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Russian 'Philosophy'

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Russian 'Philosophy'

This very imperfect transcript of IB's (lost) dictation, uncorrected after the point indicated below, and unfortunately full of gaps where words could not be heard by the typist, is the first draft of a review, commissioned by the co-editor of the *New York Review of Books*, Robert Silvers, of a three-volume anthology of 'Russian philosophy'.¹ It was never finished, and so never published in the NYRB.

In the course of a letter of 12 October 1965 to the editor of the NYRB, Robert Silvers, IB writes:

The philosophy anthology is much more tricky.² It is a perfectly worthy enterprise, but under the wrong label. It is as if an [anthology of] American philosophy [...] appeared containing works by Jonathan Edwards, Washington Irving, extracts from Melville, Poe, Emerson, Thoreau, Henry James, Channing, Niebuhr, Paul Elmer More, winding up with a statement about American pragmatism by an unknown professor from the University of Kansas. Some of the pieces might be quite interesting, some written by gifted essayists, critics and theologians, but philosophy? There did exist academic Russian philosophers: one or two are reproduced here – I ought to have added Santayana and Ralph Barton Petty – but it wasn't much good. Dutch academic philosophy, and Portuguese and Swiss, exists too, but an anthology would not be of absorbing interest. This the authors haven't done; they have done the other. They have simply taken bits and pieces from 'penseurs' – who are none the poorer for it. One of the authors is a conscientious, decent, hardworking, hack who has always been very nice to me and provided me with material which I tell everyone to read, but never read myself. I felt curious (I have never made use of it); so what am I to say about all that? However, given time, not too long this time, I shall prepare a piece for you – by December, I hope.

IN HIS RECENT report on Soviet culture,³ Mihajlo Mihajlov, a Yugoslav man of letters, had this to say:

¹ *Russian Philosophy*, ed. James M. Edie, James P. Scanlan and Mary-Barbara Zeldin, with the collaboration of George L. Kline (Chicago, 1965: Quadrangle Books).

² Than IB's 'A Great Russian Writer', a review of Osip Mandelstam, *The Prose of Osip Mandelstam: The Noise of Time; Theodosia; The Egyptian Stamp*, trans. and ed. Clarence Brown (Princeton, 1965), NYRB, 23 December 1965, 3–4.

³ Published in English under the title *Moscow Summer* (New York, 1965).

RUSSIAN 'PHILOSOPHY'

Almost all Russian philosophers are still on the index (the 'black sheet') – from Konstantin Leont'ev, Nikolai Fyodorov, Vladimir Sol[o]vyov, Apollon Grigorev (a 'Bergsonian', several decades before Bergson), Nikolai Danilevsky (with his famous work *Russia and Europe*, a predecessor of Oswald Spengler) to Vasily Rozanov, Nikolai Lossky, Ivan Il'in, Vladimir Ern, Simon Frank, Georges Florovsky, Vasily Zenkovsky, Gustav Shpet, Sergei Bulgakov, Pyotr Struve, Nikolai Berdyaev, and Lev Shestov. And since, besides Nikolai Chernyshevsky, Plekhanov, Lenin, and Anatoly Lunacharsky, Russia had no other great Marxist philosophers (they are the only ones recognised), one gets the impression that the greatest Slavic nation has no philosophy.⁴

To this the editor, Mr Andrew Field, adds the sensible comment, 'Many of the writers cited here would be considered more properly theologians, cultural historians critics, etc. than "philosophers" in the usual sense of that term.'⁵

This raises an ancient issue, but one of some historical importance. Why is it not considered proper to consider these celebrated writers as philosophers, or at any rate 'philosophers'? Apart from the fact that Chernyshevsky was scarcely a Marxist, and that Lunacharsky's claim to be regarded as a thinker – let alone as a great Marxist philosopher – is far from clear, what moved Mr Field to observe, and what justifies his observation (with which the majority of philosophers, at any rate in the English-speaking world, would tend to agree), that there is not a single writer in the whole of Russian history whom modern professional philosophers in the West in fact regard as having made any original or important contribution to their subject? Russia has produced both poets and novelists, historians and critics, natural scientists, mathematicians, theologians, logicians, psychologists of the first importance, but no philosophers recognised to be such by their Western colleagues. Is this in fact so?

⁴ *ibid.*, 138–9.

⁵ *ibid.*, 139, note 39.

I find it difficult to deny this with any confidence. 'Philosophy' has of course been used to describe almost any form of reflective or self-conscious activity.⁶ When the President of the United States handed [] to a member of the State Department, then under attack by Senator McCarthy on the grounds that he knew and approved of his 'philosophy', when heads of business firms or public bodies profess or reject [] as 'philosophy', they mean no more than a loose concatenation of ideas or attitudes to things in general. This is not the discipline taught in universities or discussed at meetings of professional philosophers – any more than Brillat-Savarin's views on food are discussed at meetings of physiologists, despite the title of his celebrated treatise.⁷

One can, if only for the sake of brevity, be dogmatic. Here is a field of enquiry which, in the West, was given its most prominent classical expression by Plato, or supplied with its basic effort and tools of research by Aristotle. It has continued, with interruptions, ever since. [] field of study of trained []. It is concerned primarily with []ation and analysis, has general categories and concepts, [] in human thought and communication. Some have thought that these concepts and categories govern reality[?] independent of the thinker. Others [] doctrines about the relations of thought to its subject which entailed a denial, total or partial, of the distinction between ideas [], on the one hand, and things or events on the other. Still others, because they hold that there is no valid distinction to be drawn between thought and its expression in symbols, suppose philosophy to be in the first place a study of means of human expression, and primarily language, whereby fundamental distinctions in experience are related or perhaps created.

Without committing oneself to the view which reflects the assumptions and perhaps the conscious belief of a great many philosophers in the Western world, philosophy is nothing but the theory of knowledge, that is, philosophy proper requires at the very

⁶ IB's correction stops here.

⁷ *Physiologie du gout*, 2 vols (Paris, [1825, dated 1826]).

least a clear formulation of publicly intelligible propositions; methods of systematic reasoning are one form or instance of verbal [] to another; the preservation of rigorous consistency; and, as its purpose, the clarification and criticism [] means of rational methods indicated above of concepts and categories held in or presupposed by [] mental activities in [] with theory and practice [] by men.

The most important criteria of philosophising are that it should be self-consistent, obey systematic rules [] and concerned with the general [] systematic coherence. For this reason our isolated insight, however profound or devastating, no meditation or series of loose reflections about the nature and problems of human life (or anything else) however interesting [] or [] important, historically or psychologically, however [] in moral or aesthetic or intellectual genius that inspires them, are to be counted as philosophy in this sense, although they may [] genuine philosophising to a radical degree [] by some be valued more highly than philosophy as systematic intellectual discipline.

It is in this sense, and for this reason, that Aristotle is a philosopher and Jeremiah is not, Aquinas is a philosopher and Dante or Eckhardt is not; Descartes and Locke, Leibniz and Mill, Peirce and Russell, James and Moore and Husserl and hundreds upon hundreds of academic teachers merely explicate or criticise or comment. The work of such thinkers as are, properly called, in the proper sense of the word, philosophers, good or bad, original or derivative; whereas teachers of [] visionaries [] – the Indian sages and the author of the Book of Job, medieval mystics and [], Montaigne and Voltaire, the Encyclopedists, Saint-Simonians, Marx, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard are prophets and thunderers of the twentieth century. No matter how great their influence nor how much deeper or more revolutionary their vision – or even how much they may have affected the course of philosophy itself – they are, if words preserve enough meaning to be useful, to be properly called philosophers. 'Triple thinkers', moral and metaphysical teachers, discoverers or inventors of new worlds, men of unique [] time [] space, 'world historical' figures

[] revolutionary transformations [] – though they may be more worthy of study than many a professional philosopher. As philosophy has become, at any rate since the Renaissance, a field governed by technical rules about as rigorous as those of the natural sciences [], no good is done by confounding it with thought in general because there are borderline cases (Bergson, Santayana, Whitehead, Nietzsche too [] to Professor Danto expected a coherent theory of knowledge from him) follow that categories on either side of the border are not distinct. Unamuno thought far more deeply than the late Professor C. I. Lewis of Harvard, but Lewis was a philosopher in the fullest sense of the word and Unamuno was not; Ortega is more interesting to read than the latest article on unfulfilled hypothetical propositions, but the latter engage in philosophy whereas Ortega is a philosophical essayist in the sense in which Thomas Mann, Goethe [] confusion between the two types of writer lead to unjustified charges in both direction and general muddle and hesitation?

This is what Mr Field's [] and taken notice of [] volumes, entitled *Russian Philosophy*, well-produced, containing admirable bibliographies and very sensible, illuminating notes. The anthology consists of extracts from Skovoroda, Radishchev, Chaadaev, Ivan Kireevsky, Khomyakov, Belinsky, Herzen, Bakunin, Chernyshevsky, Pisarev, Lavrov, Mikhailovsky, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Leont'ev, Rozanov, Fedorov, Solovev, Berdyaev, Shestov, Frank, Lossky, Plekhanov, Bogdanov, Lenin, Akselrod, Spirkin. Some of these names will not be familiar to the common reader of the West; others will be known, but mainly in other connections. [] well translated [] skilfully add to Western knowledge – but of what? Of the history of 'the spiritual'. The editors rightly point out that for historical reasons what occupied Russian thinkers is

the problem of good and evil in individual and social life, the meaning of individual existence, the nature of history. Russian thinkers turned late, and hesitantly, to such technical disciplines as logic, theory of knowledge, and philosophy of science. Even metaphysics and philosophical theology, as practiced in Russia, were intimately linked

to ethics, social philosophy, and the philosophy of history. [...] Furthermore, Russian philosophical thought has been uniquely non-academic'; few of the writers quoted were university teachers. 'Their counterparts in Western Europe would be thinkers like Kierkegaard, John Stuart Mill, Nietzsche and Sartre [...], the later Santayana and the later Wittgenstein', men of letters, in a very large sense, committed to the transformation of society or of the individual, 'political, social, and cultural critics.'⁸

With the exception of Wittgenstein, who, even in his later phase, does not belong in this company (the dragging of his name into the turbid world of ideology, which is at present prevalent, seems to me a kind of vulgarity – at any rate it is a grave disservice to the history of thought and to the memory of a philosopher of genius), this analogy is substantially correct. It is not merely pedantic to ask which of these thinkers is to be correctly described as a philosopher, in the by now accepted Western sense of the word. It is not pedantic because if it is a mistaken classification, it cannot[?] mislead the [] intelligent and critical reader from the beginning. It is [] Paracelsus or van Helmont as natural scientists. It is not misleading because at that time natural science had not become a clearly definable independent field of knowledge; it is [] Schelling as a biologist or Korzybski as a logician [].

It is, not in some narrow academic sense, not worldwide influence and significance with Peirce and James – the forerunners are at most of minor national [] interest. What would one say if [] in American philosophy were to [] any excerpts from the writings of Jonathan Edwards, [], the Federalist Papers, Emerson, Orestes Brownson, Melville, Thoreau, Whitman, Fiske, Channing, Henry Adams, Veblen, Holmes (father or son, it does not matter which), Paul Elmer More, Walter Lippmann, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Hannah Arendt – with the addition, however, also of Dewey and Reich/Rice[?], followed, for good measure, by writings from the founders of the New Republic, the New Masses, and one

⁸ Preface, ix–x.

obscure contemporary American academic teacher? [] could be exceedingly illuminating and it would not be properly called 'American Philosophy'. Van Wyck Brooks and Perry Miller are intellectual historians but not historians of philosophy.

The only philosopher, properly so called, in this volume is Lossky, who was indeed an academic philosopher in the full sense of the word, though not perhaps one of the first order, and there is of course a good deal of argument, some of it philosophical in nature, [] many of these writers; 'philosophical' in the sense in which we speak of philosophical historians, scientists with an interest in philosophy, philosophical theologians, writers who rise above the technical problems of their systems to some larger outlook, point of view.

These volumes do indeed provide a panorama of the thinkers, some among them of great originality and [] – with the exception of those in the twentieth century – of great historical influence. [] the twentieth century [] the Marxists alone. Professors Edie and Scanlan and Miss Zeldin⁹ have done their work; Professor Klein, who is one of the leading experts on Russian and particularly Soviet thought, has worked both as a translator and as an exegete. Admirable – he is a man of high learning, scrupulous objectivity and fairness, and an exceptional capacity for convincing interpretation; all this is very good: it is far more than has been done in any other country on the history of Russian ideas.

No competent professional philosopher in American universities could reasonably be expected to include this material in his classes. Intellectual historians, on the other hand, have a genuine obligation [] of what has now been provided for them and their readers. The authors represented are naturally enough of exceedingly uneven quality. Skovoroda was an eighteenth-century semi-religious essayist whose interest is mainly historical; Radishchev was a revolutionary radical who wrote almost everything in French; Chaadaev, a figure of major importance in the development of Russian thought, was the originator of all that

⁹ [She was a Professor too.]

effusion of self-accusation and self-preoccupation with which practically all nineteenth-century Russian writing is full and overfull – imaginative no less than critical – Khomyakov and Kireevsky were illogical[?] [] nationalists[?]; Belinsky, Herzen, Bakunin were radical critics of whom Herzen alone had a spark of true philosophical originality; Chernyshevsky, Pisarev, Lavrov, Mikhailovsky were publicists who touched on philosophical problems as did Michelet or Renan or Carlyle or virtually all the other nineteenth-century writers represented here. Others were interested in, say, Von Hugel or Karl Barth or [] fascinated by the astonishing beauty and eloquence of Solovev's meditations. Those who wish to read the most lucid exposition of Kierkegaard [] will read perhaps one of the best radical expositors of spiritual and intellectual trends in the modern world – Leon Shestov. Berdyaev has his meed of fame. Frank was a man of pure life, a morally moving personality but [] thought scarcely worth preserving. [] must be said of Lossky.

What interests me mainly aside from the fact that there were so few professional Russian philosophers of any stature, even [] but utterly unoriginal and uninteresting thinker, a giant among the foothills that surround him. The fact that for largely political reasons – chief among which is the censorship which stifled free philosophical writing – much naturally philosophical talent [] itself into hybrid forms, the novel, political essay, historical writing, political pamphleteering poetry, theology, a literature of personal [] – is also responsible for the fact that it is only very late in the century that professional philosophy began to count as an independent activity, and of the practitioners mentioned by Mikhailov such [] but professionally competent [] as Schmidt, Ern, Trubetskoy, and others of whom Mihajlov had not heard had gone to their [] without even a small monument in the uninterested West. *Ibant obscuri*.¹⁰ History, the secret police, the censor, [] regime, [] the historical fortunes of Russia []

¹⁰ 'They walked in darkness.' Vergil, *Aeneid* 6. 268.

responsible for [] of political journalism [] criticism, imaginative literature of unsurpassed depth and splendour[?] []].

Perhaps not altogether. No adequate explanation has ever been given for the absence of a single great painter or sculptor in Russia, or a great architect. Since the days of the icons and the building of the Kremlins, the absence of these phenomena cannot be explained. [This is impossible to decipher! The tape sounds like Donald Duck.]¹¹ Perhaps the great concepts and categories that were used for such [] explanation are inadequate. But this in itself is a philosophical problem.

[] a first-hand [] genuineness of vision which added [] social, political and literary [] of mankind, added[?] little to its intellectual achievement. *Russian Philosophy* is not quite 'The first historical anthology of Russian philosophical thought from its origins to the present day', as stated on the cover. Fortunately, for it would be incomparably drearer [], after all. [] and Bakunin, Pisarev and Mikhailovsky, Shestov and Plekhanov (though alas not Lenin) are incomparably more exhilarating reading than second-, third- and fourth-rate German professors []].

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¹¹ [Comment by the typist.]