

## THE CATEGORY OF TIME IN *ENVY*. SOME NOTES ABOUT OLEŠA'S POETICS

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### JU. K. OLEŠA AND THE CATEGORY OF TIME

The concept of time is essential towards an understanding of the birth and development of Oleša's literary work. After a careful analysis (Oleša 1934, 1935, 1974) we may come to the conclusion that the writer or, to be more exact, the narrator, in that he is the more natural means of communication with the reader, must be like an artist who can stop time and transfigure everything.

Oleša conceives the art of writing as the creation of a lasting link between the present and the past, which will generate a dream of eternity, where conventional concepts like beginning and end will signify nothing. For the writer the value of time depends on events memorized, chosen and finally used in his artistic production. From this it follows, that the category of time gains its main connotation through the basic adjective *artistic*.

For Oleša the aesthetic act, conceived as a regeneration or more simply as a generation, a creation of new images, is comparable with the activity of consciousness during two particular periods of human life: infancy and childhood. As Oleša writes:

Законы творчества — чрезвычайно мало освоенная вещь. Трудно дать себе, как это делается. Как рождается образ, как возникает идея. (...) Возникновение *Зависти* — результат почти всей сознательной юности. (Oleša 1935: 152)

These words are essential to the understanding of the poetics, the linguistic and formal devices, and the artistic structures, which characterize Oleša's work together with his time.

Childhood is intended as the moment when a man, in our case a writer, is at his most sensitive to images and impressions. A child subjects these images to his very personal way of perception and very often he changes and camouflages them: an object, a colour, a scent assume meanings very far from their usual ones. In other words, a child can create his personal metaphors from everything which he is sensitive to; he can give a new life to his sensorial impressions.

Детские впечатления играют огромную роль в формировании художественного интеллекта. Я когда-нибудь напишу статью о детских впечатлениях в творчестве Льва Толстого. Именно в творчестве Толстого эти детские впечатления сказываются особенно сильно. (...) Я приведу известный пример. Это слова Гете. Он сказал о Петре Первом, что тот построил Петербург на каналах, потому что в детстве его поразила картинка, изображавшая голландский город. Это, конечно, слова поэта, очень красивые, но может быть не совсем справедливые, однако, мне кажется, что доля правды в них есть. Умение видеть мир как бы впервые является свойством поэта. А это умение идет ведь от детства, когда человек действительно видит мир впервые (Oleša 1935: 153).

There is a very clear and direct connection between the child and the artist; between childhood and the time of artistic creation.

The freshness of sensations, the capacity of emotions are characteristic of both the writer and the child.

From similar conclusions it is by now clear how important the image and the value of memory as the foundation of knowledge are.

As regards memory, it is comparable to a half-reality, a half-consciousness. Memory gives to events a unchronological, illogical, dynamic and selected order; hopes become real events; real events are forgotten, altered, constantly reinterpreted in the light of present necessities, past fears and future hopes. The temporal plane of memory is an incoherent one, where diachronic rules are violated in favour of a space-time continuum. Memory works according to processes com-

parable to those of dreaming and sleeping, which folk tradition has always ascribed to the field of magic and fable.<sup>1</sup>

This idea of time and artistic creation must necessarily have some influence on the most direct vehicle of communication for a writer: his language. Oleša thinks that each phrase of prose must take advantage of the reader's emotivity. If such phrases are placed at the point of the work when the emotional effect has achieved its height, then even if it is stylistically incorrect nobody will notice this. *Эта фраза всплывает на лирической волне*. Of course, Oleša does not mean to justify illiteracy or slovenliness on the part of the writer, he only wants to stress the artistic and emotional aspect. Feeling and idea come first, the form will come itself.<sup>2</sup>

The child and the artist above all seize images from reality. These images are real, as they spring from the world of the senses; at the same time, they are images created from a particular point of view, which can perceive the *newness* by this time lost from the adult's experienced sight. Sometimes this *newness* borders on the category of the fantastic.<sup>3</sup> The perception of a child, of an inexperienced young man and an artist, is more expository than explicative; it represents rather than argues. Images are what prevail in the development of motifs of Oleša's prose. Now it is possible to draw a parallel between Oleša's work and the tenth Muse, the cinema.

According to Ejzenštein, two pieces of a film, whatever they may be, if set nearby, signify a new idea, acquire a new character that springs from this contraposition. In no way this phenomenon is peculiar only to the cinema; on the contrary, it may be noticed every-when we set in opposition to each other two facts, two phenomena, two objects. In the presence of such an opposition, almost automatically we carry out a clear and evident deductive generalization.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As a pure indication, since there are many works on this subject, see: Bakalov 1987, Bergson 1922, Florenskij 1967, Ivanov-Toporov 1965, Ivanov 1973, Ličhačev 1962, Meyerhoff 1955, Vysockij 1968.

<sup>2</sup> Oleša has repeatedly treated the problems of form and language in the above-mentioned works.

<sup>3</sup> For the concepts of fantastic and fantastic reality, see Oleša's essay *G. Uells* (1974).

<sup>4</sup> See Ejzenštein 1964: 228. The original text has been published in english: *The film sense*, Harcourt, Brace & Co., New York 1942; but we could in no way succeed in reading it.

Ejzenštein's words, although dedicated to analyse the technique of the film-cutting, may easily be referred to the structure of Oleša's works. *Tri tolstjaka*, *Zavist'*, its theatrical adaptation *Zagovor čuvstv*, *Višnevaja kostočka* and the unfinished tale *Samoučitel' volšebstv* are only a few meaningful examples.

One of Oleša's favoured motifs has always been the contrast between an idealized past and an equally idealized future. Moreover, our writer has always dropped this contrast into contemporary space and time, in order to clarify the degree of idealization inherent to both time categories.

We must point out that this motif of the contrast between past and future is not only an individual feature, typical of Oleša's poetics, but a recurrent theme in nearly all contemporary Russian literature. Time as experienced in the individual life of man, and time as experienced in a historical process, their coinciding or coming into collision in the artist's personal consciousness, form a common motif in Russian literary creation of the post-revolutionary years. As examples, we may cite Osip Mandel'stam's *Šum vremeni*, Anna Achmatova's *Beg vremeni*, Aleksandr Blok's *Dvenadcat'*, Evgenij Zamjatin's *My*, Boris Pilnjak's *Golyj god* and our list could go on with many other equally famous names and titles.

In Oleša's poetics the stream of images, which forms the most characteristic structure of his works, coincides with what we may define the narrator's, and not the writer's, stream of consciousness, of thinking. As a matter of fact, the metaphor of the *stream* has become a synonym for a definite literary technique, which is not quite characteristic of Oleša's writing. The expression, as used in the present essay, has as its referent a human mental process, whether conscious or not. Time, as experienced by the individual, has the quality of *flowing* like a river; and this quality is an enduring feature within the constant changing of historical time. This way, we make a selection of facts, people and reflections, correlated through motifs and coexisting on an associative ground. We may consequently notice a substantial weakness of the narrative syntagmatic axis, opposed to a semantic of the paradigmatic one.

Associations, mental digressions annulling the rational spacetime and privileging the poetic one are very frequent within *Envy* particularly and the whole of Oleša's work.

Within *Envy* an initial memory of the narrator, be he the character-Kavalerov of the first part of the novel or the unknown person of the second part, becomes an image; the image becomes a metaphor and

causes the series of the following images. We may find many examples of this particular narrative technique and two theoretical expositions in *Envy*. In the XIVth chapter of the first part Kavalero, our character-narrator, has already been chased out of Andrej Babičev's house and, within the fraction of a second necessary before the words *Get away from here!* reach his brain and become significant, he finds himself thinking:

Он ответил тотчас же, точно мы сыгрались. Но реплика дошла до сознания моего спустя некоторый промежуток времени.

Произошло нечто необычайное.

Шел дождь. Возможно, была молния.

*Я не хочу говорить образно. Я хочу говорить просто. Я читал некогда «Атмосферу» Камилла Фламариона. (Какое планетное имя! Фламарион-это сама звезда). Он описывает шаровидную молнию, ее удивительный эффект: полный, гладкий шар бесшумно вкатывается в помещение, наполняя его ослепительным светом... о, я далек от намерения прибегать к пошлым сравнениям. Но облако было подозрительно. Но тень надвигалась, как во сне. Но шел дождь. В спальне было открыто окно. Нельзя в грозу оставлять окна открытыми! Сквозняк!*

С дождем, с каплями горькими, как слезы, с порывами ветра под которыми ваза-фламинго бежит, как пламя, воспламеня занавески, которые также бегут под потолок, появляется из спальни Валя.

Но только меня ошеломляет это явление. На самом же деле все просто приехал друг, и друзья поспешили с ним увидится. Возможно, Бабичев заехал за Валей, мечтавшей, возможно, об этом дне. Все просто. А меня надо отправить в диспансер, лечить гипнозом, чтоб не мыслил образами и не приписывал девушке эффектов шаровидной молнии.

*Так я же испорчу вам простоту!* (Oleša 1982: 46–47)

These words recounting the present facts, ideally addressed as a direct speech to some listener, are interrupted by the mental images produced by the free springing of Nikolaj Kavalero's thoughts.

Just a short time before, this character had created an ideal conflict between the artist's way of speaking by images and the common man's by concepts. In his letter to Andrej Babičev, which represents a symbolic delirium of his mental processes, he writes:

Вы называли меня алкоголиком только потому, что я обратился к девушке на непонятном для вас образном языке? Непонятное-либо смешно, либо страшно. Сейчас вы смеетесь, но я заставляю вас вскоре ужасаться. Не думайте, не только образно, — вполне

*реально я умею мыслить. Что же! О ней, о Вале, я могу сказать и обычными словами, — и вот, пожалуйста, я вам приведу сейчас ряд понятных для вас определений, умышленно, чтобы разжечь вас, чтобы раздражить тем, чего вы не получите, уважаемый колбасник!*

*Да, она стояла передо мной, — да, сперва по-своему: скажу. она была легче тени, ей могла бы позавидовать самая легкая из теней — тень падающего снега, да, сперва по-своему; не ухом она слушала меня, а виском, слегка наклонив голову; да, на орех похоже ее лицо: по цвету — от загара, и по форме — скулами, округлыми, сужающимися к подбородку. Это понятно вам? Нет? Так вот еще. От бега платье ее пришло в беспорядок, открылось, и я увидел: еще не вся она покрылась загаром, на груди у нее увидел я голубую рогатку вены...*

*А теперь — по-вашему. Описание той, которой вы хотите полакомиться. Передо мной стояла девушка лет шестнадцати, почти девочка, широкая в плечах, сероглазая, с подстриженными и взлохмаченными волосами — очаровательный подросток, стройный, как шахматная фигура — (это уже по-моему!), невеликий ростом. (Oleša 1982: 38).*

The artistic images, founded on a mentally associative level without any real time and space, extend themselves in a time-space which has the ideal form of a spiral, infinite, with numberless possibilities, endless and so never perfectly circular.

To Oleša the capacity of creating a work of art, through a narrator, is closely linked to memory. As already said above, our memory crushes time barriers and in doing so emphasizes the role of the perception of the fantastic, that is an unreal category of the world. Our memory is supplied by a complete asystematic sequence of sensorial perceptions. Each artist, each narrator, must take care of his own memory; his images, his metaphors will spring from it.

The creating narrator is like an artist, stopping time and transfiguring men and objects. Therefore, the act of creating comes about in a substantial absence of time; the aesthetic act regenerates men, objects and facts; it gives life and passes beyond death; it is the instrument of immortality.<sup>5</sup>

The stress we put on the writer-narrator's memory brings with it the theme of metamorphosis. All men, objects and facts undergo some metamorphosis through memory and its reproduction. The narrators

<sup>5</sup> Bergson's and Proust's influences on Oleša have been treated in Beaujour 1977.

of Oleša's works retain a clear remembrance only of those impressions which struck at least one of their five senses; in this way, they make a choice and thus obey a common law of mental economy. These *revisited* impressions form the content of their narration.

We may call this content: *a mimesis*, which joins together the results of the narrator's attention and imagination. Attention tries to reproduce perceptible truth; imagination makes up for the absence of memory. The imaginary may be presented as truth, because it became a real truth in the narrator's mind; the reader can know nothing for certain.

Oleša's narrative time is without any past or future, nor even any present. The categories, which we are used to divide events, lose their categorial significance; past, present and future mingle in the web of the narration.

#### THE CATEGORY OF TIME AS THE BASIC LEIT-MOTIF OF "ENVY"

On first examination it seems, that the basic leit-motif of *Envy* is that very particular feeling, which gives the book its title. Envy symbolizers, can even be considered the emblem of all human feelings, that claim their right to exist even in the technical age.

The dialogue between Ivan Babičev and his examining magistrate, after Ivan's arrest and taking to GPU:

— ... целый ряд человеческих чувств кажется мне подлежащим уничтожению ...

— Например? Чувства ...

— жалости, нежности, гордости, ревности, любви-словом, почти все чувства, из которых состояла душа человека кончающей эры. Эра социализма создаст взамен прежних чувствований новую серию состояний человеческой души.

...

— Таким образом, видим мы, что новый человек приучает себя презирать старинные, прославленные поэтами и самой музой истории чувства. Ну вот-с. Я хочу устроить последний парад этих чувств.

— Это и есть то, что вы называете заговором чувств?

— Да. Это и есть заговор чувств, во главе которого стаю я (Oleša 1982: 63–64).

In fact, the fundamental decoding of the underlying significance of the novel cannot do without this consideration, in which we find a

list of all possible causes of envy: the thirst for glory, fear, a sense of personal uselessness and inferiority together with a contemporary sense of other people's superiority, the absence of outward and inward dignity, incomprehension, hate, shame and anger.

But neither envy, nor *the conspiracy of feelings*, is the main problem, which Oleša intended to deal with. In his novel, published in 1927, he solved this problem in a negative and quite pessimistic way: he prefigured the defeat of all human feelings, except the one necessary to *find peace*: indifference.

The real main theme, permeating the whole work and supporting its structure, is the conflict between two different historical epochs, two incompatible times and spaces (Pavan Pagnini 1986).

The unknown narrator of the second part of *Envy* tells us Ivan's words:

Мы — это человечество, дошедшее до последнего предела, — говорил он, стуча кружкой по мрамору, как копытом. — Сильные личности, люди, решившие жить по-своему, эгоисты, упрямцы, к вам обращаюсь я, как к более умным, — авангард мой! Слушайте, стоящие впереди! Кончается эпоха. Вал разбивается о камни, вал закипает, сверкает пена. Что же хотите вы? Чего? Исчезнуть, сойти на нет капельками, мелким водяным кипением? Нет, друзья мои, не так должны вы погибнуть! Нет! Придите ко мне, я научу вас.

...

Ворота закрываются. Слышите ли вы шипение створок? Не рвитесь. Не стремитесь проникнуть за порог! Остановитесь! Остановка — гордость. Будьте горды (Oleša 1982: 57–58).

Ivan Babičev, together with Nikolaj Kavalero, represents *the conspiracy of feelings*, an ending world. Ivan is ideally linked to a passed historically time; whose sentimental transgressions and excesses he maintains as symbols of his choice, or individuality. Oleša's characters mark the difficult relationship between the individual and community, between a subjective and objective sense of time.

The engineer Ivan, inventing Ophelia *the machine of all machines*, *the universal machine which can do everything*, preacher in the taverns, unsuccessful father, is the sign of a dying world, since it is not ready to accept the new course of history; but this dying world, before fading away will *give rise to a wonderful, fleeting flash of light*. Ivan Babičev chooses the old world, his brother Andrej *he Di-*



rector of the Organization for the Alimentary Industry; great sausage maker, confectioner and cook is a figure of transition between the two periods; Volodja Makarov, the young footballer, Andrej's favourite, is the sign of the new world, where physical culture and engineering will be very important; Nikolaj Kavalerov, unsuccessful man of letters, would like to reject the old time and space in order to enter the new ones, but he cannot move a step and can only envy the others; this latter is the one completely narrowminded character of the novel.

In *Envy* we see, how modification and coexistence are not phenomena which exclude each other, but rather strictly linked. There is always a period when the old and the new, whatever field of human activity and knowing we may consider, coexist until the new succeeds in obtaining the supremacy. As R. Jakobson said concerning linguistic modifications, thus formulating a much more general theory:

Any modification takes place first at the synchronic level and is thus a part of the system, while only the results of the modifications are imported to the diachronic dimension (Jakobson-Pomorska 1985).

In this way, the ideas of past, present and future are dialectically linked to criteria of contemporaneity.

During Kavalerov's first encounter with Ivan Babičev, of course in a tavern, Ivan says:

... мой друг, нас гложет зависть. Мы завидуем грядущей эпохе. Если хотите, тут зависть старости. Тут зависть впервые состарившегося человеческого поколения. Поговорим о зависти. Дайте нам еще пива...

... да зависть. Тут должна разыгаться драма, одна из трех грандиозных драм на театре истории, которые долго вызывают плач, восторги, сожаления и гнев человечества. Вы, сами того не понимая, являетесь носителем исторической миссии. Вы, так сказать, сгусток. Вы сгусток зависти погибающей эпохи. Погибающая эпоха завидует тому, что идет ей на смену.

...  
О, как прекрасен поднимающийся мир! О, как разблещется праздник, куда нас не пустят! Все идет от нее, от новой эпохи, все стягивается к ней, лучшие дары и восторги получит она. Я люблю его, этот мир, надвигающийся на меня, больше жизни, поклоняюсь ему и всеми силами ненавижу его! Я захлебываюсь, слезы катятся из моих глаз градом, но я хочу запустить пальцы в его одежду, разодрать. Не затирай! Не забирай того, что может принадлежать мне... (Oleša 1982: 68–71).

A digression is now necessary in order to consider tavern and street spaces; where Nikolaj Kavalerov and Ivan Babičev are most frequently to be found. We can affirm, that all their dialogues, evidencing the leading themes of the book, take place in a tavern or on the street.

They are both horizontal spaces, making impossible all further moral and social ascent or descent. The tavern is an inner space; on the contrary, the street is an outer one. In spite of this, they are not in opposition to each other; they present common characteristics and functions. They are both modelling signs of our two characters' *inner spaces*. It is obvious, that it is the street space which permits Andrej Babičev's first casual encounter with Nikolaj Kavalerov and then Kavalerov's with Ivan Babičev. The street space permits the meeting of men, who belong to completely different worlds and thus allows the development of the plot. We may also notice, that Oleša's street has negative connotations (Bachtin 1975).

To return to the point in hand, Ivan Babičev's words show that his love for the old world does not exclude his admiration for the new historical turn of events; his only desire is not to be forgotten, to continue living in memory of others. Once more, memory, as it does not permit the disintegration of the past, is the means of defeating death. Passing time has two aspects: from the negative point of view it registers the end of youth and of all expectations of what could have been; from the positive point of view only passing time can create memory which will breed immortality. Also Nikolaj Kavalerov says:

Тогда услышал я впервые гул времени. Времена неслись надо мною. Я глотал восторженные слезы. Я решил стать знаменитым, чтобы некогда мой восковой двойник, наполненный гудением веков, которое услышать дано лишь немногим, вот так же красовался в зеленоватом кубе (Oleša 1982: 21).

Nikolaj Kavalerov wants to gain immortality through fame, in order to defeat death, nothingness and his envy too. Ivan Babičev will show him the way: to become *the hero of a tale*. After having been arrested for the verbal attack against his brother, Ivan Babičev smiles and says:

Это ложь. Легенда. Просто в пивной меня задержали. Полагаю, что давно уже было за мной наблюдение. Но, однако, хорошо, что уже сочинаются легенды. Конец эпохи, переходное время, требует своих легенд и сказок. Что же, я счастлив, что буду героем одной из таких сказок. И будет еще одна легенда: о машине, носившей

имя Офелия ...

Эпоха умрет с моим именем на устах. К тому и прилагаю я свои старания (Oleša 1982: 62–63).

The historical space, diachronic and objective, mingles with the unreal and often mythical space of a tale. Immortality appears to be linked with being the hero of a tale, of the most fantastic work of folk literature. Space, where the action of the tale takes place, is characterized by ease of movement and the weak resistance, which the environment puts up to the succession of the events, in such a way as to extend the poetic space itself.<sup>6</sup> In a time of transition between two epochs, when conflictuality has reached its height, the historical space acts like that of the tale: it offers a very weak resistance to the most absurd actions. In their turn, time and space of memory are comparable to those of a tale; since they are characterized by a very low degree of resistance.

The chronotope of history would have no reason to exist without the prevailing element of time passing by (which meaning on earth could have a static history?). If this element, as it seems through Ivan Babičev's words, loses its categorial significance, then we must give in to the fact that history too may in effect not exist in as much as it represents a state of becoming, but rather in as much as it represents a state of being.

#### CONCLUSIONS

- I don't understand you –, said Alice. – It's dreadfully confusing!
- That's the effect of living backwards, – the Queen said kindly. – It always makes one a little giddy at first.
- Living backwards! – Alice repeated in great astonishment. – I never heard of such a thing!
- But there's one great advantage in it, that one's memory works both ways.
- You can just see a little peep of the passage in Looking-Glass House, if you leave the door of our drawing room wide open: and it's very like our passage as far as you can see, only you know it may be quite different on beyond. Oh, Kitty, how nice it would be if we could only get through into Looking-Glass House!

These passages from *Alice in Wonderland*, particularly from the chapter *Through the Looking-Glass*, might serve as epigraphs of

<sup>6</sup> For the use and concept of space in a tale, see Vl. Ja. Propp's many works, and Lichačev 1973.

Oleša's novel; where Ivan Babičev and Nikolaj Kavaleroŭ wish *to live backwards*. The narrator's time of memory, which characterizes Kavaleroŭ-narrator's skaz in the first part of the novel, gives a proof of it. The connection with the past is always reestablished by memory; this connection becomes stronger as the future, turned into actuality, almost always succeeds in betraying illusions and hopes of the past and the present.

Ivan Babičev's and Nikolaj Kavaleroŭ's memories form a hypothetical temporal plane, since the idealized past lies in a very difficult relationship with the plane of real time.

*Envy* emphasizes the contrast between the time of memory, which is private and personal, and the time of history, which is public. The first constitutes a category of the interior, the second of the exterior.

In a situation of standstill (even entropy), or at least of un-disruptive progress, public and private categories may coexist and individualize common purposes; but they are generally irreconcilable, the more so during epochs of essential changes. At such a moment the relations between time and guilt, time and responsibility, memory and a new creation, life and death, participation and indifference as an alternative variant of death itself, come to the fore.

Often, this basic irreconcilability realizes itself in the archetypal motif of the clash of generations; to which is also frequently associated the motif of the failure of return to an illusorily idyllic past. Oleša has not avoided this rule.

Nikolaj Kavaleroŭ's and Ivan Babičev's errors, that predestine them to a defeat, consist in the fact that they do not perceive the objective temporal order of events, to which we have sometimes to refer independently to our personal experience of time. What is happening in the present works to make man's time of experience. On the contrary, the series of past and future events are organized in accordance with the psychological categories of memory and expectation: the past is the present memory of something which has already been; future is the present expectation of something which has not yet been.

Artists express their *personal* experience of time, which privileges the qualitative rather the quantitative aspect of it.

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