

## Reflecting on the “Way to Nothing. Essays on Russian Nihilism” by P.A. Sapronov

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**Annotation.** The article is devoted to the understanding of the phenomenon of nothing. The authors appeal to the historical emergence of nihilism in literature and also discuss the reasons for the emergence of nihilism in culture, dwelling on the facts from several traditional cultures. The article contains illustrative examples of the strengthening of nihilistic position in culture. The authors discuss the problems of superfluous people, giving examples from different literary works.

**Keywords:** nihilism, being, cultural tradition, phenomenon of existence, a superfluous person, transcendental, self-reflection.

We live in the surrounding world, a social, political, and above all cultural space. It accompanies us throughout our life, playing a decisive role both in our socialization and in the formation of us as people and individuals. We can change the cultural tradition around us, more precisely, we can try to do it. After all, if a person finds himself in a different cultural environment in early childhood, then, most likely, he will grow up to be a bearer of a different culture, even if his parents will try to properly give him an idea of the abandoned homeland. One way or another, but this will be only a part, albeit significant, of the spiritual world of a person, which does not necessarily determine his attitude to the environment, and therefore, his being.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to overestimate the function of culture in this context. It forms a linguistic picture of the world that determines a person's thinking, ideas about the ethical, laid down in us in childhood, religious, aesthetic and many other things. Despite all the advantages of culture, at the same time, it is not devoid of disadvantages. Like any living organism, it is capable of growing and developing, both in time and space. Its crises and illnesses can and do manifest themselves in the fullness and significance here.

Nihilism, as one of these diseases, is the subject of the book written by P.A. Sapronov “The Way to Nothing. Essays on Russian Nihilism”. Finding the phenomenon of the existence of a text which

contains the concept of annihilation of being and "sliding into Nothing" as a symptomatic phenomenon, the author seeks to identify the means leading to the cure of culture. Recognizing the seriousness of the current situation, stating the textual manifestations of nihilism as a problem that "requires serious intellectual work to overcome it in spirit and sense" [1, 54], based on scientific methodology. It is noted as insufficient to obtain the necessary result of philosophy, "the impossibility of a philosopher is not something to occupy a nihilistic position, but at least only to think about nihilism philosophically, to find one's own logic in it", and the inappropriateness of the requirement for theology" to contemplate nihilism to the end, to make it accessible to thought" [1, 51].

On this important point, one should agree with the author of the study and accept as the basis for finding a way out of the current situation, not a philosophical or theological, but a cultural tradition with its tools. The tools allow, in addition, to try to find the answer to two more important questions that are of decisive importance. The first question is illness and crisis. This is a natural or accidental phenomenon in the life of culture. The second question is what is primary, the work, in the context of our research, primarily the literary, or social reality surrounding the text and its author.

In order to identify the problem and clearly define its boundaries and limits, it is necessary to turn to the historical component of the emergence of nihilism in literature. Since the creation of "the Song from the House of the Departed King Antisthenes" and "the Book of Ecclesiastes, or the Preacher", the authors declared and comprehended such fundamental themes of human life as being, existing (that is, man) and his life. But this is not at all surprising, but the conclusions and attitudes that are made and possessed by the writers, which is why they "lose ground from under their feet, the world of primary meanings is shaking" [1, 55]. Undoubtedly, a person is able to realize himself as a being, to understand his "I", to feel a part of being.

Arguing about the reasons for your existence, you inevitably come to reflections on the root cause, the source of being. According to J.P. Murdoch, any culture is characterized by the idea that the visible, empirical world surrounding a person is not the only possible reality, that there is also an area of the transcendental, inaccessible to human understanding, which constitutes the dominant religious representation. The concept of the end of human life, the subjective moment of the end of the earthly existence of a person, namely, death, is also a cultural universal. The authors of "Song of the Harper" and "Book of Ecclesiastes" are engaged in the problematization of these main components of culture as such and the life of an individual person in particular - being, life, death, as well as their connection with the sacred.

Understanding and accepting the transcendental foundations of being and the existence of a person, recognizing the presence of hope for help from the absolute, nevertheless, both textually and by referring to the context, it becomes obvious that the authors are "double-minded and double-

minded”, a kind of “pendulum of two, basically polar, mental states” [1, 63]. If Being is present in the world, then, at the other end, there must necessarily be its opposite, defined as Nothing.

Here it is necessary to understand one important point for research. What makes a person creating a work, who has the concept of the transcendent as the source of human existence, nevertheless, consciously or not, enter and stay in another "polar state of mind"; the source of nihilism is a point phenomenon in culture, rather an exception, an annoying misunderstanding than a rule, a strained and artificial invention of a loner who is distanced for one reason or another from others?

In this case, the position of the author of "The Way to Nothing", at a superficial glance, is not so optimistic: “Commonplaces and platitudes were not uttered for the first time. They arose by themselves and not in one, but in many heads at once. This kind of wisdom seemed to have always existed, unless it was repeated” [1, 55]. The first, so far preliminary, reason for the emergence of nihilism in culture is emerging. It is not transcendental, but rather anthropological. In this regard, it is completely possible to assume that a culture created and developed by man without the mediation of the absolute has in itself an initial, so to speak, genetic predisposition to nihilism.

The works mentioned earlier belonged to the pagan and Old Testament traditions. If we appeal to the Christian tradition, of course, taking into account its culturological, and even more precisely, literary embodiment, then it becomes obvious that here too the theme of denial of being has found its continuation, and its “grateful” admirers. In it, the striving for Nothing was even more clearly shaped, structured, at the same time acquiring complexity, and, if you may say so, its gloomy beauty.

Focusing on the list of questions posed at the beginning of the essay, one should proceed to the analysis of the Russian cultural tradition directly, since “our task is to comprehend precisely Russian nihilism ... which led us to develop the topic further than anyone else in the West” [1, 110]. Mysteriousness, so to speak, the unpredictability of the Russian cultural tradition (the word "uniqueness" was used so often and in most cases unsuccessfully in this discourse that to a certain extent it is possible to talk about the loss or distortion of its meaning in relation to the subject in question), in relation to the East, and the West is that in Russia literature, history and everyday reality are so closely intertwined that sometimes it is almost impossible to clearly define their boundaries and root causes that give rise to consequences. According to the famous Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovsky, Russia has always been a liteart-centric country.

What is worth focusing on in the first place is the topic of "superfluous people" in Russian literature, as one of the illustrative examples of the strengthening of nihilistic positions in culture. Usually these are bright, intelligent, capable and strong people. The phrase taken from the Soviet school literature lesson: “who entered into an irreconcilable conflict with the world around them” perfectly fit here. There is no particular point in arguing about conflict and irreconcilability. Difficulties arise with the determination of the initiator of the confrontation.

A “superfluous person” can choose several strategies for his behavior in the social sphere: he begins, as they say, “swimming against the tide”, denying by his behavior, by all his activities the foundations, traditions and orders that surround him, criticize and annihilate everything that they find important and valuable characters around him; to turn (speaking with a large degree of convention) to the Chinese tradition of “wu-wei”, that is, non-action, stepping aside and from the sidelines of reality with mixed feelings, observing the events passing by him. Both strategies of behavior do not provide him with the main thing - complete freedom and, as a consequence, independence from the world. A person needs him, his own, albeit negative, reaction to him indirectly confirming his value for his existence.

The tragedy of the situation for the hero is that he is not able to find a place for himself in the world, and not because he is trying badly, or is somehow “wrong” to act. This situation is very difficult to describe in words, as it is said: “A spoken thought is a lie.” But it's worth trying. Sometimes, from early childhood, a character begins to understand with ever-increasing intensity and acuteness (not always accepting) his otherness, his dissimilarity from those around him. The rest, in turn, as they can, try to strengthen this confidence in him.

This dissimilarity may not necessarily have a positive (stronger, smarter, more talented than others) or negative (weaker, dumber, more mediocre, and therefore more envious, deceitful, heartless) character. It's just that a person does not organically fit into what is happening around him: games, relationships with friends, elders. He quite sincerely does not understand why it is necessary to behave in this way and not otherwise, why he should do what, in his opinion, is uninteresting and absolutely unnecessary. Over time, the situation does not get better for him.

The second case of "being superfluous" of a person is that he does not accept the surrounding reality and the orders that exist in it, because he sees, acutely feels the blatant contradiction of reality and the postulates and values proclaimed by it as a shrine, instilled and requiring worship from childhood. This usually happens through disappointment and shifting to the edge of the social (the term marginalization, supposedly, is not entirely appropriate here).

Not understanding the general, not finding ways and opportunities to integrate into it, the hero comes to a choice: to passively resist, pulling back and enclosing himself in an “ivory tower” (or to act in a diametrically opposite way, going underground); try to annihilate the surrounding world. The first option leads to a recession (with all the conventionality of this term in the context of this study) and, with the unwillingness or inability to focus on the acquisition and structure of the inner world, “thereby opens the prospect of self-destruction” [1, 112]. The second option, if implemented, will lead the “winner” to an almost identical result, that is, the threat “to become superfluous for himself as well. And this is already a direct path to nihilism” [1, 112]. The one and the other path, if we consider it to the end, are equally dead ends and destructive, both for the subject and for the object.

So, the hero finds himself, at first glance, in a hopeless, more precisely, desperate situation, without addressing the transcendental situation. He is not able to find himself, even to begin laying the foundation of the inner space. He is quite successful in devaluing the value of this world in his own eyes. What keeps him in the space of the common, not allowing him to make a final decision regarding his own existence? This feeling used as a "last resort" is love. It does not seem appropriate to give a clear unambiguous definition of this feeling within the framework of this study. Therefore, the behavior of the characters should be considered in the context of the understanding and ideas of the author of the work.

Throughout his literary life, the hero cannot find his place in the world around him. To enter the realm of the immanent, he needs to understand his subjective space, at least try to put some semblance of order in it. It is impossible to do this for various reasons: due to weakness of will, lack of rational, excessive sentimentality, confusion, all of the above inevitably leads to banal anger or deadening indifference. Hence the nature of the relationship with others is basically not carrying anything but negative. Such communication with the world only strengthens a person in the belief that this is the only possible line of behavior.

And so, something happens that does not fit into the consciousness of the character, something that cannot be predicted rationally, explained from the standpoint of aesthetics, and overcome with the help of will: there is a meeting with the future subject of love (it's doubted if the expression "object of adoration" can be used here). It knocks out the last support from under the feet, overturns, or unceremoniously pushes into the background all the theoretical constructions created and provided by the hero, causing the latter to find himself in a state of a kind of vacuum, not knowing how to behave. The inner world with its experiences and self-reflection ceases to be relevant, external interaction also becomes problematic, focus on love comes to the fore.

In other words, the incident cannot be described as "the most tragic moment in the life of a hero". In this regard, given the indisputable weight and seriousness of the theses of the author of "The Way to Nothing", we will try to take the liberty of expressing certain objections to some of them. There is no point in denying that "... it, as it can only be in a great novel, is not only not accidental, but obligatory and inevitable" [1, 148]. Love is necessary for a person, it is vital for him, thanks to her it is possible, even if not to be healed, but at least to begin getting rid of theories and emotional states that are deadening the soul and life. The inspiring power of this feeling cannot be compared to anything else.

What follows, however, requires, in our opinion, some very significant clarifications. From a formal point of view, it is possible to agree that "Such is the statute of love for a novel, that it fulfills or does not fulfill the claim for the fullness of life: it is the decisive test of the hero according to the most significant criterion" [1, 148]. By the right of the reader, that is, being familiar with the texts of the

novels referred to in “The Way to Nothing”, we venture to generalize the following sentence somewhat, correcting it as follows: “And practically none of the heroes withstands this test”.

Love, indeed, should enliven, even humanize a work of art, putting the characters before a choice, necessarily difficult and even painful, to succumb to the impulse and feeling or ignore it. Both the first and the second can be sudden and overwhelming, defying any available analysis, which is quite consistent with the “decisive test of the hero according to the most significant criterion.” It is impossible to withstand this test simply because this feeling has nothing to do with love!

You can start at least with the lack of freedom regarding the subject of “love” of the protagonist. This is either a completely unfamiliar person or a very superficial acquaintance, and the described circumstances do not imply an improvement in the given situation. In addition, very often a woman becomes an object of adoration, neither for social, nor for intellectual, nor for any other qualities, except perhaps external (everything is quite stereotypical here: youth, beauty, grace, etc.), not absolutely suitable for the hero.

An attempt under such conditions to establish at least some kind of relationship, in advance and guaranteed, is doomed to failure. But after all, initially, it seems, it is about love, about that feeling that is only capable of becoming a turning point in a person's life, returning him to the world, making him reject and forget the disastrous path? Instead, there is not a turning point, but, no matter how harsh it may sound, the dying cry of existence, a parody of an attempt at salvation, which becomes a “catalyst” for a denouement, no doubt dramatic, which is especially indicative of the example of Yevgeny Vasilyevich Bazarov. The “decisive test of the hero”, which, without a doubt, and should be so, turns into some kind of nightmare, reminiscent of Nietzsche's “push the falling”.

As for the hero, it can be seen with the naked eye that he is absolutely not ready for such a variant of “love”. His life is a doubt and a search, even if the former are very often ephemeral, vague or too far-fetched, and the latter is distorted. He is among others, not understanding and not accepting their final life choices, their reassurance and complacency. If we conduct a thought experiment and assume that most of the “love lines” ended “successfully”, then, frankly, it is impossible to imagine Bazarov, Chatsky, Pechorin or Onegin, quoting from memory one of Ostrovsky's characters, “sitting in the morning over a cup of coffee, in a pink robe ...”. In this case, they would simply pass into the category of those characters whose life credo was rejected ontologically and ethically.

In this context, a reasonable question arises, what in this case is understood by the word “love”. The definition given by Deacon Andrei Kuraev suits enough, according to which love is a gratuitous desire for the good of a loved one. Taking this as a starting point, the very understanding of the test of a literary hero by love is radically changed. From now on, it ceases to be a strange demonstration of youth, beauty, grace, or, more simply, inaccessibility in front of the main character, only accelerating

the tragic denouement. Here, however, another difficulty arises: the author will have to complicate the heroine as much as possible, make her not only feel and think, but also reflect.

Much closer to this is the man from Kuprin's story "The Garnet Bracelet". For all the controversy of Zheltkov's position and the tragedy of the result of his life, one cannot fail to note the life-affirming nature of his feelings. Love gives him the strength to live, bringing hope, hope in spite of everything, no matter what external obstacles and conventions, to stay in this state.

If we take the above definition as a basis, then in the position of a hero settling down, sliding into nothingness, there is the possibility of finding a fulcrum almost in the Archimedean sense. He manifests the need for something else, the obligation of mediation to them. Hence, not a disappearance, but a transformation of the character's test. It ceases to be the final path of life into nothingness, the last in all senses of the word, acquiring a new, opposite to the previous meaning.

Gaining through the appeal to another experience of his own responsibility to a person, responsibility and understanding behavior on his part is expected. In this case, it is impossible to call characters, for example, Chekhov's "The Seagull" lovers. The craving for a person, a deep sincere feeling for him, should be repeated, the desire for his good, presupposes communication, that is, a dialogue, not a monologue. To love means to talk, by all means hearing the other. The value of relationships lies in the fact that they should improve people's lives, not worsen them.

Considering the "complete indifference and disregard of the one whom they love, to those who love him (her)" [1, 243], Chekhov's heroes can be called in love, but not in another, not even in themselves, it would be rather strange, but love, but solely in their own suffering. Moreover, these sufferings look rather unattractive, since they occupy the characters, it seems to me, not in a love or any other context, but solely for the sake of the suffering itself. Hence the result: "Each of Chekhov's lovers feels lonely and causes a feeling of loneliness in the one who loves him. They all suffer, and they themselves give rise to suffering in others" [1, 243].

It's time to answer the questions posed at the beginning of the study.

Culture in general and literature in particular are able to develop without direct appeal to the absolute, relying solely on the mundane. The problem here is that this development is uneven and, most importantly, temporary. And it leads, one way or another, to deviations, that is, to an active or passive denial of being and life. It follows that diseases and crises in the sphere of the symbolic will repeat themselves with a certain periodicity, based on an imperfect human nature. This idea, in our opinion, is successfully expressed by Stanislaw Lem in his "Return from the Stars" and "Solaris": humanity "conquers" space, studies other worlds, encounters the unknown and incomprehensible, but not in order to understand it, but for in order to humanize it, "crush it under yourself", remaking it in your own way. Wherever a person is, everything around him should be clear and understandable, that

is, the way he wants and sees, with all this not having a clear idea of the truth. This, according to the writer, is our main and only goal.

Taking into account the historical experience of our country, it can be argued with a certain degree of certainty that a literary work is primary in relation to social reality, sometimes influencing it in the most tragic way. But the situation does not lack optimism.

The source of the solution is often where the problem lies. Of course, in this context, the reasoning was conducted on the part of the readers, and they do not pretend either to the truth, much less to the generally validity of their position. Although, it is precisely going beyond the limits of the hero's inner experiences, his turning to another (at this point the natural and social principles of the individual intersect), openness to him, that are able to outlive nihilism as a phenomenon, to give a literary work something that he so often lacks, that is, not life-denying rather life-affirming character. This, in turn, opens the way for culture to the topic of the absolute.

### **References**

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