

LEONID STOLOVICH

The Systemic Pluralism of A.F. Losev's Philosophy

The surprising phenomenon of Losev, who is rightfully called “the last classical thinker,” has attracted attention since long ago, during the learned philosopher’s lifetime of almost ninety-five years. His books, which were published in large print runs since the 1960s, quickly became bibliographical rarities, although attention to Losev was not officially encouraged before the perestroika period. Like A. Blok, in B. Pasternak’s poem, Losev “is not made by hand / And is not imposed on us by anyone.”

Losev’s almost century-long life devoted to philosophy can be divided into three periods: (1) from the beginning of his research work to 1930, when he was arrested, imprisoned, and “reeducated by labor” at the construction of the White Sea Canal. The period begins with the publication of his article “Eros in Plato” [Eros u Platona] in 1916 and includes his brilliant octateuch of the 1920s; (2) from the 1930s to the beginning of the 1950s, a time of enforced silence and intensive work that went “into the desk drawer”; (3) from 1953 on, when it became possible to publish what he had previously thought through and recently written, including the eight-volume *History of Ancient Esthetics* [Istoriia antichnoi estetiki], *The Esthetics of the Renaissance* [Estetika vozrozhdeniia], and many other works (over 500 during this period!).

V.V. Zenkovsky evaluated Losev’s works of the 1920s very highly: “in the person of Losev, Russian philosophical thought displayed a richness of talent, a subtlety of analysis, and a power of intuition that together undoubtedly testify to the impor-

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Leonid Naumovich Stolovich is a professor of philosophy at the University of Tartu in Estonia.

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tance of the philosophical tendency that Solov'ev first pointed out with complete clarity."¹ N.O. Losskii also valued Losev's early works highly: in his *History of Russian Philosophy* [Istoriia russkoi filosofii], he characterizes Losev as a devout disciple of the dialectical method, "which appears in his works as a combination of Hegel's dialectic (concrete speculation) and Husserl's eidetic contemplation (*Wesenschau*). This combination, according to Losskii, amounts to the "Losevan ideal-realistic symbolism."²

The key concept of Losev's philosophy is *eidōs*. This Greek word, which literally means "species" or "image," was used by ancient Greek philosophers, especially Plato, as a category. According to Plato, an *eidōs* is an idea-prototype of a thing, that is, an ideal model of a thing. A Platonic *eidōs* is ideal, but it is concrete, intellectually intuitable, and thus different from an abstract concept. In phenomenological philosophy, which was founded by Husserl, *eidōs* is treated, as in Plato, as a combination of abstractness and concreteness. It is not an independently and substantially existing idea but a higher intellectual operation. Thus, for Losev in *eidōs* Plato is combined with Husserl, dialectics with phenomenology. According to Losev's definition, *eidōs* is "the essence of a thing and its appearance," "its meaning," "objective essence," "the intelligible core of a thing,"³ the manifest essence.⁴

Eidōs is a key but not the starting concept of Losev's philosophy. The starting concept is the Primordial-One [*Pervo-edinoe*]. This concept is similar to the Neoplatonic concept of unity and Solov'ev's total-unity [*vseedinstvo*]. For Losev the Primordial-One, essentially, is God, although he calls God God only at the end of *The Dialectics of Myth* [Dialektika mifa]. Everything else, first of all *eidōs*, emerges from the Primordial-One, and does so according to the laws of dialectics. It is precisely dialectics, in Losev's opinion, that can overcome the shortcoming in Husserl's phenomenology, which is limited to grasping the meaning of an object, the intuition of the object in its *eidōs*,⁵ and "stops at a static fixation of a statically given meaning of a thing."⁶ Phenomenology is necessary as a "pretheoretical description," as "a preliminary knowledge of a thing as a determinate meaning," but dialectics gives the genuine philosophical analysis. "I consider dialectics the only permissible form of philosophizing," says the author of *The Philosophy of the Name* [Filosofiia imeni].⁷

What does Losev mean by dialectics? He lived at a time when the study of dialectical materialism was compulsory, and dialectics was treated in the spirit of the "all-conquering doctrine" of Marx-Engels and Lenin-Stalin (the last only up to 1956). The dialectic that was presented as Marxist justified everything that was convenient to the party leadership. Dialectical materialism converted dialectics into subjectivist sophistry that served the pragmatic interests of the nomenclatura and in this way compromised the very concept of dialectics. Losev's philosophy helps to overcome this prejudice. The name of Losev's book *Passion for Dialectics* [Strast' k dialektike] (1990), which he prepared for publication but did not live to see published, was not opportunistic. The ninety-four-year-old thinker, blinded

(literally) by the adversities besetting him, remained faithful to the philosophical convictions of his sighted youth. By dialectics, according to the classical philosophical tradition, Losev understood development that is a transition to the opposite position or a movement through contradiction to a resulting synthesis. He formulated the fundamental law of dialectics as follows: "every dialectical determination is accomplished through opposition to the other and the subsequent synthesis with it."⁸

Guided by this dialectic, Losev does not limit the world to the ideal *eidos*. The ideal presupposes the existence of the "other"—the physical. Losev's rejection of materialism does not arise from his denial of the existence of the physical. He admits its existence. He rejects the "materialist mythology" because, contrary to dialectics, it completely denies the ideal world. (Let us note that in the 1920s militant materialism and atheism rejected even the concept of soul!)

Losev does not accept "the so-called dialectical materialism, which takes matter as the foundation of being," because "matter in the sense of a category has exactly the same role as idea," and "*a special ideal world is a dialectical necessity*."⁹ Here and in subsequent works he denies the absolute opposition of idealism and philosophical materialism. In this respect Vladimir Solov'ev served as an example for him: he described Solov'ev's worldview as idealism and as a materialism that asserts the beauty of matter.¹⁰

Losev's understanding of *miracle* is indicative of his worldview. For him a miracle is not an "*interference of a higher Power or higher powers*." In his opinion, "*a miracle is not at all a violation of the laws of nature*. A miracle is not a violation of the laws of nature, but on the contrary, their establishment and justification, their comprehension."¹¹

Continuing the traditions of Solov'ev's "metaphysics of total-unity," Losev organically combined in his philosophical views the phenomenological method established by Husserl and the dialectical method, which originated in Plato and the Neoplatonists and was developed by Schelling and Hegel. A philosopher of the highest erudition and culture, Losev made ancient philosophy relevant and took into account the achievements of Russian philosophical thought, especially Solov'ev, phenomenology, and neo-Kantianism in posing and solving the basic problems of linguistics, mathematics, logic, music, esthetics, mythology, and the history of philosophy itself, first of all ancient philosophy. At the same time Losev, together with Solov'ev, Losskii, and S. Frank, is a systematically thinking philosopher.¹²

Losev's philosophy is symbolic in nature, for in his eyes the world is a system of expressions: the *Primordial-One* as essence is expressed in *eidos*, *eidos*—in *myth*, *myth*—in *symbol*, *symbol*—in *personality*, *personality*—in *energy of the essence*, *energy of the essence*—in *name*. But symbol is not only an element of this system. It is also a principle of its construction since "expression itself is a symbol." Consequently, symbol as expression "is the correspondence of meaning with that which is other."¹³ For this reason Losev treats symbolically both myth and art,

personality and name. Losev attempted to make philosophical symbolism concrete by tracing it through different fields of knowledge. What he accomplished in this respect in the realm of the history of philosophy, esthetics, mythology, and linguistics, has not only not lost its value, but has acquired a new relevance in connection with the development of semiotics and axiology, the philosophical theory of value.

Losev's works of the 1920s, to use military terminology, "drew fire upon him." The fact is that the young philosopher did not only show no desire and intention to adapt to the then ruling ideology, but launched an apparently quixotic struggle against this ideology, especially in his *Dialectics of Myth*. There Losev explicitly characterizes Marxist-Leninist ideology as "communist mythology," and recalls that, as its founders themselves wrote, "the spectre of communism" haunts Europe. It ironically reconstructs the mythological consciousness of vulgar Marxism and exposes its logical contradictions and philosophical crudity. At the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s this was more than enough cause for arrest. The windmill hit Don Quixote, lifted him up from the earth, and then flung him down. Luckily for him, the wheel of terror reached its highest velocity a bit later. Still, Losev, who was freed in 1933 because of disability, was strictly forbidden to engage in philosophy. What remained were classical philology and esthetics, in which theoretical research was not regulated as rigidly as in pure philosophy: the most important esthetic problems were debated even among Marxists.

Losev's early publications in the 1990s, the posthumously published books *Passion for Dialectics* and *Vladimir Solov'ev and His Time* [Vladimir Solov'ev i ego vremia], and many other of his works, as well as archival materials, gave rise to a new wave of interest in Losev and disputes about the nature of his philosophical views.

The question what does the "late Renaissance" of the "last classical thinker" amount to in the philosophico-methodological respect became the subject of discussion. How is late Losev related to early Losev? Did late Losev become a Marxist? While in the books of the 1920s he courageously called dialectical materialism a "crying absurdity" and saw Marxism as a contradictory "mythologic-dogmatic system," in the books and articles of the 1950s and subsequent years he often referred to the works of the "classics of Marxism-Leninism" and declared them to be methodologically important. The notion that Losev "was broken" and hence that there were two Losevs is quite widespread.

The recollections of N.P. Antsiferov (1889–1958), a historian and author of the famous book *The Soul of Petersburg* [Dusha Peterburga] who served his prison term with Losev, are indicative in this respect. Antsiferov wrote how Losev read lectures in a "club for the workers of the State Political Administration," which were attended by prisoners. In a lecture "on Einstein's principle of relativity from the philosophical point of view," he asserted that "now science is constructing completely new ideas about the cosmos, ideas that give a powerful impulse to philosophical thought." And reading a "brief course in the history of materialism,"

Losev showed in the final lecture that “the idea of matter increasingly merges with the idea of energy.” The following episode was characteristic of Losev: “There was a reading circle. I remember V.S. Razdol’skii reading a paper on M.M. Bakhtin’s book about Dostoevsky. Losev said, ‘But is it possible to talk and to write about Dostoevsky while excluding Christ!’¹⁴ After the meeting I approached his wife and said to her, ‘Tell Aleksei Fedorovich to refrain from such declarations.’ She answered, sadly looking at me: ‘One cannot keep silent about some things.’ How Aleksei Fedorovich has changed, ‘remolded himself,’ judging by his last works!’¹⁵

Antsiferov, probably, had in mind Losev’s references to the “classics of Marxism-Leninism.” In a conversation with V.V. Bibikhin in 1973 Losev said: “My church took refuge within. I have finished my task; let those who are younger do theirs. I experienced the full burden of Stalinism, from the first to the last moment. I began and ended every lecture with quotations about Stalin.”¹⁶

Along with the views on the “two Losevs”—the early and the late—the complexity of the Losev phenomenon supports different ideas about the “one Losev,” although this unity is treated sometimes in diametrically opposite ways. Thus, in the anniversary collection *To A.F. Losev on the Ninetieth Anniversary of His Birth* [A.F. Losevu k 90-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia], published in Tbilisi in 1983, the thinker’s long journey was analyzed as a journey to dialectical materialism. But even then a suspicion arose that Losev’s Marxism of the 1950s and 1960s was a Potemkin village.¹⁷ Some people assume that without changing the essence of his views, Losev used “the ‘symbolic-expressive potential of materialist philosophy.’”¹⁸

Also the very integrity of Losev’s worldview is treated in different ways. An expert on Christianity, such as Losev’s student S.S. Averintsev, reproached his teacher for the conservatism of his worldview even in the first period of his philosophical activity, for the totalitarian-medieval treatment of Orthodoxy, which, in Averintsev’s opinion, logically led the later Losev to the totalitarianism of Marxism.¹⁹

But what was in fact the case? Were there two Losevs or did he remain as he was? And in the latter case who was the one Losev?

Did Losev change? Did his views change under the impact of the new circumstances of life and, finally, under the influence of aging? To answer these questions with an unambiguous no is to ignore dialectics, which the philosopher worshiped from the beginning of his activity to the end. Here is an example of such a change. On 19 January 1973, V.V. Bibikhin recorded Aleksei Fedorovich’s words: “Earlier, when I was young, I expatiated on the Russian soul, I had Slavophile ideas, Moscow is the third Rome and ‘there will be no fourth.’ Then as time passed I became disillusioned in all this.”²⁰

But Losev remained Losev. He did not cease to be a believing and convinced Orthodox Christian and philosopher, faithful to the phenomenological-dialectical method. Let us turn to the book published in 1976 and dedicated to the subject of his permanent philosophical-esthetic interest—the problem of symbol. Its title bears the stamp of compromise: *The Problem of Symbol and Realistic Art* [Problema

simvola i realisticheskoe iskusstvo]. The restriction of art to “realistic art” is a concession to the times and the publishing house. But in the book itself there is no such restriction! In discussing the nature of symbol, Losev does not repent of his past idealistic transgressions and does not betray the phenomenological approach he used in the past, although he does not refer to Husserl. Losev essentially is true to his principles of phenomenological-dialectical inquiry.

Losev did not renounce his books of the 1920s. In a letter to me of 30 March 1968, after sharing his impressions of the second and third volumes of the Tartu *Semiotics* (Transactions on the Sign Systems of Tartu University) he had read, he wrote:

I believe you are not unaware that in my youth, when there was still a certain possibility to publish works on the esthetics of symbolism, I managed to print several large books in this field both of a theoretical and a historico-philosophical nature (for example, *The Philosophy of the Name* [Moscow, 1927], *The Dialectics of Artistic Form* [Moscow, 1927], *Essays on Ancient Symbolism and Mythology*, vol. 1 [Moscow, 1930], *The Dialectics of Myth* [Moscow, 1930], *The Ancient Cosmos and Contemporary Science* [Moscow, 1927], and so on). . . . Presently, in my old age, I can only rejoice that my philosophical-esthetic conceptions of those days have not perished, but, after surviving a terrible period, have appeared again, although in another form.²¹

As for Losev's relation to Marxism, it is necessary, in my opinion, to take a number of circumstances into account. In themselves references to the works of the so-called classics of Marxism-Leninism do not attest to one's real worldview. In Losev and in many other serious scholars they were of the nature of a “compulsory assortment” without which their works would simply not be published. Those who knew Losev closely had the opportunity to establish the fact that the blind wise man saw perfectly well what was going on around him.

But on the other hand, Losev's relation to Marxism changed in comparison to that of the 1920s. And this change came about not only because of practical considerations. First, it is necessary to keep in mind that the spreading Marxism of the 1920s was vulgar in nature; in particular, vulgar sociology claimed the title of Marxist sociology, esthetics, literary studies, and art studies. Second, Marx's philosophical-economic manuscripts, which showed the humanistic potentials of emerging Marxism, became known only in the second half of the 1950s. Third, it became clear that in Marxism itself there are a number of currents, which sometimes sharply polemicalized with each other, and Losev, who attentively followed the heated discussions in philosophy and esthetics among people who called themselves Marxists, supported the currents that, in his opinion, continued the best traditions of world philosophical thought. This can be seen in his article “Esthetics” [Estetika], published in 1970 in the fifth volume of *The Philosophical Encyclopedia* [Filosofskaiia entsiklopediia]. Losev expressed a differentiated relation to different currents in Soviet esthetics in the 1960s and 1970s and approved studies of the problem of esthetic value and the special esthetic nature of art, a problem he worked on in the 1920s.

Therefore references to Marx in Losev's later works are not always his concession to the editors, who assumed that "one can't spoil porridge with Marx." He absorbed into his philosophy everything that he considered important in Marx, for example, dialectical historicism and the sociological approach to human relations—without vulgarization, of course. He took Marx's philosophy into account without becoming a Marxist, just as he had taken Husserl's philosophy into account in the past without becoming a Husserlian. In his references to Lenin, especially to Lenin's summaries of Hegel's works that were published in the *Philosophical Notebooks* [Filosofskie tetradi], he emphasized the universal dialectical positions, which he always accepted. This did not in any way make him a Leninist. A master of irony, Losev frequently fought his enemies by using their own weapons and by catching them at the inconsistent development of their basic principles, their proclaimed dialectics.

Defining in 1934 the methodological bases of his course of lectures on the history of esthetic teachings, Losev described his philosophical worldview in relation to his predecessors as follows: "What is one to do with me, if I do not feel like an idealist, or materialist, or Platonist, or Kantian, or Husserlian, or rationalist, or mystic, or bare dialectician, or metaphysician, if all these oppositions frequently even strike me as naive? If some label or signboard is absolutely necessary, then I, unfortunately, can say only one thing: I am Losev! Anything else will inevitably be an exaggeration, oversimplification, and distortion, although it is not that difficult to detect here features of a long array of philosophical systems my young and receptive brain passionately received and reworked at some time."²² Losev, in my opinion, remained Losev both in his youth and in old age.

This philosophical position in Losev's case is not an eclectic medley of different and sometimes contradictory theoretical views, but a special kind of *systemic pluralism*, which is characteristic of Russian thinkers such as Lavrov, Rozanov, Shpet, and Bakhtin. *Systemic pluralism*, in my opinion, is not an external and mechanical, but an organic combination of different theoretical principles that is built on the perception of one deep essence in the combined conceptions, on their presentation as different sides of a single whole, as a description of different levels of existence or consciousness.²³

Notes

1. V.V. Zen'kovskii [Zenkovsky], *Istoriia russkoi filosofii* (Leningrad, 1991), vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 143.

2. N.O. Losskii, *Istoriia russkoi filosofii* (Moscow, 1991), pp. 372, 375–76.

3. A.F. Losev, *Filosofiia imeni*, in his *Iz rannikh proizvedenii* (Moscow, 1990), pp. 145, 166.

4. See A.F. Losev, *Dialektika khudozhestvennoi formy*, in his *Forma. Stil'. Vyrazhenie* (Moscow, 1995), p. 15.

5. Losev, *Filosofiia imeni*, pp. 159–60.

6. A.F. Losev, *Antichnyi kosmos i sovremennaia nauka*, in his *Bytie–imia–kosmos* (Moscow, 1993), p. 72.

7. Losev, *Filosofiia imeni*, pp. 159, 14.
8. Losev, *Dialektika khudozhestvennoi formy*, p. 13.
9. Losev, *Dialektika mifa*, in his *Iz rannikh proizvedenii*, pp. 584, 595.
10. See A.F. Losev, *Vladimir Solov'ev i ego vremia* (Moscow, 1990), pp. 624–28.
11. Losev, *Dialektika mifa*, pp. 538–39.
12. See the description of Losev's philosophical system in the articles of L.A. Gogotishvili, "Rannii Losev," *Voprosy filosofii*, 1989, no. 7; S.S. Khoruzhii, "Ar'ergardnyi boi. Mysl' i mif Alekseia Loseva," *Voprosy filosofii*, 1992, no. 10; and N.K. Bonetskaia, "Imiaslavets-skholast," *Voprosy filosofii*, 2000, no. 1.
13. Losev, *Dialektika khudozhestvennoi formy*, pp. 15, 32.
14. According to S.G. Bocharov's recollections, in a conversation with him on 9 June 1929, Bakhtin admitted that he could not "speak about the main problems," about "philosophical problems, about that which tormented Dostoevsky all his life—the existence of God?" And he continued, "I have to equivocate there all the time—there and back. I had to restrain myself. As soon as ideas started to flow, I had to stop them. There and back" (*Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 1993, no. 2, pp. 71–72).
15. N.P. Antsiferov, *Iz dum o bylom. Vospominaniia* (Moscow, 1992), p. 385.
16. V.V. Bibikhin, "Iz rasskazov A.F. Loseva," *Nachala*, 1993, no. 2, pp. 135–36.
17. See Vik. Erofeev, *Poslednii klassicheskii myslitel'*," in A.F. Losev, *Strast' k dialektike. Literaturnye razmyshleniia filosofa* (Moscow, 1990), p. 7.
18. *Voprosy filosofii*, 1989, no. 7, p. 144.
19. See S.S. Averintsev, "'Mirovozzrencheskii stil'': podstupy k iavleniiu Loseva," *Voprosy filosofii*, 1993, no. 9, p. 22.
20. Bibikhin, "Iz rasskazov A.F. Loseva," p. 135.
21. Losev's letter was published in my article "A.F. Losev o semiotike v Tartu," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 1994, no. 8, p. 99.
22. Losev, *Forma. Stil'. Vyrazhenie*, p. 356.
23. See my "O 'sistemnom pliuralizme' v filosofii," *Voprosy filosofii*, 2000, no. 9, pp. 46–56.

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