a main character of 'Man in the Landscape', discusses the artist's attempt not just to reflect the world, but to understand. The human being lives in a narrow layer of reality, and, says Pavel Petrovich, the artist attempts to go from the earthly to the divine layer. That thread of striving, he says, *is* life. He asks what the human being's purpose is, and concludes that the Creator, as an artist, needs man to see and appreciate his creation.

Keywords: *Andrei Bitov; Gnosticism*

Взгляни на камень, который выбросили строители... – От Фомы
(Look at the stone which the builders rejected... – From Thomas)
(Epigraph to Andrej Bitov, 'Čelovek v pejzaže')¹

It makes sense to say, it seems to me, that from the very beginning of his writing career, Bitov has been writing what I would call "ecological prose".² He first writes one story, travelogue, or essay, as an individual independent entity, and then later places this entity together with another story, travelogue, or essay, to form a larger interdependent structure, an ecosystem, an ecological "organism". (The same principle holds true for his poetry, so that

the poems, too, become part of the one larger interdependent ecological whole that represents all of his works taken together.) Thus, 'Čelovek v pejzaže' ('Man in a Landscape'), completed in 1983, first came out as a short story in *Novyj mir* in 1987.³ Bitov conceived of the story as being linked to an earlier story cum philosophical essay, 'Pticy' ('Birds'). 'Pticy' and 'Čelovek v pejzaže' are now the first two parts of a three-part novel, entitled *Oglašennye. Roman-stranstvie* in Russian, and in English, *The Monkey Link. A Pilgrimage Novel*.⁴ The third part of the novel is entitled 'Ožidanie obez'jan' ('Awaiting Monkeys'); it first came out, separately, in Russian, in 1993.⁵

Andrej Bitov's 'Čelovek v pejzaže' is an extraordinary work of art. It is a story, tale, part of a novel, and a grand, powerful, pulsing, moving, funny, poignant, and finally, delicately beautiful meditation upon human life and its purpose, upon the existence of good and evil, upon art and its purpose. It is a work about the human being's relationship to the Creator (in the religious sense), about the relationship of the Creator (artistic) to his/her creations. It is a work about the thinnest of membranes that separates genius and madness. It is a work that embraces sixteenth-century Russian religious architecture and late Brežnev-era Soviet life. It is a work that shimmers with mainstream Christianity and with the apocryphal gospels (the Gnostic gospel of Thomas). It is a work whose landscape is strewn with icons; with the landscape painting of Pieter Bruegel; with the paintings of Albrecht Dürer; with Komar's and Melamid's art. It is a work that collapses distinctions between a present-day alcoholic, Pavel Petrovič, and other Pauls and Peters, in religious and historical time. It is a work that is equally at home with betrayal and envy, with compassion and awe, with physical and spiritual darkness and light, with theories of life and theories of art.

It is a work that reflects upon life and death. It is a work that demands answers to the deepest, most difficult questions that arise in our darkest, most solitary night-hours, "Gde čelovek? kto čelovek? i začem čelovek?" ("Where is man? who is man? and why is man?").⁶ It is a work that unflinchingly demands answers to *the* most terrifying questions that confront the artist when he/she faces the raw and naked terrors that accompany the creative process: how to explain those constant doubts that starkly announce that one's creations do not measure up to one's image ("obraz") of perfection?

So what *is* going on in Bitov's 'Čelovek v pejzaže'? First, for the benefit of those who have not read 'Čelovek v pejzaže', here is a brief summary. The narrator arrives, in 1979, in what the readers can gather, although it is not named outright, might be Kolomenskoe. He is struck by the combination of civilization (restored churches), nature (untouched), and the stages in between. He sees a man painting a landscape. It is Pavel Petrovič, who is at once an icon restorer, a landscape painter, and an alcoholic. Pavel Petrovič serves as the narrator's figurative and literal guide.

Pavel Petrovič leads the narrator through discussions of the landscape painter's dilemma – he cannot paint a landscape without the human being's presence in it. (It turns out that Pavel Petrovič cannot paint a landscape without painting his nose into the picture.)⁷ He leads the narrator through myths of the creation of the world. He leads them through discussions about man's relationship to God and God's relationship to man. He leads him through his theories of layers of reality and of the role of the artist (more on this later). Pavel Petrovič also serves as the narrator's literal guide on a drunken journey of visits, to Semen, an icon restorer high on drugs; and to other drinking companions.

Near the end of the tale, the narrator, waking up from a drunken stupor, finds himself in Pavel Petrovič's apartment with Pavel Petrovič and Pavel Petrovič's pregnant wife. Along the way, the reader has bumped into policemen (the narrator, a writer, also with connections to cinema, is arrested, but talks his way out of jail); an elk; Dürer's *Rhinoceros*; Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*; icons of the Savior and of Cyril and Methodius; a great Dane, Linda, whose pay for being in a film about the German occupation provides money for drinking; a rat; two chickens; and a heifer.

Is everything perfectly clear now? Do you see? Do you understand? You do not... but then, not seeing and not understanding *and* seeing and understanding are, like a thread, woven into the very structure *and* the very theme of this work. Let me explain – or *try* to explain.

In 'Čelovek v pejzaže', Bitov writes, near the beginning:

Время ведь тоже трудится, как человек: сначала совершенствуя и лишь потом – разрушая. Занятое количество границ! Дикой природы – с одичавшей культурой, одичавшей культуры – с культурным пространством, культурного пространства – с разрушением, разрухи – с одичанием, одичания – с дикостью [...]. Все тут было во взаимном переходе, во взаимном обрыве. (86)

(Time labors, after all, like man: at first perfecting and only later destroying. Such a curious quantity of boundaries! Wilderness bounded by a civilization returning to the wild; the wilding civilization, by civilized space; the civilized space, by ruins; the ruins, by wilding gardens; the wilding gardens, by wilderness [...]. Everything here was in mutual transition, mutual schism; 74)

And a bit later, he writes about a layer (of time) showing through a layer, like structure through structure: "I sloj skvozit skvoz' sloj, kak stroj skvoz' stroj" (87; "And layer shows through layer, structure through structure"; 74).

Almost immediately, then, we have cycles and layers, cycles of life and death, of culture and nature. Almost immediately, then, we have layers – and we have layers protruding into other layers – layers of time protruding into layers of space. What does this all mean, and what does this have to do with a landscape painter, with man in the landscape? On the most general level, man, an entity in time, wants to know how he fits into the landscape, an entity of space. But things get much more complicated. Again, let me try to explain.

Since this work is structured in cycles and layers, with one layer protruding into another, since the work concerns itself with, on one hand, the cycles of history, time, the individual life; on another, with layers of this earth and the divine; and finally, with the category of the divine, of eternity, it might be easier to talk about by speaking in visual terms – in order to demonstrate the dilemmas posed by Bitov and the overlapping of one layer with another. If we picture three columns, in the first, we have time, history, the individual in historical time, cycles of the life and death of cultures and nature “vo vzajmnom perechode” (“in mutual transition”), cycles superimposed on one another. In the second column, we have layers of reality, the layer of reality man inhabits, and in the third column, we have eternity, religion, the perfection of God, the perfection of God’s creation, of God’s landscape. Now, once again, things get more complicated, for there is movement between the layers and categories, again, “vo vzajmnom perechode” (“in mutual transition”).

First of all, more about layers. Pavel Petrovič expounds several theories, one of which is his theory of layers. He declares that we human beings live in a very narrow layer. “[...] my živem sovsem ne v real’nosti, a liš v sloe real’nosti...” (120; “[...] we do not live in reality at all, only in a layer of reality”; 107). We crawl around in our layer, he continues, and we are not given to understand the working principles, arrangement, structure of layers other than our own. Certain artists, explains Pavel Petrovič, artists like Leonardo da Vinci, El Greco, Goya, Van Gogh, want not just to *reflect* the world, but to *understand*; they strive to go beyond the layer, “za predely izobraženija” (121; “beyond the bounds of representation”; 109), and there, they find madness, suicide, or faith. And, according to Pavel Petrovič: “Tam, gde vera, tam uže net chudožnika” (122; “Where faith is, the artist is no more”; 109). The crisis of the artist, he explains, is that he got to the edge of the layer in which representation exists, and now wants “okrasit’ nevidimye predmety v vidimye cveta” (122; “to paint invisible objects with visible colors”; 109). That is, the artist is striving toward the category of God, of the eternal, of perfection. The genius tries to go beyond the frame and “proryvaet izobraženie” (122; “tears a hole in the image”; 109).

Then there is Pavel Petrovič’s “teorija fragmentarnosti žizni” (128; “theory of the fragmentariness of life”; 115) – the world as fragments in a

heap: “A vse – otdel’no, vse otdel’no!.. Ne zaveršeno, [...] sšito na živuju [...] Vot čto živo, vot čto grandiozno, vot čto veliko i božestvenno – nitka! Nitka-to – živaja! Ona-to i est’ prisutstvie Boga v Tvorenii!” (129; “But they’re all isolated, all isolated! Unfinished, [...], carelessly basted together. [...] That’s what’s alive, that’s what’s tremendous, that’s what’s great and divine – the basting! The *thread* is alive! *It* is the presence of God in Creation!”; 115).

And this is where Bitov/Pavel Petrovič gets closer to an answer to one of his major questions – *why* man? What is man’s purpose? How, he asks, can one explain the usefulness of man in creation if there was no evolution beyond the human being? How can one explain the usefulness of man in creation if we are imperfect in comparison with God, and if most of our attempts at art are imperfect in comparison with God, and if most of our attempts at art cannot attain divine perfection?

Again, we have to rely on Pavel Petrovič to provide the next steps in our journey to try to explain why man is in the landscape. At one point, he says that he is not only an artist, that even when he knows that he is a failure as a landscape painter because of the nose in the landscape phenomenon, he attempts to make contact with divine creation. He wants to understand. And, I believe, it is this attempt at contact, on the part of the artist, the attempt of the genius/artist to move from the human layer to the divine layer that constitutes one of the purposes, in Bitov’s story, for the existence of flawed human beings and flawed works of art.

In yet another of Pavel Petrovič’s theories, he explains the overproduction of artistic geniuses. They create many imperfect works of art, in addition to the few magnificent creations. He explains this in terms of the “yield” as in the percentage of meat in a hamburger. Thus, overproduction – and imperfection – are essential to the work of the genius. Who needs Tolstoj’s ninety volumes, he asks? But they *were* necessary for us to have the great works that remained. The artist’s dissatisfaction with his creations – the fact that the artist can paint the Madonna, but never the child – is necessary for the creative process. If the artist is hailed during his lifetime, says Pavel Petrovič, this deprives him of the important feeling of dissatisfaction, of striving toward the perfect image which he knows he cannot attain. Thus, again, we have a justification for the imperfect work of art.

What is man for, according to Bitov? Why is man in God’s “image and likeness?” To see, to appreciate God’s creation, we read. God, as an artist, says Pavel Petrovič, needed man to see and appreciate, to make contact with this creation. Thus, we are back to the thread. It is the thread to the divine that explains our purpose in life. It is the *attempt* of the artist (feeling imperfect in comparison to the perfection of God) to *reach* the divine category that constitutes the living thread.

Finally, we come to another explanation, within the story, for the existence of imperfection. Pavel Petrovič sets forth a myth of the creation of the world, supposedly from the South American Yamana Indians, that treats the Creator as artist. The great god Nikibumatva made beautiful anomalies. His shadow and devil, the jealous Esčeguki, tried to copy Nikibumatva, but his copies were ugly. Esčeguki's joke was that he sculpted a creature in the likeness of Nikibumatva, and the result was a monkey (130-131), a parody of Nikibumatva. Nikibumatva could not interfere with someone else's work, so he did not try to correct even an ugly creation. He sprinkled a teardrop of his vexation and a bead of his sweat on the monkey. He wiped away the tear and the sweat with his tired hand. The two drops scalded the monkey, and they fell into his eyes. Trying to imitate and resemble Nikibumatva, the monkey changed and became a man (130-131). What created man was the teardrop and sweat of God, and that is why love and work are man's fate: love sees the form, and work creates it. This is why man is in his image and likeness (131-132). The Creator is Nikibumatva. The Caricaturist is Esčeguki. Human beings are two-sided: created by the devil, inspirited by God. The flesh is from the devil. The spirit is from God (132).

This brings us back to the epigraph, from the Gnostic gospel of Thomas, that begins 'Čelovek v pejzaže': "Look at the stone which the builders rejected." It appears in slightly different form in the Gospel of Matthew. If we think of that which has been rejected, it is man, who does *not* fit into the landscape made by God, and it is the imperfect work of art made by human hands when compared to God's creation. Yet the very imperfection serves as a *reason* for the human being's existence – to see and to appreciate the creation of God, the artist, and to strive, in our own art, toward God's perfection – to make contact with the creator and the creation, to create the very thread that binds the human to the divine. We strive from our earthly layer to the divine layer.

Bitov talks about the presence of the divine in the earthly layer. Gnosticism teaches of the hidden reality of self-knowledge/divinity/kingdom of God within, if one sees and understands. One can go toward this – from darkness to light – or one can stay in the dark. In the story, there are frequent references to images of light *and* darkness. Both of these sides show in the story – the wild, drunken sprees of Pavel Petrovič and the narrator. Yet there are flashes of wisdom, as the narrator *sometimes* begins to understand. Sometimes, he does not see, nor does he understand. The same is true of Pavel Petrovič. Like a Biblical apostle, he gives the key to the monastery to the narrator. Yet he is a Judas (he is even called that) in his betrayal of the narrator as he runs away when the narrator is arrested. There are three scenes reminiscent of the Last Supper. The "Biblical fishermen" Semen and Pavel Petrovič fish, not for fish, but for pickles, an Esčeguki-like parody of a sacred text.

Man, says Bitov, cannot fit into the landscape. At one point, Pavel Petrovič refers to Pieter Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. The lesson to be drawn, says Pavel Petrovič, is that the human being should not attempt to fly. In this case, the earthly layer fails to soar in a realm close to the sun. An icon mentioned, *Spas nerukotvornyj*, is only, in Pavel Petrovič's and Semen's work, a mere copy of a form that had long ago provided a window to the divine.

But 'Čelovek v pejzaže' ends on a more hopeful note. As we saw with cycles of death and life at the beginning of the tale, life leads to death, but death also leads to life. Near the end, the narrator is present in the apartment where Pavel Petrovič is asleep with his wife, about to give birth. The religious overtones continue as the last scene includes the writer, figuratively giving birth to the story we have just read, as he sits with two baby chicks, on his foot, who seek contact and warmth. The images of resurrection hint toward the presence of the divine in the material world. The writer mentions Leonardo da Vinci's *Adoration of the Magi*, a painting about the birth of Christ, a painting which, we know, has been praised through the ages for its unity of religious spirit *and* the physical body. Thus, the divine layer has found a presence in the human layer, an artist has succeeded in combining art and faith, a writer has ended one tale, with his next tale, i.e., the third part of *Oglašemye*, 'Ožidanie obez'jan', being subtitled "Transfiguration", in *The Monkey Link*, the English translation of the novel. In Christianity, of course, transfiguration is all about the presence of the divine layer in the earthly layer.

We, the readers, are inside the layer of "paint" of the picture that the artist Bitov has painted. Our struggle, as readers, is to make *contact*. He, as creator, artist, waits for us, as readers, to see and appreciate. The second epigraph to 'Čelovek v pejzaže', which is the last line of the first tale, 'Pticy', is "[...] a on nam rasskazyval kak raz ob étom..." (79; "[...] and that's just what he was telling us about..."; 67).

 NOTES

- ¹ Andrej Bitov, 'Čelovek v pejzaže', in: *Oglašemye*, Sankt-Peterburg, 1995, p. 83.
- ² See my book, *Andrei Bitov. The Ecology of Inspiration*, Cambridge, 1993 (Transl. into Russian by I. Larenov: *Andrej Bitov. Ėkologija vdochnovenija*, Sankt-Peterburg, 2006).

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- ³ Andrej Bitov, 'Čelovek v pejzaže', *Novyj mir*, No. 3, 1987, pp. 64-99.
- ⁴ Andrej Bitov, *Oglašennye. Roman-stranstvie*, Sankt-Peterburg, 1995; Andrei Bitov, *The Monkey Link. A Pilgrimage Novel*, New York, 1995 (Transl. Susan Brownsberger).
- ⁵ Andrej Bitov, 'Ožidanie obez'jan', *Novyj mir*, 1993, No. 10, pp. 6-102.
- ⁶ Andrei Bitov, 'Man in a Landscape (the Novice)', in Bitov, *The Monkey Link*, p. 92; Bitov, 'Čelovek v pejzaže', in Bitov, *Oglašennye*, p. 104. Hereafter, citations from these editions will appear in parentheses within the text of the article.
- ⁷ The artists Komar and Melamid made up an artist, whose paintings included a series of landscapes with noses. See *Komar and Melamid*, New York, 1999, pp. 68-92. Bitov had heard of these Komar and Melamid paintings, but had not seen them (my conversation with Bitov, New York, October, 1995).