

THEURGIC AND PROMETHEAN ASPECTS OF ALEXANDER CHAYANOV'S *THE JOURNEY OF MY BROTHER ALEXEI TO THE LAND OF PEASANT UTOPIA*¹

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Summary. *A utopian novel by the famous economist Aleksander Chayanov, The Journey of My Brother Alexei to the Land of Peasant Utopia is based on the theurgic and humanistic ideas of the early 20th century. Eugenics is put to widespread use in the peasant utopia, including artificial selection and the so-called “therapy of failed lives”, and the state “prevents any waste of talent”. The Gospel parable of the talents receives a hyperbolic interpretation: to achieve full development of a person’s talents and abilities, the person is deprived of free will. The symbol of the Tower of Babel, introduced into the text by references to pictures similar to those of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, shows the inherent danger of the humanistic theories proclaiming the equality of man to a deity.*

Keywords: Chayanov, parable, utopia, theurgy, humanism.

A utopian novel by the famous economist Alexander Chayanov, *The Journey of My Brother Alexei to the Land of Peasant Utopia* was based on the theurgic and humanistic ideas circulating among writers and philosophers at the beginning of the 20th century.

Chayanov’s idea of a peasant utopia was closely related to the quest of the early 20th century writers and philosophers. It was similar to the “agrarian and patriarchal vision of the future”, and to the “Heaven on Earth” of the Russian peasant poets (Esenin, Klyuev,

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Klychkov).² These writers and poets, “defenders of traditional national beauty, tried to recreate and instill into people’s memories the idea of a fictional peasant cosmos where God, nature, people, reapers, plowmen, and pastoralists lived in harmony with each other.”³ According to Chertkov, Chayanov created “a modernized and more civilized” version of the Slavophile ideal of Russia.⁴ Some scholars believe that the work of Chayanov was influenced by the ideas of Eurasianism. O. A. Kaznina, who has researched the philosophical context of early 20th century Russian literature, noted that L. P. Karsavin’s article on “Foundations of Politics” envisions a utopian state very similar to the one found in the works of Chayanov.⁵

Though very close to the ideas of neo-peasants, Slavophiles and Eurasianists, Chayanov’s utopia was at the same time far from being a positive social ideal. The new country carefully preserved traditional values, but also applied “manipulative practices aimed at ‘transforming’ human consciousness”⁶ and carried out “artificial selection of the most talented lives and encourage[d] special management of them.”⁷ According to C. Solivetti, “we encounter some very rigid social models in this Arcadia, not too different from those found in the 1921’s society.”⁸ By creating a work of popular science filled with ideas that were an alternative to those of the Bolsheviks, Chayanov conducted a literary experiment with the utopian model, showing its strengths and weaknesses.

In this utopia, the comprehensive development of a person became the top priority. All of the forces of the utopian society were directed at that. Particular attention was paid to the cultural development of the citizens. Not only did the inhabitants attend mobile exhibitions of old masters, but they valued the “Suzdal frescoes of the 12th century” so much that one could say they ruled their minds, as did the works of realists, with “Pieter Bruegel as their idol.”⁹ The protagonist, Alexei Kremnev, visited the relic halls of the Rumyantsev Museum, and saw what the people of the future guarded: “he was struck by Pushkin’s room, Ushakov’s album, sheets of poetry from old albums, portraits of relatives, a small house that used to belong to Naschokin, and hundreds of other witnesses of great lives.”¹⁰ The residents of this utopia held the old architectural styles in high esteem. Driving through the new Moscow, Kremnev saw “the outlines of familiar buildings, most of them being built in the 17th and 18th centuries.”¹¹

2 Solivetti C. Utopia or Meta-utopia? *The Second Prose*. Trento, 1995, p. 297-314, 299.

3 Skorospelova E. B. Fiction as Means of Generalisation in Art. *History of Russian Literature in 20th Century (1920s to 1950s): Literary Process*, M., 2006, p. 149.

4 Chertkov L. N. Chayanov as Prose Writer. *The Story of the Hairdresser’s Doll and Other Works of Botanist X.*, M., 1989, p. 39-42.

5 Kaznina O. A. Ideas of Eurasianism in Literature. In: Gacheva A. G., Kaznina O. A., Semenova S. G. *Philosophy Context of Russian Literature of 1920s and 1930s*. A. M. Gorky Institute of World Literature, Russian Academy of Sciences, 2003, p. 246.

6 Pavlova O. A. Utopia in Russian Literature from the 1900s to the 1920s in the Context of Russian Culture. Synopsis of a thesis, Dr. hab., (10.01.01); Volgograd State University, Volgograd, 2006, p. 11.

7 Chayanov A. V. *The Journey of My Brother Alexei to the Land of Peasant Utopia*. In: Chayanov A. V., *Moscow’s Hoffmaniada* / Afterword by V. B. Muraviev, Annotations by V. B. Muraviev, S. B. Frolova — M., TONChU, 2006, p. 263.

8 *Supra* note 2, p. 313.

9 Chayanov A. V. *op. cit.*, p. 228.

10 *Supra* note 7, p. 267.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 229.

The idea of theurgy, of an artist taking the place of God, starts to become visible in the conversation between Kremnev and Paraskeva Minina, a female citizen of the utopia. Talking about her preferences in painting—namely Bruegel the Elder, Van Gogh, Rybnikov, and Ladonov—she told him that “in art, she looked for the secret of all things, something either divine or diabolical, but beyond human abilities anyway.” While recognizing the highest value of the Creation, she also demanded that the artist be congenial with the Creator of the Universe, and appreciated the magical power of a picture, the spark of Prometheus, giving it a new essence . . .¹²

The mention of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, a Dutch artist who often painted biblical subjects, is important for understanding the text. One of the paintings on the wall in the room where the protagonist, Alexei Kremnev, woke up, depicted people in “colored suits, ladies with umbrellas, cars,”¹³ the plot of which was something like an airplane’s departure, in its composition with an elevated skyline, use of expensive, even precious paints, it resembled a classic thing of Pieter Bruegel the Elder.” We encounter Bruegel’s works more than once in the pages of *Peasant Utopia*.

Chayanov probably wanted to remind his reader about Bruegel’s *The Tower of Babel* (1563) and *The “Little” Tower of Babel* (1564). The image of the Tower of Babel serves as a symbol of pride for the people who have created perfect living conditions: a city that looks more like a park, with convenient transportation, including air, but where the humanistic principles of life and everyone’s right to realize their talents to the best of their desires and perceptions were forgotten.

The inhabitants of the utopia conducted “therapy of failed lives”, so as not to waste a single spark of talent. The Gospel parable of talents receives a hyperbolic, grotesque interpretation there. People of the future created the world around them and nature itself with their own hands; having learned its laws, they controlled the weather and even the magnetic fields of the Earth. They also encroach upon the rights of the Creator, trying to improve human nature itself.

The echo of Zamyatin’s *We* could be heard in the idea of artificial selection: “The main idea, which facilitated the solution of the problem, was the idea of artificial selection and special management of talented lives.”¹⁴ The problems of human diseases, malformations, pathologies are taken into account and solved: “Now we know the morphology and dynamics of human life, we know how to develop all the forces inherent to a person. . . . now no talent can be lost, no human opportunity floats down the waters of forgetfulness. . . .¹⁵ An oligarchy of the so-called “augurs of spirit” was formed, and they created a new world, usurping the rights of God by doing so.

O. A. Pavlova noted in her research on the origins and features of the early 20th century utopia: “Manipulative practices based on the idea of ‘transformation’ of human consciousness in a certain direction were a constant property of all utopian projects conceived in Russia in the 1900s and 1920s. . . . Chayanov was the first to point out the

12 *Supra* note 7, p. 227.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 225.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 263.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 264.

manipulative aspect of all those plans to build Heaven on Earth, having depicted the sophisticated tyranny of ‘augurs’ and ‘people of art’ in his *Journey*.¹⁶

The national anthem of the utopia is Alexander Scriabin’s *Prometheus*. It is performed together with Sergei Rachmaninov’s *Divine Liturgy* on the bells of the Kremlin “in cooperation (sic!) with the bells of other Moscow churches.”¹⁷ As a symbol of theurgy and theomachy, the theme of Prometheus was also interpreted in the eponymous writings of V. Bryusov and V. Ivanov. As E. V. Smirnova wrote, for Scriabin, Prometheus was, first of all, a symbol of “creative principle”, the “active energy of the universe”,¹⁸ it meant “fire, light, life, struggle, effort, thought”, and the idea of “*Ordo Ab Chao*”, world order rising out of chaos. Chayanov’s peasant utopia was most likely an opportunity to combine the ideas of Prometheism and theurgy, and to show how dangerous this interaction is.

Deeply involved in Russian cultural life at the beginning of the 20th century, Chayanov could probably sense the theurgical aspirations of artists to create a new world and change human nature. Perhaps Chayanov saw the audacious poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky (“Hey, you! In heaven! Take your hats off!”)¹⁹ and the radical changes in the life of the USSR itself as the creation of a new Babylon, an unholy place that had forgotten God. It is not by chance that this is when Vladimir Tatlin created his project for the Monument to the Third International, a “monument of iron, glass, and revolution”, as Viktor Shklovsky put it, and architect Boris Iofan was working on his project for the enormous Palace of the Soviets.

In *The Journey of My Brother Alexei to the Country of a Peasant Utopia*, Chayanov proposed his own, scientifically sound program for the development of the country, but showed that, having become content with his work, a man could idolize himself, usurp the place of God, and thus become a colossus with feet of clay, doomed to destruction like the Tower of Babel.

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16 *Supra* note 6, p. 11.

17 *Supra* note 7, p. 270.

18 Smirnova E. V. Philosophical Studies of Alexander Skriabin. *Philosophy. Literature. Art. Andrei Bely, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Alexander Skryabin* / Edited by K. G. Isupov, M., 2013, p. 445.

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TEURGINIAI IR PROMETĖJIŠKI ALEKSANDRO CHAYANOVO ROMANO „MANO BROLIO ALEKSEJAUS KELIONĖ Į VALSTIETIŠKOS UTOPIJOS ŠALĮ” ASPEKTAI

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Santrauka. *Garsaus ekonomisto Aleksandro Chayanovo utopinis romanas „Mano brolio Aleksejaus kelionė į valstietiškos Utopijos šalį“ atskleidžia XX a. pradžios teurgines ir humanistines idėjas. Valstietiškoje Utopijoje plačiai taikomos eugenikos nuostatos, atliekama dirbtinė atranka ir taip vadinama „nepavykusio gyvenimo terapija“, kai valstybė stengiasi užkirsti kelią „talentų švaistymui“. Evangeliškoji talento parabolė įgauna hiperbolizuotą interpretaciją: siekiant tobulai išgryninti asmens talentus ir gebėjimus, iš jo atimama laisva valia. Babelio bokšto simbolis atsiranda tekste tarsi nuoroda į panašaus turinio vyresniojo Peterio Brueghelio paveikslų scenas ir perspėja apie pavojus, glūdinčius humanistinėse, lygiateisiškumą su Dievu skelbiančiose idėjose.*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *Chayanovas, parabolė, Utopija, teurgija, humanizmas.*

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