



A way out of hell: Dante and the philosophy of personal salvation in post-Soviet Russia

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Abstract

This article examines the transformation of Dante’s image in post-Soviet scholarship. The author shows how Russian philologists Vladimir Bibikhin, Olga Sedakova, and Georgii Chistiakov introduced a new image of Dante to post-Soviet readers in fresh translations of his work, scholarly writings, and lecture courses that revealed previously obscured philosophical and theological dimensions of his texts. The post-Soviet reader came into contact with a more complex image of Dante than previously portrayed in official Soviet literary scholarship: Dante the philosopher, the Christian humanist, the spiritual guide who calls upon individuals to embark upon a difficult but crucial existential journey. The author also shows how the unstable and transitional decade of the 1990s was a time of a particularly active study of Dante’s philosophical and poetic anthropology. Dante’s main themes (personal salvation, activism, living in tradition) resonated profoundly with intellectuals during the late Soviet and early post-Soviet years, which were marked by a special soteriological attitude and a belief that individuals and society not only can but *must* change.

Keywords Italian renaissance · Dante · Russian philosophy · Bibikhin · Sedakova · Chistiakov

Dante’s optical instruments, his ‘mirrors and convex lenses’, are intended for looking closely into the fabric of contemporaneity, its perishable texture, which is for some reason intended for salvation. Perhaps that is why his Comedy often turns out to be a means of basic necessity precisely where salvation is very far away—or it seems that it is far.

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The comfort zone of Dante's *Inferno*

In the Soviet Union, official scholars of Dante tended to focus on Dante's *Inferno*, stopping short of the other two Kingdoms of the Afterlife depicted by the poet in his *Divine Comedy: Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Similarly, Russian unofficial intellectuals (writers, thinkers, poets) of the Soviet era drew upon the *Inferno* with higher frequency in their work. Imprisoned in a labor camp at Kolyma, the writer Varlam Shalamov found himself in a real hell that reminded him of the *Inferno*'s cold depths. In contrast to the aspiration of *Purgatorio* and the good of *Paradiso*, the anguish portrayed in the *Inferno* simply hit closer to home for imprisoned poets of the GULAG, writers who lived through the German Blockade of Leningrad, and those who fought in the Second World War. For Anna Akhmatova, Dante's muse was the one "who dictated to Dante the pages of Hell". Alexander Solzhenitsyn references the epic poem in the title of his novel, *In the First Circle*. Indeed, during the Soviet era, it was the *Inferno*, rather than the *Comedy*'s other two *cantiche*, that found the greatest resonance: both among those who suffered during it and those who created its new cultural models.

Karl Marx's favorite writer, the man glorified by Engels as "the last poet of the Middle Ages and the first poet of the New Time" (Engels 1962, p. 382), could not help but become a source of sustenance for a Marxist–Leninist scholasticism. The Soviet reader knew a severe and fearsome Dante: a moralist damning the papal curia, moneylenders, and the nascent bourgeoisie; a politician opposed to the Church's secular authority; a prophet of a united humanity and earthly paradise. According to the influential Soviet Dante scholar Il'ia Golenishchev-Kutuzov, at the beginning of the October Revolution, the well-known Bolshevik and revolutionary thinker Anatolii Lunacharskii liked to recall Dante's famous words from his letter to Cangrande: "But dropping all subtle investigation, we may say briefly that the end of the whole and of the part is to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and lead them to the state of felicity" (Alighieri 1904, p. 351). Felicity was understood here, of course, in the sense of the triumph of Russian communism.

During the Soviet era, Dante's work was continually exploited to suit the ideological needs of the regime.¹ From numerous attempts to accentuate the "progressive" aspects of Dante's thought and minimize those that were deemed anti-Soviet, as well as to find a concrete place for the poet in the "universal development of world culture" (Golenishchev-Kutuzov 1971, p. 514),² his real image became completely indecipherable. According to the Russian poet and thinker Olga Sedakova (born 1949), "There was an insurmountable wall between Dante and the Soviet reader. It consisted of complete ignorance about everything related to theology, aesthetics, and ethics of a different, non-'materialist' type" (Sedakova 2013). The time of militant atheism

¹ Similar ideologization processes took place in the poet's homeland under Mussolini. See: (Albertini 1996) and (Scorrano 2001).

² The fundamental theoretical position of Soviet historical and philosophical scholarship stipulated that each period in the development of world philosophy, starting from antiquity, was a necessary link leading to the "glorious crown" of philosophical thought: Marxism–Leninism. Within this framework, Dante and his era were also such a link. For an account of these features of the Soviet historical and philosophical thought see (Soboleva 2018).

imposed its rigid framework on Dante's thinking. Scholars exaggerated his "heretical tendencies" while downplaying his deep Christian humanism, thereby making any objective interpretation impossible. Aleksei Dzhivelegov, a well-known Soviet scholar of Dante, noted: "[E]verything that is alive in Dante's religion comes from heresy. [...] One doesn't have to read the *Comedy* very attentively to immediately see that Dante's religion is nobler and more humane than the official religion" (Dzhivelegov 2018, pp. 338–339).

The Soviets were not alone in their rewriting of Dante. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the tsarist ecclesiastical censors were as severe towards Dante as their Soviet successors. The fate of one of the greatest Catholic poets in a country that is traditionally Eastern Orthodox and hostile to the Roman faith was complicated. In her study of the reception of the *Divine Comedy* in Russia, Kristina Landa observes that prerevolutionary censors found even the very title of Dante's masterwork blasphemous (*koshchunstvennyi*) and "made claims mainly to those verses of the first *cantica* that somehow touched on the Sacred Tradition or theology" (Landa 2021, pp. 147–148). However, for the official ideologies of both Tsarist and Soviet Russia, the *Inferno* was the most acceptable and neutral *cantica*. *Purgatorio* already presented difficulties. First and foremost, this "intermediate location" simply did not exist in Orthodox teaching.³ The afterlife in Eastern Orthodox Christianity is divided into two spaces: hell and heaven, in contrast to Catholicism, where there is also a third space, the purgatory.⁴ This dichotomy of the Orthodox afterlife undergirds Juri Lotman and Boris Uspenskii's seminal essay, *Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture* (1977), which argues that Russian culture is fundamentally dualistic. The authors argue that traditional Russian culture had no concept of progress in a gradualist or tentative sense, preferring to divide up the available world into two mutually exclusive spaces: holy and sinful. The option of a "free neutral zone" was alien; all values were located "in a bipolar value field, separated by a sharp line without any neutral axiological zone" (Lotman and Uspenskii 1996, p. 339). The bipolar nature of Russian culture, they argued, precluded any kind of purgatory in Russian concepts of the afterlife.

Lotman and Uspenskii's binary cultural model squares aptly with the *Inferno*'s position in Russian culture as a comfort zone considering censors' tolerance of a Communist-like utopian *Paradiso*, even in an atheistic state. After all, in building a communist paradise, Soviet culture had in fact retained the same archaic binary scaffolding. In the post-Soviet period, which I will discuss in detail below, public intellectuals such as Olga Sedakova, Vladimir Bibikhin, and Father Georgii Chistiakov sought to push back against the bad infinity of this dual model and encourage

³There is no doctrine of purgatory in Eastern Orthodoxy. However, the belief that the afterlife of the soul, which after death remains in an intermediate state until the Last Judgment, can be changed through active actions (primarily through prayers of the Church, relatives, and friends) pervades Orthodox liturgical practice. For parallels on this issue between the Western and Eastern churches see (Ratzinger 2007, p. 219).

⁴As Archimandrite Simeon (Tomachinskii) argues in his study, the *Divine Comedy* indirectly made important adjustments to the teaching of purgatory that had been developing in the Catholic Church for a long time (and were formalized as part of the doctrine in the 15th century by the Councils of Florence): the preservation of free will in purgatory and the rejection of its infernalization. "Due to Dante", notes Archimandrite Simeon, "the posthumous purification of souls began to be seen not as torment or punishment, but as a spiritual elevation, the process of moral change" (Tomachinskii 2020, p. 86).

faith in that “third zone” where value can be created by our own efforts in real time. Following the Italian poet, they point to the active nature of those souls who fell into this “intermediate place” (which was understood primarily as the strongest poetic metaphor for earthly life in general⁵). They tried to spur among their weary compatriots a desire for personal transformation, ascent to freedom, and spiritual growth. Finally, Dante’s *Purgatorio* is, of course, a place of hope that a person realizes his potential and good purpose. Souls in Dante’s second Afterlife Kingdom strive for theosis, a union with God (divinization). After the horrors of the Stalin era, which could compete with the torments encountered in Dante’s *Inferno*, faith in the good of man was shaken.

I think, our century, destroying people right
And left, has diverted our eyes away
From Dante’s Hell: they buried (alive) and burned
And surpassed all conceivable torment.

(*I myslimykh muk prevzoshli varianty*)

(Kushner 2015, p.183)

It was time for the themes widely exploited by Russian poets and émigré writers—suffering, physical and spiritual death, victims and torturers, and exile—to finally give way to a faith in progress towards a changed state.

The official Dante and the underground Dante. Soviet Dante scholarship

In the 1930–40s, an epochal literary event took place in Soviet Russia: a complete Russian translation of the *Divine Comedy* was gradually published, *cantica* by *cantica*, by the renowned translator and poet, Mikhail Lozinskii. A great Christian poet was published in a country where God was taboo, yet most of the salient religious dimensions of his poetry were obscured in the translation, and thus became unobtainable to the Soviet reader. Lozinskii, who had a deep knowledge of the philosophical, ethical, and theological dimensions of the *Comedy*, did not address these elements in his annotations to the translation, limiting himself instead to general historical information. It was important to Soviet censorship that the atheistic public not become literate in the religious meanings of Dante’s text (Landa 2021, pp. 159–163). In fact, the result of Lozinskii’s translation was to veil the *Comedy*’s metaphysical content, shifting the emphasis to humanitarian affairs (culture, history, politics), so that Dante’s philosophical and poetic anthropology, which calls for an active change in oneself for the sake of personal salvation, eludes the reader. According to the Russian philosopher Vladimir Bibikhin (1938–2004), “Lozinskii’s translation of the *Divine Comedy*,

⁵Dante’s *Purgatorio* looks terrestrial in comparison with the subterranean *Inferno* and heavenly *Paradiso*, and thus becomes an energetic symbol of man’s earthly pathway to God – “the mountain that he calls us to climb... precisely during our lifetime, before the moment when our relatives and our friends will have to pray for us as for the dead and to call for divine relief (*oslabiy*)” (Chistiakov 2016, p. 78). This specific understanding of Dante’s *Purgatorio* has attracted both Russian prerevolutionary religious thinkers and post-Soviet intellectuals to this *cantica*. Such an image is also close to Russian Orthodox soteriology, which tends to emphasize the importance of lifetime repentance.

for which he received the Stalin prize in 1940 (more than Dante ever received), shows how unprepared we were to approach the early Renaissance, to come closer to Dante” (Bibikhin 1998, p. 31). The translation of a collection of Dante’s minor works (1968), in Bibikhin’s view, repeats the same tendency: “It builds itself into a ready-made idea of what to expect from the Renaissance: something nice and familiar, understandable, something humane in the humanitarian sense, something aesthetically elevated and abstract” (Ibid.). This “ready-made idea” hindered the readers’ ability to access Dante himself and the original meanings of his texts. Delving into the theoretical issues of translation in his article “Substitutional Translation”, Bibikhin states more specifically the goal of translation in general: “It is not at all the case that a good translator shows us the foreign author as he really is while a bad translator distorts him. A good translator makes him ours; he brings him into our home” (Bibikhin 2001, pp. 196–197). With regard to the Soviet translation of Dante he argues:

The peculiarity of Lozinskii’s *Divine Comedy* is that, while conveying the structure of the original in detail, it does little to root it in our culture. This is perhaps characteristic of the translation school of the 1930–50s. It was a product of its cold time. How could it make Western reality something intimate and homelike when it itself felt homeless? (Bibikhin 2001, p. 197)

In their work, Soviet scholars, of course, referred to Lozinskii’s translation, but even those who knew the original text perfectly did not refer to it in official publications, because the original was deemed unreliable, containing many anti-Soviet ideas.

However, Lozinskii’s award-winning translation (Alighieri 1950) did possess a spirit of resistance. In one of his lectures on Dante given in 1997 on the radio station “Sofia”, the Russian Orthodox priest, philologist, and religious thinker Father Georgii Chistiakov (1953–2007) points to the beginning of Canto X of the *Inferno* as a particular instance that would not have escaped an attentive reader:

And here moves ahead, by a path along the edge,
(I vot idet, tropinkoyu, po krayu)
 Between the wall of the kremlin and the place of torment
(Mezhdu stenoj kremlya i mestom muk),
 My master, and I follow
(Uchitel’ moi, i ya vosled stupayu).

The original reads as follows:

Ora sen va per un secreto calle,
 tra’l muro de la terra e li martiri,
 lo mio maestro, e io dopo le spalle
 (Inf.10.1–3).

Rather than rendering Dante’s “muro de la terra” as “the ramparts of the city” or “the walls of the city”, Lozinskii employs “kremlya” (“kremlin”) which introduces the specific connotation of the Moscow Kremlin.⁶ Chistiakov believes that Lozinskii

⁶The word *kremel’* also just generally means a city fortress and does not always refer to the Kremlin.

uses this word unconsciously. “The poet overpowered the translator”, he notes (Chistiakov 2016, p. 102). However, there are reasonable grounds to believe that Lozinskii deliberately transfers the narrative of the *Comedy* to Soviet Russia. The *canto* continues, and we learn that here, along “the wall of the kremlin”, laid in fiery tombs are eternally tormented heretical souls, adherents of Epicureanism, the materialistic philosophy in which the soul dies with the body (“*che l’anima col corpo morta fanno*”) (Inf. 10.15). By inserting the word “kremlin” into the translation, Lozinskii refers the Soviet reader to a precise topographic point: the area near the wall of the Moscow Kremlin between the Nikolskaia and Spasskaia towers, which served as a burial place of prominent Bolshevik leaders (militant atheists and materialists). Lozinskii thereby literally sends these Bolsheviks to the sixth circle of Dante’s *Inferno*, where materialists are tormented for rejecting the immortality of the soul and committing self-separation from God.

Lozinskii’s translation thus subtly renders the consonance of Dante’s text to his own Soviet epoch. In this latent invective, there is something of Aleksei Losev’s brave ironic remarks in his *The Dialectics of Myth*: “It is absurd for a professor to dance, for a socialist to be afraid of eternal suffering or to love art” (Losev 2003, p. 51). An attentive, truth-seeking reader, plunging into Dante’s world through Lozinskii’s translation, could not help but want to go further to obtain acquaintance with the original source (which was arguably one of the most important tasks of the translator working under severe Soviet censorship).

Some Soviet thinkers dedicated themselves to the unseen but significant task of smuggling the real meanings of Dante’s texts into the Soviet Union. To approach the non-Marxist Dante was also possible through the “coded” writings and lectures of Losev (Manova 2020; Kusenko 2021, pp. 256–261), where he laid out his views on the Renaissance. Sergey Averintsev’s commentary on the publication in 1969 of *Novaya Zhizn* (*The New Life*) was a great help for entering into Dante’s world. According to Sedakova, a student of Averintsev, these comments

tore down the wall ‘between Dante and us’—and the delightful horizons of *The New Life* – philosophical, mystical, theological – its sophisticated symbolism, its poetic structure, its Christological script, opened up. [. . .] A completely new Universe was opening before the reader, the Universe of medieval thought and medieval beauty. (Sedakova 2013)

An important book summarizing the underground work of Soviet thinkers on nonideological interpretations of Dante was Alexander Dobrokhotov’s monograph, *Dante*, published in 1990 by the *Mysl’* press in the famous Soviet book series, *Thinkers of the Past*. This book was the final volume in this philosophical series and the first post-Soviet study of the Italian poet, where nominally Marx and Engels still figure most prominently in the bibliography, but, in fact, no trace of the ideologized Dante remains. For a better understanding of the philosophical dimensions of Dante’s texts, Dobrokhotov proposed the following theoretical preconditions (which stood in strong opposition to those stipulated by official Dante scholarship): First, “to admit that it is impossible to single out the ‘progressive’ part of Dante’s worldview and to separate it from the ‘reactionary’ one” (Dobrokhotov 1990, p. 6). Secondly, “to accept the fact that we should understand the integral and complete phenomenon

of Dante's thinking, i.e., what he himself offers us, and not what we would like to include in 'modernity'" (*Ibid*, p. 7). And, thirdly, Dobrokhotov insists on the importance "of admitting that the era, the meaning and the purpose of which Dante tried to express, was not only a link in the chain of history, but also put forth a self-sufficient and original type of culture" (*Ibid*, p. 7).

Dobrokhotov's work became a necessary propaedeutics for entering into the philosophical layers of Dante's works, and it also opened up for readers a wide range of texts about Dante that were unknown in the USSR by Osip Mandelstam, Viacheslav Ivanov, Dmitrii Merezhkovsky, Petr Bitsilli, and others. Dobrokhotov concludes his preconditions for entering into Dante's worldview with a suggestion for future researchers that found a wide response in the post-Soviet intellectual environment: "That which is great is re-read by every generation and reborn. From this, in particular, it follows that we will not be unfaithful to the historical approach if we just try to read Dante" (Dobrokhotov 1990, p. 8).

Three philologists, or "We'll just try to read Dante"

The 1990s were a time of an attentive examination of Dante's philosophical and poetic anthropology. Dante and the Italian Renaissance in general permeated intellectual discourse of the first post-Soviet decade (although not as intensely as in the Silver Age of Russian culture, see: (Silard and Barta 1989), (Kopper 1994), (Kusenko 2021), (Sedakova 2021)). When the Iron Curtain collapsed and Marxist–Leninist doctrine was abolished, it was necessary to fill the resulting cultural vacuum, to bring back the feeling of true transcendence, and here Dante's universal genius helped. During the Soviet period, Russian intellectuals had long suffered from a "yearning for world culture".⁷ They yearned for true value, for the right to experience an epoch on its own terms and not as a transition or waystation to some utopian future projection, for a nonideological encounter with history and tradition, and for the "incriminating light" of antiquity (Bibikhin 1998, p. 34),⁸ of which Soviet citizens had been deprived. Examining the role of Averintsev and Sedakova as public intellectuals, Vera Pozzi observes:

The main task for Averintsev and Sedakova (reminiscent of the activities of the humanists of the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries) was the restoration of broken ties with the cultural past (both Christian and secular). In other words, they sought to offer all the richness of tradition, finding new words for this, giving a

⁷On February 22, 1933, speaking at the Leningrad House of Press, Osip Mandelstam called acmeism "a yearning for world culture". The expression came to be widely used by Russian intellectuals of the Soviet era.

⁸In fact, it was a yearning for the lost "sonship" to world culture, which the *homo sovieticus* proudly refused to own as its heritage. Thus, Soviet culture abandoned the humiliating understanding of man as "'*homo haeres*', a being inheriting and transferring inheritance" (Sedakova 2010b, p. 169). The "prodigal son"—the post-Soviet subject—returning to the native home of world culture and striving for moral and spiritual growth, could not help but feel its unworthiness before it. When Bibikhin read Petrarch, he deeply felt "his unworthiness (*nedostoinstvo*) in the face of Antiquity", before ancient virtues, before the "lessons of the highest realization of man". In other words, Antiquity reveals our present imperfection in comparison with the heights of spirit previously achieved in history.

person the opportunity to rediscover their own value, to open themselves to the Other and to the transcendent. (Pozzi 2019, p. 67)

Many Russian intellectuals in the 1980s and 1990s understood their task in a similar way. One of the significant scholarly events of the 1990s in Russia, thanks to the efforts of the philologist Vyacheslav Vsevolodovich Ivanov, was the opening of the Department of History and Theory of World Culture at Moscow State University. In 1992, the department became home to the new Institute of World Culture, which brought together Russia's premier scholars of literature and history, such as Mikhail Gasparov, Aron Gurevich, and Sergei Averintsev. That same year, Sedakova and Bibikhin began giving lecture courses there, a fact that is mentioned in their personal correspondence. Bibikhin wrote: "You are on the schedule of those teaching Dante next semester. I am 'the Renaissance' on this list, which for me also means Dante" (Bibikhin and Sedakova 2019, p. 26).

Vladimir Bibikhin, Olga Sedakova, and Georgii Chistiakov, who also gave a course of lectures on Dante on the Orthodox radio station "Sofia", in 1997–98 (these lectures were published in a separate edition (Chistiakov 2016)), opened up to their listeners and readers a full panorama of Dante's works, including the *cantiche Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, replete with philosophical and theological dimensions. For Sedakova, it is in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* where ethical discussions—"of reason and faith, evil and suffering, mercy and justice, free will and destiny"—continually unfold. In Hell, explains Sedakova, "the good of reason", *il ben dell' intelletto*, is lost, so it is simply impossible to hold conversations on general, 'abstract' topics there" (Sedakova 2020, pp. 35–36). Russian readers learned from the three thinkers how deeply Dante experienced and absorbed the Bible (as shown in the verses of the *Comedy*, which allude to the Sermon on the Mount, The Lord's Prayer, the Lamb of God [Agnus Dei] and other Christian prayers, as well as the Psalms from the Old Testament), that Dante's idea of light is permeated with Eastern Christian mysticism, and that he was a direct heir of Aristotle, Augustine, Gregory the Great, Dionysius the Areopagite, St. Gregory Palamas, Boethius, Thomas Aquinas, and other Fathers of the Church and great figures in Western thought.

Bibikhin, Sedakova, and Chistiakov all took great care to closely study the original Italian text, believing that the authentic transmission of Dante's voice was an essential element in the education of a person and their soul. Bibikhin and Chistiakov analyzed terms from various works of Dante and translated some of the most important passages of the *Comedy*, which remained unclear in Lozinskii's translation. Sedakova set herself the more ambitious task of creating a new line-by-line annotated translation of the *Divine Comedy*. As she suggests, "With Dante—with an annotated Dante!—he (the reader) learns, for example, about cause and effect, about the part and the whole, about 'teleological warmth' as Mandelstam put it. One can think differently than the mechanistic system of the new era taught to him" (Sedakova 2020, p. 20).

In his essay *Conversation about Dante* written in the 1930s, to which Sedakova refers, Osip Mandelstam argues that Dante's texts will turn into a conversation about modernity.

It is inconceivable to read Dante's cantos without directing them toward contemporaneity. They were created for that purpose. They are missiles for capturing the future. They demand commentary in *futurum*.

For Dante time is the content of history understood as a simple synchronic act; and vice-versa: the contents of history are the joint containing of the time (*sovместnoe derzhanie vremeni*) by its associates, competitors, and co-discoverers. (Mandelsham 2002, p. 67)

Sedakova's task is precisely to make the new post-Soviet readers of Dante "associates, competitors and co-discoverers", to arouse in the passive and cynical post-Soviet reader the desire to embark on a personal existential journey with the *Comedy*, to interpret it with his own life. For this task a new translation—as close as possible to the literal and annotated, but at the same time performed by a poet, enlivening the lines of the great Italian poet in modern Russian poetic language—was needed. Both scholarly rigor and poetic breadth were required to give the readers artistic pleasure and at the same time to invite them into a laboratory of thought. This task of translation was wonderfully expressed by the Russian philosopher Merab Mamardashvili (1930–1990), who had to translate certain parts of the *Comedy* for his own lectures. His point is akin to the defamiliarization strategies of early Russian formalism:

Lozinskii's translation is, of course, brilliant. Precisely because of this, it sometimes obscures meanings, simply because in reality, in our minds, meanings take form when we come to a stop, that is, when there is a difficulty. The smoothness of translation, on the contrary, makes us race past many places, but if the translation were clumsier (*neukliuzhii*), then we would stop at the fact that some words are not accidental. (Mamardashvili 2015, p. 104)

Below, I will give only a few examples of how the authors work with Dante's original text, whose living word they tried to convey in Russian. These examples relate to Dante's anthropology, his concept of personality and consciousness.

All three Russian thinkers pay close attention to the concepts related to the sphere of the mind in Dante. Sedakova emphasizes "how filled and differentiated the field of the 'mind' (*um*) is in Dante's dictionary: *intelligenza, intelletto, ingegno, mente, ragione, scienza, canoscenza, coscienza, memoria* [...] each of these extremely Dantean words is a kind of hero of an intellectual adventure, no less than the characters encountered in the three Kingdoms of the Afterlife" (Sedakova 2013). One of the words from Dante's discourse on the mind that is difficult to translate into other languages is the word "*mente*". In the Russian translation of Dante's *Convivio*, for example, we read that "reason distinguishes humans from other animals". In the Italian version, one would reasonably expect the word "*ragione*" instead of the word "reason", but Dante (it is extremely important for understanding his discourse on personhood) uses "*mente*". Regarding this term, Chistiakov notes:

This is the Latin *mens* (*Gen. mentis*). And I must say that it really cannot be translated into Russian. 'Intellect', 'reason', 'mind'—none of these meanings are appropriate. *Mens*, or the Italian *mente*, is something more: it is intellect, heart, mind, reason, and soul all at once. [...] Perhaps an equivalent to this term in the language of the New Testament is the apostle's [Paul the Apostle's] expression the 'inner man' or 'hidden man of the heart'. Our 'I' in its wholeness and inseparability—this is the *mente* of Dante's *Convivio*, and it is exactly what

distinguishes a person from an animal. *Mente* is something important in a person that leads us forward, encourages us not to stop, but to move further and further. (Chistiakov 2016, p. 130)

As we can see, behind the subtleties of translation there are some crucial problems of Dante's philosophy of mind and the soteriological perspective of his thought.

Sedakova's translation of the speech of King Manfred whom Dante meets in *Purgatorio* (a sinner who repents at the last moment before his death) helps to clarify Dante's concept of human consciousness. To express the inexpressible—the abyss of the human soul and the abyss of divine mercy—Dante infuses the king's speech with words full of vivid philosophical and theological images that reveal the author's brilliant theological education. In Mandelbaum's English translation (Alighieri 1980) of the passage, Manfred says:

My sins were ghastly, but the Infinite
 Goodness has arms so wide that It accepts
 who ever would return, imploring It.
 (Purg.3.121–123)

Sedakova observes that the Russian translation (incidentally, like the English quoted above) lacks a very important accent: “Infinite Goodness” accepts (or better embraces, as one hugs a loved one) not “the one *who* turns to It”, but, as Sedakova clarifies, following the original text, “*what* turns to It” (*che prende ciò che si rivolge a lei*) (Purg.3.123). Thus, she continues, it is

not the whole man who can qualify for mercy, but only *something* in him. And this *something* will be accepted. All the strangeness and difficulty of Dante's expression truly conveys how unthinkable for the human mind, how unlimited and incredibly open the power of this *Goodness* is. (Sedakova 2020, p. 12)

It is worth adding that equally incomprehensible for Dante is the abyss of human consciousness, which can reject “Infinite Goodness” with its rational side and may lack the will to find it. Rather, with a subtle irrational *something* in us, it stretches out a hand or just a little finger towards God, and this impulse will be sensed. Paying attention to Dante's every word, Bibikhin, Sedakova, and Chistiakov made it possible for the Russian-speaking reader not only to feel the beauty and depth of the *Divine Comedy*'s thoughts and images, but also to understand the important religious and philosophical aspects of human existence and to expand modest, personal, and existential experience after many years of atheistic maximalist Marxist–Leninist ideology.

In general, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* were extremely difficult for the majority of readers brought up under the Soviet system. These parts of the *Comedy* are filled with prayers, liturgical hymns, and Old Testament allusions, which were practically unknown and incomprehensible to people who had experienced decades of exclusion from European culture and Christianity. Dante either resorts to the Latin version of the sacred texts, which in his time in the Catholic environment were in circulation in Latin, or translates them into *volgare*. In instances where *volgare* is used, the anthropological perspective of his thought is more clearly revealed. As Father Georgii

notes, Dante's translation into Italian of the Lord's Prayer (Purg.11) "directly concerns what Dante thinks about man, about his identity, and it is intended not just for rote repetition, but for personal awakening" (Chistiakov 2016, p. 156). The focus of Dante's text on real and effective personal changes—ultimately, personal salvation—resonated greatly with the thinkers of the late Soviet and early post-Soviet realities of the 1990s, periods in which soteriological attitudes and the belief in the necessity and possibility of changes in individuals and society took hold.

"Dante's task"

In 1992, one year after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Bibikhin delivered his course on the Renaissance (later adapted into a book *Novyi Rennessans (The New Renaissance)*) at Moscow State University. The philosopher was preparing this course at a time when Russia was reeling from the loss of its Soviet identity. Bibikhin sought to draw attention to the lessons of the Renaissance epoch that could help break multiple dead ends in post-Soviet historical and cultural development, and Dante became the central figure for him.

Significantly, for Bibikhin, one of the important components of the Italian Renaissance, whose essence the philosopher finds primarily in Dante, is activism. However, it is not a humanistic activism in a secularized sense that starts simply from the optimistic placement of the human subject at the center of the universe. The Renaissance activism, according to Bibikhin, consists in an active attitude to one's own personhood and soul, as well as to the fate of the whole world. This Renaissance-era orientation stood in contrast, according to the Russian philosopher, with the medieval concept of spirituality, "which in a crisis easily leaves the world" (Bibikhin 1998, p. 173). To demonstrate that activism was a truly fundamental value of the Renaissance individual, Bibikhin refers to the *Comedy*. He stresses that Dante placed in his *Inferno*, or, more precisely, in the Ante-Inferno, the entrance hall of Hell, among the first sinners the *Ignavi* (Neutrals), condemned to the most terrible punishment of eternally chasing, naked and without any hope of reaching it, a white banner, while wasps and flies sting them. They are punished, because they never took a definite position in life, they lived as though they were dead and therefore remain stuck between life and death. Even Hell does not accept them.

As already mentioned, Bibikhin began his course on the Renaissance at a very complicated time in Russian history, which could have been terminal for Russian civilization, and he saw a serious threat to the future of Russian culture from the new post-Soviet *Ignavi* who embodied "socially dangerous mediocrity" (Sedakova 2010a), namely, the people unaccustomed to thinking critically and caught in mental *amechania*.

Collecting oneself, getting out of one's own darkness, and personal salvation were some of the central themes in the late Soviet philosophical circles. In the 1980s, these issues were constantly discussed in Merab Mamardashvili's public lectures, for whom Dante was an important companion along with Kant, Proust, and Descartes.⁹

⁹Mamardashvili's *Lectures on Proust* ("The Psychological Topology of the Way") contain abundant references to the *Divine Comedy* and Dante's "psychological topology" (Mamardashvili 2015, pp. 23–28, 33–38, 48–51, 52, 54, 57–59, 67, 103–105, etc.).

In one of his famous lecture courses, adapted into the book titled *The Psychological Topology of the Way*, Mamardashvili develops his “existential soteriology” (Solov’ev 2009), expounding the theme of a spiritual journey for the sake of personal salvation, illustrated with the images from Dante’s Afterlife. As Father Chistiakov has observed, Mamardashvili’s understanding of the Last Judgment appears to be strongly influenced by Dante: this eschatological event is not something that will happen to us in the afterlife, but is our present, the “indication of the quality of every minute of our existence” (Mamardashvili 2017, p. 581). In one of his last lectures, Mamardashvili suggests: “The Last Judgment means a simple thing: here and now you must extract meaning from your experience, so that it does not later repeat itself to ill effect. You must complete your life and be reborn or resurrected from the wreckage and ashes of the past” (Ibid.). Though he was not a religious thinker, he contended that one of philosophy’s most important tasks lay in personal spiritual salvation. As Erikh Solov’ev suggests, Mamardashvili believed that philosophy was “a special mental practice that prevents death during life or helps the resurrection of the living dead (*pri-zhizni-umershikh*)” (Solov’ev 2009, p. 189).

The soteriological aspiration of Dante’s works indeed took on a new significance in the post-Soviet era. The salvation of the “living dead”, both in the religious and secular sense, was the task the Russian intellectuals of the 1980–90s had set before themselves, and in this sense they continued Dante’s mission, which Father Georgii formulates as follows: “Dante’s main goal is to do something with people, change them and the world. This is not only poetry. This is Dante’s *task*. And Dante achieves this task. He descends with his readers into Hell, becoming a Vergil for them in order to save them from eternal torment while they are still alive” (Chistiakov 2016, p. 87).

Dante starts his spiritual journey with the lofty goal of changing a person in her lifetime. As Chistiakov suggests, Dante’s experience becomes “a real guide to the purification and salvation of the human soul, like the Ladder of John Climacus” (Chistiakov 2016, p. 201). The appeal of Dante’s texts, he argues, coincides with the appeal of Christianity and the Teachers of the Church: here on earth, one must actively work on one’s own salvation and hope for a *union* with God in *eternity*. For Father Georgii, as a priest and religious thinker, Dante is an example of a Christian who is actively concerned with his own salvation and that of “everyone and everything”, along with the whole world.¹⁰ He is deeply involved in the world. Everything matters to him: birds, animals, plants. Everyday burdens of peasants coexist on the *Comedy*’s pages with the glorious deeds of those who have gone down in history, with ancient gods and heroes, with questions of church dogma and universal significance. In Dante’s thought, Christian culture visibly contains Antiquity, all of the diversity of tradition

¹⁰This responsibility for the salvation and transfiguration of all Creation (animals and the natural world as a whole, i.e., the whole planet) echoes throughout Dante’s *Comedy*. In modern terms, Dante’s Christian ecology resonates with Russian culture. Imperial Christianities have tended to be anthropocentric and neglectful of this mandate, but the East Slavic Mother-Earth, the archaic concept whose echoes we find in Russian philosophy, literature, and, for example, in Russian Cosmism, adds a gentler note. Sedakova’s poetry, saturated with the agency of nature, is part of this tradition (Sandler et al. 2019), as well as Bibikhin’s writings on nature and “the problem of living matter” (Bibikhin 2021). In *The New Renaissance*, Bibikhin touches upon environmental issues and reflects on the Renaissance person’s “empathetic (*uchastlivoe*) attitude” to nature (Bibikhin 1998, p. 247).

and the entire universe with all its global events and “little things”. To his radio listeners, Father Georgii not only explained the philosophical and theological meaning of the *Comedy*, but also, with the help of Dante’s texts, made the audience aware of what modern humanity lacks—such as a keen involvement both in life’s current process and in tradition—thereby broadening their existential experience. As an Orthodox priest who at the same time positively regarded the Roman Catholic Church and its traditions and rooted himself in the Greco-Roman foundation of culture common to both branches of Christianity, Father Georgii played a particularly significant role in the era’s unveiling of Dante. He brought Dante into the Eastern Orthodox culture as if he had brought the poet home. He made the great Catholic poet near and dear to Russian believers. “I think that an Orthodox priest can and should think about world culture, about world spiritual experience, about poetry, about music, and about art”, argued Chistiakov. “You see, it is very important that we have the opportunity to talk competently about absolutely everything. It is very dangerous to drive yourself into a ghetto. And above all, of course, it is important to talk about those who can be called the eternal companions and eternal teachers of mankind, like Dante Alighieri” (Chistiakov 1997).

Bibikhin, too, stressed the need for the modern person’s active involvement in tradition and the restoration of humanity’s “goodness”. In *The New Renaissance* he argues:

Dante does not at all question the Christian dogma that there is no salvation without help from above; he only makes it clear that for the act of divine salvation, there must first be an object of salvation, a human being who has found itself or at least strives for self-fulfillment. The success of the meeting of the earthly and the heavenly depends on whether one comes to one’s Creator disintegrated and lost or recovers oneself. (Bibikhin 1998, p. 267)¹¹

Certain aspects of Russian Orthodox faith practices might be seen as actually having helped Bibikhin, Sedakova, and Chistiakov in recuperating Dante for the post-Soviet individual who was, on the one hand, too cynical and fatigued to be a proactive agent, but, on the other hand, could not humbly expect Divine Grace because he had most likely forgotten about his lost faith. Unlike certain Catholic (and much Protestant) dogma, Orthodox soteriology tends not to emphasize Grace versus Good Works, but rather synergy, cooperation between God and man, and the preparation of the individual to be a partner rather than a helpless supplicant to God.

For Bibikhin as for Chistiakov, Dante is an example of a person who actively strives for his salvation and recovers or gathers (*sobiraet*) himself for this with the help of “Antiquity”, restoring in his soul virtues, such as “Hatred of idleness, diligence, the capacity for spiritual impulses, hard work as food for the soul (‘Homo nascitur ad laborem et avis ad volatum’) and courageous constancy” (Bibikhin 1998, p. 279). In an encyclopedia article about Dante, Bibikhin emphasizes the “collective nature” of his genius: “Dante’s synthesis includes the Classical Greek image of the harmonious fullness of man, the Classical Roman civil activism, and the mystical depth of Christianity” (Bibikhin 2000–2001, p. 651). Such a strong bond with Antiquity, with tradition, is lacking, Bibikhin argues, in modernity:

¹¹More about Russian Orthodox faith practices can be found in (Kenworthy and Agadjanian 2021).

The modern man is so exceptional that he has gone into the unknown, into the darkness, and all measurements, assessments, and criteria have become inapplicable to him. In any case, Antiquity is not applicable to the modern man. An absolutely new man, he has disappeared from sight. Ancient thought, poetry, virtue, goodness were probably good, but they have gone. Now everything is completely different. (Bibikhin 1998, p. 34)

Bibikhin viewed the beauty of Dante's language and ideas as a crucial tool for conveying the liberating power of tradition. "When he wants to shake out evil and lies from the world 'like dust from a carpet' ", says Bibikhin, "there is an electric spark of such a tension in his words that it nonetheless passes through the layers of centuries" (Bibikhin and Sedakova 2019, p. 42). Bibikhin sought to convey to the post-Soviet society, which was, in fact, tired of decades of obsessive subjection to the Marxist–Leninist doctrine, the idea that true tradition is not a constraining force, but a timeless precious resource that opens opportunities for restoration and movement toward the new.

In this sense, the New Renaissance, which Bibikhin believed was necessary, was an appeal to Antiquity, a call for an immersion in it, a repetition of the same feeling, the same *Stimmung* in the Heideggerian sense (Magun 2015, pp. 142–143), which gives the possibility of salvation, a way out of cultural and historical dead ends. The Renaissance, Bibikhin suggests, "is not a past period of our history, but its essence. Any discovery of meaning is a step towards the Renaissance, which in its task is the same now as in past centuries" (Bibikhin 1998, p. 23). The main task of the Renaissance, according to Bibikhin, is "the restoration... the return of fullness, apokatastasis" (Bibikhin 1998, p. 33). Following the Russian religious philosophical tradition of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, Bibikhin sees in apokatastasis (the restoration of all, universal salvation in the fullness of being) the ultimate goal of human history and of each person. The *Divine Comedy* is a comedy, i.e., a story that suggests a fertile, harmonious ending, and from this bright optimistic side it more intimately (than themes of Hell or exile) intersects with Russian spiritual culture and its special eschatological mood, meaning the expectation of the world's salvation in the fullness of being. This characteristic belief of prerevolutionary Russian thought resounded with renewed vigor in the post-Soviet context with Bibikhin, although, probably, less optimistically, but just as firmly.

The 1980s and early 1990s in Russia can be characterized as a period of "yearning for world culture", akin to the appeal of thinkers and poets of the Russian Silver Age to the classical tradition. However, on the other side of Stalinism, this yearning is far less naïve and escapist, and far less self-congratulatory. The post-Soviet reality was in some way a postcatastrophic, postcrisis reality. In thinking through the nature of *Purgatorio*, Sedakova suggests it can be considered a site for Russia in the 1990s:

To live after avoiding catastrophe is probably the most tender and grateful kind of happiness known to man. There is no pride in this happiness. The saved knows that he has nothing to be proud of. And Dante's *Purgatorio* is the place of salvation. (Sedakova 2021, p. 22)

Russia's survivors begin where Dante began, by changing themselves in the present and disseminating the idea of a high-minded and energetic humility before tradition.

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