

MARIA'S KEYS.  
ON THE PATTERNS OF THOUGHT IN THE WORK  
OF SERGEI YESENIN

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This study pursues the spiritual traditions of Byzantine and East European thought that are manifested in the Yesenin's essay. These responses were founded in the conviction that Russian culture has its roots in Scythian rather than Byzantine culture and this became the basis of his gnoseological system. The Russian mind can be understood especially through the art and social culture which surrounds the Russian people. Favouring social culture before the spiritual (literary) is a typical Byzantine feature.

The essay *Maria's Keys* (written in 1918 and published in 1920, the data important from the viewpoint of their understanding and assessment as a whole) has undoubtedly a significant place in Yesenin's work. Though not very extensive, this work is generally understood as a reflection of the Russian ornament, sometimes as an essay on the essence of Russian art as a whole, and sometimes as an account of the sources of Russian literature.<sup>1</sup> The essay is based on ideological impulses which occur and are elaborated in the most contemporary context of the ideas of the time, within which Yesenin had lived shortly after the Revolution. On the one hand, his sympathy for the group of Scythians, whose members were characterized by their vague and hollow eulogy of Russian village and its community, is emphasized; the Russian village was for the members of the group of Scythians the only genuine expression of the Russian spirit.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the characteristic features of Yesenin's poetics, which led him to the imagism,

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<sup>1</sup> The individual opinions cf. E. NAUMOV and A. MARCHENKO in: *Sergei Yesenin. Sobranie sochinenii, tom 4*, Moscow 1967, pp. 173, 290. See also NAUMOV, E.: *Sergei Yesenin*. Moscow 1960, p. 237. Already A. ILIINA indicated that Yesenin wanted more, in: *Yesenin, zhizn, lichnost, tvorchestvo*. Moscow 1926, p. 103: We sense Russia thanks to the signs of the wooden cottage symbols.

<sup>2</sup> In order to understand opinions of the group of Scythians not elaborated as yet, cf. their quasi manifest in the introduction to the journal *Skify* 1, 1917, p. VII and mainly IX. E. NAUMOV (*S. Yesenin, Sobranie sochinenii, tom 4*, p. 271) characterizes the Scythian group as neonationalist. Cf. also S. GORODETSKII (*Yesenin. Zhizn, lichnost, tvorchestvo*), p. 43; YUSHIN, P.: *Poeziya Sergeya Yesenina*. Moscow 1966, p. 212.

are pointed out: this was a primary accentuation of the poetic image as the only relevant essence in poetic and literary works as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

I shall not touch on the problem as to what extent this is an adequate evaluation. A more detailed analysis of Yesenin's essay enables, however, a more exact definition of its subject matter and contents, and reveals the deep sources and traditions. These have become the starting point of Yesenin's methodological and gnoseological principles and approaches and by means of which he mastered his subject matter. It is particularly the tracing of Yesenin's methodology and gnoseology that enables us to overcome the largely first-level interpretation of the text and to uncover the constant and unchanging ways and forms of thinking which persist in a particular cultural milieu in spite of the variability of its topical contents, resisting any kind of dynamics of the development of a certain society and its ideological principles. The constancy and the resistance of the forms and patterns of thought are great indeed, if we realize that it is manifested even in such a peculiar work of art as in Yesenin's essay created in a period of vast ideological and social changes.<sup>4</sup>

### *Subject matter and contents*

Yesenin's essay is actually based on the considerations of the Russian folk ornament applied on Russian folk embroidery as mainly seen on Russian table cloths or towels (MK, 174, 176).<sup>5</sup> He disagrees with any decomposition of the ornament into individual components: Syrian, Persian or Byzantine. Yesenin denies all such conceptions of Russian art, which could disturb the idea of its immanent development and which consider it as the result of implemented influences and patterns. Even the essence of the Russian artistic expression in the historical period (of non-folk origin) when even Yesenin could no longer doubt in its Byzantine foundations and connections cannot be explained in this way. Byzantium

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<sup>3</sup> For the problem Yesenin and imaginism cf. different opinions and assessments: B. SHERSHNEVICH, *Znamyá* 2, 1920, p. 58 considers Yesenin to be an ideologist of imaginism and Maria's Keys the philosophy of imaginism but already N. ROZANOV pointed to the difference between his and MARIENGOF's and SHERSHNEVICH's perception (In: *Yesenin. Zhizn, lichnost, tvorchestvo*, p. 88); cf. also P. YUSHIN, op. cit., p. 243. On the other hand B. ROZENFELD (*Yesenin. Zhizn, lichnost, tvorchestvo*, p. 148) inclined to Shershnevich's attitude; he says that Yesenin's imaginism was not just something external. In this study I shall try to prove that Yesenin has never had in mind any word formalism (at least not in Maria's Keys) characteristic of imaginists. Quite the reverse, he tried to find out the sense, essence, depth, meaning of the word and image expression.

<sup>4</sup> I base my conception following the long-lasting and far-reaching influence of certain ideas and their perseverance (also variants) on the ideas of Annales School as formulated by BRAUDEL, F.: *Histoire et sciences sociales: la long durée*, Annales ESC 1958, No. 4.

<sup>5</sup> References to Maria's Keys, abbreviated MK, directly in the text. Quoted according to the edition *Sergei Yesenin. Sobranie sochinenii, tom 4*, Moscow 1967.

had not intervened with the character of Russian art at all, it had not fertilized us, as the author literally put it (MK, 174). Byzantine art was merely assigned the task of an accidental actor. In order to avoid any suspicion of exploring Russian art in any transformed form, Yesenin reached for the patterns and relics which would enable him to perceive it in its purest and most original shape represented by the Russian ornament and embroidery. Further contemplation of Russian art and its essence show, however, this framework to be insufficient. He gradually extends the object of his exploration: he adds to the ornament and embroidery the whole world of wooden cottage (*izbyannaya*) culture, its arrangement, mutual relations and connections (MK, 182).

What have the Russian wooden cottage culture and its objective world and art and its essence in common? Is it still just art? According to Yesenin himself, the very title of his essay and his commentary on the work betray that it is not true: Maria is perceived by "Khlystovtsy"<sup>6</sup> (and by Yesenin himself) as the soul itself; Yesenin's comments on the whole picture of economic and social life serve as evidence that the ornament was, has remained and has survived as the beautiful towel, which depicts a family by means of the silk and the pattern. This confirms that it does not concern merely the soul of art but something more (MK, 175-76). The ornament is thus not only a work of art; it is primarily a symbol of the Russian life as a whole and its essence. The fact that the essence of Russian being is denoted once as the soul and then as a family does not necessarily mean a contradiction or a poetic license in the use of concepts: denoting the essence of the national being by the term soul is comprehensible in the context of philosophical and poetical (romanticizing) 19th-century understanding; the classification of this essence as family in the context of Russian, primarily Slavophil ideological tradition according to which the basic unit of society is peasants' common ("obchina"), is equally understandable. It is its inner principle put in contrast to the "external" principle of statehood and state: however, the foundation of the common is family.<sup>7</sup> Yesenin intends to penetrate into the essence of the Russian spirit and being through the ornament and its pattern. This is the second, much more important and deeper level of his essay. By reaching for the most original and untouched sources and models of Russian culture, Yesenin in his contemplations of the specific traits of the Russian spirit indicates a priori the result of his investigation: the Russian soul and its character is determined primarily by its own development more than by any secondary impact. A seemingly logical and unambiguous approach is suddenly complicated as soon the poet proceeds from a declarative general account to concrete analysis. We are little surprised that the substance of the Russian soul is not revealed unambiguously as a positive con-

<sup>6</sup> Khlystovtsy represent a kind of analogy to the West-European mediaeval flagellants.

<sup>7</sup> For details cf. BERDYAEV, N.: *A. Khomyakov*. Moscow 1912, p. 197; TSYMBAEV, N.I.: *Slavyanofilstvo. Iz istorii russkoi obshchestvenno-politicheskoi mysli 19. veka*. Moscow 1986, p. 175.

cept; it is defined rather as a contradiction to Byzantine culture and its civilization type extinct long time ago. This surprising motive of Yesenin's conception of the Russian soul and the method of contradictory comparison of Russia and Byzantium as a whole is, however, one of the oldest and most constant building components of many Russian ideological concepts. This way of thinking appears almost regularly in the most decisive moments of Russian history.

This motive and the method emerged for the first time in the the middle of the eleventh century in the first ideological concept of metropolitan Ilarion. After almost half-century of Byzantine cultural dominance which had been evident since the adoption of Christianity (989) it seemed that the Byzantine impact would suppress all the manifestations of the sovereignty of Russian culture and would not allow any development of Russian ideological conception of a sovereign state. Metropolitan Ilarion presented in that time his cultural and political programme which, as a matter of fact, did not deny Byzantine background of Russian culture (Christianity came to Russia from Byzantium...) but he emphasizes its own roots: they mostly date back to the pre-Christian period of Russian statehood; influences and connections with Judaism of the Old Testament as a model of Russian development being highlighted.<sup>8</sup>

An analogical concept from the perspective of typology, form and structure appeared in Russia under entirely different conditions in the fourteenth century. Byzantium surrounded and straitened by Turkish threat agreed with the union with Rome, recognized the Papal Primacy and accepted western dogmatic and liturgical teaching and habits. On the other hand, Russia was, after the battle of Kulikov field with Tatars, at the beginning of the process of regaining political independence and power restoration. In the Russian way of thinking, the political changes of the first half of the fourteenth century were reflected in the ideological concept with its most significant representative metropolitan Jonah: the prosperity of Russia and the decay of Byzantium resulted from the different approaches of the two communities to religious traditions and to the original apostolic faith left by Byzantium but still cultivated by Russia.<sup>9</sup> This conviction had logically led to a hint of political doctrine which was completely developed in the following century as a theory of Moscow – the third Rome: Russia should not only have political and religious autonomy but also the leading role throughout the Orthodox

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<sup>8</sup> Ilarion does not deny the arrival of Christianity to Russia from Byzantium (*Slovo o zakone i blagodati*, ed. MÜLLER, L.: *Illarions Lobrede auf Vladimir den heiligen und Glaubensbekenntnis*. Wiesbaden 1962, p. 102), motive of comparison of Vladimir and Constantine the Great is undoubtedly a Byzantine element (*Slovo*, ed. Müller, p. 117) but elevation of Judaistic elements in the beginnings of Russian Christianity is a motive of the Russian ideology of sovereignty (*Slovo*, ed. Müller, p. 121). For interpretation of *Slovo*, cf. AVENARIUS, A.: *K počiatkom transformácie byzantského vplyvu v Kyjevskej Rusi*. Slavica slovaca 21, 1986, p. 187 ff.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the attitude of the Russian metropolitan Jonah in: *Akty istoricheskie sobrannye i izdannye Arkheograficheskoyu kommissieyu I*. Sankt Petersburg 1841, pp. 86, 95.

world which should replace a similar role of Byzantium – the second Rome in the preceding period.<sup>10</sup> Again an ideological concept emerges from the antithetic contradiction between Byzantium and Russia. This contradiction deepened as compared to Ilarion's understanding and took on an evaluating aspect. "Orthodox" Russia and "apostatic" Byzantium are here compared.

Long after the fall of Byzantine tradition, the seventeenth century saw the re-emergence of a coming to terms with the Byzantine cultural heritage which had existed since the fourteenth century on two contradictory but yet complementary levels and intentions – continuation in and denial of Byzantine tradition. The reform of the Church realized under the Patriarch Nikon pursued the first line of following Byzantine traditions. Its aim was to correct translations of the divine service books in which numerous errors, mistakes and deviations had accumulated through centuries in comparison with Byzantine original works. Patriarch Nikon struggled thus for tighter adherence to the Byzantine pattern. His efforts met with the opposition of old masters of ceremonies; they saw in the deviations from Byzantine habits the proof of the preservation of the principles of apostolic faith and church; Byzantine customs were perceived as irregular. The Russian usage was not, however, understood merely as the preservation of old traditions generally valid and binding which also implied the idea of the conservation of universal cultural pattern in the Russian milieu. This usage was at the same time conceived as a certain Russian cultural distinctiveness.<sup>11</sup> The specific character and the image of "orthodox" and "correct" Russia is again defended and placed in contrast to "apostatic" Byzantium.

It is the persistence of the Russian tradition (both as universally valid and as the most optimal from the perspective of national development) in the period in which Byzantine reality and seemingly also the relics of its ideological activities must have been overcome that shows to what extent was this thesis about the double predominance of Russian tradition over Byzantine tradition. The Russian Slavophiles of the first half of nineteenth century, who were increasingly dissatisfied with inorganic inclination of Russia to the West and its emerging culture since the rule of Peter the Great, shaped their ideal and clear image of Russia stemming from its historical development and emphasizing its unique features (the Orthodox Church as an optimum form of religion, the family and the common as

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<sup>10</sup> For the problem Moscow – the third Rome, see mainly SCHAEDEER, H.: *Moskau – das dritte Rom*. Hamburg 1929; LURYE, Ya.S.: *O vozniknovenii teorii Moskva – tretii Rim*. Trudy otdela drevnerusskoi literatury 16, 1960; MASLENNIKOVA, N.N.: *K istorii sozdaniya teorii Moskva – tretii Rim*. Ibid., p. 18, 1962.

<sup>11</sup> The Russian 17th-century conflict has not been adequately elaborated so far. Still topical philosophical assessment is the essay by SOLOVYOV, V.: *O raskole v russkom narode i obshchestve*. In: *Sobranie sochinenii III*, p. 221 ff. For the course of events, see KAPTEREV, N.F.: *Patriarkh Nikon i tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich I*. Moscow 1909, p. 227 ff; see also ROBINSON, A.: *Borba idei v russkoi literature XVII veka*. Moscow 1974, p. 192 ff.

economic, social and moral basis of society, the principle of "territorial" government as a counterbalance of statehood, etc.).<sup>12</sup> Fighting with the western ideal and the reality of social order, they did not make sufficient use of the tradition of Byzantine heritage in their argumentation so they were critical of it. It seemed to them that the basic principles of spiritual ideals in Byzantium were fossilized and appeared in a hypertrophic role of statehood impeding the healthy development of society and in the formalistic understanding of the function of orthodox faith: this hindered its real spiritual evolution.<sup>13</sup> It is obvious that the criticism of Byzantium and its heritage is a strange element which only overshadows the aim of such policy within the critical Slavophil concept directed against the West and its influence in Russia. The anti-Byzantine element in Slavophil teaching is explainable by its long and deep tradition for which the Slavophiles had to pay a price.

This Byzantine syndrome or deviation is not characteristic merely of Slavophiles; Vladimir Solovyov has also been influenced by it little later. His work devoted in principle to the struggle with the Slavophil idea of the specific exclusiveness of Russia and its Messianic mission conveys the need of renouncing its own national characteristics in favour of a cosmopolitan cultural ideal. Such renunciation of one's own national uniqueness has taken place in the history of Russia with positive results twice: the Russians had given up their idea of their own nation-state and statehood for the first time by inviting the Varangians, whom they entrusted with creating a state form. According to V. Solovyov, the second time the Russians gave up their civilization ideal in favour of a more universally valid cultural ideal through the deed of Peter the Great by replacing their own (worse, local) with foreign ideas (better, universal).<sup>14</sup> The regional was sacrificed to the universal. The universally valid civilization and cultural type was, however, immediately narrowed and limited. V. Solovyov identifies it exclusively with the western (west European) type. If he considers western culture to be a suitable starting place for better understanding among cultures and religions or even their unification, and the unification should take place within the process of the selective use of all the best achievements of regional cultures, he eliminates in principle the Byzantine culture from this potential reservoir of building components of a new cultural unity. The only exception is his unequivocal emphasis of absolute preferences of Russia and her historical development. From his as well as from the Slavophiles' point of view, it was Russia that has preserved her vivid informal traditions of human and national existence in contrast to Byzantium.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For different problems of Slavophilism with rich references see the latest work by IVANTY-ŠYNOVÁ, T.: *Češi a Slováci v ideologii ruských slavjanofilov*. Bratislava 1987.

<sup>13</sup> KHOMYAKOV, A.: *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, tom 7*, Moscow 1907, pp. 448, 450; BERDYAEV, N.: *A.S. Khomyakov*, Moscow 1912, pp. 168, 171 f and 194.

<sup>14</sup> SOLOVYOV, V.: *Sobranie sochinenii III. (Natsionalnyi vopros o Rossii)*, II, pp. 17, 30, 146.

<sup>15</sup> SOLOVYOV, V.: *Vizantiya i Rossiya. Sobranie sochinenii*, 5, p. 513.

V. Solovyov's conception of Byzantine culture, its place in the global cultural development and its relation to Russia evidently deviates from and even completely contradicts his philosophy of history as a whole: in this only does. V. Solovyov replaces his universalist conception by the scheme in which mutual comparison of Byzantium and Russia in the historical perspective evidently favours for Russia.

Within this historical ideological context Yesenin's polemic with Byzantine heritage does not seem so out of time and surprising. If the poet objects to the overestimation of Byzantine influences in Russian milieu, his reasoning has naturally no longer the religious flavour of anti-Byzantine debates and attitudes of his predecessors. It is typical, however, that in relation to Byzantium his assessment loses even the unfavourable evaluating aspect. As if we could see his return to Ilarion's conception: he does not make his axiological judgements, he does not compare, only accentuates different features in the picture of Russia and seeks their unique native roots. The basic scheme handed down in the Russian way of thinking and modified remains with Yesenin: Russia is the antithesis of Byzantium in Maria's Keys.

Stressing the uniqueness of the Russian soul and its development, Yesenin does not find its origin in the Russian milieu but he deduces it from the Scythian milieu. We are again surprised to hear that it is the "Scythian element" that is the essence of the Russian soul (MK, 179), the mystery of endless nomadic life. However, Yesenin is ever the poet and he expresses his opinion not after thorough argumentation but in the poetic form which is probably the only adequate form. He thereby makes use of the poetic image of his friend Klyuev: a pony on the roof of a Russian house means that our journey is long (MK, 174). The Russian peasant placed a horse on the roof of his house to make it similar to an open carriage (MK, 179).

In his contemplations of the Scythian origin of Russian existence and culture Yesenin went probably beyond his aim: in his effort to present the authentic roots of Russian development, he deduces it at last from a remote foreign culture. This deviation is not accidental, it is historically determined by the traditional conceptions and patterns inherent in Russian historical thought from time immemorial. It was the group of Scythians which above all has influenced Yesenin in this question, in addition to the above mentioned return to the country life in the common as a prototype of Russian society. The ideology of the group of Scythians is also characterized by a motive of interconnection, fusion of Russian and Scythian history.<sup>16</sup> Understanding the connections between Russian and Scythian culture, their historical continuity is not a new ideological achievement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is questionable whether the title kagan which Ilarion uses to address the Russian ruler is a reminiscence of the period of the Scythian power in northern area of the Black

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<sup>16</sup> Journal Skify 1, 1917, pp. VII-IX.

sea;<sup>17</sup> the conscious use of Scythian motive in the construction of the Russian distinct ideological concept comes, however, a century later.

The motif of the Great Scythia as a cradle of eastern Slavs appears at the beginning of the twelfth century.<sup>18</sup> The Scythian became a synonym of the Russian in the twelfth-century Russia; the Russian sources consciously apply this opinion as such and remove its pejorative flavour assigned to it by the late antique and Byzantine historiography where the Scythian was a synonym of the barbarian. In the twelfth century there also occurs another application of the Scythian motif in Russian milieu. The exteriors of Russian churches are in this period decorated almost all over the surface by the scenes drawing the themes and symbols from Scythian animal and plant ornaments.<sup>19</sup> It is a unique phenomenon in such a scope, digressing from the customs. It is, however, understandable in the background of religious and political struggles of the day. It is associated, in time at least, with the period of Andrei Bogolyubskii's struggle with Byzantium for the foundation of separate Church organization, independent of Byzantium, with the seat in Vladimir.<sup>20</sup> The elements of Scythian art of this period can be explained as a symbolic visual expression of efforts at reaching autonomy also conveyed through the artistic means of their own remote and famous history.

Neither here nor in other cases is it possible with Yesenin to speak of conscious return to remote ideals or analogous means. These all are motives and analogies randomly preserved throughout the centuries as tradition, creating the fundamental framework of constant and unchanging patterns and forms of thinking. Here Yesenin is also the poet first of all: in his poetic vision of endless Scythia it is as if a concept of Great Scythia has been revived and this idea has been transferred into his poems. Blue (*golubaya*) Russia evokes the allusion deep and vast (*glubinnaya*): an image rousing the idea of boundless remoteness.

### *Methodology and gnoseology*

Yesenin's methodology, i.e. the way he masters the object of his exploration is consciously marked by an opposition to the so-called scientific way of understanding and investigation in which the problem was touched by the renowned

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. ILARION: *Slovo o zakone i blagodati*, ed. Müller, p. 57, 100, 103; see also notice in *Sofia Kievskia* entitled *kagan*, published by VYSOTSKII, S.O.: *Drevnerusskie nadpisi Sofii Kievskoi*. Kiev 1966, p. 342 ff.

<sup>18</sup> *Povest vremennykh let*, ed. D.S. Likhachov, Moscow 1950, p. 14; to the appellative the Scythian in Russian milieu see MAREŠ, F.V.: *Byzantský názor o totožnosti Slovanů a Skytů na Staré Rusi*. Vznik a počátky Slovanů I, 1956, p. 7 ff.

<sup>19</sup> VAGNER, G.K.: *Sudby obrazov zverinnogo stilya v drevnerusskom iskusstve*. In: *Skifosibirskii zverinnyi stil narodov Evropy*. Moscow 1976, p. 253 ff.

<sup>20</sup> VORONIN, N.N.: *Andrei Bogolyubskii i Luka Khrysoverg. Iz istorii russko-vizantiiskikh otnoshenii v XII veke*. Vizantiiskii vremennik 21, 1962, p. 300 ff.



explorers Buslaev and Stasov quoted by the poet. The main thing Yesenin objects to in their approach is their analytical way of thinking, the separation of the organic and complete ornament into individual components. The essence of the ornament cannot be simply accounted for by an analytical method – this is how a possible insight into “the heart of our folklore” escapes (MK, 175). He had selected a method which he did not even try to define and placed it in contrast to rational and analytical approach. He reached for an allegoric image of the poem about a lost key opening the door to the essence of art; the key has, however, fallen into the sea and has not surfaced as yet (MK, 175).

In spite of the poetic image through which Yesenin characterized his approach to problem solving, it is not so complicated to identify at least the starting impulses of this method. It is no delayed romanticizing dislike for everything exact, systematic, scientific. Here one can think of closer connections with that type of gnoseological approach characterized by N. Berdyaev at a universal level starting from his peculiar interpretation of Plato: it is not a rational understanding, but an imaginative apprehension.<sup>21</sup>

The cognition of the essence through perception grasping the objective world directly associated with the essence was manifested in a specific form in Byzantine milieu. It has mainly come to the fore in connection with iconoclastic struggles, struggles for worshipping icons and its function in the eighth and ninth centuries. There were iconoclasts who refused icons and perceived them in terms of the Old Testament as idols and their opponents iconodules whose attitude is most interesting to us in this particular connection. An icon did not mean merely an arbitrary sign (as it used to be in western church), to iconodules it was not only an illustrative account of biblical history and the events by means of an image; it was not a mere symbol indicating an interconnection between man and a divine sphere in Plato's understanding. It was primarily a gnoseological function of an image as a material object which was in a way connected with its archetype reaching thus a central position in the gnoseological process.<sup>22</sup> The image is a means through which we approach the knowledge or understanding of that part of the unknowable which is accessible to man. Such is at least the standpoint of the most prominent representatives of iconodulic movement at the turn of the eighth and ninth centuries – Nikephoros and Theodoros Studites.<sup>23</sup> In a hagiographic source of the day it is even argued that the image opens the door for the soul to

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<sup>21</sup> BERDYAEV, N.A.: *Filosofiya svobodnogo dukha. Problematika i apologiya khristianstva I*. Paris 1927 passim.

<sup>22</sup> See also AVENARIUS, A.: *K charakteru byzantskei ikonodulie*. Studia balkanica bohemoslovaca III. Brno 1987, p. 57 ff.

<sup>23</sup> *Theodoros Studites Antirrheticus*, ed. Migne, Patrologia graeca 99, col. 368, p. 420 but particularly *Nikephoros Antirrheticus*, ed. Migne, Patrologia graeca 100, col. 428.

the cognition of the divine.<sup>24</sup> The character of this imperfect cognition is irrational but non-mystical. It can probably be best denoted as objective perception directed from the phenomenon to its essence or archetype.

This gnoseological approach was clearly applied in Byzantium at least once more in the period of theological hesychastic quarrels in the fourteenth century which again concerned the traditional problem of eastern Christendom: the exploration of the possibilities of the access to God. Besides mystical cognition it is spoken of as iconognostic learning, i.e. knowing God through images (i.e. the rational way).<sup>25</sup>

With Yesenin, the object of the investigation itself has changed; it does not concern the routes to the divine through the created world. The basic scheme and the pattern of the thought remains, however unchanged: the essence of the Russian soul can only be approached by cognizing the Russian "objective" world through its perception not particularly specified.

In this overall aim of Yesenin's gnoseology an antiintellectual statement surprising at first glance becomes better comprehensible; according to the statement it might seem that the poet does not lay great emphasis on writing (spiritual education) brought to the Russians from western Slavs since "the keys to human mind had already been found; through these signs the spirit was expressed and manifested" (MK, 182) having in mind the signs, the objective world from which ordinary man had built up his "wooden cottage liturgy" (ibid.). It is an obvious (maybe conscious?) contrast to Khomyakov who saw the preferences of the Russian spirit just in its spiritual substance (principle of Iranism). This spirituality culminated just in the Russian milieu and Khomyakov had placed it in contrast to lower, material form of culture which he denoted Kushitism.<sup>26</sup> Yesenin does not directly compare himself with Khomyakovian terminology but his opposite opinion is evident anyway: the actual expression of the Russian spirit is the Russian material world and its objective reality.

If in the case of the definition and understanding of the subject matter of his essay, Yesenin's starting point was the Russian ideological tradition which had always confronted Russia with Byzantium in spite of various nuances it was always in favour of the Russian past and presence – in his gnoseology and methodology, i.e. in the way of mastering the subject matter, it is possible to follow traditions and the ways of thinking developing within the wider framework of the Byzantine cultural sphere. However, in both cases the traditions were hundreds of years old.

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<sup>24</sup> *Vita s. Stephani junioris*, ed. Migne, *Patrologia graeca* 100, col. 1113.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. AVENARIUS, A.: *Specific Features of Early Byzantine Humanism*. Human Affairs, 1, 1991, 1, p. 59.

<sup>26</sup> KHOMYAKOV, A.S.: *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, tom 5, p. 509 ff.