

Genesis of the Phenomenon of Platitude and its Conceptualization in Russian Literature

ARTEM ZUEVICH, *Lomonosov Moscow State University*
artemzuevich@mail.ru

Received: November 20, 2016.

Accepted: December 20, 2016.

ABSTRACT

For the present, insufficient attention is paid to the phenomenon of platitude in the studies of the philosophical and aesthetic type, while the recourse to it seems relevant because this phenomenon manifests itself not only in many aspects of daily life, but is also reflected in the contemporary cultural context and in works of art, especially in literature. To clarify the aesthetic meaning of the notion “platitude”, we should refer to the etymology and semantics of the word. In all the aspects, platitude is such a phenomenon that “kills” the idea of dignity and brings spiritual and ethical values of a person to vulgarization, to the level of philistine understanding, where the narrow-minded understanding of the “meaning of life” turns into a life moral principle. Thus, platitude can be considered in the context of aesthetics as an integral element of society and of an individual’s spiritual existence.

The purpose of this article is clarification of the aesthetic meaning of such a notion as “platitude”, its understanding in different historical periods and its conceptualization, primarily in the Russian literature of the XIX century.

We find it interesting to consider the aesthetics of platitude in the light of the works by the classics of the Russian literature – N.V. Gogol and A. P. Chekhov, who laid the basics of the platitude image in the Russian literature. If in the first half of the nineteenth century platitude was understood only as externally ugly and ridiculous attempt to look greater and more significant, then nowadays platitude is just falseness and parody, claiming to be the truth. This understanding of platitude relevant for our time can be traced in the works of the Russian writers.

Keywords: platitude, profanity, vulgarity, Russian literature, aesthetics.

Rather insufficient attention is paid by researchers-philosophers and art theorists in the philosophical-aesthetic research to the phenomenon of platitude today, while the recourse to it seems relevant, because this phenomenon manifests itself not only in many aspects of daily life, but is also reflected in the contemporary cultural context and in works of art, especially in literature. In everyday life, we often hear the word “platitude” and use it ourselves, sometimes without thinking about its origin and true meaning. To clarify the aesthetic meaning of the notion “platitude”, we should refer to the etymology and semantics of the word. What is word and what determines its use? A word is the symbol of a particular fragment of natural or social objective reality. The more often and brighter the fragment manifests itself, the more its “name”, that is the word, defining it or its concept, is used.

Assuming these arguments, proliferation of the word “platitude” in the everyday language suggests that the social life is becoming platitudinous nowadays, deeds and actions of people are becoming platitudinous, human mind is becoming platitudinous. Daily life of society is settled in such a way that social reality is constructed through the thoughts and actions of people. Hence, a string of logic is drawn up: platitudinous thoughts - platitudinous actions - platitudinous life.

But what is platitude and what is the meaning of this concept from different points of view? At the most general consideration platitudinous means indecent, that is contrary to the ideas of lovely and beautiful, but in this case platitudinous would be no different from ugly. So, the concept needs to be specified. Platitudinous is not only contrary to beautiful, but

also discredits it by its plain hypocrisy and outrage with claims to genuineness and beauty. One idea can be traced in all manifestations - that speaking about platitudinous thinking and way of life, we should imagine such a picture which "kills" the idea of dignity and brings a human's intellectual values to vulgarization, to the level of philistine understanding, where the "the wisdom of life", narrow-mindedly understood, turns into a life moral principle. In this case, if platitude as a concept is in line with the concepts of beautiful, ugly, lovely, then there is every reason to include it in the class of aesthetic categories and to consider the phenomenon of platitude in philosophical and aesthetic way.

Platitude signifies not only a property of platitude, but platitudinous way of life, a platitudinous act, platitudinous expressions, comments. Expressive colouring of the word "platitudinous" becomes increasingly sharp closer to the middle of the nineteenth century. V.I. Dal in his dictionary, pointed out the ancient meanings of the word "platitudinous" and considered other variative meanings of the word, characteristic of the Russian language of the 50-60-s, identifying the most classic definition of the word platitudinous - that is "trite, well-known and bothering, post-usage; obscene, considered rough, simple, mean, vile, vulgar; vulgar, trivial." (Даль, 1882: 374)

In the Russian language platitude as a concept expresses one of the most negative aesthetic values. As an aesthetic category "platitude" can be comparable with the category of beautiful in its volume. To some extent, to be platitudinous is much worse than being ugly. This is because, if ugly contrasts with beautiful, shading it (thus it confirms the existence of beautiful), platitude usually denigrates beautiful. Platitude in every phenomenon destroys what is the deep essence of the phenomenon, the parody, which is the result, unfortunately, is not very different from the original, thus offending the taste.

It should be noted that the words "platitudinous" and "vulgar" are close to each other. O. Frolova in her article "Vulgar or platitudinous" distinguishes between the concepts, outlining that platitudinous is an internal characteristic, while vulgar is a more external manifestation. The author argues in favour of her position by referring to the language use. However, it is important to notice that the social differentiation of society is observed in vulgarity. Despite the fact that the vulgarity endlessly attracts man, probably on an unconscious level, he decries it, identifying it with the social group, whose membership is unacceptable to him. The ideas of rudeness and unpretentiousness strongly correlated with the concept of vulgarity (often associated with physiology and instincts) in reflections of the person, who does not want to have anything to do with the representatives of low social status.

Of course, some social component is present in platitude as well, but it is somewhat different. The taste of the man who, desiring to rise above his environment, uses alien elements from a higher level of culture. This is due to the influence of various signs on social relationships, when, depending on the person's appearance, people surrounding him model their behavior in relation to him. A true representative of a higher cultural layer will always appreciate a parody of refinement, will mark unoriginality and the hypocrisy. Almost everyone who has written about the issue of platitude, mark its pretence unoriginality and hypocrisy. In his essay, "Platitudinarians and platitude", Vladimir Nabokov writes: "I claim that a simple, uncontaminated person is rarely platitudinous, because platitude involves the outside, the facade, the veneer" (Набоков – "Пошляки и пошлость", 1999: 393). That's why platitude is an inner manifestation; the characteristic associated with attempts to fit and

not to be, thus even more revealing a lack of sophistication and sublimity.

Continuing the topic of comparison the concepts of “vulgar” and “platitudinous”, it is noteworthy to mention that in one of the historical and etymological dictionaries, the two words also have the meaning “obscene”, but the semantic transition interface with obscene due to the fact that it’s rude and physical, while platitude may not necessarily be rude, but is it compromising the carrier of this property as much as obscenity.

The unique character, so to speak, of platitude lies in the fact that it has addictive power. Despite the fact that the platitude has no charm, it is able to envelop a person and immerse him in its world with the help of sentimentality. For example, most of the songs about so-called love for mother in the style of Russian chanson are platitudinous, because such inducements are not a sincere expression of feelings, but just a tribute to the prison subculture, where “mother” stands as one of the indisputable values.

In an ontological approach, platitude may be considered as a special modus of a “fallen” spiritual being. “Damage” is seen in the utmost narrowness of the person’s spiritual field, the identification of being and entity. The first sign of platitude can be considered as the paucity of ideas and isolation in the circle of narrow-minded routine. But the philistine life, despite its absurdity and monstrosity, is characterized by an extremely principled equanimity: “due to the rejection of the transcendental, platitude excludes any self-development, there is just no need or reason to strive for anything” (Житенев, 2008: 225).

Platitudinous consciousness has many forms. One of its undoubted signs is reductionism, reduction of complex to simple: a philistine is characterized by “persistent desire to explain to himself as soon as possible everything that shakes the settled balance of the soul”, but not in order to “understand new and unknown, and only exonerate himself” (Горький, 1982: 179). The philistine’s dependence on various mental and verbal stereotypes is what defines his desire for a full explanation of the new by the known.

Current use of the concept of “platitude” has led to the emergence of many contextual meanings that mark some characteristic as vituperable. In the interpretation of I. Annensky, platitude is a kind of daydreaming, inability to match imagination with reality, equivalent inflation of everything valuable: “High and Holy in a dream becomes platitudinous and pathetically small in the words of a dreamer” (Анненский, 1979: 126). For Vladimir Nabokov platitude was associated mostly with the melodrama. He called bad taste “digging into people’s souls with post-Freudian complexes... rapture by tragedy of trampled human dignity” (Набоков – “Федор Достоевский”, 1999: 183)

Thus, platitude vividly shows that the person has no aesthetic sense, that is, the ability to distinguish between tones and semitones in the diversity and complexity of life. However, this is only one aspect, an external symptom. Platitude is not only bad taste: the main contents of platitude is conformism, herd instinct, the desire to “be like everyone”, rejection of individual choice. In such a case life is subjected to sequential and global averaging: average outlook, average values and average life style and limited sight, selfishness, mediocrity connected with it. One of the main attributes of this mode of existence becomes boredom, which is acutely felt by any thinking and feeling person entering this environment from the outside. This is the philistine way of life, speaking by the language of classical Russian literature.

The word “platitudinous” (“poshly”) is primordially Russian in its origin. It represents a verbal adjective, or rather participle of the verb to go, turned into an adjective. The adjective

“platitudinous” appears in ancient texts in the twelfth century and up to the seventeenth century inclusive, has only neutral or positive connotations (“platitudinous” means “primordial”, “old”, “true”, for example, and the gold would be platitudinous, i.e., real, genuine; platitudinous merchant or a guest is the merchant, who is a full member of the Corporation, that title was passed to offsprings as well). In the eighteenth century the word is hardly used..

Revitalization and wide spreading the word “platitudinous” in the literary language of the early nineteenth century was due to the renewed interest in Russian history, ancient writing and its language. It is curious to note that the word “platitudinous” due to its bright expressiveness accumulates family of derivatives around the mid-nineteenth century: platitudinarian (“poshlyak, poshlyschka”, “poshlyanka”, “poshlyatina”). In the Russian literary language from the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, more advanced meanings and shades of that word continue to determine and become more acute.

In Russian literature of the nineteenth century, a platitudinous man is the one who constantly uses averaged formulations and clichés in his speech, he is sure that these general, superficial statements are sufficient for full communication, for expression of any, even the most profound thoughts and ideas. Such overconfidence gives him a sense of complacency and even tranquility, a platitudinous man never, under no circumstances, will dare to avow himself platitudinous. Free of his own ideas on such people, as noted by F. M. Dostoevsky: “instantly adhere invariably to the most fashionable idea to immediately debase it to instantly caricaturize everything what they sometimes sincerity serve” (Достоевский, 1970: 282). Platitude of speech, language corresponds to the platitude of everyday life, which also is a kind of statement deployed in space and time: interior, gestures and clothing, and where every personality disappears.

In the 30–60-s of the nineteenth century, the focus of platitude in Russian literature is considered to be a secular society, where since about the 70-s such a focus is seen in the philistine and its environment. Finding by the end of the 80-s the clear semantic contours, the concept “intelligentsia” is beginning to be comprehended as the opposition of platitude and philistinism. Thus, the above-noted three-stage structure attains a steady shape: intelligentsia - philistinism – people.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, due to the social and cultural transformations, the values of the previous generation become the subject of cultural reflection, which most directly applies to the concept of platitude. Some authors sharply criticize the utilitarianism and love for people of the “generation of fathers”, contrasting them with the love for the higher truth found in the mystical creative process. Reflections on the platitude of philistine life and the need to sacrifice themselves for the people are considered to be platitudinous. On the other hand, a really significant for the intelligentsia heroic line is being questioned - when the life without great ideas, related to the need for daily repetitive efforts, is declared low and platitudinous and heroic impulse is transformed from a means into a self-sufficient goal to justify spiritual laziness.

In general, the category of platitude retains its significance in the Soviet times. Intellectuals formulate the main conflict of the era as a conflict between the world philistinism and the people (proletariat, peasants), who finally received an opportunity to implement the strength kept inside. In the clash of aggressive platitudinous philistine life and the chaos of new life,

they find themselves on the side of the chaos, which they are trying to structure. There is a change of cultural flows in the 30-s, the place of radical intelligentsia in the power structures is taken by the former workers and peasants. The forms of life, taken by them as an example, with the ideas of cultural sensitivity, prosperous life are sharply at odds with the image of the future created by the intelligentsia, moreover, they quite correspond with the concepts of platitude and philistinism in their understanding. For the Soviet culture of the 30–50-s, the concept of platitude is placed to the periphery of the cultural field and is used as a synonym for lack of principles.

The Soviet literature of the 60-s is following on the intelligentsia of the 20-s and once again falls on philistine life, contrasting the petty limitations of the owner to the impulses of altruistic initiations. The frequency of the word “platitude” usage increases, but its value is being blurred. The songs by Okudzhava or Vysotsky who appeal to the values of the private person and thus fall under the “sin” of political apathy, can be called platitudinous, as well as the desire for material wealth and fashionable clothes, and blind reproduction of ideological clichés. The latter is particularly relevant for dissident and close to them intelligentsia of Brezhnev’s time, whose disagreement with the Soviet authorities are aesthetic. Aesthetic rejection of the constantly reproduced ideological clichés complies here with the ethical protest against the moral sense of the people uttering them. The word “platitude” again becomes significant and begins to be used in scientific texts, even very far from the problems of Russian culture.

However, while maintaining the traditional meaning by a rather narrow circle of scientific and artistic elite, in the everyday use, the semantics of the word begins to significantly blur, and platitude begins to mix with indecency, obscene lexicon, and now without such a harsh negative connotations. The system of values of the second half of the twentieth century, formed by the Russian culture, which was reproduced (with significant changes) in the Soviet time, is experiencing radical change, concerning both positive and negative aesthetic examples. The culture ceases to feel, “what is good and what is bad” and this is involuntarily reflected in the language: classic standards of platitude are beginning to lose the status of standards as such.

However, the basic interpretations of platitude are offered in the literature of this period and later in the works of the emigrants. Almost all of them are built to appeal to the chief merciless accuser of platitudes - N. V. Gogol.

D. S. Merezhkovsky in his essay “Gogol and the devil” gives the category of platitude an ontological characteristics, associating it with the highest evil, that, from his point of view, is “in a too wise middle ... in stupidity and the banality, platitude of all human feelings and thoughts, not in the greatest but the small” (Мережковский, 1906). V. V. Zenkovsky in his work “N. V. Gogol”, noting that “the phenomenon of platitude relates to the field of aesthetic assessment”, then brings it to the religious plane and associates platitude with the motif of “impoverishment and perversion of the soul, the insignificance and emptiness of its movements when other forces are present, being able to raise a person” (Гиппиус, Зеньковский, 1994: 215). Within the conceptual system, similar motives are developed Vladimir Nabokov. In his essay “Nikolai Gogol” he claims that the word “poshlost” has no direct equivalent in the European languages he knows and it is not surprising, because in the European tradition there is no such a clearly worked out countermeasures against platitude

and for some nations, such as German, platitude has become one of the leading qualities of the national spirit and traditions. Nabokov connects platitude with the substitution of infinite values to the finite ones, with the idea that “the greatest happiness can be purchased and that such a purchase ennobles the purchaser” (Набоков – “Н.В. Гоголь”, 1999: 181).

Thus, we call platitudinous something average, large-scale, philistine, based on prejudice, but claiming to external sophistication, originality, sentimentality and refinement. Platitude is a skillful forgery, concealing inner primitivism. At some point, platitude can be likened to the “glamour” of our modern society. Glamorization of our society is reflected in the fact that the measure of the value and beauty of any phenomenon or even of a person is not the spiritual essence, not the true beauty, but bright, conspicuous external tinsel, the shell. In the universal sense, by “oposhlivanie” of life one can understand its virtualization – the replacement of real being by the virtual one, artificially constructed and substituting the real one.

It is surprising, but such understanding of platitude, relevant for our time, can be traced already in the nineteenth century in the works by of N. V. Gogol and Anton Chekhov. Both the classics can be traced to a particular aesthetics of platitude, namely, understanding it as spiritual primitivism of the individual.

As noted by Nikolai Vasilievich himself, the concept of platitude is beyond moral categories, it can cause laughter, but more often it causes disgust. Of course, platitude makes us disgusted, because it causes aesthetic revulsion, but much more we are irritated by the unfounded arrogance in people, lack of work at themselves. Seemingly, why do insignificant interests of the people make us irritated? As every thinking, intelligent person has an aesthetic approach to a person and, as noted by Gogol, fear of platitude is beautiful, because the fear means that still, deep down, we assume that the man must move forward and make spiritual progress, we expect action and change from people.

In the works by Chekhov platitude appears as an expression of materialism and pessimism. Philistinism is placed next to platitude at Chekhov’s works. Such Chekhov’s stories as “Man in a case”, “Gooseberries” and “About love” demonstrate his conviction of platitude of spiritual stagnation. In the writer’s works, the idea of human freedom, of dependence of his thinking and behavior emerges. The world of things distracts the person from his nature and does not allow him to express himself. Chekhov noted inability to actions and often even to thoughts in his contemporaries. With all his heart he hated philistinism that cripples a person’s soul, draws him into the routine and kills everything best in him, the writer despised philistine happiness, which promotes the destruction of beauty of human relations.

This idea is relevant for the modern consumer society, where a person becomes a slave of things, a passive consumer. This person was long overdue by Chekhov through the system of artistic images. The writer was not limited only to a statement of platitude, but platitude is revealed and overcome in the evaluation and the characters of his works go all the way to this evaluation. The short stories “Grasshopper” and “Lights” can serve as an illustration of the platitude aesthetics in Chekhov’s works. There the writer creates an “artistic atmosphere” of philistinism, owing to which the reader comes to the evaluation of characters, makes conclusions and correlates Chekhov’s characters with real people encountered in life.

The problem raised in the works by Gogol and Chekhov are relevant nowadays. First of all, Chekhov is important to us by his humaneness that permeates his works, by his amazing

faith in the future, by firm realization that all that is best in the world can only be created by human work. A similar parallel with the position of the “late” works by Gogol is observed here as well. Nikolai Vasilievich believed that if every person doesn't morally educate himself, then inside agitation cannot be corrected by any means, only the human self-consciousness is required, which is elaborated over the years by constant self-cultivation and work.

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