

BOOK REVIEWS

MALITI, Eva: *Symbolizmus ako princíp videnia* (Symbolism as the Principle of Vision). Bratislava, Veda 1996. 176 pp.

The title of the book is symptomatic and adequate: it contains six essays devoted to Russian symbolism of the twentieth century. Following the Cassirer philosophy and semiotic approaches, Eva Maliti joins such an understanding of symbolism, which she sees not only as one of many streams of literature and ideas at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also as a modern philosophical and artistic outlook with reflections adequate to contemporary thought.

The object of E. Maliti's interest is Russian symbolism in both its forms – scientific (Florensky, Rozanov) and artistic (Bely, Pasternak, and Gazdanov). This dual approach and selection of personalities helps the author to interpret Russian symbolism in its various forms, within its variety of genres and richness of ideas.

E. Maliti is fully aware of the fact that symbolism is not a monolithic ideological phenomenon; nor is Russian symbolism. In the introduction she characterizes the essence and multiformity of this symbolism by presenting different outlooks, opinions, and interpretations. It follows from her analysis that particularly from the point of view of gnozeology, its span varies between a capturing, vision, intuitive outlook towards the essence, and actual understanding or cognizing of the hidden reality.

The first representative of Russian symbolism, to whom the author directs her attention, is P. Florensky, the orthodox clergyman, religious thinker and expert in natural history, persecuted in the Soviet period. His dual orientation towards spiritual contemplation and exact science could be considered an ideal prerequisite for what is postulated by symbolism (and together with it by E. Maliti) as its principal aim: in-depth, correlative seeing or knowing of the essence in its complexity and integrity. Florensky is presented by the author as the representative of ontological, realistic symbolism, the quintessence of which is analysed on the basis of his teaching about the name. Florensky understands the name (title, term) as a key leading to the knowing of the matter itself: he who knows the name, knows the substance, the relation between the phenomenon (in this case the name) and the reality is substantial, not conventional. E. Maliti reveals this principle of relation as a tradition of Byzantine-Slavonic thought by pointing to the philosophical understanding of the Byzantine theologian of hesychasm G. Palamas in the 14th century. But there is another more striking parallel, which was also recognized as affinitive by Florensky himself. It is the Byzantine struggle over icons (eighth and ninth centuries), where Florensky analysed such efforts to approach the heart of the matter through direct rational knowing of its reflection or phenomenon (in this case icons). Byzantine theorists of icons thought, like Florensky, that the essence, i.e. God, can be reached through icons. In any case, such an understanding of the symbol directed towards unambiguous (rational) cognition of the original surpasses symbolism to some extent in its two substantial characteristics: in its unambiguous relation to the cognitive archetype and in the emphasis laid on knowing, understanding, but not capturing the reality: the symbol is definitely not the equivocal magic vehicle penetrating into the substance from different sides, different angles and perspectives, always revealing its particular part, which is probably the crucial characteristic of symbolism. In the latter case, the symbol has a much weaker position in Florensky's conception.

The second type of symbolism, as if a sort of antithesis of Florensky's understanding, is represented by Andrei Bely and his novel *Petersburg*, in particular. Bely is a poet body and soul: his symbol is never a simple symbol, from the semantic point of view it is a multilayered, ambiguous sign, linked through a variety of bonds and meanings with its original, with what it represents. This intuitive, equivocal type of symbolism indicates, defines, seizes, rather than gets to know.

E. Maliti also realizes this difference and this specific feature of Bely's symbolism: the passage about Bely represents the culmination of the book. Not only because she knows the novel to the small-

est detail (she translated it) but also because this type of intuitiveness and symbolism is closest to her, as is documented by her own creative writing.

The leitmotif of the essay is precisely the working out of the most important and the most layered symbol of the novel – the equestrian statue of Peter the Great, more precisely his horse. Bely's poetic imagery launches the symbolic game, accumulates one layer after another in one symbol to express the ambivalent relation of the author and his characters to reality. The horse with his hind legs, fixed to the ground – the symbol of Russian reality, his trunk and forelegs, hanging in the dark – this is the (not too positively assessed) reality of the Western world – the aim of Russia from the time of Peter the Great. The imagination of E. Maliti adds to this symbol a less conventional form and meaning: the horse is a courier connecting the real world and the other world. In the interpretation of E. Maliti the ancient Orphean, Dantean motif emerges here. This "other" world is present in Bely's novel as the world of ideas that have bred and permanently breed the real world of Petersburg. This world of ideas, the world of dreams is not homogeneous either. The world of the protagonist, the bureaucrat Ableukhov, is stiff, motionless, and stony, like Petersburg itself. On the opposite side there is the world of his son Nikolai which is full of motion; however, it is a convulsive, tossing motion, expressing the other side of real Petersburg and, at the same time, reaction to its non-authenticity, which is merely a substitute symbol expressing the reality of the Russia of Bely's time. The choice of Peter's horse, perhaps interpreted too much symbolically and imaginatively in terms of the Orphean myth, as much as the interpretation of the two principal dreams – ideas of the novel – is the symbol itself – the key, offered by E. Maliti to the reader on the route to the decoding of Andrei Bely.

Another type of symbolism is represented by the "most mysterious" author – V.V. Rozanov. The word as a saturated symbol of reality is the centre of his interest. In spite of this saturation, the word appears to be insufficient as a symbol. This opinion on the insufficiency of the word leads to Rozanov's neglect of the formal side of verbal presentation, emphasis on the sound, scenic, musical side of the word and speech, actually his complete "departure from literature", which most mystifies Rozanov's personality and by which he mystifies himself. However, Maliti's revelation of Rozanov's personality proves that his true interest and aim is the search for God. This in fact demystifies Rozanov, because with his aims he fits very well not only into his time but also into the whole tradition of Byzantine and Russian orthodox thought. The word is insufficient for him to specify primarily God (the parallel to Yesenin is evident here: he also considered verbal means to be insufficient to get to know the Russian soul). However, Rozanov is not looking for an essential, depersonified God. He is looking for, as he puts it, "intimate, own" God: again a parallel with the differentiation in Orthodox theology between transcendental God and God with his energies existentially accessible to man. This is the God Rozanov is looking for above the word and the words, above any rational approach. This is probably the heart of his mystery, which he wants to pass to the people as a message.

The study on Russian-Ossetian emigrant writer Gaito Gazdanov, unknown in our country and little known in the world, is revealing (at least within the Slovak context). His symbolism is the symbolism of alienation. The theme of his works, of *Night Roads* in particular, is Paris, an alien, dead city, to which the foreigner with his inner world remains immune. We again face an attempt of E. Maliti to derive the symbolizing perception of a foreign city as a motif of the hero's wanderings through the underworld, as a motif of return, here based on the tradition of Ossetian folklore.

This personal, intuitive, and symbolizing approach, present not only in this, but in all the essays, is, together with the revealing topic, probably the greatest asset to Slovak academic literature. Such a transparent disclosure of an author's attitude is not frequent in our regions, where the sterility of topics and thought burgeons beyond measure.

The author's approach to symbolism is exceptionally personal and intuitive, always controlled by scientific, rational thought. A rare harmony and balance between these two approaches was conditioned by the peculiar and strikingly inventive character of the book.

Alexander Avenarius

Institute of Historical Studies, Slovak Academy of Sciences,
Klemensova 19, 813 64 Bratislava, Slovakia