

## Artículo de investigación

**A. Losev and Russian Symbolists****А. Лосев и русские символисты**

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The object of study is a little-known aspect of the famous Russian philosopher A. F. Losev's works, namely, his fiction. Losev's works are considered in comparison with Romanticism and Symbolism. Having a lot of philosophical commonalities, sharing their basic ideas, Losev disagrees with the Symbolists in determining consequences the idealization of man. Any kind of art, and even music, are not capable, according to Losev, of overcoming the egoistic restrictions of human individuality. In Losev's works one of the central themes of Symbolism finds its continuation – the struggle of man against the dark forces. The writer shows that they can take possession of a person and arouses in him an irresistible desire for destruction. The analysis shows that Losev has a dialectical approach to the nature of any phenomena, including belles-lettres. Based on the artistic traditions of his predecessors – Romantics and Symbolists, combined with the achievements of Russian and European classical literature of the 19th century, Losev offers his own solution to the problems of good and evil, life and death, heaven and earth. Warning the reader about the dangers of individualism and worship of the idols of science and technological progress, he maintains the idea

**Аннотация**

Объектом исследования является малоизвестный аспект творчества русского философа А. Ф. Лосева, а именно его художественная литература. Творчество Лосева рассматривается в сопоставлении с романтизмом и символизмом. При наличии множества философских точек соприкосновения и общности основных идей, Лосев не соглашается с символистами в определении последствий идеализации человека. Любой вид искусства, даже музыка, не способен, по мнению Лосева, преодолеть эгоистические ограничения человеческой индивидуальности. Одна из центральных тем символизма – борьба человека с темными силами – находит свое продолжение в работах Лосева. Писатель показывает, что зло может овладеть человеком, вызвав у него непреодолимое стремление к разрушению. Анализ показывает, что диалектический подход присущ Лосеву по отношению к природе любых явлений, в том числе художественной литературы. Основываясь на художественных традициях своих предшественников – романтиков и символистов, в сочетании с достижениями русской и европейской классической

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that a soul that has fallen away from God and is trying to realize its creative intentions as a demiurge will inevitably succumb to temptations leading it into the realm of eternal dust and decay. An alternative way of the soul that has fallen from God may be selfless service to the Motherland. The theme of “heavenly Motherland” continues to be voiced in Losev’s works with particular strength, while preserving the hope of the Symbolists for the coming transformation of the world.

**Key words:** Aleksey Losev, Post-Symbolism, Russian Symbolists, thanatological motifs.

литературы XIX века, Лосев предлагает собственное решение проблем добра и зла, жизни и смерти, горнего и дольного начал. Предупреждая читателя об опасностях индивидуализма и поклонения идолам науки и технического прогресса, он поддерживает идею, что душа, которая отошла от Бога и пытается реализовать свои творческие намерения, приравнивая себя к Творцу, неизбежно поддастся искушениям, ведущим ее в царство вечной тьмы и разложения. Альтернативой может быть, по словам Лосева, только жертвенное служение Родине. Тема «небесной Родины» продолжает звучать в работах Лосева с особой силой, сохраняя при этом надежду на грядущее преобразование мира.

**Ключевые слова:** Алексей Лосев, постсимволизм, русские символисты, танатологические мотивы.

## Introduction

Losev’s fiction works belong to the post-symbolic period in Russian literature. In 1910, when, according to N. S. Gumilyov, “Symbolism has completed its development circle and is now falling” (Losev, 1913), the famous Russian philosopher turned 17 years old, but it is impossible to deny the enormous influence of poetics and ideologies of Symbolism on his personality and work. Losev’s connections with the younger generation of Symbolists were especially close. He personally knew Andrei Bely, had close contact with the poet Vyacheslav Ivanov. Their common philosophical interests included Plato and Vladimir Solovyov, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer, united “with a truly Christian God and with prayers” (Taho-Godi, 2002), faith in Eternal Femininity, and passionate hope for the transformation of inert matter and eschatological forebodings, ideas of life-creation and overcoming death. And the definition of one of the main characters of Losev’s prose as “a musician, philosopher, mystic” is a capacious characteristic of a Symbolist poet.

E.A. Taho-Godi called Losev’s fiction “the world of nightmare” (Taho-Godi, 2000). Thanatological images, which are represented in abundance in Romantics’ and Symbolists’ works, really make up the compositional and ideological core of Losev’s novels and stories, which are distinguished by a high degree of catastrophism. His characters continue the

Symbolist tradition, they also have experiences of the borderline existence on the verge between reality and metaphysical being, but their attempts to break out of the shackles of everyday life often fail, leading to complete emotional devastation.

## Methods and Methodology

The work is based on theoretical and methodological principles developed on the basis of the dialectical and comparative-historical approach. This means that the authors of the article are based on the idea of culture as an organic integrity, capable of continuous development, combining personality and society. Any culture contains its own objectivity and obeys its own logic of functioning. The basis of culture is a set of universal dominants that determine the direction and dynamics of its development. Their constitution allows us to compare and establish the commonality and difference of similar phenomena in different cultures and, as a result, make cultural generalizations.

The research methodology involves hermeneutical techniques for modeling the author’s position of literary texts. At the same time, special attention is paid to the value aspects of the life and work of Losev and Russian Symbolists, as having a direct and indirect relation to the content side of their work. The work also used a phenomenological

methodology, which involves the study of culture, based on the consciousness of its creators. This makes it possible to determine the semantic specifics of the symbolist and post-symbolic approaches to the fundamental value orientations throughout the space of Russian culture of the Silver Age.

In general, the study is based on a wide range of theoretical sources of philosophical significance: the works of outstanding philosophers, writers and poets; on modern cultural, philosophical, historical and literary studies. In the process of working on literary texts by Losev and Russian Symbolists, methods of aesthetic and literary analysis, in particular comparative studies, were also involved.

### **Losev vs Russian Symbolists: Vitality, Mortality and Creativity**

Sharing many of the ideas of his predecessors about life and death, Losev reveals the perniciousness of the romantic idealization of individuality, worship of a creative man, and the substitution of the divine for the human. The author puts characters in a borderline situation when they are forced to make a choice between good and evil, life and death. Being between two abysses (D.S. Merezhkovsky), they realize the duality of the world, the difficulty of distinguishing between illusion and reality. But if the Symbolists could trust the intuition of an artist-creator who is able to comprehend the secret of the world because he possessed abilities to insight into the essence of the world and man (V. Bryusov "Keys of Secrets"), then this opportunity is not given to Losev's characters, since, according to the Russian thinker, romantic art is not able to overcome the egoistic limitations of the human individuality. Instead of the anthropophagous god portrayed by Lautreamont in *Les Chants de Maldoror*, a human anthropophagus appears before the reader of a number of Losev's works, and in his soul the eternal dispute between God and the devil ended in favor of the latter. The Symbolists' attempt to synthesize the higher and lower abysses is completely debunked. In practice, their desire – "I want the Free Rook to float everywhere, And I want to glorify the Lord and the Devil," as V. Bryusov defiantly wrote (Bryusov, 1903) – turned out to be unrealizable, moreover, it entailed a number of difficult tragedies.

The catalyst for the internal evolution of Losev's character is art and, above all, music. "With your enchanting voice you have awakened in me a musician, a philosopher, a mystic," wrote a

young man to a singer Kapitolina Zapol'skaya in a suicide note (Losev, 2002). Symbolists, like Romantics, considered music to be the highest art. Verlaine's words became their motto: "De la musique avant toute chose.... et tout la reste est littérature" (Verlaine, 1885). The symphonic musical form was especially attractive to them, which some Symbolists and close to them writers even used in their works. The literary debut of Andrey Bely was "The Symphony (2nd, dramatic)" published in 1902. It was the first of four works in this synthetic genre where Bely used the technique of leitmotif development, some structural and compositional principles of a musical sonata. This experimental genre continued to be developed by Pavel Florensky, who wrote a literary symphony under the title "Eschatological Mosaic" (1904), and in 1918 Bryusov's poem "Recollection" which had the eloquent subtitle "The First Pathetic Symphony with Introduction and Conclusion" was published.

In Losev's prose, with an incredible depth and strength, the inner tragedy of the works of the great Romantics is revealed. Music has such power over the human soul that even the rapid approach of imminent death in the story "Tchaikovsky's Trio" is not taken seriously by the characters. Hearing of the outbreak of hostilities, they return to the house to play a piece of music, and die under bombings.

In the story "I was 19 years old" the Dionysian spontaneous principle, embodied with extraordinary power in romantic music, breaks the veils, frees the dark forces of chaos, until then hidden even from the characters themselves, awakens the most base instincts of their nature. When the main character contemplates the portrait of the singer Pototskaya, his love gives way to the opposite feeling: "His narrowly squinted eyes pricked with a subtle hint of some vague void and seemed to provoke an intimate, but fatal battle with this deceptive and cruel bottomlessness of the soul" (Losev, 2002). Here, for the first time, a "thirst for death" motif appears in the story, which completely takes possession of the character during the concert and leads to the murder of Pototskaya and her lover Balandin. Under the influence of music, the surrounding world is also demonized (the waltzing couples are perceived by the character as "the sea boiling with terrible monsters" (Losev, 2002). The elemental power of art awakens the chthonic monsters of the lower abyss, which at the same time make Losev's characters feel a dual sense of horror and delight. Their appearance change: the features of a beast

begin to show – a viper, some unknown monster with tentacles, a wolf, a dog or a cat tracking a prey. The divine principle in man gives way to animal instincts as a manifestation of the “lower abyss”.

Symbolists, in particular, Andrei Bely use a similar technique. In “The Return” (Bely’s third symphony), the negative character Tsench is endowed with the signs of a wolf. Svetlova from the “The Goblet of Blizzards” at the moments of awakening her sensual passion has cat features that clearly hint at her moral decline. Her husband, engineer Svetlov, looks like a dolphin, the fortuneteller’s hands resemble chicken legs, Colonel Svetozarov is compared to a spider who entangled the main characters with his nets, etc. The similarity of the characters of the “Second Symphony, the Dramatic” with animals usually associates with a negative characteristic of everyday reality: “Bull Muttonovich Meat seemed like a dolphin in a raccoon coat and with a briefcase under his arm” (Bely, 1991). In the fourth symphony, “The Goblet of Blizzards”, Bely pedals the idea of the tragic imperfection of earthly existence, creating an “image of the ‘perished’ and awaiting only the eschatological end of the world, the grandiose world of Sodoma” (Boychuk, 1995). Losev’s characters experience their “personal Sodom” under the influence of music. It acts on their souls with tremendous destructive power, exposing the innermost corners of their inner world, from where the primary instincts dozing there burst to the surface. They force the main character of “I was 19 years old” to commit murder and find an unexpected response in Pototskaya’s soul, whose death wish from the character’s hands combines with a pathological sensual passion for his killer. According to Mochulsky, many Alexander Blok heroines are distinguished by a similar character: “Blok inherited Platonic Eros from Solovyov and ascetic disgust for sex. His sensuality and passion are always demonic: from ‘*The Unknown Lady*’ to the prostitute Kat’ka in ‘*The Twelve*’” (Solovyov, 1948).

The problematic relationship between Eros and Thanatos is the heart of the “erotic utopia” of the fin de siècle generation in Russia, based on the belief that “only love can overcome death and make the body immortal” (Matich, 2008). In the female images of the Symbolists, the features of the twelfth eon of Sophia are discerned – her fallen hypostasis Achamoth, who, according to the teachings of the Gnostics, is held captive by inert matter and awaiting her savior – Christ. This is Blok’s Beautiful Lady who “changed her appearance” and is in the grip of chaos. Andrei

Bely wrote about her duality, combining a bright beginning and chaotic elements in “Memories about Blok” (Bely, 1995). The relentless onslaught of the temptation to confront the main characters of his last symphony – “The Goblet of Blizzards”. Their unexpected “breakdown” in sensuality is explained not only by autobiographical circumstances (Boychuk, 1994), but primarily by the writer’s desire to embody the ideological and artistic concept of the work based on Christian mythology. The closer characters come to Christ, the greater danger of falling into sin awaits them. This is confirmed by the spiritual practice of monasticism. In the language of ascetics, monks are often called spiritual warriors for the reason that they resist the stubborn and prolonged temptation of the devil. Bely expressed this idea in one of his leitmotifs: “The more holy the mystery sighs, the more subtly the line which separates from the mystery of Sodom. Beside the whiteness, azure and purpura of Christ, other purpuraes attract us with a whirlwind of temptations. Angelically, angelically they look at the soul as one, forever one” (Bely, 1991). The last words of this phrase do not accidentally recall VI. Solovyov’s poem “The Omen”, beginning with the words “One, forever one”. Bely shares the philosopher’s convictions that “the more perfect and closer the revelation of true beauty, dressing the Divine and His power leading us to deliverance from suffering and death, the finer the line separating it from its false likeness – from that deceitful and powerless beauty, which only perpetuates the kingdom of suffering and death” (Solovyov, 1921). Dying for the world understanding as Sodom, the characters of the symphony are reborn for eternal life. Love, according to the author of “The Goblet of Blizzards”, is a condition for victory over earthly time, the key to the resurrection of mankind and the complete transformation of the world in accordance with the prophecy given in Revelation of John the Theologian. Losev’s characters often express the opposite point of view. They either refuse love, like Vershinin in the Tchaikovsky Trio, Vershinin in the Meteor, or come to the conclusion that it is necessary to destroy love for all mankind: “Love, this is naivety and insignificance, this is the sleepy helplessness that people get rid of when his sleep stops. Love – of course, I mean love between a man and a woman – will die when a person rises to the highest level of culture” (Losev, 2002).

In mythological terms, the unity of Eros and Thanatos is due “the universal outpouring of self-generating and self-devouring elements” (Losev, 2002). A striking artistic embodiment of her

impact on a person is one of the episodes in the story “I was 19 years old”, preceding the murder of the heroine: “Remembering now my wild state in those minutes of escape from Pototskaya, I see how Pototskaya immediately devoured both me and herself and in agony, in sweet and disgusting agony, wanted to give birth in a year to herself and me, and to someone else third. To my horror, I longed for those moments of my destruction, and then – why did I run away from her? And I was so much lusted for killing her...” (Losev, 2002). The strong desire to kill the singer is connected in the character’s mind with erotic connotations – “lusted for killing”.

In the novel “*The Woman Thinker*”, with special strength and passion, the impossibility of preserving the integrity and purity of Sophia, who came three times to Vl. Solovyov in his visions and in whom Aleksej Losev finds “a hint of the Soul of the World, the Eternal Feminine, the Wisdom of God” (Losev, 1983). Descending into the earthly world, the image of Sofia acquires an apocalyptic tint, its creative essence of an “artist”, who embodies the demiurgical will of God, is combined with the features of a pagan magician, sorceress and executioner. This duality becomes the reason that “the real Radina cannot climb up the steps of the ladder of “knowledge”, she goes down lower and lower – and now she is no longer a Mother, not a beautiful Nun, not a Bride Unwedded, but a chekist ‘in a leather jacket with a revolver in the back’” (Taho-Godi, 2002).

Symbolistic understanding of life as process of creation corresponds with their steady tendency to the conjugation of thanatological and erotic motifs in artistic practice. First Andrei Bely, and then Valery Bryusov, had a complicated personal relationship with Nina Petrovskaya – the prototype of the sorceress Renata from Bryusov’s novel “*The Fiery Angel*”, whose motto, according to Vladislav Khodasevich, could be “Everything or nothing!”. Obsessed with death, Petrovskaya in a moment of jealousy tried to shoot Bryusov. Previously they intended to commit suicide, and in the end she did it. There is evidence that the thanatological coloring was inherent in the lyrical relationships between Losev and his lovers when he was young. His characters are often overwhelmed with thoughts of death. This is “a little coquette Ol’-Ol’ <...>, for which thoughts of death are as familiar as the desire to fool around” (Taho-Godi, 2002: 8), and Zhenya Gaydamovich, an addressee of the future philosopher. He writes to her: “Let’s die together and be ascetics” (Taho-Godi, 2002). He talks about symbolic death for the world, which is

similar to the adoption of monastic penance. Christianity, according to Losev, is a means of liberating a person from the “apotheosis of insanity”, which is “life taken in its purest form” (Losev, 2002).

Symbolists treated Christianity in a special way. Their desire to create a synthetic culture presupposed either the renewal of Christianity, as Dmitry Merezhkovsky did, trying to create so-called Church of the Third Testament, or combining it with elements of pagan culture – ancient (Viacheslav Ivanov and other young Symbolists), Buddhism (Fedor Sologub), Scandinavian mythology, which gained fame in Russia due to the popularity of the works of Richard Wagner, etc. As a result, Christian images in the Symbolists’ work undergo a significant transformation, are rethought and filled with new content, sometimes difficult to interpret, as happened with the image of Christ in Alexander Blok’s poem. Famous Russian scientist Sergey Averintsev, who took part in the discussion of Blok’s poem “*The Twelve*,” noted that “there is not the slightest opportunity not to take into account the anti-Christian constant of Blok’s creativity” (Averintsev, 2000). In the report, the author of which is considered to be Pavel Florensky, Blok’s poem “*The Twelve*” is directly characterized as the “limit and completion of Blok demonism” (Florensky, 1931). The transfer of sacred images into a pagan context, according to N. Kotrelev, “is sacrilege, most often associated with profanity” (Kotrelev, 2000). Defining one of the essential features of Blok poetry, this statement can be extrapolated to the work of other representatives of Symbolism.

Despite the fact that Christianity was considered by Andrei Bely as a synthesis of all religions and as the “last religion” and in early prose, he sought to reveal, in his own words, “the new Christ and Sophia in man (that’s what the mimicry of my Symphonies is about)” (Bely, 1995), in the preface to the last symphony, the writer notes that “the 4th symphony “*The Goblet of Blizzards*”, where the task of verbal counterpoint is expressed, in particular, in drawing together and even identifying opposing motifs – sensual love “longing and passion” and “the passion of Christ” that led to blasphemy and the writer himself had to admit it in the preface to the symphony (Bely, 1991). It is also known that Losev criticized the highly regarded poet and scientist Vyacheslav Ivanov precisely for the Christianization of antiquity.

“Dionysism, dark, painfully sweet, pulling somewhere down, into darkness, into longing”

(Losev, 2002), combined with a catastrophic attitude and a thriving interest in magic, occult sciences, spiritualism and secret societies (Rosicrucians, Freemasons, etc.) that flourished at the beginning of the 20th century, determines the stability of the Symbolists' appeal to infernal images. Nine circles of Dante's hell from the bowels of the Earth seem to rise to the surface and become part of the surface relief in Andrei Bely's symphony "The Return" and his books "The Meadow Green" and "The Symbolism", in the poetry of Valery Bryusov and his novel "The Fiery Angel", in works of Vyacheslav Ivanov and Zinaida Gippius, which makes it possible to raise the question of the "Dante's Code of Russian Symbolism" (Sylard & Barta, 1989). Dante's "The Divine Comedy" is another intersection of the Symbolists and Losev (Tahogodi, 2002).

For decades, Fedor Sologub was considered to be the "singer of death", the "singer of evil" and the "singer of devil". Was not his famous "the gray under-poked" ("nedotykomka seraya") the predecessor of the one who controls the character of Losev's story "The Theater Lover"? This is a creature of the middle gender, which is endowed with a number of negative qualities: "Here it is, everywhere and unceasingly – petty, vicious, crooked, sick, powerless, vengeful, empty, capricious, mediocre, stupid, picky, viscous and sticky, gray, dull, expressionless, annoying, meticulous and nauseous, ugly, helpless and suffering, slimy, strangled and spiritually dead, spiritually cold, stubbornly non-communicative, rotten, slippery, marshy, elusive, alluring with empty phantom, some kind of eternal nagging and hang up cold and methodically brutal, petty malice" (Losev, 2002). There is an obvious resemblance to a brisk, gray, dusty, dirty, nasty, malicious, snubbling under-poked, curling around Peredonov, enclosing him in a magic circle, from which there is only one way out – madness and death.

Another small demon, Epishka who Elena Tahogodi called "the faceless face of hell" does not just become a double of the main character in Losev's unfinished story. Dark forces take possession of the character's soul, and the worst thing is that this happens to him at an innocent age when he was still a five-year-old child. The demon, to whom the young man gave the derogatory nickname Epishka, not only affects the personality of the character, but also successfully socializes. The story breaks off at the moment when Epishka gathers a huge crowd and acts as a prophet who has the magic power and abilities to save people from the fear of death.

The main thing in this kingdom of antichrist, to which he calls his gullible listeners, is a machine, a dead mechanism about the danger of worship before which Romantics warned. The character of "The Theater Lover" ("Teatral"), to whom reality appears in a distorted, disfigured form: "some dead bodies, some empty mechanisms" (Losev, 2002), went all the way to madness. In Losev's stories, one of the central themes of Symbolism finds its continuation – the struggle of a man against dark forces that can take possession of a man who, at first glance, is completely out of harm, arouse in him an irresistible desire to destroy both the world around him and himself, when a lie becomes "stronger than death" (Losev, 2002).

### Conclusion

Based on the artistic traditions of his predecessors – Romantics and Symbolists, combined with the achievements of Russian and European classical literature of the 19th century, A. F. Losev offers his own solution to the problems of good and evil, life and death, heaven and earth. Cautioning the reader about the dangers of individualism and worship of the idols of science and technological progress, he maintains the idea that a soul that has fallen away from God and is trying to realize its creative intentions as a demiurge will inevitably succumb to temptations leading it into the realm of eternal dust and decay. An alternative may be, according to Losev, only sacrificial service to the motherland. The theme of "heavenly Motherland" – one of the leading leitmotifs of Andrei Bely's prose – continues to be voiced in Losev's works with particular strength, while preserving the hope of the Symbolists for the coming transformation of the world.

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