



Aleksei Korovashko. A Review of **Maria Akhmetova** *Konets sveta v odnoi otdelno vzyatoi strane: Religioznye soobshchestva postsovetskoi Rossii i ikh eskhatologicheskii mif* [The End of the World in One Country: Religious Communities in Post-Soviet Russia and their Eschatological Myth]. Moscow: OGI/Russian State Humanities University, 2010. 336 pp.

‘Sleep. Farewell. The End is Come’

Sleep. Farewell. The end is come.
A courier has arrived for you...¹

Maria Akhmetova’s book *The End of the World in One Country: Religious Communities in Post-Soviet Russia and their Eschatological Myth* analyses the home-grown ‘ragnaröks’ postulated by the representatives of the most widespread Russian religious subcultures: The Centre of the Mother of God, the Church of the Last Testament, the White Brotherhood and the so-called Orthodox ‘church environment’. The immediate objects of study were not only the field materials collected by the author in the course of participant observation at centres of Orthodox pilgrimage in Moscow, Temnikov (the Monastery of the Nativity of the Mother of God at Sanaksary) and Diveevo (the Monastery of the Holy Trinity and St Serafim) but also the written texts that circulate within the above-mentioned subcultures.

If we follow the methodological rule of Aleksei Fedorovich Losev, who said that every philosophical system should be summed up in a single phrase (without which he regarded ‘the study of this system insufficient’ [Losev 1988: 208]), the kernel of the concept that Akhmetova has developed should be the identification of eschatology with the art of understanding, with a carefully worked-out hermeneutic technique.

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¹ A quotation from the poet A. I. Vvedensky (1904–1941). [Transl.].

For this reason it is not surprising that the ‘eschatological conspiracy theory with which the *Weltanschauung* of many apocalypics is imbued’ (p. 37) is fully in accord with the principles of the traditional hermeneutic circle already formulated by St Augustine. Since in order to understand Holy Scripture it is necessary to believe in it, and since belief in turn requires understanding, likewise ‘an adequate understanding of current events allows one to deduce that the Last Judgment is imminent, and, contrariwise, knowing that the end of the world is nigh makes it possible to make correct deductions about the meaning of what is happening’ (p. 36). Within the framework of this universal eschatological logic any ‘present-day events are signs of things to come’ (p. 37) and ‘absolutely anything could be a harbinger of the end of the world’ (p. 37).

In their interpretation of the verbal code of observed or supposed events, the bearers of eschatological consciousness, in Akhmetova’s words, ‘act very much in the spirit of A. T. Fomenko’s “new chronology” or V. N. Eemelyanov’s theories (the *Pamyat* society), and may even be the heirs to their ideas’ (p. 46). Thus one sometimes hears the disciples of the Mother of God say that ‘the salvation of the world will come through Russia and through the Slavs, because this word means “those who glorify (*slavyat*) God”’ (p. 264). In the church environment there is a great vogue for anagrammatic acrobatics that are supposed to prove the sinfulness and illegitimacy of modern behaviour which, in the believers’ opinion, is hastening the universal catastrophe. (‘Listen, about the varnish — that people paint their nails with. If you read the word “varnish” (*lak*) backwards, what do you get? (*Kal* — “filth”.) And “fashion”?! It was a nun who told me this’. (p. 278), according to the teaching of one ordinary woman making a pilgrimage to Diveevo.)

Besides this, native religious subcultures are inclined to decipher the names of places which figure in the narratives of the last times in such a way as to give them a Russian origin and thereby ‘exalt the elect Slavonic people (a similar practice is particularly prevalent in neopagan circles)’ (p. 43). In particular, members of the White Brotherhood (Yusmalians) and Orthodox ‘find Russian roots above all in places in the Holy Land’ (p. 43). For them Palestine is *Palenyi Stan* (the Burnt Camp), founded once upon a time by the Cossacks, Jericho is another form of the Slavonic city of Yakhron, and Jordan is a corruption of Yardon (*don* is imagined to be ‘river’ and *yar* ‘bright, fiery’, so the Jordan is the Fiery River). At the same time, as Akhmetova stresses, ‘Russian toponyms may be interpreted by means of other languages to prove their holiness and special mission’ (p. 44). For example, the adepts of the Centre of the Mother of God attempt

¹ *Moda*, which in reverse produces *adom*, instrumental case of *ad* — ‘hell’. [Transl.].

to derive the word *Russia* from the city-name *Jerusalem*. Sarov, where, it is said, the last righteous Russian tsar will be proclaimed to the world, is associated by the church environment with the root *sar*, which is supposed to mean ‘tsar’ in many ancient languages. (‘Therefore our Serafim of Sarov, if you follow the logic of language, is translated as Serafim Tsarev,’ (p. 254) as one informant told the author of the book.)

We have but to add that all these linguistic tricks are not so much a direct imitation of the mechanisms by which A. T. Fomenko and V. N. Emelyanov made their ‘discoveries’ (one might also mention V. A. Chudinov and M. N. Zadornov) as a bringing up to date of the quasi-linguistic tradition that may go back as far as the works of Admiral Shishkov, Aleksei Khomyakov, Platon Lukashevich and Aleksandr Veltman¹. The last of these, as F. I. Buslaev has already pointed out, ‘returned ever and anon to his favourite idea, discovering his own, not even Slavonic, but specifically Russian elements everywhere and in everything’ [Buslaev 2006: 549]. This allowed him to assert that ‘the Sabine tribe was Slavonic, and *sabini* is the same word as *slavyane*, Numa Pompilius, who gave the Romans their first laws, was a Slav, the Celts are the Slavonic *chelyad* (domestics), the Huns are Wends, the Lombards are the Lusatians, Thuringia is the Turov region, Belgium is Belarus and the Riesengebirge is the Russian Mountains’ [Buslaev 2006: 549]. Anticipating the present day ‘etymology’ of the church environment, Veltman derived the word *tsar* from the Sanskrit *sura* (‘deified’).

Attempts such as these, which associate lexical units on the basis of their sound, may be seen as a secondary variant of folk etymology; naturally, it lacks any scholarly dimension.

Faced with having to explain reality at the level of objects and activities, modern Russian apocalyptic demonstrate the same fantastic inventiveness as they do in their deciphering of the verbal code. The ‘Rosstandart’ symbol² is sporadically interpreted, as Akhmetova writes, as ‘a Yiddish-Masonic symbol, which means something that we don’t know, but that they know very well’, a foreign firm’s logo as ‘the devil’s circle’, the copyright sign © as meaning that the product is kosher, i.e. bewitched (p. 47). Even ‘children eating Chupa Chups lollipops are really “kissing the head” of the idol Baphomet’ (p. 48).

The people who hold eschatological doctrines within these sub-cultures do not ignore the progress of historical events either. As they ‘filter’ them through their set of principles, they follow, according

¹ Patriotic authors of the early nineteenth century, who disapproved of the use of imported words. [Eds.].

² The equivalent of the British kitemark, indicating conformity to national standards. [Transl.].

to Akhmetova, two basic strategies. The first of these is ‘to take the Revelation of St John the Divine or the book of the Prophet Daniel as enigmatic texts and to apply the interpretation of their symbols to their own contemporary world’ (p. 48). The second assumes ‘the existence of a particular concept of history, through the prism of which all the events of the past and present may be viewed, thus giving a clear idea of the future; this is the principle on which the book *Russia before the Second Coming*, which has gone through several editions and supplements, was compiled’ (p. 49).

Science as such is turned into an object of eschatological conspiracy theory by the apocalyptics. Quite often it is ‘associated with witchcraft, and understood as the work of enemies who want to bring the Antichrist to power’ (p. 61). The conviction that a secret detachment of Satanic forces is being recruited first and foremost from medics and biologists involved in ‘the creation of a new breed of people obedient to the will of Antichrist by means of cloning, *in vitro* fertilisation, organ transplants etc.’ (p. 61) is current amongst the religious subcultures.

Both the leaders and ordinary members of the communities examined by Akhmetova in her book are solidly ‘manifesting their rejection of rational knowledge’ (p. 60), which however does not stop them from making extensive use of scholarly discourse and obtaining ‘the information that is relevant to them even from obviously secular sources, if that information fits their picture of the world in the required manner’ (p. 67). Instructive in this respect are the works of Archbishop John (Bereslavsky) the founder and permanent director of the Centre of the Mother of God. We find in them an almost complete prohibition on rational knowledge, which leads mankind away from the light and the truth: ‘The invention of writing,’ he says in *The Fire of Penitence*, quoted by Akhmetova, ‘has led to the loss of direct verbal communication with God. <...> The invention of printing meant the complete degeneracy of the Word, when it was “taken over” by the servants of the Prince of Darkness’ (p. 61). There is no point in pointing out at any length that philippics against writing look somewhat out of place, to put it mildly, on the pages of a printed book (even Rousseau, after all, used culture in his fight against culture). It is much more interesting that John’s lucubrations contain distinct echoes of the ideas of Marshall McLuhan, whose *Gutenberg Galaxy* accuses writing and printing of having created a gulf between mind and heart, desacralised existence, stimulated the cult of individualism and provoked schizophrenia.

An eschatological intentionality, as Akhmetova convincingly argues, causes people to replace the accepted system of geographical and chronological co-ordinates with a new spatio-temporal matrix which guarantees an anticipatory fixation with the coming catastrophe.

For example, ‘the idea that time is accelerating is a commonplace’ (p. 82), as a result of which ‘the Lord shortens the last days’ (p. 82). The remarks of the informants and the printed works circulating within the subcultures are literally full of such assertions: ‘Everything is getting many, many times faster. <...> Time has been shortened: we still have twenty-four hours in a day, but they have become “shorter”, they pass more quickly. <...> Today the times have become three times faster. <...> Time is going very fast, events are going very fast. They pass by in an instant. <...> The elders say that because of the cruelty of the Antichrist the Lord will shorten the last three and a half years, and they will pass by like one year. <...> Nowadays the days are going by at breakneck speed. <...> Since a certain time, time has been moving more quickly. It is compressed, concentrated, and so solid that it can injure you’ (p. 82).

It would be an unforgivable mistake to regard all these notions as subcultural and psychological constructs belonging only to the situation that has prevailed over the past two decades. A. F. Losev, for example, explained the regular occurrence of apocalyptic expectations in human history as ‘due to the concentration of time, which is near to the end of time, but then dissipates’ [Losev 1994: 87]. Not only that, he was seriously convinced ‘that since 1914 time has condensed in some manner and started to flow more quickly’ [Losev 1994: 87].

As for the perception of space in eschatological prophecies, Akhmetova concludes that ‘it is wholly constructed on the opposition between *sacral* and *unclean* and between the *centre* and the *periphery*’ (p. 106; italics in the original). Predictions based on the first opposition ‘describe in the greatest detail the sacred space of Russia, which is a “cosmos”’ (p. 106). Everything outside it is, as a rule, ‘to be either destroyed or assimilated’ (p. 106). Forecasts based on the opposition between the *centre* and the *periphery* usually set the big city, which has defiled itself with sin (the absolute record-holder being, of course, Moscow), against ‘the provinces, the wilderness, which have the potential for renewal or retain a memory of an ideal past’ (p. 105). It is curious that the list of sacred spaces that promise protection and salvation to those within their territory is compiled, among other things, by means of the verbal code. There are those among the Orthodox pilgrims, shall we say, who believe that before the end of the world ‘the Church of the *Ascension* in the Diveevo Monastery will ascend’ (p. 93; italics in the original). The fact that there is no church at Diveevo with any such dedication is fine evidence that eschatological topography does not coincide with the actual geography of the country.

A large part of Akhmetova’s book is taken up with the classification and characterisation of specific images of the apocalyptic catastrophe.

Among the basic eschatological motifs she lists natural and ecological disasters, famine, war, foreign invasion and ‘technological’ eschatology, which ‘endues the fruits of progress with an eschatological significance’ (p. 145), the enchantment of the world by enemies and the reign of Antichrist.

It should not be thought that every eschatological motif is known to every member of these religious communities: some of them are ‘confined not only to a particular local tradition, but also to a particular period of time, and not necessarily a long one’ (p. 215). In the end, ‘it cannot always be said that these motifs possess a definite structure; they might be better defined as “rumours and whisperings”’ (p. 215).

Still, there are various motifs of a particular nature that orbit each fundamental motif like satellites around a planet. Thus the hunger motif is frequently accompanied by the motif of the edible earth that will save the elect from death in the last times. The mechanisms by which the basic and additional motifs attract and repel each other are determined by the general eschatological view of the world, which ‘before the end of will, firstly, fall under the power of the forces of darkness and, secondly, become dangerous for the people living in it’ (p. 222), and, thirdly, will enter a zone in which all principles are shattered and vice will assume the status of normality.

The final part of the monograph summarised here is devoted to scenarios for post-apocalyptic existence. The ideal world order which they describe and which is to come after the final catastrophe is ‘an essential element of eschatological ideas, even though it is represented to different degrees in the teaching of different communities at different times’ (p. 311). Summing up her analysis of this element, Akhmetova says that the two ‘poles’ of its definition ‘are the early White Brotherhood with its real apocalyptic hysteria and, accordingly, minimal vision of the ideal (the amount of description of the future world in Yusmalian literature is infinitesimal in comparison with the description of calamities and cataclysms), and the Church of the Last Testament, the head of which is rather hazy when talking of calamities, but at the same time proclaims the conditions for the practical building of the Kingdom of God upon earth’ (p. 311). For all the religious communities, though, the end of the world ‘is not the final destruction of the world, but a sort of test that they have to pass in order for harmony to take the place of chaos’ (p. 311).

We would like to conclude our discussion of *The End of the World in One Country* by pointing out one undoubted merit of the book, which is its determination to examine contemporary eschatology with reference to as wide a range of social institutions and discursive practices as possible. Akhmetova has, for example, established that ‘the kingdom of Antichrist is at present frequently described

according to the conventions of the dystopian novel, a literary genre which is perceived by late Soviet and post-Soviet readers as a description of twentieth-century totalitarianism' (p. 195). However, 'the dystopian genre itself did not come into existence uninfluenced by the Christian eschatological tradition': 'the murky world of the dystopia is constructed according to the same logic as the "last times" that precede the end of the world' (p. 195).

Admittedly, from our point of view, the author should have paid a little more attention to mass culture, which has undoubtedly had as great an effect on the formation of current eschatological *topoi* as the classical images of serious literature. To be convinced of this it is enough to look at the eschatological significance bestowed on such a product of technology as the television. The apocalyptic's certainty that it is, 'on the one hand, an independent reality, demonic in nature, and on the other a medium which connects this world with the world beyond, a magic window which allows people to look into the world of demons and even enter it <...> while the demons can penetrate into the world of humanity' (p. 152) is, we would suggest, sustained by the enormous popularity of horror films. One might in this context call to mind at least two films based on a typically eschatological 'demonisation' of the television: *Poltergeist* by Tobe Hooper (1982) and Wes Craven's *Electroshock* (1989). Both of them, incidentally, became cult films among Russian viewers during the 'golden age' of video cinemas, which coincides with the period when all the religious communities discussed began (the late 1980s and early 90s).

However that may be, readers of Akhmetova's book will certainly follow the author in beginning to understand why eschatological expectations in contemporary Russia 'look the way they do, and not some other way, and what functions they fulfil' (p. 7). The syntax of their own 'utterances' on this subject will depend on the apocalyptic grammar defined in *The End of the World in One Country*.

References

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Translated by Ralph Cleminson