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## Reflections on the Magic of Artistic Discourse

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The discovery of the functional asymmetry of the brain's hemispheres is one of the greatest achievements in the field of psychology in late 20th century. In this context, artistic perception is considered in "Reflections on the Magic of Artistic Discourse". This essay accords particular attention to the interrelationship and antinomy of logical (left hemisphere) and figurative (right hemisphere) thinking. Thus, while the former posits a simplified, schematic model of reality, the latter perceives reality in all its complex polysemy and contradictoriness. It must be noted that these contradictions coexist without canceling each other out. This is the foundation of almost all literary fiction with its ambivalence, metaphoric language, implicitness, levels of connotation and play of meaning. It is well known that a thought uttered directly destroys the esthetic effect of a work of art whereas «a complicated artistic structure, created from the material of language, allows us to transmit a volume of information too great to be transmitted by an elementary, strictly linguistic structure» (Yu. Lotman). However, this kind of information is special and cannot be broken down into categories or reduced to a binary logical or black-and-white outline. It would, therefore, not be an exaggeration to say that all the devices used in a work of art undermine left hemisphere thought, loosening intellectual control over the text's metaphoric constituents. By using a series of examples to demonstrate the manner in which an artistic text functions and takes possession of the reader's attention, feelings and will, the author draws a parallel between artistic and hypnotic impact.

**Keywords:** asymmetry of the brain's hemispheres, logical thinking, figurative thinking, artistic perception, art image, literary text, hypnotic addiction.

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## Магия художественного слова как повод для размышлений

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В статье предпринята попытка рассмотреть процесс художественного восприятия в свете функциональной асимметрии мозговых полушарий. Ее открытие на рубеже XX–XXI веков позволило по-новому взглянуть на многие мозговые процессы, включая художественное поведение человека, роль в котором правого полушария до недавнего времени во многом недооценивалась. Так, если левое, речевое, полушарие оперирует в основном вербально-логическими конструкциями, схематизируя картину окружающего мира, то «бессловесное» правое полушарие отражает мир как он есть, во всей его многозначной противоречивости, не зная четкого деления на «да» и «нет». И то и другое сосуществует одновременно, не отменяя друг друга, в виде реализованных или нереализованных потенций, примером чему может служить почти вся художественная литература. Поэтому художественное произведение, в силу своей многозначности, противоречивости, безоценочной амбивалентности, несет в себе некий потенциал, препятствующий его аналитическому истолкованию. И эта антиномичность двух типов нашего мышления позволяет многое понять в специфике художественного произведения,

всей суммой своих приемов работающего против левополушарного мышления, высвобождая из-под интеллектуального контроля его образную составляющую. Показывая на конкретных примерах, как функционирует художественный текст, как овладевает он вниманием, чувствами и волей читателя, автор проводит параллель между художественным и гипнотическим воздействием, рассматривая их как явления родственного порядка.

**Ключевые слова:** межполушарная асимметрия, логическое мышление, образное мышление, антиномия логического и образного мышления, художественное восприятие, художественный текст, гипнотическая зависимость.

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The world's image, captured in a word,  
Creative work, and miracle-working.

*Boris Pasternak*

It has been long known that we experience esthetic emotions, even the most intense ones, in a special way — without any external manifestations. Art, as L. Vygotsky points out, “appears to awaken very powerful feelings in us, but at the same time, these feelings do not manifest themselves in anything [...] Thus, it is this hindrance of external manifestation that constitutes the defining characteristic of artistic emotion whose extraordinary force is preserved” (267–268)<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, attention must be paid to another essential aspect of artistic perception which can be defined as the neutralization of the reader’s or viewer’s will. In this connections, let us recall how difficult it can be to part with an enthralling book or how we resist tearing us away from the television set after an engrossing film. We wish the story would never end. In order to switch modes of activity, we need to make a certain amount of effort. This applies not only to the works of great masters but even rather mediocre creations conscientiously wrought according to the rules of a given genre.

“Vera Iosifovna read how a beautiful young countess founded a school, a hospital, a library, in her village, and fell in love with a wandering artist; she read of what never happens in real life, and yet it was pleasant to listen — it was comfortable, and such agreeable, serene thoughts kept coming into the mind. One had no desire to get up” (Chekhov). This passage from Chekhov’s short story “Ionych” can serve as a kind of illustration for the arguments presented above. This goes without saying for work by true artists whose steady creative ability captivates the audience, forcing it to temporarily forget itself and powerfully drawing it into the stream of the author’s will.

The notion of “artistic captivity” implies the kind of hypnotic power that works of art, including verbal art, exercise over us, drawing us into their magical orbit. We experience ease and pleasure as we follow the unwinding yarn of events in a story — as if someone’s hand, like that of Ariadne in Minos’ labyrinth, leads us through all the

upheavals of the plot toward an unknown and invisible goal. We are convinced that this hand will masterfully undo even the tightest of narrative knots, finding an exit out of any fix. And even if one is momentarily tempted to wonder how a protagonist can get out of a given dead-end predicament or how the author can resolve the complexity of the plot, there is no question of coming up with the answer on one’s own. Thus, we continue to “eat up” the story piece by piece, merely managing to note that the answers to all these questions could only be those provided by the story, e.g., there can be one only possible outcome to the duel between Bazarov and Pavel Kirsanov in *Fathers and Sons*. Any other resolution would have harmed the artistic edifice of Turgenev’s novel.

However, how significantly different are our feelings when we reread a story or watch a familiar film, i.e., when we already know what is coming up? A true work of art does not lose any of its freshness on second reading or viewing. On the other hand, an artlessly told tale barely deserves our repeated interest. It appears that the esthetic potential in a masterfully executed story is not exhausted by our first encounter with it. The work maintains the power of its particular effect at every approach. The question is to what extent this character of great art is intertwined with its hypnotic quality.

If we assume that this is how a work of art affects the audience, would it be logical to suppose that the creative process also unfolds on the basis of the same or at least related patterns? An indirect confirmation of this assumption can be found in particular in Leo Tolstoy’s famous letter to the literary critic N.N. Strakhov who had shared his own perception of *Anna Karenina* with the novel’s illustrious author — a question on the minds of many contemporary readers:

In everything, or nearly everything I have written, I have been guided by the need to gather together ideas which for the purpose of self-expression were interconnected; but every idea expressed separately in words loses its meaning and is terribly impoverished when taken

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated in the Works Cited, all translations from Russian are by V. Tumanov.

by itself out of the connection in which it occurs. The connection itself is made up, I think, not by the idea, but by something else, and it is impossible to express the basis of this connection directly in words. It can only be expressed indirectly—by words describing characters, actions and situations (Quoted in Paperno: 45–44).

Now, if the author, according to Tolstoy, cannot express his or her artistic thought directly but rather only in a mediated fashion, does it not follow that the path leading from the initially unclear authorial intention must necessarily go through the very devices that the reader encounters in their finished form and that the author has yet to discover in the process of his or her artistic quest. To quote Yu. Aikhenvald writing at the turn of the previous century:

Those who have seen the galley proofs of Tolstoy's works know all about the endless corrections to which the author subjected all that he wrote. He spent a great deal of time patiently rethinking every line, but hardly any of these countless and persistent amendments pertains to matters of style or appearance. They all aim at the essence, i.e., only at content. Tolstoy does not care about style. In fact, such concerns are anathema to him — a sin against “the word.” He doesn't give technique a second thought, not even noticing himself as an author (550).

However, one may diverge from the great literary critic's opinion. Indeed, Tolstoy's writing is characterized by a certain stylistic heaviness, long textual segments and repetitions. And yet, the author is clearly preoccupied with style. In order to ascertain this, one only has to turn practically any page of *War and Peace* for example and concentrate in particular on those parts where Tolstoy's favorite characters are featured. Thus we read: “Princess Mary could not understand the boldness of her brother's criticism and was about to reply, when the expected footsteps were heard coming from the study. The prince walked in quickly and jauntily as was his wont, as if intentionally contrasting the briskness of his manners with the strict formality of his house” (Tolstoy).

There is no need for any kind of special linguistic analysis in order to sense the lightness and nimbleness of this phrasing. No matter how deep Tolstoy's vision, he could not get away from the laws governing the composition of an artistic text. In this case, Tolstoy's technique amounts to our ceasing to notice individual words with their logical connections. We end up perceiving the above-cited passage as one whole, as a complete organism imbued with complex meaning full of diverse imagery and not amenable to be grasped by analytical thought.

Particularly noteworthy in this connection is the conjunction “when” in “[...] was about to reply, *when* the expected footsteps were heard coming from the study.” It helps to bring together both the daring judgement regarding Prince Andrei's father and the unuttered objections on the part of the Princess Mary who awaits with familiar trepidation the appearance of the old prince and the splendidly depicted sound of his unstoppable footsteps. These footsteps convey his despotically vibrant

personality in its entirety and expose the way the old man's dictatorial grip extends over the whole household. As a result, the footsteps become the center of gravity and the nucleus of the textual segment, drawing into its orbit and solidifying the entire dynamically intense narrative structure.

And here is another example of a different kind of enmeshment: “Soil acidification is considered to be one of the mechanisms behind forest desiccation in the temperate zone of the northern hemisphere. The degradation of forests took on threatening dimensions in the early 1970s” (Globalnyie Problemy). Compared to the above passage from Tolstoy, this strictly logical construction is essentially static, i.e., it is devoid of any internal movement whereby connections between the constituent elements are linear and black-and-white. This text, therefore, can be considered discrete, i.e., it is discourse that can be easily disassembled into separate words forming a rigid causal chain. And a certain effort of will is required in order to make sense of these atomized elements and merge them into a meaningful whole.

This type of thinking is linked by neuropsychologists with the activity of the brain's left hemisphere — responsible for “the formation of a highly ordered and unequivocally perceived context which ensures coherent, logical analysis” (Rotenberg: 9). On the other hand, according to the current understanding of the functional asymmetry of the two brain hemispheres, the right hemisphere is responsible for the formation of nuanced, multifaceted contexts and image-based thinking. The advantage of this thought strategy manifests itself when “information is complex, internally contradictory and cannot be exhaustively represented in an unambiguous context” (Rotenberg: 8).

Dreams and works of art are typical examples of such contextual polysemy — non-reduceable to its verbal and logical interpretation. That is why we often fail in our attempts to recount many dreams in ordinary language. The substance of the dream eludes us, and its narration pales in comparison to the original so that in the end we give up in frustration.

But these are dreams — a gift from our brain. As for the fabric of art, it is essentially a human creation. In contrast to what happens in the case of dream structure, the perception of artistic image-based networks occurs against the background of cerebral wakefulness. Hence, whereas we perceive dreams uncritically, we can use our rational faculties anytime in order to critically examine our artistic perception as is most often the case when we are confronted with weak and talentless works of art. However, in those case where we are exposed to a creation by a master, something stands in the way of distancing ourselves from the resulting hypnotic effect.

Anyone having experienced Soviet schooling will probably recall that, along with the essentials of literary analysis drummed into the heads of high schoolers, there was a standard thesis regarding the unity of form and content in an artistic work. And yet, L. Vygotsky demonstrates the groundlessness of this notion, namely,

the source material behind a given artwork (its content) and the means of its artistic embodiment not only fail to correspond but, on the contrary, more often than not appear in a state of mutual contradiction: “A work of art is always underpinned by a certain contradiction, a kind of internal lack of correspondence between material and form [...]. And the formal aspects imposed by the author on this material are not aimed at uncovering the qualities inherent in the material itself [...] but rather at the opposite – overcoming these qualities” (208). This is the source of the spark that produces esthetic emotions in the reader.

Hence, in his analysis of the compositional elements in I. Bunin’s short story “Light Breath,” Vygotsky demonstrates the manner in which the author constantly violates the chronological series of the events he represents. The result of this inversion is the desired esthetic effect. Vygotsky concludes the results of his analysis as follows: “The words of a short story or a poem are the carriers of the text’s simple meaning – its ‘water’ so to speak – whereas its composition puts forth a new meaning above and beyond these words, arranging all this in a completely different manner and turning it into ‘wine’ (201).

Let us attempt to follow Vygotsky and demonstrate the manner in which Leo Tolstoy transforms the extremely banal story of Stiva Oblonsky’s marital infidelity suddenly uncovered by his wife thanks to her discovery of a love note. Everyone remembers the beginning of *Anna Karenina* so there is no need to retell it in one’s own words. But the way Tolstoy presents it, merits unconditional attention.

As mentioned above, the family quarrel is unleashed on the basis of the unfortunate note. However, the author is in no hurry to bring us into the discovery scene – that initial moment when Stiva enters his astonished wife’s bedroom and surprises her with “an expression of horror, despair, and indignation” (Tolstoy). Instead, the author sets up the scene as if from a distance, telling how Oblonsky wakes up in the morning in his study and not in his wife’s bedroom. Stiva fails to find his housecoat in its usual place and recalls all the events of the previous day. Before this, Tolstoy describes the explosive atmosphere in the household where the children run around as if they were lost while the adults “felt that there was no sense in their living together, and that the stray people brought together by chance in any inn had more in common with one another than they, the members of the family and household of the Oblonskys” (Tolstoy). It would therefore not be an exaggeration to say that this entire simple story is placed by the author into a kind of frame that determines the way it is perceived by the reader.

In order to convey the meaning of Bunin’s five-page story, Vygotsky requires more than twenty pages. The limitations of this publication will not allow me to follow his example, and my purpose is completely different. However, I would like to emphasize to what extent the meaning of the ordinary conflict created by Tolstoy

becomes infinitely complex when the author, instead of presenting it head-on, intertwines it with the myriad details of daily life in the Oblonsky family – even including Stiva’s dream before he wakes up on his leather-covered sofa. Tolstoy enhances this effect by prefacing all the events with the famous opening: “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” (Tolstoy).

Thus, stitch by stitch, the artistic fabric is woven so that every element labors in the service of authorial intention. Nothing is fortuitous: the children left to their own devices and dashing about the house; the English governess who has quarreled with the housekeeper and has asked a friend to find her another employer; the cook who has left the house right in the middle of dinner; and the pear (in mid-winter!) that Stiva Oblonsky – cheerful and content as he returns from the theater – brings into his wife’s bedroom and sees her reading the disastrously revelatory love note. All this harmony of banal trifles, to paraphrase Nabokov enriches and merges with the novelistic images, thereby contributing to the formation of the vague and general picture that constitutes the meaning of an artwork.

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Thus, no matter the angle of approach, the first thing that attracts attention is the high level of complexity and polysemy repeatedly evoked by Yu. Lotman: “The complexified artistic structure created out of linguistic material makes it possible to transmit a volume of information that is completely inaccessible to communication by means of an elementary, properly linguistic structure” (86).

But this information is rather special. It is self-contradictory and characterized by numerous half-hints, semantic nuances, troubling inuendo and understatement. It frequently appears to be unclear and emerges against merely guessed at backgrounds. All this constitutes the “meat” of literary fiction. Such information cannot fit into the framework of verbal and logical thinking and therefore ends up within the purview of the right cerebral hemisphere with its ability to grasp wholes and instantaneously capture seemingly disconnected aspects and angles. Therefore, as far as logical thinking is concerned, we are dealing with incomplete information or rather “underinformation” since it is not amenable to ordinary analytical processing.

Here is one more example: *Eugene Onegin*, chapter 7. Tatiana is in Onegin’s study – “this fashionable monk’s cell [...] [where she sees] Lord Byron’s portrait, by a small cast-iron statue” and of course books.

The books surround her,  
And at long last claim attention,  
Though, in her indifference,  
At first they make but little sense,  
Then, intrigued by the collection,

She samples them, and as if called  
To an unknown world's enthralled.

[...]

And so my Tanya began  
— Thank God — bit by bit, to learn  
His nature, comprehend the man,  
For whom her heart was made to burn,  
By fate's implacable decree.  
That sad and dangerous mystery,  
Was he from Heaven or from Hell,  
A devil in pride, or yet an angel,  
Which was he? Mere imitation,  
An empty phantom, or a joke,  
A Muscovite in Childe Harold's cloak,  
A poor second-hand illustration,  
A fashionable glossary,  
A lexicon, a parody?  
Had she solved the conundrum,  
Had she found the word at last?  
The clock runs swiftly on and on,  
The guests have come, the hour is past,  
At home they're already waiting,  
She's the subject they're debating (Pushkin).

It's as if the author has barely confronted us with these fateful questions and then immediately lures us in a different direction, not giving us enough time to ponder and work out all that he has not managed (or doesn't want) to finish telling us. This constantly provoked sense of "unsaidness" preventing our logical thinking from tackling such repeatedly offered "underinformation" forces our rational mind to yield and recede into the background. And what remains in our memory? The fact that Onegin is an imitation, a "fashionable lexicon"? Only that? And what if this is not quite the way things work — or not at all? The value judgement appears in half-finished form, but we can't linger over it because of the ceaseless novelistic momentum. We are unable to fight this movement, following it obediently with baited breath. The result is the appearance of something indistinct, something not drawn to completion — an entity constituting the fabric of an artistic work where many potentialities exist simultaneously without canceling each other out. And that is precisely the specific object of the image-based thinking that has held us in its thrall all throughout the reading of Pushkin's novel.

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A rhetorical question may be asked: what is the writer's purpose? To quote V. Mayakovsky, "For the sake of a single word you waste a thousand tons of verbal ore." (103). Indeed, many might think that this is how things stand and that the author's primary goal is to find the most precise and expressive words. One can come across brilliant verbal gems, such as "a fiery-red autumn leaf,"

in V. Rasputin's work for example or in V. Astafiev's. But then what are we to make of Chekhov who looks like a second-rate author against this background?

However, words, after all, don't exist in isolation. They are in complex dialogue with each other and part of a system of interconnectedness on a higher, hierarchical level. But for this system to start doing its work, all the epithets, metaphors and analogies, often found as a result of a painstaking search, must dissolve and die in the final text — the way protein molecules disintegrate and die once they end up in a living organism in the form of food, thereby giving life to new cellular structures. And when a text is rid of all that is extraneous, when meaning-laden events and notions are firmly interconnected (which almost never happens in life), when all manner of seams and inorganic links are no more — that is when an author's creation truly comes to life. At this point, the reader is overcome with the intoxicating ease of reading and stops noticing individual words or phrases, intuiting beyond them something like "pure meaning," to borrow Vygotsky's expression. Now, the text is perceived not as a sum of its constituent parts, but rather as a non-reducible, unified alloy of artistic meaning.

This notion of the literary work as an integrated semantic structure makes it possible, among other things, to also explain certain oddities of our esthetic perception. Thus, we would hardly be satisfied by some dry message with logical inconsistencies and cryptic elements. But in an artistic text, such passages do not put us off at all and even stimulate our imagination.

Here is an example from Lev Kulidzhanov's 1957 film *The House I Live in*. Demobilized soldiers are coming home on the very evening of May 9, 1945 — the day of Soviet victory over Nazi Germany. Most likely, fewer than 15 years since the end of WWII, war veterans could not have taken seriously the impossible timing of these events. But as someone who had come of age after the war and had known about it merely from books, I needed to see the film several times in order to realize that this bizarre situation made no sense. That was roughly how the return of the soldiers in this film was perceived by most of my peers — according to their own reports.

Of course, much has been written on the numerous lapses and errors in films, i.e., the above example is by no means unique. But here, we are dealing with a classic of Soviet cinema, and so one inevitably ponders the frequent non-correspondence of the truth in art and truth in life. If artistic creators always stuck to the truth of life, they would certainly respect a kind of one-dimensional verisimilitude as required by our analytical mental faculties. But then Kulidzhanov's film would lose its amazingly powerful final notes that bring together the nation's jubilation on the one hand and on the other — the profound personal tragedy of the protagonist Sergei. The latter is dumbfounded upon his return by news that Galia, the love of his life, has been killed. The result is the primacy of artistic truth, which is confirmed by this film's success and status as a classic.

\* \* \*

I don't know the origin of the expression: "When words feel crowded, thoughts feel free." But if we modify it to include "feelings feel free," this would apply all the more to the artistic text.

It would be absurd to apply the concept of novelistic space to a math textbook or a cookbook. And yet, the more this space can contain, and the broader the range of potentialities — even the unrealized ones — that it can take in, the more nourishment is given to our mind and imagination. This is what sets *King Lear* and *Hamlet* apart from works merely dealing with daily concerns. Such brilliant works are not so much about providing answers as they are about asking questions for which there are no definitive solutions.

In the same way, art and unambiguous valuations are incompatible. For example, if we apply V. Sappak's concept of a negative character taking on a positive function to M. Bulgakov's satanic Voland in *The Master and Margarita*, how will our attitude toward this character be shaped? Voland combines good and evil in such an ambiguous way that no spectral analysis will help us disentangle these two moral poles. In fact, it is this ambivalence in Voland's character, already made evident in the novel's epigraph, that imbues Bulgakov's Satan with the mysterious charm that has been conquering the hearts and souls of readers generation after generation. Outside the context of the human psyche, this unique feature of art cannot be understood.

Above, I outlined the antinomy of imaged-based thinking and logical thought. The latter's essence can almost be reduced along the lines of Hamlet's "words, words, words." While words do constitute the fundamental basis of logical thought, they also impoverish it as they try to fit the world into the Procrustean bed of verbal interpretation. "A thought, once spoken, is a lie," to quote F. Tyutchev' (Tyutchev). It goes without saying that the world is immeasurably richer than its verbal representation, but our logical faculties refuse to accept this and keep trying to impose on us a "straightened-out" version of reality.

On the one hand, the rigidity of our logical thought offers considerable advantages, allowing us to grasp the environment unambiguously, i.e., from the get-go. Without this ability, we would hardly be in a position to find our bearings in most situations where one does not require any particular insight into the essence of things. Thus, when crossing the street, we would be ill-advised to start deliberating on what side we have to go around a streetcar given the existence of set norms on the matter. Along the same lines, it makes sense to keep money deep in our pockets and matches far away from our children. The problem is that such routine thinking is extremely sluggish, tempting us to view everything around us in a one-dimensional manner.

It is in opposition to such linear pragmatism that art finds its vocation. In order to free him- or herself from the tyranny of such robotic thinking, the artist has to

"shift" material taken from life in order to deprive familiar objects of their triteness. V. Shkovsky calls it defamiliarization. Now words can sparkle with new, unexpected light as they become enmeshed extralogically, thereby forming the artistic space outlined above.

In this case, the clarity of discourse appears in an either-or framework. There is either semantic definitiveness, as in a safety manual, or polysemy, understatement and inuendo, a hazy "semantic stain" to use Yu. Lotman's formulation. Needless to say, such lack of definitiveness has no place in a safety manual, but when processing the artistic realm beyond analytical investigation, the reader or viewer acquires a kind of second breath. Thinking becomes enriched, and one is spiritually uplifted. At the same time, we can be stumped as we try to communicate the resulting feelings through the language of daily prose.

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Let us now return to the question posed at the beginning of this article: is the magic of art really related in some way to hypnotic dependence? And if so, what in this would play the part of inducer and what would be the equivalent of the recipient? Earlier, I proposed that a work of art, through the sum of its techniques, appears antithetical to logical thinking. This liberates the artwork's image-based essence and emancipates it from intellectual control. Thus, the common denominator here is the degree of uncritical perception. This approach allows us to view art in the same vein as dreams and the hypnotic trance both of which involve the shutting down of volitional mechanisms and certain other characteristic features.

It appears that many famous authors have expressed similar ideas when talking about the secrets of their craft in the collection *How We Write* (1930, re-edited 1989). This book is based on the results of a poll sent out to M. Gorky, A. Tynianov, A.N. Tolstoy and other major writers asked to explain their creative process. Among these illustrious names, I would like to focus on the testimony of E. Zamiatin who was the initiator of this unique project. His interest in the psychology of the writer's creative activity had appeared long before the publication of this book — already in the early 1920s when he had given a series of lectures entitled "The Techniques of Artistic Prose" in the studio of the House of Art in Petrograd. This is why Zamiatin's "internal" point of view appears particularly valuable for the present discussion.

He begins his personal account as follows:

In every compartment of sleeping cars, there a small ivory-covered handle. A turn to the right produced full lighting, a left turn shuts the light off completely and a middle position causes a blue light to go on. The latter makes everything visible but does not interfere with sleep at the same time. When I am asleep and dreaming, the handle of my consciousness is turned left. When I am writing, the handle is in the middle position, and my

consciousness is under the blue light. I see a dream on paper, and my imagination operates in a reverie-like state, progressing by means of dreamy associations but under the cautious direction of my blue-lit consciousness. As in a dream, as soon as consciousness is turned on to the max, the dream vanishes (*How We Write*: 25).

This is none other than the projector of logical thinking shutting off the creative potential when turned on to full power. This is why, as Zamiatin observes, the wakeful dream of creativity is steered by consciousness cautiously in order not to “spook” it. It was, however, spooked once in Zamiatin’s case when, after a series of lectures on the techniques of artistic prose, he felt compelled to “cast a glance backstage in [his] own theater of the mind.” That is when he lost the ability to write for a few months: “Everything seemed in order. The bedsheet of white paper had been spread. Sleeping and dreaming were about to start, but then a bump woke me up, and everything was gone — I had started to consciously follow the sleep mechanism. [...] This insomnia ended only when, in the course of work, I learned to forget that I knew how to write” (*How We Write*: 26).

And so, it is about knowing and at the same time not knowing how one writes. This must be key to discovering the mystery of the writer’s craft, and in the 1920–30s, it was opposed by various ideological formations such as the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers. The latter insisted on full consciousness, i.e., the author had to possess complete control over the creative process. No wonder: any lack of clarity, any lyrical disturbance would have been seen by these communists as being in danger of losing the “correct” ideological footing, which they could never accept. Certainty was the hallmark of Soviet Marxism and official party ideology. Needless to say, this anti-artistic position caused immeasurable harm to Russian literature because it attempted to squeeze the author’s imagination into the shackles of one-dimensional rationalism. Upon the failure of his innovative play *The Seagull*, Chekhov was accused by pedantic critics of deviating from theatrical norms and rules in favor of “carelessness and unspokenness.” No wonder Vladimir Nabokov labeled these critics “slaves of cause and effect” (Nabokov).

In his self-report, Zamiatin mentions the word *hypnosis* only once:

The most difficult thing is to start — to push off from the shore of reality into the waters of dreams. The dream is still airy, shaky and ungraspable. [...] But then, page by page, the dream gains strength as the engine of the imagination keeps increasing its rpms. [...] Finally, there comes a day in the process of work when something real arrives — the dream that has already begun becomes unshakeable and capable of hypnotizing the author. You keep thinking about it in the street, at meetings, in the bathtub, at a concert and in bed (*How We Write*: 26).

In this connection, it makes sense to quote Aleksey Tolstoy: “It used to happen that I would sit down at a table like someone preparing to be hypnotized” (*How We Write*: 123).

One way or another, the word *hypnosis* always appears to be in the background although strictly speaking, the issue is not hypnosis as such. In a letter to L. Pan-telev, L. Chukovskaia uses the analogy with anesthesia: “When we live under it, we don’t feel threats and dangers or minor mishaps — inside us a book appears to be writing itself” (130). What appears to be at work is a special mode of cerebral function different from the complete darkness of profound sleep and from the total illumination of wakefulness. I will let specialists come up with an appropriate label.

Admittedly, all of the above pertains not so much to the perception of an artistic work as to what happens “behind the mirror.” The creative product, once it has been put forth by the author for the reader, inevitably implies its own backstage nature. However, there is obviously a certain analogy between the creative process and the perception of its result. In both instances, we are confronted with a special kind of image-based thinking — antithetical to logically ordered activity and in this sense somehow akin to hypnosis. But only in the case of the creative process does this kind of thinking swing the doors open to intuition and the artistic search. When it comes to the perception of the creative process, the reader is presented with something completely formed — a finished text.

Unfortunately, we still know very little about this phenomenon although, thanks to the modern understanding of the functional asymmetry of the cerebral cortex in both hemispheres, we have progressed far beyond what was the case a couple of decades ago. This relates in particular to the role of the right hemisphere in human artistic thinking. Here, we are dealing with rapid action and the ability to process information along many parameters simultaneously. The left hemisphere does this only in stages, sequentially and therefore slowly. The right hemisphere can model virtual objects absent from the real world (Lipsky). This is why it appears appropriate to view the problem in the context of hemispheric asymmetry and the antithesis of the two modes of thinking.

Leo Tolstoy’s esthetic understanding was based on the assumption that, along with “correct” art, there are “incorrect” varieties which do not provide an outlet for feelings that overwhelm us, e.g., the Kreutzer Sonata in Tolstoy’s eponymous novella. Instead, this incorrect art merely confuses and irritates our spirit. Arguing with this position, L. Vogotsky wrote: “Music is an impetus, stimulating us — but in a most indefinite manner which does not appear directly connected to any concrete reaction, movement or action [...]. It clarifies and clears the psyche, unearthing and bringing forth enormous, heretofore suppressed or displaced forces” (Vygotsky). I could not say it better myself. But this psychological mechanism itself “which does not appear directly connected to any concrete reaction, movement or action” remains to this day behind a mysterious veil, “stimulating” and challenging us to ponder the great enigma of creativity.

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