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## **The Ethical Catastrophe of Russia and the Mission of Registration<sup>1</sup>**

This paper analyzes the anthropological catastrophe which occurred in Russia in the XX c. and discusses, which anthropological and social strategies are possible for re-dressing it in the immediate, post-catastrophic period. We review how ethical models have changed in Russia, from the prerevolutionary period to the present day, showing that the changes were typically sharp breaks between subsequent ethical models which were dictated by state power in a normative and violent manner. These breaks were damaging and disorienting for ethical consciousness, and gradually deprived this consciousness of sensitivity, eventually degrading it entirely. The paper characterizes the final, post-soviet stages of the process as the formation of “anti-ethics” (in the 1990s), followed by today’s formation of “non-ethics”, i. e. atrophied moral instinct and ethical consciousness.

Next, the paper undertakes an anthropological analysis of the post-catastrophic state of man and society in Russia. Based on the conception of man as the “being-presence” (developed chiefly in Heidegger’s philosophy of *Dasein* and in the philosophy of Vladimir Bibikhin, in Russia), we conclude that in the post-catastrophic situation man exists in a certain deficient mode that might be termed the “trampled-down presence”. We find examples of this mode of existence portrayed in modern art in the works of Rilke, Klee and Kharms, and also in works of GULAG prisoners. In these examples, man’s mission of self-realization — insofar as self-realization is even possible under such extreme conditions — is qualified as a particular kind of existential practice that we term “registration on the edge”, or “ultimate registration”. Those who accomplish this mission are “ultimate registrars”. The mode of being that we call “trampled-down presence” lacks a full-bodied ethical model (as well as other dimensions of normal being-presence), although it still has a certain ethos.

KEYWORDS: ethics, ethos, ontology, anthropology, Russia, Russian revolution, archaization, anthropological catastrophe, being-presence, extreme practices, repentance.

1. The basis for this article is a paper by the author which was presented at the international conference announced under the rubric *Russia between the Past and the Future: Guardians and Trailblazers*, which was held in Moscow and the Moscow Region in November, 2018.

It is impossible for the Russian consciousness not to associate the theme chosen for our meeting with the line from Lermontov's *Borodino*:

We then began to count the wounded — count our fellows fallen<sup>2</sup>.

We are plunged into a situation in which the country and its society have endured a series of extremely difficult and destructive ordeals. We want to be able to understand where it has all led — where and in what state has all this left the consciousness of our society, the country's cultural life and civilization — exactly *where are we*? And we want to understand what our chances are for overcoming this great trauma, with its spiritual, anthropological, cultural and social consequences.

All of these questions have, countless times, found themselves in the limelight of public discussion, with its eloquent declarations and lofty meditations: but they remain unanswered to this day. It is already long ago, in 1989, that Merab Mamardashvili wrote that anthropological catastrophe is at the centre of what happened during the XX c. This assertion became popular — it was repeated then, and is still repeated now, though there have been no breakthroughs in the understanding of the catastrophe, either from Mamardashvili himself or from other authors. In order to work our way toward an understanding, our conversations need to become specific, concept-based and analytical. This paper is an effort to make some headway in that direction.

For a start, it is easy to agree that *catastrophe* is the key word we need to use in order to convey adequately the character and meaning of the events of the last century. And there is also enough evidence to entirely agree with Mamardashvili's thesis — that the main result of all that has happened in our fatherland is an *anthropological catastrophe*. It's unlikely to be productive, however, to make the whole phenomenon, in its entirety, the central object of study. Anthropological reality is not only complex — it has an infinite number of dimensions; and it is surely impossible to comprehend the changes that happened all at once, in all their aspects. Therefore, in order to understand what has actually happened with anthropological reality, it is first necessary to single out some key aspects, which could be described precisely and interpreted on a reliable conceptual basis. In my recent works, I have tried to achieve such a description and conceptualization for the process of ethical changes in Russia over the course of the XX c. It is well-

2. Original Russian: *Тогда считать мы стали раны, товарищей считать.*

known since Aristotle that the ethical aspect is principal and essential in man's existence, and hence its analytical description will provide a basis for understanding the anthropological catastrophe.

As is often said, the XX c. truly began in 1914, with the sharp change in the historical dynamic that accompanied the start of the First World War. For Russia, the landmark turning point and the beginning of the catastrophic changes was the fall of the Russian Empire. It is the character of the process of change that is important, in the first place. In Russia, a Bolshevik regime was established, i. e. the rule by the most radical wing of the Russian intelligentsia represented by a group which had persistently strived for a power clash, the polarization of society and the destruction of the nation state. Even before the Revolution, a state of conflict between the authorities and society prevailed, and there were strong tendencies toward social enmity. Traditional, Orthodox Christian foundations of ethics and societal consciousness were seriously undermined. Upon coming to power, the Bolsheviks affected a total, forcible transformation of not only the structure of society itself, but also of societal and personal consciousness. They wanted that the development of the nation embodied their radical programs and plans, which were subordinated to abstract ideological schemata. But these plans didn't correspond to reality, and thus *the shattering of reality* became the principal Bolshevik strategy and slogan. This strategy was announced and implemented openly and aggressively. A specific discourse of breaking, which repeated persistently the motifs of forcible break, dismantling, demolition, destruction became predominant in the rhetoric of the new regime.

The breaking had to be performed in all spheres of life in the country — to all the dimensions of the cultural-civilizational organism. In relation to people and society, the main concept expressing the strategy inherent in this Bolshevik wave of destruction was “engineering”. The stated goal was the creation of a new, Soviet man — and the process for his creation was seen as a technical, engineering project. One of the most popular ways of referring to this project was the “reforging” of man. This recreation of man was viewed from a revolutionary and global perspective — man's previous state of consciousness was declared obsolete, and in need of total replacement with an “advanced” Soviet consciousness. All spheres of public and private, family and everyday life and behaviour were to be subjected to revolution and deep reconstruction. Different means and technologies for performing this reconstruction were selected and tested. Art had to be transformed

into an efficient instrument for the reconstruction of man; according to Stalin's formula, writers had to become "engineers of human souls". But the main engineers of this anthropological transformation were chekists (the public security officials), and Communist party workers.

The anthropological technologies, programs and utopias of the Soviet era represent an enormous and extremely heterogeneous layer of culture. The basis of this layer was composed of two neighbouring, but not coinciding currents: scientific and technological transformation of the human being, and his/her forcible social demolition and reconstruction. Figures such as Dziga Vertov, Valerian Muravyov, A. K. Gorsky, N. A. Setnitskij and others were active within the first current, fed by ideas of avant-garde art, Russian cosmism, and philosophy of Nikolay Fyodorov<sup>3</sup>. This first current followed the approach of so called transformative anthropology, an analysis of which is presented in my book "Society and Synergy: Colonizing an Interface" [*Horujy* 2016, 411–428]. But now we are concerned with the second current, in which the practical anthropology of Soviet totalitarianism was formed-up. Its leading goals and features were personally determined by Stalin and Gorky. Stalin's *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (1938), methodically lays down the path for the break-up and destruction in all spheres of life, affirming the need to "shatter the structures of the bourgeois state power", "destroy the remains of class-based society", bring in "red terror", "liquidate the kulak class as a whole" [*Stalin*], etc. As for Gorky, after his return to the USSR, he became the main ideologist and propagandist for the forcible ethical and anthropological reconstruction of the human person. It was he, who introduced and insistently cultivated the concept "not fully beaten enemy", demanding the ruthless breaking of human nature:

The more decisive the working class is in continuing to break the backbone of the all-union petty bourgeois, the more piercing and pitiful is the petty bourgeois's chirping complaint [*Gorky*, 72].

The NKVD took upon itself the functions of the destruction of the foundations of the family and civil community, in addition to its functions of the direct reprisals. In the jubilee declarations for the 20<sup>th</sup> an-

3. Nikolai Fyodorovich Fyodorov (1828–1903) was a Russian Orthodox Christian philosopher, who was part of the Russian cosmism movement and a precursor of transhumanism. Fyodorov advocated radical life

extension, physical immortality and even resurrection of the dead, using scientific methods. (Source: Wikipedia).

niversary of the formation of the Cheka security service in 1937, we find the following statements:

...The NKVD not only uncovers criminal cases, but organizes the people... [Mikoian, 39].

Citizen Dashkova-Orlovskaya, for instance, was instrumental in uncovering espionage on the part of her former husband... [Mikoian, 38].

One worker informed the NKVD about the members of a Trotskyite organization, and named his own brother among them... This simple worker was unafraid to tell the truth about his own brother, because the Soviet power is above all, above personal and family interests for him. (*Applause.*) [Mikoian, 38].

...Young pioneer Kolya Shcheglov... informed the regional head of the NKVD of the fact that his father was stealing building materials from the sovkhoz where he worked. His father was arrested... <...> ...Young pioneer Kolya Shcheglov knows what Soviet power is. This is where the power is — this is the strength of our people! [Mikoian, 38–39].

Of course the main working field for totalitarian anthropological technologies was the GULAG. Basic principles, which determine the economy and the ideology of the GULAG, have been elaborated in parallel during the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 1920s. The economic part was built upon the ideas of Naum Frenkel, relating to the organization of an empire of slave labour, while the core of the GULAG ideology was the well-known idea of “reforging” the human person. The neologism, “reforging” (“perekovka”, in Russian), was the result of an intensive search for a word which would adequately express the specific change within the human person — a prisoner, but not necessarily prisoner — in the case of a person who turns out to be in the midst of an enormous building or production process, under conditions of strict regime, grueling work and miserable living. It seems that the term arose on the island of Solovki around 1930; along with the language of re-forging, terms like “demolition”, “breakage”, “reconstruction”, “remelting” and “resoldering” were used. The first authors who made use of this new language, explained that it relates to a “new breed of people”, who had been “reforged” in the building works of the Belomor Canal, and then the Moscow — Volga Canal. The ideology and practice of this re-forging is presented in detail in a well-known publication, the collective monograph “Stalin Belomorsko-Baltiiskij Canal: A History of

its Construction from 1931 to 1934” [*Belomorkanal*]. This voluminous work, which Solzhenitsyn writes of in his *GULAG Archipelago*, is one of the primary sources not only on Stalinist ideology, but also on ethical and anthropological processes of that era. Its pages expose both the totalitarian practices of repression and the moral degradation of cultural community, in the person of dozens of authors — all eminent Soviet literary figures.

But the stated goals of the socialist reforging of man actually had very little to do with real man’s changes under Soviet regime. Anthropological changes were really taking place, and they were deep and important — but they were absolutely different and unforeseen. Below, I describe briefly the changes, which took place in the ethical dimension. As we shall see, here the strategy of the breaking was implemented in a series of forced, administrative changes to the ethical model of society. Contradicting each other, these changes systematically destroyed moral consciousness, progressively pushing it through degradation to total catastrophe.

This process began immediately with the Revolution, as a result of which the ethics of the radical intelligentsia became dominant. This ethics produced the first in the series of new ethical paradigms: *the Ethics of Revolution and Civil War*. This is an ethics of aggression, which inflames the hate and enmity of the lower classes to the higher, as well as to everything and everybody belonging in the old order. It declares open war to the old Russia and her Orthodox ethics: “Let’s fire a bullet at Holy Rus’!” («Пальнем-ка пулей в Святую Русь!»). The ethics of revolution also justifies the Red terror, as well as any cruelty and repression deemed necessary to the cause. As is the case with the regime of war communism in general, this defiantly extremist ethics could not be practiced for more than a short time; thus it leaves the scene with the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP). The 1920s were an interim and indeterminate period, during which the regime allowed certain elements of the old culture, societal order and economic way of life to exist as a sort of compromise, at the same time advancing toward their total liquidation. In the domain of arts, the period was bright and fruitful, but in its moral aspect, the 20s were ambiguous and slippery. Loud revolutionary rhetoric and unprincipled compromising practices screamed contradictions at each other, and ethical consciousness lost its foothold, becoming disoriented and confused.

The next period, however, left nothing undetermined. It realized the transformation of all ethical spheres and gave birth to a new ethi-

cal formation, the *ethics of Soviet totalitarianism*, which was driven into the social and personal consciousness so forcefully and was inculcated so deeply that many of its marks remain to this day. This ethics of Soviet totalitarianism is a very important phenomenon, which is poorly understood and too-little studied up to this day. Here I shall only point out its principal features.

The most important principle of totalitarian ethics is *loyalty to the party*, to the person of its leader and to its teaching, which had to be recognized as absolute truth without fail. It means that the type of this ethics is close to that of criminal gangs, for which the most important principle is loyalty to the head of the gang. The next most important principle is *violence*. Loyalty to the regime is maintained by means of a terror machine, which practices cruel repression, including murder, against a broad circle of groups of individuals, which are declared “enemies of the people”. When used against “enemies of the people”, violence and murder are seen as moral acts. The justification for this widely cultivated violence is achieved with the aid of the equally wide arousal of *hate*. The mechanisms of hate are deeply ingrained in the ancient strata of our consciousness with their archaic and atavistic patterns, and therefore the totalitarian consciousness with its ethics of violence and hate belongs to the category of the *phenomena of archaization*<sup>4</sup>. In the campaigns of totalitarian terror the reproduction of the archaic paradigms of the “scapegoat” (which was reconstructed by R. Girard) and the Homo Sacer (described by G. Agamben) is unavoidable. Meetings with hundreds and even thousands of people were organized, in which the crowds were to demand the death punishment for enemies of the people, and these events were rituals in the truest sense of the word, turning each one of the participants into a symbolic partaker in the murder of the scapegoat. There were categories of people, for instance the fugitives from concentration camps, whom anybody could kill on legitimate grounds, which corresponds exactly to the Homo Sacer paradigm.

Along with this, the taboo paradigm, one of the basic features of the primitive consciousness, reemerged and became widely spread. The reigning terror was perceived by the mass consciousness in the same way as pestilences and plagues of old: victims of such epidemics, together with their homes, were considered as contaminated and tabooed so that it was dangerous and forbidden even to mention their

4. Look about it, e.g.: [Horujy 1994, 443–445; Horujy 2018, 634].

names. Myths of the shape-shifting returned as well: Soviet discourse made broad use of the notions like “masked”, “disguised” or “changed-color” enemies and wreckers whose figures were represented exactly as shape-shifters of the primitive consciousness. The large-scale return to primitive and archaic patterns of social consciousness was taking place. Thus, the archaization must also be considered as one of the main traits of totalitarian consciousness, and this trait has a great number of consequences for ethics.

Another one of the most important traits of totalitarian ethics is the culture of the total “informing” on others. The primary principle of loyalty to the regime included the obligation to report any infractions of loyalty, and inform on any people who did such infractions. Not to report disloyalty was considered a crime. The institute of secret informers reached such enormous proportions, that the presence of them was assumed everywhere and in any company. In this way, the atmosphere of total distrust and fear was created, which in the greatest extent poisoned human relationships, be it at work, between friends, or between family members.

Finally, it must be taken into account that alongside this real ethics of totalitarianism there was also the official Soviet ethics. This official ethics had only one point in common with the real ethics, which was the principle of loyalty to the party and its leader. The other official principles, such as soviet collectivism, labor for the good of society, etc., were far from reality, but they were part of the totalitarian dogma, and therefore everyone was regularly required to affirm his/her belief in them. The crying contradiction between these obligatory declarations and reality gave birth to hypocrisy and lies in all areas of public life.

In the next stages of soviet history, after the Stalinist terror, violence and hate were shifted to a more peripheral position, while hypocrisy and lies turned out to be the most typical and long-lived features of Soviet consciousness and ethics. It was for this reason, therefore, that Solzhenitsyn called upon society to “*Live without lying!*” The late Soviet period brought forth a new change of the ethical model. This period was characterized by the progressive erosion and collapse of Marxist-Leninist dogma. Official ethics was wavering between the loyalty to the old dogmas and attempts to renew them and make them more humane. A typical example would be the “Moral Code of the Builder of Communism”, written by the order of Khrushchev. But all these attempts don’t even come close to reaching the level of a full-bodied ethical concept. It becomes increasingly obvious that the ruling class



does not live in accordance to the high-minded morals that it preaches, and previously-held respect for the authorities gradually gives way to mockery and contempt. But the regime still maintains the levers of power and the machine of violence and hence fear continues to live although it is now weaker than before. A specific combination of cautiously defensive fear and derisive contempt emerges here. In this peculiar formation dominated by the creeping rot of cynicism, the process of ethical degradation is already vividly obvious.

After the fall of the Soviet regime, this process quickly reached its culmination. Here we can see a contradiction — after all, the removal of total repression and control returned freedom of conscience and societal action, making it possible to recognize the symptoms of decay and degradation, evaluate them and find paths to overcoming them. But this chance was rejected. The necessary first step in overcoming the moral decay is repentance: in the most general sense, repentance is nothing but moral self-analysis and sober awareness of one's moral situation, which makes it the universal paradigm of the beginning of and the first step to the recovery of one's moral health. Just as the Soviet regime was on its way out, there was a short period of moral breakthrough for Russian society, when the theme of repentance came into the public discourse and was widely discussed. During this period, the path of repentance was affirmed as necessary for society. But before too long, the reaction to this breakthrough turned into indifference or denial. The path of repentance was rejected, and this rejection was, speaking properly, the first moral act of Russian consciousness after it was granted freedom. A posteriori, we see that this was the test which determined a great deal for the subsequent development of our ethical situation.

The numbness of the national conscience is the main symptom of its illness [*Fedotov, 11*].

Soon a new ethics appears in post-Soviet society. The predominant feature of this new ethics is again overriding cynicism. It is an anti-ethical stance which is active now under particular circumstances: with the fall of the Soviet power, not only the Communist dictatorial machine was destroyed, but also the basic institutes of law and order, the battle against crime was dismantled, and the basic mechanisms for maintaining day-to-day life disappeared. In the wake of the destruction and collapse of the economy and society, we also see the collapse of all ethical norms, independent of their connection with So-

viet ideology. All ethical taboos disappear. Our country witnessed the total collapse of social ethics — a particular state of affairs in which the most hideous and inhuman crimes, including murder, can almost be openly committed. Moreover, these crimes are now considered by public consciousness as acceptable, and they do not arouse any moral judgement. Some practices of this kind are even popularized and begin to be considered prestigious: people relate with interest and even with some respect to such “professions” as bandit, killer, or prostitute. This means that a sort of reverse ethic has taken hold within public consciousness. This is an ethical formation in which the basest and most criminal acts are legitimated and positively evaluated. The most natural name for such an ethical formation is *anti-ethics*.

Just as with the state of extreme destruction of the country, so the related state of anti-ethics could not be of long duration. With the new millennium a new period of the development of Russia begins, the period we are living in today. This period has delivered relative economic stability and societal order, and anti-ethics has also become a thing of the past. However, this latest change in ethical model turned out to be not the overcoming of the ethical degradation, but its further stage, which is extreme, in a certain sense. Analyses of the ethical situation in the country characterize this stage as the absence, or total withdrawal of ethics. One of leading modern writers of prose, Dmitry Glukhovsky, for instance, writes:

We are in a period when people reject any ideas about ethics. Ideas about good and evil are no longer used [*Glukhovsky, 11*].

But we need to take a closer look at what is going on here, because ethics, as such, is an immanent property of man and society so that its exact and literal absence is impossible. Even anti-ethics is in fact a certain form of ethics. A more careful analysis reveals that at any given time, today’s public consciousness accepts certain ethical norms and principles, some of which may even be quite strict. But this acceptance is purely formal and superficial. It takes place in obedience to orders laid down by the authorities, and these orders are nowadays no more than products of “operational demands” that is the political or ideological interest of the moment. As a consequence, they change frequently and unexpectedly, and often contradict to each other. Society obediently takes on any ethical position dictated to it, only to change this position again, equally obediently, may be, the very next day. And this means that society has no position or moral reaction of its own.

And this is the essence of the new ethical formation: it is actually the imitation of ethics, a *simulacrum*. As a result of the series of sharp and repeated changes to the ethical model and the forcible breakings of the ethical consciousness, this consciousness has lost its moral sensitivity. Pasternak warned us of this danger long ago, when he wrote:

It is impossible, without serious consequences for our health, to behave ourselves day after day contrary to what we are feeling inside...<...> Our souls... fit into us like teeth into a mouth. They can't endlessly be ravaged with impunity [*Pasternak*, 560].

So we have reached a state of atrophy of the moral instinct, and a good name for this state of affairs might be *non-ethics*. The substitution of ethics by its simulacrum is the final result of the century long process of cruel experiments on Russian public consciousness which began in 1917. It is of no doubt that this state of non-ethics is an ethical catastrophe. But the ethical dimension is central and pivotal within the constitution of man, which means that an anthropological catastrophe takes place as well. Together, the ethical and anthropological catastrophes should be viewed as the main result of Russian societal development over the past century, the fruit of the process of decline set off by the Revolution of 1917.

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This is the true face of the Russian ethical, and therefore anthropological catastrophe. Our description has already provided answers to a number of the questions we have asked: we see where the events of the past have led and in what state we find ourselves today. The next questions need to be about the actions we take in response to today's situation. In the first place, our response must take into consideration the scale and depth of the catastrophe. Both the final and penultimate ethical states of our society (non-ethics and anti-ethics), are extreme stages in the degradation and destruction of the foundations of moral consciousness and social ethics. Because of this the further existence of the socio-cultural organism as well as our actions must begin with a clean slate, from the most elementary bare minimum.

And what is this bare minimum? Obviously, it is the simple confirmation of the existence — or rather of the non-absence of the human person. In its turn, this is equivalent to confirming the Presence of Man — only his pure presence, as we are surely unable, nor do we intend to, affirm anything more about man. We affirm exclusively and

only the fact that he is not absent, has not ceased to be: man is present here. In short, the human being here is conceived exclusively as an instance of presence. But the human being as Presence is an extremely loaded philosophical formula — not only anthropologically, but ontologically, as well. Let me give two examples, both very different from each other, but together providing a clear picture which sheds light on the philosophical formula.

The first illustration is from Scripture. To realize oneself as Presence is the mission which Abraham, our forefather, became aware of and took upon himself. He determined the manner of his being and existence in that at any moment, no matter where he was or in what state, he was able to answer God's call: "Lord, here I am!"<sup>\*1</sup>. In other words, Abraham was able to confirm his presence to God. This means that Abraham understands himself as Presence and that Presence is his constitutive predicate. The second illustration is of an entirely different type and relates to culture. It is the well-known characterization by Herzen of the role and mission of Chaadaev in Russia at the time of Tsar Nicolas I. According to Herzen, Chaadaev played the ancient game of "Alive and Kicking" with powers, with society, and with Russian reality. In its sense, the idiom "alive and kicking" is used simply to affirm or confirm presence, notwithstanding the vicissitudes, betrayals, and threats of life. The unknown person who is "alive and kicking" is an imaginary, generic character, a conceptual personage, about whom nothing more is known other than that he is "alive and kicking", which is to say that he is present here — and that therefore, like Abraham, he is a pure instance of presence.

Following these examples, we have to look at anthropology in general. The interpretation of man as presence has, for some time already, been one of the main currents in contemporary anthropological thought. The founder and main proponent of this current is Heidegger; the central concept of his philosophy is "Dasein", literally "being here", which corresponds exactly to the idea of presence. Of course we aren't going to tackle that classical philosophical conception in full here, but we need to recall its most important element, which is the ontological contents of Dasein. Dasein, as such, prior to being equipped with all its existential infrastructure, is none other than pure Presence or the absolute minimum of humanity. However, this minimum is ontological, i. e. it is ontologically loaded minimum — and is thus *Being-Presence*! As Heidegger explains, presence presumes that which is expressed by another of his key concepts, namely, the ontological difference (*ontologische Differenz*) that means the difference between the existent and

<sup>\*1</sup> Gen 22:1

being. This means that *the essence and definition of presence is relational* since it includes the relation and relatedness of the existent and being. Thus, it follows that if the human being is affirmed as presence, then he is by that very fact also affirmed as an ontological instance. In other words, if man affirms himself as presence, this presence is necessarily the presence of being. This conclusion is very significant for us.

Moreover, we need to add that in Russian philosophy we are indebted to V. V. Bibikhin, for his development of the discourse on presence. The key moment in the history of the conceptualization of presence in the Russian context is Bibikhin's translation of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, and his decision to translate Heidegger's term "Dasein", as the Russian *prisutstvie*, "presence". Thereafter, in Bibikhin's own philosophy, his anthropology develops precisely within this current of understanding the human being as presence. And for Bibikhin this concept also had a significant religious aspect; in his view, it was precisely this concept that adequately expressed the relationship of man to God.

Here we have briefly outlined a general anthropological concept, the interpretation of man as Presence. But our topic isn't just anthropology, but an anthropological catastrophe. What is valuable for us is that this interpretation makes it possible to advance to the philosophical comprehension of the catastrophe.

Speaking generally, the concept of Presence is associated with man as such, and not with man in catastrophe: Presence actualizes itself in the unfolding into the entire economy (οἰκονομία) of man's existence. For instance, in Heidegger, Dasein is equipped with a sophisticated framework of existentialia. In reality, however, we also find such states and modes of existence, in which Presence is, for one reason or another, deprived, or deprives itself, of the opportunity for full-fledged actualization — particularly of the opportunity to actualize its ontological content and status. In philosophical discourse, we would say that Presence, in these cases, finds itself in various anomalous, handicapped modes. Heidegger describes somewhat similar phenomena, which he calls the phenomena of the "forgetfulness of being". Further, we note that amongst all the set of such modes, a special attention must be paid to a specific *mode of maximal handicap*, when Presence is deprived of the whole spectrum of its potential manifestations — of any and every opportunity for development, unfolding and realization. It turns out to be "squashed" or "flattened" to the limit so that this mode of maximal handicap can be called the *mode of trampled-down Presence*. This particular mode, which is not only anomalous but also extreme, can be associated with man under extreme, destructive-cata-

strophic conditions. We might consider it a preliminary philosophical definition of anthropological catastrophe.

Thus, anthropological catastrophe is an extreme situation of ethical collapse and severe decay to the formational energy of the cultural-civilizational organism. We see that from an anthropological standpoint it is characterized by the following property: it is the situation, in which *minimal anthropological manifestations, expressed as presence and nothing more, coincide with the maximum possible for human beings*. As it happens often in cultural life, art was the first to apprehend the emergence of such situations. In order to convey their specific nature, the new and unexpected in artistic discourse concept of *registration* was used. It was this concept that was found to correspond to the unique activity and practice, which was the only remaining possibility for human self-realization under the extreme conditions of being “trampled-down”; when there was no spectrum for possible activity or expression since the space for action — and indeed for one’s own existence! — became reduced to a single point.

In 1921, Rilke writes about the work of Paul Klee:

like people caught in a shipwreck or hemmed in by polar ice, who outdo themselves, striving up until their last minutes to put their observations and lived experience down on paper, so that their lives might leave a trace on clean white margins of the sheet, where no one else has managed before to get... just so Klee... appears as a registrar of all interrelations and participations in the phenomena of this world, though these phenomena are already themselves incoherent and turn their faces from him, being so useless to him that he, “drunk with absence” (In Rilke’s original, “ivre d’absence”, the quotation from the poem by Paul Valéry “Le cimetière marin”. — S.H.) and as if luxuriating only in his poverty, is occasionally able to use their forms [Rilke, 274–275].

As is clear, in Klee’s water colors, and behind them, Rilke discerns a person who is deciding that in answer to the call of the extreme, unbearable situation, a person must precisely “register” himself and the world, along with all its interrelations and participations. Rilke describes Klee as a “registrar on the edge” who carries on his mission overcoming himself. Moreover, neither Rilke nor Klee knew that Klee was soon to fall ill with a rare and tortuous disease — scleroderma. According to Klee’s biographer:

Klee was forced to experience slow death in the form of the progressive organic stiffening and freezing of all tissues and juices of his own body [Giedion-Welcker, 95].

But Rilke had an extreme sensitivity to elemental suffering and people's borderline conditions, as well as the gift of incredible expressive abilities, which enabled him to register these elemental forces. Furthermore, in his last years he also suffered, like Klee, from a tortuous disease. So we can see that Rilke, like Klee, is a registrar at the edge, or *ultimate registrar*.

And soon after Rilke, suddenly Kharms speaks of the same mission of registration. In his program text "*Sablya*" (*The Saber*) (1929), we read:

— Our work... consists in registering the world... <...>  
 — ...And how shall we register the world?  
 — In the same way as the number one registers the other numbers, that is, subsid-  
 ing in them and observing what will result of this. <...> The number one registers  
 other numbers by means of its own quality. So should we act. <...> ...Each one  
 of us has his own, particular quality. <...> Work begins with searching for that  
 quality [*Kharms*, 436–439].

At first glance, this mission of registration seems entirely different from that spoken of by Rilke. First and foremost, it seems that Kharms is not speaking about registration on the edge, under extreme conditions. But in point of fact, this is exactly what Kharms is talking about — the mission of the ultimate registrar. In order to register the world, one must first locate one's "own quality", and, according to Kharms, this quality becomes our weapon for registration — our Saber. To locate such a quality within oneself means to travel to the limits of oneself; that is why, according to Kharms, across all of time, only five people have possessed their Sabers in this way, with Velimir Khlebnikov at their head. It is clear that Kharms himself also possessed the saber. He was a person of very particular nature, with his unique method of existence: he always saw, felt and realized himself to be located in some way beyond standard reality — on the edge of it, or at the extreme. His whole life and work is an *experiment in creative life on the edge*, which he pursued and continued to realize rigorously and relentlessly up until the very end, with his death in prison from hunger. There is no doubt that the creative life of Kharms in its entirety is the fulfilment of the mission of the ultimate registrar.

Rilke. Klee. Kharms. These living examples vividly show us the mission of the ultimate registrar, as a way of living under extreme or catastrophic — or pre- or post-catastrophic conditions. It is a way of living under conditions of trampled-down presence, when the maximal

anthropological manifestations coincide with the minimal ones. In no way is this way the formal registration of the current state of one's self or of the surrounding world. Rather, it is an existential practice into which the human being is involved in its wholeness. Within this practice there is a deeply hidden inner fervour and will, and a calm and tragic decisiveness. The practice demands that you know that you are on the very edge, that the world itself is poised on the brink... and that it must be registered.

We could easily list more examples. The example of Kharms already suggests that various extreme artistic practices such as performance art, or actionism, or Moscow's theatre.doc genre may be closely related to ultimate registration (the very mission of the ultimate registrar jibes with the idea of the theatre.doc genre). And surely the creative work of Efrosinja Kersnovskaya must be considered as a model example of ultimate registration: everything that Rilke says about registration on the edge can be directly related to her years-long, exact and ruthless registration in graphics of the inhuman world jeering at her.

It is not an accident in the least that the practices of the ultimate registrar appear most often and primarily in art. Not trying to prove this, we just show the logical thread that helps to understand the phenomenon. In ultimate registration, a person actualizes the inalienable minimal predicate of presence as such including even the trampled-down presence: *free relationship* to things and phenomena, which is distinct both from unqualified acceptance and from wholesale rejection. ("Free relationship", *freie Beziehung*, — is a concept used by Heidegger. The term is introduced in the context of the question concerning technology. Free relationship is a necessary condition of the ability to ask about essence and the condition of our openness to the essence of the object asked.) Further, it is specifically ethos, that makes "free relationship" possible for us<sup>5</sup>. Ethos is the principle, which belongs naturally in trampled-down presence. It is one of the main components in the set of initial and minimal properties of Presence. "A man's ethos is his demon"<sup>\*1</sup>, or that which is the precedent and general root of both the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of anthropological reality.

Here our logical threat comes to the end: as Heidegger argues (in the final part of "The Question Concerning Technology"), it is in the essence of art that ethos can be found, in the first place. Primarily in

\*<sup>1</sup> *Heraclitus*.  
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5. Cf., e.g., "ethos, a state, which makes 'free relationship' possible (in the Heideggerian sense. — S. H.)" [*Baynshtajner, Krepal'di, 142*].



art, but not exclusively in art. In particular, there are examples, when the work of a philosopher is imbued by ethos and takes on the nature of ultimate registration. For lack of time and space, I will name only two philosophers who, in a particularly direct way, embody the mission of the ultimate registrar. The first is Ludwig Wittgenstein, who was the true model of the ultimate registrar both in his life and in his work. In his philosophy, this was reflected in his strictest demand for precision and responsibility of philosophical judgement. In his life, his general strategy and all his important decisions correspond to ultimate registration. There is one famous episode which could serve as the symbol of this mission: once, being a watchman for an artillery battery, he was at the watch-tower registering and reporting what was going on in battle, and he stubbornly continued to do this even when everything around was destroyed, and all communications had been lost. And we also have our own example amongst Russian philosophers: it is Vladimir Veniaminovich Bibikhin.

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In conclusion, we must also mention that in the situation of post-catastrophic decay, besides ultimate registration, one can choose other ways and means of overcoming catastrophe. Chief amongst these is, of course, repentance. For Christian consciousness, repentance is the necessary condition for overcoming any fall and collapse.

Repentance is a separate and big subject, and above we touched briefly upon its fate in post-Soviet Russia. Right at the beginning of the collapse of Soviet power, one of the symbols of change was a film entitled "Repentance". The topic was openly declared, and the perspective of general repentance was presented to the society. There was nothing accidental about this. On the contrary, this was a direct attempt to restore Christian foundations of public consciousness, foundations which until 1917 had always been accepted, because Russia considered itself to be an Orthodox nation. Nevertheless, within a short time society had rejected the path of repentance, and the topic fell out of the public discourse. Of course, the cult of the martyred Tsar and the royal family, which was born spontaneously and directly by people's consciousness, includes elements of repentance. However, this is a rather indirect and ritualistic expression of repentance, which is far from the integral rebirth of the human person, which is the goal at the heart of the Orthodox Christian work of repentance. All in all, society responded to the perspective of repentance with antipathy and total lack of understanding. Various manifestations of the moral and

anthropological catastrophe began to unfold, and instead of repentance, society dived with great gusto into the filth of anti-ethics. Then, having wallowed in this filth for a while, society, by its own choice, gave all power in the country to those very forces which until not long ago had terrorized it, and in the present generation do not deny at all that they are the successors of the previous agents of terror. The era of non-ethics is upon us now, and the moral instinct of the nation is atrophied. Non-ethics, as an ethical state, is diametrically opposed to repentance, not in the sense that it openly refutes it (on the contrary, if the authorities will tell the people to repent, the people will willingly start “repenting” immediately!), but in the sense of being entirely unable to repent.

Comparing practices of repentance with those of the ultimate registration, one can explain this inability more deeply, in terms of anthropological and personological structures. Repentance is a spiritual act, which is committed by the whole human being, by man’s consciousness in all its fullness. As for the ultimate registration, it is a sort of reanimation of personal consciousness, in which the latter restores and resuscitates its moral and spiritual dimensions. It is a practice by means of which man regains the fullness of consciousness and confirms to himself that this fullness exists, and is in his possession. But if this fullness is absent, man’s ability to repent is absent as well, and hence all appeals urging him to repent will result only in misunderstanding and conflict. At the beginning of the post-Soviet period, neither society nor — alas! — the church were able to see and understand this. Nobody took into account the chain of interrelated important facts:

- there is a broad spectrum of states of consciousness, both personal and societal, in which consciousness is deprived of integrity and fullness;
- it is precisely within the range of such states that Russian society finds itself at present;
- thus, the first task of society is to regain full consciousness, or “come to consciousness” anew.

And this chain implied that the work of the ultimate registration is precisely what was needed then. Only after the completion of this work could the call to repentance be successful.

Evidently, the task of the ultimate registration left unaccomplished then still stands before us now. Moreover, its accomplishment meets new obstacles today, which reflect the enhancement of totalitarian survivals in public life and consciousness. Active trends in historical

research emerged, which try, with the support of the authorities, to inculcate substitutions and falsifications into the description of Russian history. At the same time, they try to convince us that historical truth, as such, doesn't exist, and that it is perfectly normal and lawful to promote deceptive and false versions of history, on the grounds that they correspond to "people's ideas" about history, though in reality, they are determined by the interests of the ruling groups.

What this means, is that the mission of registration is outright rejected here because it is directed strictly to the truth. Thus society risks now to lose not only its ability to repentance, but even its ability to the ultimate registration. This danger requires our closest attention. Instead of overcoming the anthropological catastrophe, we may easily find ourselves on a path toward its deepening and fastening.

*Translation from Russian by Georgia J. Williams, S. S. Horujy*

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