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## The Motif of Loss as Gain in Andrei Bitov's "Pushkin House"

This article analyses the motif of loss turning into gain that became fundamental for Andrei Bitov's artistic philosophy of the 1960s; it was this motif that contributed to a completely ambivalent aura that makes his legacy outstanding. First of all, it considers Bitov's *Pushkin House* (1964–1971) as a novel whose plot structure is mainly based on a variation of this motif. The article primarily focuses on the reasoning expressed by a philologist and philosopher Modest Platonovich Odoevtsev, whose point of view is that the October Revolution did not destroy Russian culture but, on the contrary, saved it from destruction.

**Key words:** Andrei Bitov, paradox, loss, gain, misunderstanding.

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Many researchers of Andrei Bitov's legacy may have noticed him tending to appeal to various kinds of paradox<sup>1</sup>. In this article, we will talk about Bitov's paradox-driven concept of *loss as gain* that played an important part in creative endeavours of the writer best known for *Pushkin House*, especially in the 1960s. It first appears to have originated in 1963 from a diary entry, initially not intended to be published, entitled as *The Prayer*, “You find God when you lose Him. For the time being, I could set aside thinking of Him as He was within me” [2, p. 173]. It is obvious

<sup>1</sup> For example, see: [1; 4; 5].  
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that the quoted reflection on loss turning into gain means that people cannot register and analyse a phenomenon that is inherent and inseparable from their personality. For example, a healthy person does not usually think of ailments and medicines, and has little to no interest in clinics, hospitals, and physicians. Hence, personal health prevents people from being interested in the phenomenon of health. To really think of health, to evaluate this phenomenon, to comprehend it, one will need a factor of loss. We don't think about the air we breathe as long as we have enough of it. The same goes for freedom that must be lost first to be of serious concern, and for morality: it is common knowledge that an inclination towards constant reasoning about morality is a sign of personal trouble in the very field of morality. Similarly, he who organically believes in God is not inclined towards appropriate analytical reasoning, while reflecting on religion may partly be a sign of loss of organic faith.

### **Materials and methods**

Let's now turn to *Pushkin House* (1971), a novel that offers especially many variations depicting loss as gain. Almost all reasonings of the kind are expressed by a philologist and philosopher Modest Platonovich Odoevtsev. His idea that the October Revolution did not destroy Russian culture but, on the contrary, contributed to its conservation, might be the first to catch a reader's attention. The loss of the old culture turned out to have helped Russia acquire it anew.

Here is an excerpt from this character's monologue of 1956: "Well, you might be thinking that the year 1917 has destroyed, ruined the old culture, while it did nothing but conserve and save it. What matters is discontinuity, not destruction. The prominent ones, undefeated and motionless, get frozen within; everyone has their place, from Gavril Derzhavin to Alexander Blok – what comes after will not shake their authority, because there is nothing to come. Everything turned upside down; still, Russia remained a sanctuary. Getting there is out of question" [3, p. 68].

Here is another excerpt from Odoevtsev's writings of 1921, amidst the disaster of revolution: "The ties are broken, the secret is forever lost ... and the mystery is born! Culture remains as monuments only with destruction serving as a silhouette.

A monument is destined for eternal life, it is immortal only because everything that used to surround it has been destroyed. In this sense, I am not worried about our culture since it once has been. Now it's gone. <...> You madman of a liberal! You keep crying that the culture that surrounds you is not understood well enough, while being the one who brings misunderstanding. Misunderstanding is your only cultural role. <...> After all, this is the only condition for it to exist – to be misunderstood. <...> Being misunderstood or understood in the wrong sense, that is, being unrecognised, is the only thing that protects culture from destruction and murder. <...> You keep saying that Russian culture has been lost. No, quite the opposite! It's just been born. The revolution will not destroy the past; it will stop it, leave it behind. Everything has fallen apart – now that the great Russian culture is born, it's born forever, because it will not develop to continue. <...> Death is the glory of Living! It is the boundary between culture and life. It is the keeper of human history. Dantes the artist created Pushkin, casting him from a bullet. <...> The unreal is the condition of life.” [3, pp. 348–350].

## Results

How are we to understand Modest Odoevtsev's paradox of judgment? First of all, it maybe needs to be understood in the light of the statement from *The Prayer* quoted above – that he who loses God, finds God. To appreciate its great culture (from Gavrila Derzhavin to Alexander Blok), Russia had to lose it – of course, not the brilliant literary works were lost, but that ground they grew on. There is a common saying, “We don't care of what we have, but we cry when it is lost.” As if developing this idea, Bitov shows that whatever people have as a given, they not only take for granted, but they also do not really notice at all. This happened to Russian culture: by destroying its roots, the revolution allowed it to turn into something worth being analysed, something the nation could reflect upon. Realising how bad that loss was, we saw, appreciated, and “gained” our great culture.

Modest Odoevtsev's idea that the factor of revolution-induced “discontinuity” eliminating any chance for it to continue and develop is what makes Russian culture immortal requires special commentary. How should we understand this paradox?

Why does Odoevtsev the father actually equate the development of Russian culture with destruction and murder? According to Bitov's ideologist character, even well-intended attempts to develop and continue an important and valuable tradition, such as a cultural one, often turn into profanation and destruction. That is why, if you want to protect a valuable phenomenon from destruction, a “discontinuity” that would eliminate any opportunity for it to go on is a necessity.

In this regard, special attention should be paid to the motif of “misunderstanding”, as emphasised by Bitov's character. Moreover, the lack of understanding for culture comes not from the dumb and the illiterate, as one would expect. Modest Odoevtsev claims that his colleague, a renowned scientist of liberal views, is the one who brings misunderstanding, believing that misunderstanding is the only cultural role of the “madman of a liberal.” Odoevtsev partly helps to understand this rather vague reasoning by expressing an idea in another episode that the mind is null, and ignorance is its cornerstone. “The mind is null. Yes, yes, null is smart! <...> Ignorance is the cornerstone of the mind.” [3, p. 81]. Obviously, according to Odoevtsev, only he who is aware of his intelligence being limited because human nature is imperfect, and, accordingly, of his knowledge being purely relative, is truly intelligent. He who thinks that he understands everything (as the character's interlocutor, a member of the so-called intellectual elite), is very much under the sway of a dangerous illusion; hence, his purposeful actions are mostly destructive, bringing results directly opposite to those conceived. People know what they are doing the least when they participate in global historical processes.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

In the same context, we should understand the blasphemous odes Odoevtsev sings in honour of Pushkin's murderer. Just like the revolution that destroyed Russian culture and made sure to conserve it and save it from destruction, Dantes who ended the life of a great poet is who made him truly immortal. Two postmodernistic maxims of Odoevtsev bring a logical limit to the paradox-driven concept of loss as gain: “Death is the glory of Living!” and “The unreal is the condition of life.”

To sum up, we can state that the motif of loss as gain was one of the most important foundations of Andrei Bitov's artistic philosophy in the 1960s, and any adequate perception of the works he created during that period is only possible if we take this motif in consideration.

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## Мотив утраты как обретения в романе

### А. Битова «Пушкинский дом»

В статье анализируется мотив утраты, оборачивающейся обретением, ставший одной из основ художественной философии Битова в 1960-е годы. Именно данный мотив поспособствовал формированию той всецело амбивалентной ауры, которая характерна для произведений писателя. Прежде всего рассматривается роман Битова «Пушкинский дом» (1964–1971), сюжетно-смысловая структура которого строится главным образом на варьировании этого мотива. Основным объектом анализа оказываются рассуждения Модеста Платоновича Одоевцева, филолога и философа, с точки зрения которого большевистская революция не разрушила русскую культуру, но, наоборот, спасла ее от деструкции.

**Ключевые слова:** Битов, парадокс, утрата, обретение, непонимание.

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