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History and Christianity, Time and the Church (Musings of a Theologian-historian)¹

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Abstract: *What exactly is the relationship between theology and history? How does the Church re-create time? These are the main questions behind this article in which the author reviews the current stagnation of the historical profession, along with a few suggestions that might lead to a re-discovery of a common tradition. Using theological literature from the Bulgarian space and abroad, he will try there to present the main aspects related with the aforementioned problem and to offer an interesting and actual debate dedicated to this topic. In the same time, the aim of the article will be the one to create bridges between spiritualities from different areas and to invite to debate and dialogue.*

Keywords: history, theology, time, Church, Florovsky.

*I consider the days of old, and remember the years of long ago;
You are the God who works wonders.
Ps. 75:6;14*

A new theoretical focus of church history in general, as well as of the various theological-historical disciplines is needed today. The recent overemphasis on the *practicization* of historical knowledge has led to a loss of direction and perspective. Today technical knowledge about history is a piece of cake. A myriad of electronic tools make the traditional knowledge of the historian – dates, events, and persons almost worthless. Much more is needed – a deeper ability to reflect and contemplate, balance and focus. It could be said that a time of ripe harvest, a grace-filled time, for historical knowledge is upon us, contrary to the period after the Second World War when history began to be thought of as unnecessary ballast, and a sharp turn is made towards the natural and engineering sciences. History is at the center of the humanities and with it, using it like a walking-stick, theology could find the best place in the connected fields of study, so that it can *tell the story of God* and *to lift up* all of the humanities.

¹ With gratitude to father Gregory Florovsky and Mark Bloch's texts which have provided almost unceasing provocations over the past 20 years and without which I cannot imagine historical research or it would be only a series of dates and event. Cf. especially: G. Florovsky, *The Predicament of the Christian Historian*, in *Essays in Honor of Paul Tillich*, edited by W. Leibrecht, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1959, pp. 140-166. M. Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire, ou le Métier d'historien*, Paris, Cahiers des Annales, vol. 3. Paris, 1949; (In Bulgarian) Mark Blok, *Apologia na istoriyata, ili znanaiatyt na istorika, prevod Todorka Mineva i Veselin Pramatarov*, Sofia, Sonm, 1997 as well as many others.

History

History is not just the past. It is a deep reflection, understanding and a sharing on the fate of the world. In doing so, though, it always encounters a Higher Authority, an Absolute, Who creates, establishes and organizes a certain hierarchy of values. God-less history is just a past, because in it there is no *economy*, no *plan of salvation*.² For it the past is a sequence of deaths, be they as they may heroic. Death is all-powerful in the past. This view in turn seems more appropriate to archeology, rather than to history, in which Life reigns. History tells the story of Life, preaches Life. It is because of this that the archeological approach to history is incredibly harmful, looking closer to the work of a pathologist.

History always has a religious meaning. That is the reason why every religion has its own way of telling history. It has long been established that Christianity is the most historical of all religions. „Christianity is a religion of historians“, summarizes it best the great Mark Bloch.³ To be religious, to believe, when you are a historian is an advantage, not a shortcoming. Perhaps at this point somebody might bring up the question of objectivity. But real objectivity exists only in the natural sciences and even there it does so conditionally. When it comes to history the criteria for objectivity are the listeners – because of this the easiest way to check a historical interpretation is through its proclamation and sharing. In this sense history is a proclamation, a witnessing. On the other hand most religious systems have an understanding of sin. Lying is a sin. In history one cannot lie unabashedly and purposefully. Some things may be twisted, hyperbolized, even mythologized, but that is usually only a way to focus attention. If it is done with other motives then it becomes intentional confusion, which is a result of our sinful nature. At this point the question of keeping silence about certain moments in history comes to the foreground. If that, again, is done in purpose then it is a misdirection, which is a name we give to a lie. This has long been pointed out, already at the dawn of modern historiography.⁴ Honesty is the defining characteristic of a Christian historian.

² Church history is that history which is connected to and concerned with the salvation of human kind and the world and not just a history of an institution, even if the institution in question is the Church. The Christian understanding of history or of Church history always has as its beginning and aim in God – “The God of Abraham, God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of Christians is a God of love and solace, that fills the souls and hearts of people”, if I were to use Pascal’s expression.

³ Mark Bloch, *Apologia na istoriyata, ili zanaiatyt na istorika, prevod Todorka Mineva i Veselin Pramatarov*, p. 4.

⁴ One of the best examples is given already by Mavro Orbini on the Greek historian’s attitude towards the history of the Bulgarians: “these authors have written not entirely honestly and have withheld many of their [the Bulgarian’s] noble and heroic deeds, perpetrated against their emperors.” Cf. (In Bulgarian) M. Orbini, *The Kingdom of the Slavs*, Nauka i Izkustvo, Sofia, 1983, p. 51.

Christianity: „Two thousand years have come and gone—and not a single new god!“⁵

The Christian understanding of history requires theological effort. History is not determined only by humanity's different actions. What is crucial is faith that the main actor, the creator of history is the Creator of the world and every single person. The human being, created by God, is not only God's *beloved* creature – the crown of creation, but is also God's co-worker. The world moves in history – from creation and fall, to the Incarnation, and from the restoration of humanity in Christ through the workshop of Life – the Church – towards the eschatological horizon. The Christian historicism describes the dramatic relationship between the loving Creator and His creatures, who respond to His love with love, struggling in the fulfillment of His will, or through defiance, *bogoborstvo*.⁶

History studies humanity's past. Consequently, in its efforts to organize the facts it cannot search for, like the natural sciences, for one hyper-logical explanation to the historical phenomena because a human being possessing free will cannot be thought of as an actor playing a role, predetermined by some celestially imposed "historical necessity". The fundamental understanding of the human being is of utmost importance for the direction of the historical search which is, likewise, intimately connected with the understanding and experience of God (including the possibility of rejecting Him).

These fundamental assumptions of human knowledge are always objects of faith and it is always a free, personal act. It is because of this that the Christian vision of history cannot be imposed or proven. Our task is to show that it can be meaningful for otherly8-orientated humanitarian knowledge.⁷

Time

„Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.“

1 Thess. 5:1

⁵ Such is, according to Gadamer, Heidigger's moto of his reception of Nietzsche. Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 2, *Hermeneutik II*, Tübingen 1986, S. 361-375. Cf. also (In Bulgarian) <http://grosnipelikani.net/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=81>, accessed 10. 09. 2020.

⁶ Cf. V. Asmus, „Principi bogoslovskogo podhoda k istorii,” in *Istoricheskaï vestnik*, 9-10 (2000), p. 167.

⁷ Cf. also Jaroslav Pelikan, „The Historian as Polyglot,” in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 137 (1993), no. 4, p. 659-668; as well as Jaroslav Pelikan, „The Predicament of the Christian Historian: A case study,” in *Reformed review*, 52 (1994), no. 3, p. 196-211.

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Some time ago, when Father George Florovsky's text, “*On the last things and the last events*”⁸ was being prepared for publication in Bulgarian I remember being very impressed by the clear, strange, and, even, daring language that the father used when it came to discussing the end of time. That sparked a lasting interest with eschatology in me. We return, it could be said, departing from the *end* to an understanding of time's *beginning*. The complexity is deepened by the fact that there is no systematic conception of the subject.

“Christianity is a vindication of time, a philosophy of Creation, a teaching of the coming into existence out of nothing and ascending into eternity – a teaching of the dawning of eternity. In this hides the meaning of Christian metaphysics. And it is revealed by the contemplation of the historical Christ”⁹, says Fr. Georges Florovsky. On the one hand the German Idealism, predominant in philosophy at the beginning of the 20th century, seen through the eyes of Fr. Florovsky, leads to a dead end, especially when it comes to the understanding of history. It leads to a conception, that history, in itself, leads, following the example of natural evolution, to a necessarily good end – a utopia. On the other hand, knowing the pre-modern philosophical heritage, the father points out its inherent inner determinism – the world is eternal, because nothing new can happen, things and events are repetitions of previous ones. Arguing against this vision he posits the understanding of personal freedom in history in opposition, through a Christocentric interpretation of history. In entering the field of the Christian understanding of time and history, though, he encounters another extreme, very typical for the West's Christian thinking – that history is guided and governed by God's grace, without considering human kind's freedom and participation. Knowing the experience of the Eastern Fathers he suggests that only freedom is the key to the understanding of history.¹⁰

The end of time or the time of the end

*„I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short;
For the present form of this world is passing away.”*
1 Cor. 7:29;31

After the coming of the Savior time *contracts*, begins to *run out*, a time of the end, the last phase of time's passing. The frontier of time is the Coming Christ. He changes time's very character. In the early Church Christians greet each other at every liturgy with „Come, Lord!”. This is a cry for the shortening of time, for its running out. Today we greet each other with „Many Years or *Είς*

⁸ G. Florovsky, „On the Last Things and the Last Events, in Creation and Eschatology,” vol. 3 in *The Collected Works of Gregory Florovsky*, Belmont MA, Nordland Publishing Company, 1976, pp. 243-265.

⁹ G. Florovsky, *Protivorechiyata na origenizma*, in *Cyrkva: Predanie ili utopia*, Sofia, 2011, p. 112. (In Bulgarian). First published in *Put* 18, 1929, pp. 107-115.

¹⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*

πολλὰ ἔτι“, meaning, we want to lengthen the remaining time, our earthly time. If we say that after the fall time becomes *heavy*, then after the Resurrection time *lightens*, becomes powerless. There exists now a final tension in time. On the one hand time *holds* and *expands* by the worldly (the powers, by the Empire, according to St. John Chrysostom), by the secular, but on the other the Church constantly ends, finishes time as every Divine Liturgy confronts us with the End – stands us before the Kingdom of God.

In Christianity the very feeling and understanding of time radically alters. Time begins and ends, but in it is also fulfilled every human being’s fate. Time itself is ontologically unique and never returns to its former shape. And the Universal Resurrection is the final frontier of this unique time, of this unique fate of all creation. In Greek philosophy the circle is a symbol of time or of its periodic repetition. In Christianity time is symbolized rather with a line, a ray or an arrow. But the difference is far deeper. Time is not just a procession of moments, nor is it an abstract form of multiplicity. Time is a vector because of its direction and its aim. But it is also inherently limited due to the conscious expectation of the end and of its fulfillment.

The order of time is arranged from the inside out. The magnificence and concreteness of the aim connect from the inside the stream of events into an organic whole. Events are exactly what they are – events – not just passing happenings. The order of time is not a sphere of privation, what it is to the Hellenic mind. It is something other than a mere stream. It is a creative process in which that which was brought into existence from nothing by the will of God ascends to its ultimate end, when in the last day God’s purpose will be fulfilled. And the center of history the Incarnation and the victory of the Incarnate Lord over death and sin. St. Gregory of Nyssa describes the vectoral character of history in the following way:

“Whenever, then, humanity shall have reached the plenitude that belongs to it, this on-streaming movement of production will altogether cease; it will have touched its destined bourn, and a new order of things quite distinct from the present procession of births and deaths will carry on the life of humanity. If there is no birth, it follows necessarily that there will be nothing to die. Composition must precede dissolution (and by composition I mean the coming into this world by being born); necessarily, therefore, if this synthesis does not precede, no dissolution will follow. Therefore, if we are to go upon probabilities, the life after this is shown to us beforehand as something that is fixed and imperishable, with no birth and no decay to change it.”¹¹

This end and purpose is the Universal Resurrection. St. Gregory writes about the inner fulfillment of history. Time will end, because sooner or later everything will be fulfilled. The seeds will grow and blossom. The Resurrection of the dead is the only and unique destiny of the entire Universe, for everybody

¹¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *De anima et resurrectione*, in Migne, PG, 46:103.

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and everyone, a universal and catholic equilibrium. There is nothing naturalistic in this conception. God will raise the dead. This will be the new and unique revelation of God, of His omnipotence and glory. The Universal Resurrection is bringing to an end the Resurrection of our Lord, the completion of His total victory over mortality and death.

The Church – catholicity of time

Since the earliest patristic witnesses the Church has been defined as *wandering, in via*. This definition does not point us towards a chronological continuity but a transformation of time’s character. The Church, since its founding on Pentecost constantly lives in the running-out of time, in the interval remaining between time and the very end of time. The Church does not constantly wave a hand before our eyes, pointing us towards the end of time but in her we live every present moment as last, as connected to the end of time and the beginning of eternity.¹²

In Orthodoxy the catholic character of the Church is expressed not so much as spatial and geographical but in a much larger degree by the quality of all-timeness, a catholicity of time, because to the Body of Christ belong equally the faithful of all times, the ones called in the first hour as well as those who are called in the eleventh. Following the words of St. John Chrysostom the Church is one body, because to her belong all believers who „live, lived and will live.”¹³ The living of this all-temporal unity is revealed and is fixed in the Church's liturgy.

The Church, so to say, creates a new culture of the perception of time. That is probably one of the most fundamental cultural achievements – to live in time but to constantly meet the Coming Christ, Who *ends* time. It could be said that in the Church time is mystically *overcome*, as if that apocalyptic moment, when there *no longer is time*. The contact with grace seems to stop time, the pattern and repetition of minutes, brings out the grace-filled from the order of continuity and, in a certain mystical “co-temporality” the disunity of all that is scattered is overcome. This is a mystical image of eternity. And it is only in this mystical approximated image that we can understand how certain people from different

¹² Cf. for example Ιωάννη (Ζηζιούλα), Μητροπολίτου Περγάμου „Η Ορθόδοξη Θεολογία και οι προκλήσεις του 21ου αιώνα” – a speech delivered by the metropolitan when he was declared a honorary member of the Volos theological academy on the 29th of October, 2011. Available in Bulgarian at https://dveri.bg/component/com_content/Itemid,100522/catid,281/id,23202/view,article/, accessed 08.10.2020, as well as Florovsky, G. *The Catholicity of the Church*, in Vol. 1 of the Collected Works of Georges Florovsky, Belmont MA, Nordland Publishing Company, 1972, p. 37-57; Florovsky, G. *Sybnomstva na Cyrkvnata – V Biblia, Cyrkva, Predanie. Pravoslavnoto Gledishte, Sybrani Sychineniya, t. 1, Biblioteka “Pravoslaven kaleidoskop”, S., 2003., Г. Съборността на Църквата. – В: Библия, Църква, Предание. Православно гледище. Събрани съчинения, т. I, Библиотека „Православен калейдоскоп“, С., 2003, p. 43 – 68.*

¹³ In *epistolam ad Ephesios*, Migne, PG 62, 76.

generations become gracefully-alive. The Church is a living image of eternity and in the ecclesial experience this graceful “co-temporality of the shattered” is truly given in the fulness of everlasting life, it is revealed in the communion with the Eternal King – the Christ.

The Church is an Everlasting Kingdom, because there is an Eternal King in the Church, dwelling in a historical wandering thus time is powerless. The Church, as the Body of Christ, is the mystical foretasting of the Universal Resurrection.¹⁴ In the litany, or the intercessory prayer, at every liturgy we pray for the good re-creation of time. In the Church *time is mystically overcome*. The outpouring of grace seemingly stops time, stops the procession of minutes and seasons, overcomes even the common order of continuity and discontinuity of all those things, that happen in different times. In the unity with Christ, through grace, in the gift of communion with the One Spirit, the people of different epochs and generations become our living contemporaries. Christ reigns equally in the Church – among those that have passed and the living because God is not God of the dead, but of the living. The catholic nature of the Church is best expressed in the character of her historical “*all-temporality*” because all believers from every time and generation, who are alive today, who have lived and who will be born belong to her in equal measure. They all form one Body and through one and the same prayer are connected in one before the throne of the Lord of glory. The experience of this unity throughout time is revealed and sealed in the whole cycle of the liturgical services.

During the entire 20th century, to some degree in certain forms of Neo-Kantianism (Cassirer for example), with Bergson, in phenomenology (Husserl), in existentialism, and especially in Heidegger’s outlook and the philosophical hermeneutic that started with him - temporality becomes a leading philosophical theme. This is the understanding of modernity and modernization, even, if you want, progress. At the same time one Orthodox theologian brings up the question of time in his own specific way. Faithful to his method of “a return to the spirit of the fathers” he sees time as one of the crucial categories of the patristic tradition. For us the widespread understanding that with the secularization of Western Christianity originates the idea of progress, and with the secularization of Orthodoxy – the idea of catching-up is of no interest to us here. The distinction seems to come from whether or not human beings participate in the creativity. This poses the question: could a secularized Orthodoxy even exist and would it not be inherently impotent – only catching up the progress of secularized Western Christianity.

Perhaps currently every day a new work is published, regardless of the school and method, that directly addresses or operates within a context of the question of time. Very often under a theological “guise” and pretention of a work about time is hidden, again, another orientation and methodology. It seems that

¹⁴ Cf. G. Florovsky, „Creation and Redemption,” p. 203.

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today the hardest thing to do is to write theologically about time without injecting another methodology and, at the same time, to speak clearly and in a contemporary language.

The faith of the historian as “a mustard seed”

Nicholas Davila, in one of his many famous *escolias*, says: “Contemporary history is a dialogue between two people: one of them believes in God, the other – that he is God.” His historiography is a professional effort to pass through or to overcome the Enlightenment-type of “philosophy of history”. Practicing historiography confronts us with problems that require not only historiographical sources but a deeper reflection. The Enlightenment understanding of history meets hermeneutics, and from this follows a shift in the theoretical interest: instead of the problem of history by itself, the common world history, its plan, path and direction, the search for stages and patterns, epochs, phases and formation, progress and the future of history – the Enlightenment, it shifts towards questions, some of which are very appropriate even today concerning how do we know history, how do we make historical interpretation, what is history, who writes history, the specifics of the task of the historian, how is his historical narrative influenced by him, what is and how do we separate the important from the unimportant in historical telling and later – who decides all of this.

The researchers, and the listeners for that matter, are less and less interested in history by itself. Most of the interest is directed at why and how we write *about* histories. That, by itself, puts the grand narratives of the Enlightenment historical processes into question.

The observations on writing about history need to find its their name and discipline, a place in the research and teaching of Church history. My suggestion is the establishment of the course “Introduction to Church History”, which includes Protology and Eschatology (*from Creation to Theosis*). This is necessary because we observe that secular historiography frees and distances itself from the Enlightenment project with far greater ease than its ecclesial counterpart. And history is also the faith in the future and in everlasting life, faith in the victory over death through the Resurrection of Christ.

The historian as apostle: narrating

The greatest provocation is the discussion, the meeting;

The journey and not the thinking, researching, or writing.

*Reading is far better than writing. Movement and not stationarity.*¹⁵

¹⁵ A reference to Gadamer’s commentary on Heidegger. Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 2, Tübingen, Hermeneutik II, 1986, S. 361-375. Gadamer says: “Because talking is conversing. Man must look for the word and may find the word that would reach the other. He can even learn the words of the other, to learn their language. He can pass into the language of the others in order to be able to reach them. The language as language is capable of all this.”

Recently, after the Divine Liturgy in a rural church the priest that had just celebrated shared with me in conversation that it is better to do history, rather than to document or write about it. He is right, to do is better than to describe. But is history only a description? As a person who for decades now has professionally worked with history, I took it personally. Is the historian really just a scribe, a writer of descriptions? Do not other professions do this? What does the historian do? He witnesses in narrating, by telling a story.

“The manner of telling and the form of the story vary according to periods and circumstances, but the taste for telling and retelling a story remains the same: the narrative flows endlessly and never runs dry”, says Ivo Andric in his famous speech delivered when he received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1961.¹⁶ The historian often must speak and to tell the story on behalf of those who cannot or do not succeed to do so. To be a historian is a worthy vocation and does not need to be reduced to writing or describing.

The historian is a storyteller. He convinces and witnesses. As the Bulgarian poet (Constantine Pavlov) would say – he is a *trustworthy* witness, and if need be – *dangerously trustworthy*. He is generous, he needs to give more than he needs to take. Justice is relative – generosity is wise. Memory requires generosity and magnanimity. The *histor* is wide-reaching, even if only when he historizes. The Historian is not merely a documentalist. Only the close-minded become documentalists and this is what kills history. Today, more than ever, what is needed is a conversation about the *holy* objectivity of the historical source. It is important to grasp that it is always somebody’s point of view meaning that the source by itself is subjective, be it as it may that this subjectivity is now far and hidden from us.

The positivistic cynicality has always induced something close to indignation – if there is a source, there is history; no source – no history. The source is only one possibility that should not be overestimated. What is more important is the *one contemplating* it, the *histor* and the source is only a mediator, a medium. History needs to be always told with a pinch of imagination. Without imagination there is no science, as Einstein famously notes. History, though, is an art, not only a science. Art stands above science – to make art you need experience also, not just knowledge. It is because of this that art is connected to experience and the experienced, knowledge that has been lived beyond, outlived. Also without a belief in the god-likeness of human beings it is not possible to be a historian. By nature, by his very creaturehood, man is good, an evil one is an exception. If you are evil, a traitor, a fallen personality you would not be capable of being a *histor*, a witness, because you will take as a rule of thumb that people are just like you – evil. The historian needs to be a hermit, a *podvizhnik*, of the good. History is the revelation of the good and evil is its counterpoint. The fall is

¹⁶ Andric, Ivo, Banquet Speech, Nobel Media AB 2020, available at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1961/andric/speech/>, accessed 05. 10. 2020.

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not a background but a *contre-jour*, that blurs the details. History is not a profession and neither is it a method but a gift and a possibility. For the *histor* everything is important, everything has a history. There are no meaningless events or people.

Achieving the extraordinary with ordinary words

As Nietzsche notes science first carefully hides something, so that it can then long pretend to be looking for it.¹⁷ Simplicity as an aim of the presentation, also in iconography – perfection in the expression, not a perfect expression. The work of the historian is similar to the work of the theologian – he needs to translate un-translatable things, to find the most appropriate, not the most accurate words, in order to tell his contemporary audience in such a way, that they could understand – that is *if* history can ever be translated.¹⁸

It is the monumental work of the hermeneutic school during the last century to invigorate the terms and to return to the sense and wisdom inherent in them. Today, it seems, it is easier to tell a story, but we also fully comprehend our linguistic poverty and inability to hand over, to *tradition*, the wealth of meanings of the traditional terms, when we talk *with* or *about* tradition. The science or the art of History engages the *grand* history (of the common, of the beginning and the end, of salvation or death) and when it engages the *little* history it does so in order to show the *grand* in the little. If it does not do so it ceases to be a science-art and becomes just bilious publicism. “Go along the middle, the royal way, according to the commandment: neither begin something beyond your powers, neither give in to slothfulness. Do not think up anything to add to the written in the books, but live as the holy apostles teach.”¹⁹ And it was Pascal, also, who wrote that “the history of the church should be called the history of truth.”²⁰

*Where the history of life ends,
there begins the history of everlasting life.*²¹

Translated into English language by Theodor Avramov

¹⁷ A reference to “Oh, how much is today hidden by science! Oh, how much it is expected to hide!” F. Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, T.N. Foulis, 1913, London, p. 193.

¹⁸ A reference to Sp. Kazandzhiev, „Bylgarskite prevodi na “Tyi reche Zarathustra”, in *Zlatorog*, 1920, № 1 (in Bulgarian), where he argues that Nietzsche is untranslatable and that he cannot be reached, nor recreated and is beyond copying.

¹⁹ Prezviter Kozma, *Beseda Protiv Bogomilite*. Cf. Duytchev, Iv. *Rilskiyat Svetec i negovata obitel*, Sofia, 1940, p.44. (In Bulgarian), c. 44.

²⁰ Pascal, Blaise, *Pascal's Pensées*, E. P. Dutton, New York, 1958, №857, p. 257.

²¹ A somewhat ironical reference to Sirak Skitnik's essay “Pytyom”, published in 1928 in “Slovo”, where he says that where life ends, there art begins.