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## THE RUSSIAN URBAN TEXT: CITY AND ATMOSPHERES IN *MY* BY E. ZAMYATIN

### 1. The pathosphere

The idea of a relationship between landscape and literature is certainly not new in the field of literary theory and literary criticism. However, in order to develop a possible theory of literature on an atmospheric basis, this relationship must be reviewed first and foremost in the light of the primordial relationship between man and the environment and, consequently, between culture and the environment.

In this sense, it is necessary to take a step back and start again from the idea that the original character of being coincides with a being-in-atmospheres. In this sense atmospheres are the transcendental foundation of the relationship between the Ego and the world and «without the atmospheric intercourse there could not in general be such a thing as an encounter (with the world)» (Hauskeller 1995, 32). From this perspective, and taking into account an idea already suggested in the definition of biosphere by V.I. Vernadskij, it was decided to define 'pathosphere' as that inseparable unicum that emotionally unites subjects and environment; that atmospheric-sentimental substratum that permeates human space and time and from which, certain atmospheres emerge, according to a cyclical rhythm, in specific historical moments, determined by the particular mutual interaction between the subjects and the surrounding environment.

By evoking the primordial maternal dimension, the pathosphere, in fact, possesses an intrinsically relational nature and manifests itself precisely through the co-presence of and the interaction between the specific characteristics of the environment and the subjects located in it, generating a particular orientation of feeling and specific emotional-sentimental configurations, which give a characteristic imprint to each civilization, culture and the individuals that are surrounded by it.

In fact, in every culture, there is a primordial relationship with the environment, whose imprint is, albeit latently, present in all the historical-cultural cycles that animate its life: based on the type of geographical space in which the pathosphere finds itself manifesting, specific affective disposition will develop, which will confer, in a binding manner, a given character to a given culture – this is what, for example, in the historical-literary context is often defined as the ‘soul’ of a culture –; and individuals born from the womb of a particular culture will always carry within themselves (and unconsciously transmit) the traces of the particular atmosphere of a given geographical area.

Taking up Schmitz’s idea of the development of felt-bodily dynamics, on the basis of movements of contraction and expansion, the affective disposition of a culture is articulated according to a horizontal axis – whose extremes are *Enge* and *Weite* – and a vertical axis which indicates the degree of intensity of this disposition.

## 2. Atmospheres and literature

Based on the ideas just described we need to take into consideration that any product of a culture will be imbued with a given prototypical *Stimmung* and a certain macrotonal atmosphere. Since «paintings, songs, conventions of design, and symphonies can all absorb atmospheres and moods and later offer them up for experience in a new present» (Gumbrecht 2012, 16), literature and literary texts, understood as forms of expression of the *passionarnost*’ of a civilization, which represent the *chiaroscuro* imposition of atmospheres over sensitivity, become instruments of the emergence of the *atmospheric*.

By defining literature as a practice of feeling influenced by historical and subjective factors, we can say that the atmosphere of a literary text has a stratified structure, articulated in the following manner:

- the prototypical atmosphere (*Stimmung*) of a literature, understood as that ‘something’, that ‘character’ – indefinable, but still experienceable –, which marks the originality and singularity of a given culture;
- the atmospheres of the texts, i.e. the (macrotonal) literary atmospheres which emerge in the various texts of the written corpus of a certain culture. These atmospheres, linked to certain moments of the historical cycle of a civilization and to the the

pathospheric configuration of these moments, correspond to that particular impression that 'hovers' in a text and constitutes its Leitmotiv. They can also be defined as the linguistically embodied manifestation of the atmospherics of a culture, i.e. of the particular and transitory way of configuration of the pathosphere in a given territory at a given moment, and correspond with the quasi-intentional part of literary creation;

- the atmospheres in the text, i.e. the microtonal atmospheres which follow one another within the text and whose specific combination will, in most cases, define the character of the macrotonal one. Also definable as 'local affective/emotional tones', these sentimental singularities can be independently recognized, while keeping a relationship with the macrotonal atmosphere, of which they absorb some colours. Unlike the macrotonal one, the microtonal atmospheres are derivative, as they are intentionally produced by the author.

### 3. Is Russian literature atmospheric?

Now let's see to what extent Russian literature can be considered atmospheric in relation to the culture's disposition towards *passionarnost'*. Starting from Lev Nikolaevich Gumilev's<sup>1</sup> theory of ethnogenesis, the concept of *passionarnost'*, understood as the ability of an organism to absorb energy from the outside and transform it into action, releasing it by creating something, illustrates well the impulse which, on a macroscopic as well as on a microscopic level, determines the development of a greater or lesser tendency to 'suffer'. On this basis, an increased propensity of the organism-culture to absorb and, therefore, to be grasped by certain atmospheres, is reflected, at a microscopic level, in the generally greater propensity – with the necessary exceptions of a purely subjective nature – of the components of this civilization to 'feel' atmospheres. Consequently, every culture, including the Russian one, is configured as a proper-body, an extension of the *Leib* of the subjects making it up, and it dynamically relates in a specific way with respect to the pathosphere, describing certain

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<sup>1</sup> Gumilev (2001, 21, 23) defines *passionarnost'* as «energy, a surplus of biochemical energy of living matter, a vector opposed to instinct, which defines the capacity for overvoltage [a term coined by Gumilev himself]», as «high drive for action». *Passionarnost'*, in the definition that Gumilev gives of it as a «passionary impulse», recalls the «vital impulse» that Schmitz defines as the cornerstone of the peculiar dynamics of the body.

tensive and expansive movements in relation to the tensive components of the *Enge* and the *Weite*.

On the other hand, if the discussion about atmospheres becomes quite complex in cultures, such as the Anglo-Saxon ones, where the tendency to consider moods and feelings as something private complicates the possibility of speaking in a clear and defined way about sentimental tones widespread in the outside world, on the contrary, the theme of emotionality is extremely central in Russian culture, as attested by the «tremendous stress on emotions and on their free expression, the high emotional temperature of Russian discourse, the wealth of linguistic devices for signaling emotions and shades of emotions» (Wierzbicka 1992, 395).

When Turgenev says: «We sit in the mud, my friend, and reach for the stars», what he is talking about is exactly that eternal tension between narrowness and vastness that Russians have always constantly experienced, in an extremely accentuated way compared to the West, and which determines the emergence of a particular *Stimmung*.

The exceptional character of Russian literature, already noted by Auerbach when he observes how it «preserved an immediacy of experience which had become a rare phenomenon in the western civilization» (Auerbach 2003, 523), derives precisely from the fact that feelings and emotions are considered as ‘essences’, which are constantly interacting with the subject, enveloping him, and permeating the space in which he lives.

In fact, the almost excessive *passionarnost*’ characterizing Russian culture materializes in an extreme and polarized properly bodily disposition of the subjects who belong to it, in the positive and negative value that this definition can have.

As well expressed by Aileen Kelly in the introduction to Berlin (1986, 32), «it is often said of the Russians that their national peculiarity consists in expressing in an extreme fashion certain universal characteristics of the human condition», but, to put it more precisely, they embody «not one but at least two fundamental, and opposed, human urges».

This tendency towards the polarization (*tendencija k krajsnostjam*) – for example, analyzed at the level of semiotics of culture by Jurij M. Lotman, who links it to the founding binary opposition between *čužoe* (foreigner) and *svoë* (one’s own) –, which not implies a synthesis of the opposition between the two

poles, is what defines Russian literature and what makes it so alive, because in it lives the alternation of *Enge* and *Weite* which characterizes human life and relationship with atmospheres.

#### 4. Stimmung and landscape: the Russian example

The marked *passionarnost'* that characterizes Russian culture reverberates in a conception of space that is not limited only to a three-dimensional space.

In the Russian language, in fact, there is a specific word to indicate atmospheric space *par excellence*: the word *prostor*, which contains within itself only the reference to the horizontal dimension of space. Therefore, its plural, *prostory*, could be understood as «the vastness to all parties» (Levontina-Žmelev 2005, 66).

The *prostor* implies the absolute absence of boundaries, because it is the space of research, of longing, so that V.P. Aksenov (2009) writes that «we needed to go somewhere, break out into this frosty vastness (*prostor*), to fly out of our seats, to feel like crazy travelers on the open road»<sup>2</sup>. It is, therefore, the space of feelings precisely because of its absence of boundaries, in which the subject, speaking as Schmitz, belongs to the space – in a non-limiting sense, but, on the contrary, meaning an extension of the possibilities of movement of our proper-body – and is able to experience the primordial influence of *Enge* and *Weite* in it:

The relationship with the vastness (*prostor*) in Russian culture is ambivalent: the cold wind of vastness both attracts and frightens. [...] Two possible emotional tones are associated with space: either major, hedonistic, when vastness is seen as freedom, or minor, when the vastness of sorrowful fields (M. Tsvetaeva) evokes melancholy. (Gudymova 2011, 43)

The *prostor*, understood as vastness, is «the absolute place [...] in which the here of the primitive presence is given» (Schmitz 1990, 280) – and, therefore, it's the place of the prototypical atmosphere of a culture – from which all the possible topological configurations of the *prostranstvo* and the atmospheres that can emerge in it originate. Unlike the *prostor*, the *prostranstvo* is mostly a three-dimensional space, which can be *zamknutyj*

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<sup>2</sup> Short quote from *Oranges from Morocco* (*Apelsiny iz Morokko*). The translation is made by the article's author.

(closed) – as in the case of the city – and which is generally related to the presence of a well-defined purpose or meaning.

The *prostor*, a space that is in a certain sense pre-dimensional, with absolute dimensions, founded on the absence of surfaces and correlations with three-dimensionally defined objects and spaces, where the bodily dimension – physically understood – leaves room for the lived-body, gives birth to the *prostranstvo* of the city, understood as an atmospheric landscape in consideration of the fact that it possesses the characteristics of separation, unity, physical aspect and presence of borders.

From this perspective, regardless of the architectural differences, the Russian city – normally identified with Petersburg or Moscow – is constituted as a sort of *enclave*, with well-defined borders which separate it from the rest of the Russian land<sup>3</sup>. Unlike what happens in the *prostor*, where the Russian man is positively at the mercy of atmospheric feelings, in the city the subject finds himself, instead, in consideration of the aforementioned *tendencija k krajsnostjam*, in the space of absolute domestication – or of the attempted domestication – of feeling, in a thanatological place of intensification of the only *Enge*.

In this sense, if the *prostor* is the space of the specific Russian *Stimmung*, the *prostranstvo* becomes a space of configuration of the specific macrotonal atmospheres that derive from this *Stimmung* and which, in the case of the Russian city, orient the proper-corporeal directions of individuals towards markedly contractive tendencies.

## 5. The Russian *Stimmung* and the Russian urban text

The outcome of the development of the relationship of Russian culture with a complex geographical environment, boundless and confined at the same time, is the emergence of the specific Russian *Stimmung* of 'helplessness'. This prototypical atmosphere, in consideration of the aforementioned *tendencija k krajsnostjam*, takes the form of extreme dynamics of total resignation or devastating explosiveness, of freezing of the action in the perpetual rumination of Dostoevsky's tormented characters or of revolt in Vladimir Mayakovsky's verses, in the constant ambiguity

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<sup>3</sup> For further information on this theme and the consequent birth of the so-called *tret'e prostranstvo*, see Mari (2018).

of the relativity of a thought that clashes with the desire for absolutes.

In this sense, ambiguity as a modal expression of the *Stimmung* of helplessness, to which Russian culture reacts with the most extreme control – an expression of omnipotence – or the most total abandonment of resignation, becomes a founding characteristic also of the subject's relationship with the urban landscape.

If space represents «social morphology», the form of lived experience, and «a materialization of 'social being'», then the Russian urban environment is an expression of the specific *Stimmung* of Russian culture when it embodies the absolute deprivation of agency of the subject who inhabits the city space.

The city, albeit in different ways, denies the visceral relationship of the Russian man with the act of feeling, by attempting to annihilate the indomitable *passionarnost'* of its inhabitants and changing it into a composed and often apathetic behavior dictated only by the limited atmospheres that can exist within its boundaries.

From here, in the transformation of the urban landscape into a literary urban landscape, in the wake of V.N. Toporov's (2009) definition of 'Petersburg text'<sup>4</sup>, we introduce the term 'Russian urban text', meaning a sort of 'hypertext' (*sverkhstekst*) built on the basis of 'city' literary texts. This hypertext can also be defined as that atmospheric *continuum* found in Russian urban texts, regardless of the genre, the author and the time of their composition. It arises from the interconnection between the emotional-sentimental elements that appear in the different texts composing it. In this sense, once again, the approach to literature

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<sup>4</sup> Let us remember that the 'text', for Toporov (2009), has a triple meaning, so it can be understood as:

- Single literary text, which has the city of Petersburg as its object or subject;
- A first-level hypertext that includes representations of the city in an author's production;
- A second level hypertext, '*edin i vzjazan*' (unitary and cohesive), given by the homogeneity of some linguistic specificities which can be found in all the literary production concerning the city, regardless of the genre or era to which this production belongs.

Here we look at the third meaning, because it implies a modal perspective, that relates to the way I understand the discussion on literary atmospheres.

in an atmospheric sense is modal, when it considers as 'Russian' those texts which talk in a certain way about the city and the atmospheres that hover over it.

### 6. Urban landscape and atmospheres in *My*: some hints

In the case of the literary text, the ambiguity that dominates the relationship of the Russian subject with the urban landscape leads to the equally ambiguous description of the city space, where the macrotonal atmosphere and the microtonal atmospheres composing it, emerge from the conflict of the words' meaning and the emotional-sentimental 'between' that lies among them.

This is what happens also in the novel *My (We)* by Y.I. Zamyatin (1884-1937), where the background of the plot is dominated by the apparently perfect urban landscape of the One State (*Edinoe Gosudarstvo*) and where the transparency of the materials – the walls of the apartments are entirely made of glass –, the absolute geometrisation of space, the standardization and scheduling of the behavior of all inhabitants are pervasive.

I woke: soft, bluish light, glimmer of glass walls, glass chairs and table. [...] The brisk crystal bell over my head: seven o'clock, time to get up. On the right and the left, through the glass walls, I see myself, my room, my clothes, my movements – repeated a thousand times over. This is bracing: you feel yourself a part of a great, powerful, single entity. And the precise beauty of it – not a single superfluous gesture, curve, or turn. (Zamyatin 1972, 32-33)

In the street, when I had already crossed to the other side, I glanced back: in the bright, sun-permeated glass hulk of the building squares of bluish-gray, opaque drawn shades could be seen here and there – squares of rhythmic, Taylorized happiness. (Zamyatin 1972, 44)

These elements give the atmosphere of the One State a character only apparently familiar, meanwhile suggesting a sense of constant restlessness, a looming atmosphere of desolation, allowing us to state that the idea according to which «we then have to admit that the (physiognomic) 'character' more often involved in urban perception is that of 'familiarity'» (Griffero 2013, 4), must be reconsidered in the case of the specific relationship of the Russian subject with urban space, which, as evident in the One State, imposes at the same time both the 'what' and the 'how' of action.



Every morning with six-wheeled precision, at the same hour and the same moment, we – millions of us – get up at once. At the same hour, in million-headed unison, we start work; and in million-headed unison we end it. And, fused into a single million-handed body, at the same second, designated by the Table, we lift our spoons to our mouths. At the same second, we come out for our walk, go to the auditorium, go to the hall for Taylor exercises, fall asleep...[...]. Twice a day, from sixteen to seventeen, and from twenty-one to twenty-two, the single mighty organism breaks up into separate cells; these are the Personal Hours designated by the Table. (Zamyatin 1972, 12)

The inhabitants must, therefore, necessarily be in tune with the environment, on the basis of an extreme manipulation of the urban space oriented by the most absolute rationality, which by exasperating the contractive tendencies of the inhabitant's own body, undermines the emotional and cognitive abilities of the subject and places him in a state of extreme apathy or confusion, leading him to 'die' – whether figurative or real.

The bell. It was day. [...] A vague, quivering mist filled my head. Through the mist I saw the long glass tables, the spherical heads chewing slowly, silently, in unison. From afar through the fog, I heard the ticking of the metronome, and in time to this familiar, caressing music I mechanically counted to fifty along with everyone else: fifty prescribed chewing movements for each bite. And, mechanically, in time to the ticking, I descended and marked off my name in the book of departures – like everyone else. (Zamyatin 1972, 102)

In the city of *My*, which is configured as a thanatological place, extreme domestication leads to emptiness, to the absence of real spaces of feeling, to a cartography of deadly significance: people find themselves living, in fact, in a reality that breaks and fragments them more and more. And in this suffocating space they lose any connection with their own real feeling and, therefore, with their own *Leib* (living body), because it is reduced to pure physical presence (*Körper*).

This bond begins to be restored only when D-503, the hero, sets foot in the Old House and then beyond the Green Wall, when he is attacked by the 'primitive presence' of the atmospheres which, not 'domesticated', strongly strike the subject and place him before a pre-reflective authenticity that shakes him from the state of emotional torpor he was in.

Evening. A light mist. The sky is hidden by a milky-golden veil and you cannot see what is above, beyond it. The ancients knew that God – their greatest, bored skeptic – was there. We know that there is only a crystal-blue, naked, indecent nothing. But now I do not know what is there: I have learned too much. Knowledge, absolutely sure of its infallibility, is faith. I had had firm faith in myself; I had believed that I knew everything within myself. And now...

I stand before a mirror. And for the first time in my life – yes, for the first time in my life – I see myself clearly, sharply, consciously. I see myself with astonishment as a certain 'he'. Here am I-he: black eyebrows, etched in a straight line; and between them, like a scar, a vertical fold (I don't know whether it was there before). Steel gray eyes, surrounded by the shadow of a sleepless night. And there, behind this steel...it turns out that I have never known what is there. And out of 'there' (this 'there' is at the same time here and infinitely far), out of 'there' I look at myself – at him – and I know: he, with his straight eyebrows, is a stranger, alien to me, someone I am meeting for the first time in my life. And I, the real I, am not he. (Zamyatin 1972, 59-60)

But this will last only for a while, because, in the end, the hero will yield to the One State once again, showing how strong the impact of the primordial *Stimmung* of helplessness is.

### **7. Urban atmospheres and atmospheric markers**

The ambiguity of the urban landscape of *My*, as in other texts that can be placed in the aforementioned 'Russian urban text', emerges in the use of specific linguistic elements that we could define as 'atmospheric markers' and which indicate the macrotonal atmosphere of desolation that hovers over the text.

At the level of microtonal atmospheres, these markers are used above all on the basis of the mechanism of narrative estrangement postulated by V. Shklovsky, whereby a perceptive discrepancy between the signifier and the signified is generated. The deautomatization of perception is guaranteed in this case by the use of excessively positive adverbs to describe the components of the city. By the use of this instrument we're able to feel the contractive tensions that arise from a markedly oppressive macrotonal atmosphere:

And again, as this morning on the dock, I saw everything as though for the first time in my life: the straight, immutable streets, the glittering glass of the pavements, the divine parallelepipeds of the transparent houses, the square harmony of the gray-blue ranks. (Zamyatin 1972, 5)

Among the atmospheric markers we'll focus here only on punctuation. Normally associated with the rhythmic dimension of the text, it becomes fundamental when expresses the activation of the bodily islands hit by the atmosphere, i.e. when through it we could feel the heartbeat speeding up, the breathing slowing down and, as a result, the tensing and contracting or dilating and expanding body.

In this sense, it is interesting to consider how the writing in the diary of the protagonist, D-503, is marked by an increasing fragmentation of the phrases, by a great presence of suspension points at the end of incomplete sentences, or by the use of the exclamation point:

I am alone. Or, rather, alone with that other 'I'. I am sitting in the chair, legs crossed, watching with curiosity from some 'there' how I – my own self – writhe in the bed.

Why, why is it that for three whole years O and R and I have had that fine, warm friendship, and now – a single word about the other one, about I-330...Is it possible that all this madness – love jealousy – exists not only in those idiotic ancient books? And to think that...Equations, formulas, figures, and...this! I don't understand anything...anything at all...Tomorrow I shall go to R and tell him that... (Zamyatin 1972, 63-64)

In this regard, such a use of punctuation is characteristic of a metonymic use of the language, which, even in the microtonal atmospheres, suggest the presence of the macrotonal atmosphere related to the urban space as well as the *Stimmung* which characterizes the Russian urban text, alluding to it without making it explicit.

Likewise, this metonymic use of punctuation marks the spatially diffuse character of the atmosphere – in this case urban – , since the relationship established by metonymy is of contiguity and its dimension is more purely horizontal. Therefore, these characteristics indicate how, in relationship with the urban text, the perception of the atmospheric density of the objects and subjects that make up the city, as well as the spatial relationships

between them, are preponderant compared to the vertical dimension of the relationship between text and interpretation.

### 8. Conclusions

Although only briefly mentioned, it appears clear that, in Russian culture and literature, the city, despite taking on different architectural configurations correlated to the presence of different macrotonal atmospheres, presents some innate peculiar characteristics which, marked by the presence of a specific prototypical atmosphere, make it definable as a 'Russian landscape' of which the 'Russian urban text' is but a reflection.

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