

## Где «я»? : acephalous body and the role of space indexicals in Being's definition in Kotik Letaev by A. Belyj

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Taking as a starting point Kotik Letaev and considering the work of Andrej Belyj on *slovo*, we can see how the author focuses on the problem of knowledge (познание), understood as self-knowing (самопознание). Influenced by the theories of Rudolf Steiner, Belyj describes a cognitive process based on the “feeling of the heart”, hence reestablishing the emotional dimension and linking it to the cognitive one. The image of the acephalous body, with all the cultural references involved, is a symbol of a person's path towards a superior spiritual dimension. The use of particular forms of deixis explains the metasystemic aspect of a language in which signs are strictly oriented towards their own denotation (я).

Key words: Andrej Belyj, deixis, symbol, embodiment, linguistics.

And where you are is where you are not.  
T. S. Eliot

### Introduction

At the beginning of the XX century the linguistic problem involved the most diverse branches of knowledge like logic, with important authors like C. S. Peirce or B. Russell, psychology with important authors like L. S. Vygotskij, S. Freud and J. Piaget, ethnology with E. Cassirer, and later with important linguists such as F. De Saussure, R. Jakobson or L. Hjelmslev. This vast interest in this topic is based on the problem of the relationship between language, consciousness and thought, as shown in work *Мысль и язык* published by A. A. Potebnja, a similar work by P. Florenskij, the work *Мысль и язык (философия языка А. А. Пот ебни)* by A. Belyj, *Мишление и реч* by L. S. Vygotskij, *Язык и сознание* by A. R. Lurija, *Язык и мишление* by N. Ja. Marr, or the work, *Le langage et la pensée chez l'enfant* by the Swiss psychologist J. Piaget.

The linguistic experimentation which characterizes the first three decades of the XX century, in Russia takes different connotations however: on the one hand, the linguistic experimentation intended as the mixing of grammatical components of words or of phrases (for example we can consider the *заумный язык* by V. Chlebnikov), and on the other hand, the possible determination, in a similar manner, of the redefinition of the idea of a “word” and the consequent reconstruction of the forms of artistic expression, elaborated according to a different linguistic-philosophical conception.

This is the case with Kotik Letaev by Andrej Belyj, a text which deserves a multifocal approach, involving literary criticism, philosophy, linguistics and even cognitive sciences.

The image of the acephalous body was chosen since it is, emblematic of a system of symbols which presume a specific use of language. This image and the one of the bird with its neck stuck in the throat of the body are found towards the end of the last section of the text, when Belyj, states that the consciousness

Выворачивалось из меня самого (Belyj, 1922: 268)

Since then the concept of “I” has remained firmly anchored to that of the body as a medium through which one defines one’s geographic location. Hence, in a language like Russian, which can rely on the use of specific prepositions to indicate the direction of the movement, the preposition *вы* indicates the existence of a clear and obvious point of view i.e. “internal” in relation to which we can talk about moving away toward the “outside”. This means that the distinction between inside and outside, and the schema in-out, is clearly defined by the intellect when the body is linked to the perception of the surrounding world and is re-elaborating this in the form of a thought.

### 1. For a theory of representation: symbols and understanding

In his essay *Магия слов* (1969), Belyj gives a clear definition of the relationship between *слово* and *символ*, saying that

[...] слово - символ; оно есть понятное для меня соединение двух непонятных сущностей: доступного моему зрению пространства и глухо звучащего во мне внутреннего чувства, которое я называю условно (формально) временем.

Considering the representational system found in Kotik Letaev as the outcome of the relationship between the two kinds of languages (language-in-images and spoken language), the two principal semiotic systems I-I, and the definition of the symbol as the specific result of the combination of these two languages, we can say that

What a symbol means depends on its use, its context, and its history, as well as on the syntax and semantics of the language or symbol systems it belongs to. (Elgin & Goodman, 1987)

The basic problem is the explanation of the relationship between a concept, linked to a perceptual-experiential context, and the signified in linguistic field.

The classical theory states that there is a necessary relation between an object and its perception through the senses; however, it seems that Belyj describes a system in which perception is something linked to the “feeling of the heart”; though it’s impossible to think that when he was a child he experienced a real detachment of the head and body. Therefore he overlooks the issue concerning autonomy of the signified, because, for example, in considering the acephalous body, we already have a correlation with something that is not an immediate given. It’s evident that, in agreement with Elgin and Goodman, these symbols can’t have the same implications even if these were extrapolated from the linguistic schema of the text and, consequently, from the global system of symbols. In the specific case of Kotik Letaev we could consider a more general system of symbols on which the text is based.

So, the work of art shows something different that begins from its inner, pulling this “other” through some “structures”. Referring to the ideas of Deacon:

[...] symbols cannot be understood as an unstructured collection of tokens that map to a collection of referent because symbols don’t just represent things in the world, they also represent each other. Because symbols do not directly refer to things in the world, but indirectly refer to them by virtue of referring to other symbols, they are implicitly combinatorial entities whose referential powers are derived by virtue of occupying determinate positions in an organized system of other symbols. [...] Because of this systematic relational basis of symbolic reference,

no collection of signs can function symbolically unless the entire collection conforms to certain overall principles of organization. (Deacon, 1997: 99)

Furthermore the understanding is an aesthetic experience, which is not a passive contemplation of an immediate given, but implies an active approach, similar to activities like research, creation and re-creation.

The work of art functions correctly when it forms, re-forms and trans-forms the visual perception and it does not imply a banal visual perception, but as an understanding in general.

The symbol of the acephalous body implies a series of historical, cultural and metaphorical references, assimilated by Belyj especially during his stay in Dornach, in Switzerland, and his contact with Rudolf Steiner and the Anthroposophical Society<sup>40</sup>. In particular, the image of the acephalous is a part of the magic-syncretistic literature of Greek-Egyptian origin where this specific representation was linked to the idea of a divinity to whom all is revealed. The same theriomorphism, which is expressed through the image of the bird in the text, is a classic element of the ancient Egyptian culture, which saw in it a better means to access knowledge compared to the human form. Specifically the bird which Belyj describes can be associated with the hieroglyphics of Akh, the “transfigured spirit”, an ibis with a long neck which is also one of the elements of the human anima. It is the bright - understood as inspirational - element of the subject which, after death, will be reunited to the creator. The achievement of its own Akh corresponds to the achievement of the death and, consequently, of the spiritual ego.

## 2. From emotion to cognition: the embodiment in the linguistic expression

According to the considerations on knowing meant as understanding, it's clear that a re-evaluation of the bodily dimension of Being begins with the end of the traditional dichotomy between emotional and cognitive aspects.

The path from perception to the linguistic expression implies different steps, which are made more complex by the re-elaboration phase of the visual perception, hypothetically, of Andrej-Kotik, made through the language of Andrej-author. Hence, we can imagine a three-level semiotic system (two systems I-I, and one I-You. Where *You* is the lector), which involves three different types and levels of communication. In fact, if we think about the understanding of the Being as intuition of the *noumenal reality*, which is linked to the specific perception of the subject, it appears evident that the first type of communication is based on a semiotic system I-I. Hence,

Когда мы говорим о передаче сообщения по системе «Я-Я», мы имеем в виду в первую очередь не те случаи, когда текст выполняет мнемоническую функцию. Здесь воспринимающее второе «Я» функционально приравнивается третьему лицу. Различие сводится лишь к тому, что в системе «Я-ОН» информация перемещается в пространстве, а в системе «Я-Я» - во времени. (Lotman, 1992)

At this stage we must distinguish two different representational systems, linked to two different stages of a person's life: therefore, hypothetically, according to Andrej-author, in a

<sup>40</sup> On the influences of the ancient Egyptian culture on Anthroposophy, see also Steiner (1992).

four-year old child, the path from perception to language is based on the creation of mental images, where with the term language we mean any communicative system, while in an adult man, the initial perception, is transformed into an image, and then re-transformed into a linguistic sign.

This operation of “translation” is the result of a set of steps within the path that leads from perception to language. Accordingly at later stage, the representation-in-images is compared with mental, physiological and cultural categories, in order to obtain concepts, and at the last stage these concepts are seeped through a choice of conceptual distinctive characteristics, i.e. the choice of the properties which are considered characteristic and representative. It is important to notice that this kind of operation always implies a division of the universe in at least two classes: the class of the entities with certain properties and the class of the entities without these properties.

These are the speciċ symbols we’re considering, in order to support the observed importance of the auto-communicative process, therefore highlighting the acephalous body implies the individual embodiment of a perception within a speciċ semiotic system considered by the author. This emphasizes still more the role of the deictic pronoun я and of the spatial deixis linked to it.

Self-knowing and the spiritual and deeper consciousness of the Universe is only for special subjects, willing to accept their material boundaries as the beginning of a new superior life: it is an elitist system of meanings, not open to all, and not based on a rigid or classic correspondence between signifier and signified. Therefore it is not surprising that the pronoun *I* does not have a plural form, which, usually, indicates the repetition of something.

There is a word that *one* speaks, the word that comes out of us and become rigid in representation, becomes a property of what it designates, which is deposited in the designatum (signified). But there is also a word that remains inside whoever pronounces it, like the originary images of creatures remain inside the Father, who is also Logos (Meister Eckhart, *Ave, gratia plena*). (Cacciari, 1994: 11)

We are still in the context of ощущение, perception, when Belyj says that

[...] все влипалось мне - внутрь: отливало мне в сердце; внутри себя внутрь себя отходило мне все [...]. (Belyj, 1922: 268)

All that is inside, means everything falls within a certain limit, that is a boundary that marks the separation between the self and the outside world: the point of view of “beings” can be only inside the body, which proves its presence *here* and *now*.

However, the Being is something that transcends mere matter, the pure physical presence and the determination in a three-dimensional space: it is a multi-directional motion, i.e. a four-dimensional path of substantiality that moves between time and space.

Bearing this in mind, the connection of the acephalous with the Monophysite does not appear so abstract and asserts the existence of one nature in Christ, the Logos, a spiritual nature that, in apophatic perspective, is unattainable through the mere exercise of the intellect.

Transcending its corporeal, perceptual and intellectual nature can be the only way to try and approach this spiritual essence. The denial of the intellect, the “decapitation” of the body is a negative moment in theology since one can attempt to reach the divine by stating what is not. Nevertheless we can still make a distinction between what is inside and what is

outside, so

Ничего внутри: все во мне: [...] «я» - «не-я» [...]. (Belyj, 1922: 269)

The denial still implies necessarily the existence of a well-defined point of view, which is based on the certainty about what I am.

The headless body then becomes the not-me, my denial as a being who thinks of itself.

[...] все, что было мне мною когда то, - тепер -  
- безголовое, проседает во мрак: голова провалилась [...]. (Belyj, 1922: 269-270)

At this stage the point of view expressed in Kotik is no longer that of its head, now sunk down, but risen *многочитый* where the inside is inside but at the same time outside: inside it but also out of the body that is still “me”.

Многоочитый [...] круголет переживал себя: -  
- «внутри!»  
Но это «внутри» было - «вне»: «вне» сидевшего тела [...]. (Belyj, 1922: 270)

The eye, which is usually the basis of a point of view, is now multiplied endlessly, transposing the vision in a space that develops differently from the three-dimensionality. This is the space of the Spirit, of the spiritual *physis* and that is the substantiality that spreads to all levels of the Being and of the Universe.

However, in this new space, the sense of loss is expressed in a simple query: где “я”?

The sense of loss and the loss of the material self are closely linked to the gradual loss of spatial coordinates and immersion in the infinite cosmos: so far the use of space indexicals as *вне* or *внутри* indicates the existence of a definite relation between the perceiver and what is perceived. The transformation of the representational system corresponds systematically to a transformation of the represented and of the representing.

What was true for me before was to state something, to give a name to something, which means literally to put words in mouth of *this* body, to have a specific relation between mind (head) and body.

When the body loses its central processing of sensory information, it loses itself meaning that it loses the specific relationship with itself that it had so far, as well as the relationship between itself and the outside world built on precise spatio-temporal basis.

If the indexicals need to be fully defined as such, they hence require *a priori* knowledge on the part of the receiver both of the existence of what is reported, and of the appropriateness of the use of that specific indexical. As a consequence this means that interpretation cannot be also *a priori*, but it must be based on *a posteriori* knowledge of a higher order.

The acephalous body, then, is a symbol of the process of understanding the world that, moves downwards toward the heart, but doesn't go through the interpretative activity of thought. Hence:

[...] мощною прорезью крылий переживалось содержание вне-мысленных ощущений  
моих: себя волящих чувств: -  
- переживались: -  
- птицею, припадающей к безголовому телу с просунутой длинной шеею -

- горлышком! -  
 - в сердце: птица думала сердцем моим; [...] в месте отверженной головы бились крылья [...]. (Belyj, 1922: 271-272)

So the image of the bird with a long neck that replaces the head on the acephalous body, in Egyptian matrix, is essential in the light of the above considerations, since it symbolizes the inner strength through which man can lead consciousness to a spiritual re-ascent, and thus a return to the deity.

This return implies self-understanding in a new space, which can no longer be thought of, but only heard of and whose four-dimensionality is built on the collection of seemingly confused за, к, в, which, at the same time, indicate a multidirectional motion.

The man is no longer a self-defined and defining, but an out-of-itself-in-itself as an in-itself-out-of-itself, i.e. a universal entity in the particular and a particular entity in the universal. The wings replacing the head are a symbol of a thought whose origin is not the closed world of the brain, but the infinite space of feelings in the heart, which can only abduct the ego and, with a spiral flight, lead it to the Being.

[...] в сияющих перьях бросался: за мною, ко мне и... в меня: снять мне «Я» и лететь с ним через форточку в бесконечность [...]. (Belyj, 1922: 272)

### 3. Deixis and the egocentric position of the Being

The process of a thought is based, as we've mentioned earlier, on the auto-communication, i.e. a process by means of which we produce, according to a semiotic behavior, objective signs for individual experiential perceptions. Consequently, the subjective experience becomes an object of reflection and apperception for the person.

The phenomenon of deixis presumes, in a dialogic perspective, an orientation of the same speaker, because, while "normal" words, such as "table" refer to a certain reality, which is not linked to the communicative act, deictic words instead can only find a reference in communication (Uspenskij, 2008).

More specifically, compared to the other classes of shifters, spatial deixis always imply an implicit reference to the *ego* of the speaker.

In particular, the egocentric position of the child in Kotik Letaev seems to propose again the position of God. In the Bible God introduces Himself saying «I am what I am»<sup>41</sup>, in a tautological way that, in the work Kotik Letaev, is the evidence of a mythological consciousness<sup>42</sup>. The same idea of breaking up of the physical body of the ego could be linked to breaking up the body of the embodied God, Christ, condensed in the image of the crucifixion<sup>43</sup>.

The importance of deictic spatial words is linked to the fact that, contrary to names, for example, they can only be referred to the specific person who's speaking at that moment. Considering that the simultaneous presence of Andrej-Kotik and Andrej-author would be impossible, then the movement is developed more in time than in space. Therefore, it's clear

<sup>41</sup> To deepen the problem of the biblical translation make reference to Schild (1974).

<sup>42</sup> On the mythological consciousness: Lotman, Ju. M., & Uspenskij, B. (1973).

<sup>43</sup> About the role of Christ for man, Steiner (1992) says that «Christus Jesus [...] hat den gewaltigsten Impuls der ganzen Menschheitsevolution gegeben. So mußte sich erst der Mensch trennen von den spirituellen Welten, um erst wieder an diese anzuknüpfen mit der Christus-Wesenheit.»

that we are speaking of a temporalized space<sup>44</sup>, in which man is still considered as focal point of the spatial orientation, but of an orientation which gradually loses its classic linear development in virtue of movement.

Hence the importance of the spatio-temporal position of the subject of the story, that corresponds to the author, but at a different stage of life due to the orientation in the position in the speaker's discourse, we can define deixis in the text as a secondary deixis. In fact, the position of the speaker is different compared to the position of the subject of the story. If we think of the text in an analytical perspective and we think it pursues the philosophical system of Belyj, so it is possible to state that the material condition of the man, is only coded in different ways. The difference between these two spatial positions is also highlighted, at a typographical level, by the particular structure of the corpus of the text, where the path from the author's plan to the subject is further marked by the return path.

Furthermore, the use of deictic words marks a kind of knowing which is still a part of a mental representation and not of the reality-in-itself, understood as *noumenos*.

In conclusion, in reference to the two different semiotic system I-I, we can say that in the communication-in-images for Andrej-Kotik, considering that learning the use of the pronoun *I* by a child corresponds to the development of the idea of existence, the deictic pronoun *I* is a formative sign, and doesn't require the mediation of the signifieds to be correlated with the denoted. (Uspenskij, 2008: 162).

#### 4. The acephalous body: metaphor or metonymy?

The symbolic beheading of Kotik's body, from a linguistic point of view is a clear metonymy, because through the mutilation of a body part (*pars pro toto*) it is possible to access a superior spiritual dimension of the Being. However, from a semantic point of view, this is only a metaphor.

Nevertheless, if we consider that at the basis of the metonymic discourse there is the suspension of the referential modality of the communication, it is without doubt that the direct correlation between the object, understood as signified, and the word, understood as signifier, is lost, in virtue of a word which doesn't find its own explanation in a true correspondence with reality - the detached head of Kotik cannot be a real fact. So, the principle of identity, in which the concept is the ideal and immutable support of the signification, crumbles and the representationalist conception gives way to the differential logic of the sequence of the signifiers, where then the signifier is the supporting element of the significant process.

In fact, the importance of tropes lies in their capacity to generate images and with regard to Kotik Letaev, it re-conducts the dialogue to an earlier stage, in which, above all literal meanings, the system of associations is enlarged in an exponential manner. In the second semiotic system I-I and the semiotic system I-You (author-lector) the role of tropes is to make more comprehensible something that belongs to the domain of intuition and, therefore, at a superior stage in the Being's life. Language, understood as material means of a physical creature (man), marks the beginning of an higher understanding of the Self and of the World in general and, at the same time, it is the boundary line of the material life from the moment in which it tries to explain what is unexplainable.

<sup>44</sup> «[...] звук соединяет пространство со временем, но так, что пространственные отношения он сводит к временным [...]» Belyj (1969).



## Conclusions

The problem faced involves the relationship between thought and language and between their different representational systems. We've tried to outline the different and possible approaches to this problem considering a complex text like Kotik Letaev.

Here, what associates the Being and the Word is not a language understood only as spoken language, but the essence of communicability: what languages reveal is not man's spiritual essence, rather the fact that this essence is communicable. Therefore, language is a necessary and constitutive element of the subject's life, but it is also something by means of which a man experiences the impossibility to say "all". This "all" is an ancient feeling, a universal song which silently resounds in every human being, a silent memory of the memory which lies in the man in the flesh, in the body limit. This "all" is the universe, the divine creation which is the basis of human creation and which is always reflected in the latter.

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