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THE “STRICTNESS” OF SOPHIA AS THE UNITY OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN SERGEI BULGAKOV

Sergei Bulgakov’s Philosophy of the Name [Filosofiia imeni] (1920) is a work that deals with both philosophical and theological questions. Nevertheless, the author viewed it as his “most philosophical book.” Paying due heed to Bulgakov’s statement, one can say that the central importance of this text from the perspective of theoretical philosophy is in the field of ontology of language. The discussion of language found in the work is interesting not only as an historical document of that which emerged from the struggle between the Anti-Nominalists [imiabortsy] and Nominalists [imiaslavtsy], but also as an example of the systematic structure of Bulgakov’s arguments, in which language proves to be a central constituent of his ontology, epistemology, ethics, and other areas. This is precisely why Bulgakov’s position can still be integrated into modern philosophical discourse after the so-called “linguistic turn.” The major aspects of his conception and its consequences for the theory of culture are the subject of this paper.

In his attempt to define the essence of language, Bulgakov concludes that language is not simply a means of communication or a tool for the expression of ideas. A linguistic identifier is not arbitrary or conventional. It is a symbol representing a particular idea in a concrete, sensually perceived form, and connecting the noumenal and the phenomenal worlds with each other. The understanding of language as symbol cannot explain its actual functioning, but it does offer an answer as to its genesis. The model of pars pro toto, which is enacted in and by the symbol, proves that language is an image of the world and an expression of the universal relationship between all things. Language as a symbolic system participates in being and receives substantiation in being itself. In Bulgakov’s terms, such substantiation occurs by way of the World Intellect. In Filosofiia imeni he claims that: “language is given to man because it is in and through him that the universe speaks. Humanity is the logos of the

1. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Oliver Smith for his help in editing this text.
universe, and any word is not only the word of a given subject about something, but also the word of that something itself.”

The basis of natural languages is that “one Word” that represents the ideal unarticulated language of objects or being. Bulgakov comprehends this internal language of being as “a sphere of pure ideas, divine Sophia.” He considers that “words exist only because there is the Word, and ideas, or meanings, exist only because there is the Idea-Meaning. Sophia exists, the World Soul, the Wisdom of the world, as the all-perfect organism of ideas, as the Pleroma, the fullness of being.” Sophia is here understood as the Word and represents the ideal basis of the world, or its onto-logic structure. The world appears therefore not as a casual set of objects, but as an animated space, as an internally-organized unity. It is this that allows us to describe it as “epiphenomenal.” Bulgakov maintains the ideality of reality: every object is inherent in its own Logos, its own idea, and each idea is ordered and interconnected with every other. Following the Platonic tradition, he assumes that the cognition of an object consists in the cognition of its idea. Moreover, the essence of things in the world shapes human logic and grammar.

Sophia, understood as the one, or unitary, Word and Meta-Logos, is presented and reflected in natural languages. As a result of the energy inhering within it, the idea-word [slovo-ideia] transforms itself into the speech-word [slovo-rech]. The former becomes materialized in the latter and finds in the speech-word its “body.” In this way, ideal entities find their expression in speech, and language acquires a transcendent-immanent or, to put it in modern terms, a semantic-semiotic character.

Sophia imposes herself on the structure of language. According to Bulgakov, there exists a “primary language” [pervoiazyk], which is directly connected with Sophia. This “primary language” is the universal language of the world, it constitutes the basis of every national language, and has as its bearer or speaker something he calls the “world-man” [mirochelovek]. Bulgakov uses these concepts – “primary language” and “world-man” – to explain the embodying of Sophia in natural languages and to suggest the direct influence of reality on the logic of language. In so doing, he creates a myth about the origin of language characterized by an assertion of a once-existent, primordial unity of world and humanity, or being and mind. According to this linguistic myth, the “world-man” articulates the world so that the world may articulate itself in and through him. The human being here appears as a medium for the “self-ideation of the universe”; the “world-man” speaks a language whose words

3. “Iazyk dan cheloveku potomu, chto v nem i cherez nego govorit vsia vselenntsa, on est’ logos vseleennai, i vajakoe slovo ne est’ tol’ko slovo dannogo subiektka o chem-to, no i slovo sa-mogo chego-to” (Bulgakov, Filosofija imeni, p. 36).

4. “Sferu chistykh idei, bozhestvennuiu Sofiiu” (ibid., p. 181).

5. “Slova suschestvuuiat lish potomu, chto est’ Slovo, i idei-smysly syl’ lish potomu, chto suschestvuuet Ideia-smysl. Est’ Sofii, Dusha mira, Mudrost’ mira, kak vsesovershenny organizm idei, kak Pleroma, polnota bytiia” (ibid., p. 113).