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The Eastern Side of the Circle: The Contribution of Mixail Tubjanskij¹

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Abstract. The intellectual biography of M.I. Tubjanskij is considered, setting his work within the context of the Baxtin Circle in the mid-1920s, but considering his wider engagement with the intellectual field of the time. Tubjanskij's passage from studies of the work of Hermann Cohen and of Plato, through his work on Buddhism, contemporary Bengali thought, especially the work of Rabindranath Tagore, to his later work on Mongolian culture is described and analysed. In conclusion it is argued that the non-European orientation of Tubjanskij and his associate Nikolai Konrad are significant dimensions of the work of the Baxtin Circle, but also need to be considered on their own terms. Tubjanskij's brief autobiographical sketch from December 1926 is also provided in English translation.

Keywords: Tubjanskij, Soviet orientology, Tagore, Buddhism, Baxtin Circle.

One of the most neglected aspects of the work of what we now call the 'Baxtin Circle' is the significance of the presence at Circle meetings of two of the most important Soviet orientologists of the period.² This neglect is probably due to a lack of understanding of the extent to which, in the 1920s, the development of philology, which was in the process of splitting into linguistics and literary studies, was still heavily affected by the entangled histories of Indo-European philology and European imperialism. Early Soviet linguists and literary scholars sought to extricate their object of study from the imperial agenda. Late imperial philologists and orientologists in Russia had already adopted a critical perspective towards the main trends in British and French studies of the orient, which was underpinned by a linguistic ideology that legitimized their respective colonial projects (Trautmann 2006; Tolz 2008; Yelle 2013). Towards the end of the nineteenth century the philological project of tracing historical relationships through lexical patterns increasingly became entangled with racist discourse, reaching a particularly disturbing scale among some German scholars (McGetchin 2009, p. 141-88). In response, certain Russian thinkers sought new bases for tracing historical relationships between cultures, replacing lexical with semantic patterning or the ordering of natural categories between languages and cultures. The work of one of the founders of comparative literature, Aleksandr Veselovskij played an important role here, encouraging analyses based on typological parallels and semantic correspondences between cultures that had no proven connection. Such research had a significant impact on Russian orientologists (Kulikova 2001, pp. 142-59), and marked an important stage in undermining ethnocentrism. Yet while many late imperial orientologists criticized the repressive nature of

¹ I am indebted to a number of scholars for valuable assistance in researching this article, most notably T.B. Ermakova, E.P. Ostrovskaja, S.L. Burmistrov, Ja.V. Vasil'kov and McComas Taylor.

² I use the term 'orientologist' in order to distinguish the professional study of the East from the pejorative sense 'orientalist' has acquired since Edward Said's 1978 book *Orientalism*. The rationale for this distinction will become clear in what follows.

Tsarist nationality policy, they remained linked to a liberal imperial project that sought to promote the regional identities of peoples who remained locked within a pan-Russian political sphere.³

Defeat of the first European imperial power at the hands of an Asian power, when the Japanese routed the Russian fleet in 1905, further shook complacent Eurocentric attitudes, while encouraging the assertiveness of intellectuals among the colonised peoples (see, for instance, Mishra 2012). What is now called postcolonial studies essentially begins at this time, becoming consolidated in the decade after the October 1917 Revolution. This is a topic worthy of a much wider study (see Brennan 2004), but within the bounds of our present concerns it is worth noting that one of the new generation of Japanese specialists, Nikolaj Josifovič Konrad, was a friend of Mixail Baxtin during his student days and became an occasional attender of Baxtin Circle meetings in Leningrad in the mid-1920s. At this very time Konrad was preparing a major study of the history of Japanese literature (Konrad 1927; 1973), in which he discussed, *inter alia*, the rise and morphology of the novel as a genre, the dynamic relationship between verse and prose genres, high and low genres, the role of the grotesque in literature and related issues. Identifying semantic patterns and drawing typological parallels between the histories of Japanese and European literature, Konrad's work anticipates many of the themes Baxtin was to develop in his writings on the rise and morphology of the novel in the 1930s. This is a topic that needs to be developed in a separate study, but suffice it here to note the significance of what might initially appear remote concerns to understanding the work of the Circle more generally.

While Konrad's connection with the Circle was sporadic, a more regular attender in the Leningrad period was another of the younger generation of orientologists, the Indologist and Buddhologist Mixail Izrailovič Tubjanskij (1893-1937). There has been some excellent work by Russian scholars in recent years that has clarified Tubjanskij's contribution to Russian Indology and Buddhology, but the focus of study has been restricted to specific areas of his life and work (Vorob'eva-Desjatovskaja and Savickij 1972, pp. 162-165; Gnatyuk-Danil'chuk 1986, pp. 142-158; Ermakova 2011a; Ostrovskaja 2012; Koženikova 2013). We do not have very much direct information about Tubjanskij's role in the Circle, but it seems Baxtin and Tubjanskij met only when the former arrived in Leningrad in 1924 and they were close for a period in the mid-1920s.⁴ Two other members of the Circle had encountered Tubjanskij as early as 1922, however, since Matvej Kagan, Lev Pumpjanskij and Tubjanskij all attended meetings of the Free Philosophical Association (Belous 2005, pp. 389-390), and Tubjanskij specifically criticized a lecture that Pumpjanskij gave about anti-Semitism at one of their meetings in May of that year (Belous 2005, pp. 716-718). Pumpjanskij's notes of

³ As the major historian of Central Asia Vasilij Bartol'd noted in his speech before the defence of his dissertation in 1900, Russian scholarship was an index of its higher position in the cultural hierarchy: 'the peoples of the east will believe in the superiority of our culture all the more when they are convinced we know them better than they know themselves; In this way, Russian Orientalists could contribute to the 'peaceful convergence of the peoples of the east with Russia' (Bartol'd 1963 [1900], p. 610)

⁴ In an undated letter to Matvej Isaevič Kagan, most likely from the mid-1920s Lev Pumpjanskij notes that he, Tubjanskij, Maria Judina, and Baxtin constituted a circle of the closest friends who were then studying theology persistently (*uporno*). See Kagan (2004, p. 658). Nikolai Nikolaev notes that Tubjanskij is mentioned in Pumpjanskij's surviving papers in March 1923 (Pumpjanskij 1992, p. 247 n.2).

lectures by Baxtin surviving in the former's archive (Pumpjanskij 1992; Pumpiansky 2001) appear to show some disagreement between Baxtin and Tubjanskij over theological questions, but we never learn what Tubjanskij was supposed to have argued, and there are some grounds for uncertainty about whether the points were actually made by Tubjanskij or Kagan.⁵ In their hagiographical 1984 biography of Baxtin, Clark and Holquist problematically divide the Circle into Baxtin's alleged 'disciples' – Marija Judina, Ivan Kanaev, Pavel Medvedev and Valentin Vološinov – and his interlocutors – Tubjanskij, Ivan Sollertinskij, Pumpjanskij and Kagan (1984, p. 103). No evidence is provided to back up this distinction, which consigns significant scholars to the status of mere mouthpieces for Baxtin's ideas, but it does at least acknowledge Tubjanskij to be among the independent thinkers in the Circle. In their 1993 biography of Baxtin, Konkin and Konkina follow suit (1993, p. 105) before going on to claim that as a result of the discussions about theology Judina and Tubjanskij converted to Russian Orthodox Christianity (1993, p. 369 n.16). Again no evidence is offered to support the claim of Tubjanskij's conversion, and I have found no evidence in his archive to support this claim.⁶

Tubjanskij's conversion would certainly have marked a significant event in his life. A Jew born in 1893, Tubjanskij was allowed to live in St. Petersburg due to his father's work in the legal profession. From 1913 his intellectual pursuits were focused on Jewish history, and he became involved with the Jewish Historico-Ethnographical Society (Otčet 1914, p. 25). Unlike Baxtin, he actually did graduate from the historico-philological faculty of Petrograd University in 1919 (AV 53/1/46) with a prodigious knowledge of ancient and modern languages. Materials in his archive show he knew at least the following languages well: Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, German, Dutch, English, French, Italian, Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Bengali, and later he would learn Tibetan and Mongolian. On graduation he appears to have been extremely knowledgeable about European philosophy, with an impressive range of material discussed in his numerous notebooks (AV 53/1/31), and to have had a particular interest in Marburg neo-Kantianism. He also appears to have had Zionist sympathies, which are evident from the surviving fragments of an introduction to a collection of Hermann Cohen's articles on the Philosophy of Judaism, the first part of which he prepared and translated (AV 53/1/32/3-10). Here he argues that while Cohen was opposed to Zionism, his philosophy should be understood as a philosophical accompaniment to that political movement, for Cohen's philosophy is a 'Jewish philosophical maximalism' that is based on the 'unconditional truth of Judaism', rejecting all the attractions of mysticism, pantheism, naturalism, atheism even though he finds things of value in rejected positions' (AV 53/1/32/7-8). Correspondingly Zionism is a 'Jewish political maximalism' that

⁵ It appears only the initials M.I. were given and the date of the discussion is uncertain (Pumpianskij 1992, p. 251 n.81). Nikolaj Nikolaev, who edited the publication, credits Tubjanskij on the basis that Kagan was already in Moscow at the presumed time (Pumpianskij 1992, p. 251 n.82). I am grateful to Sergeiy Sandler for pointing this problem out.

⁶ Suggestions that M.I. Tubjanskij was involved with A.A. Meyer's group *Voskresenie*, implication in which led to Baxtin's arrest, that are based on Judina's letter to M.F. Gnesin of January 1929 (Judina 2006, pp. 156-57), seem problematic given that Judina only cites a surname, Tubjanskij had left Leningrad in 1927, and the relevant archival materials mention a certain Il'ja Davydovič Tubjanskij rather than Mixail Izrailovič (Obvinitel'noe 1999, p. 127).

unconditionally rejects all alternative solutions to the ‘Jewish question’, all the attractions of diaspora (AV 53/1/32/8). Where Cohen takes aspects from European philosophy, principally Plato and Kant, for the modern assertion of the truth of Judaism, Zionism takes elements from European political life to fulfil its project of the establishment of the Jewish state in Palestine (AV 53/1/32/8).

This publication never appeared, and nor did a 1920 work on the function of myth in Plato’s philosophy (AV 53/1/36), which is significant in that Plato’s Socrates is presented as the first point at which the power of tradition is recognised as a source of truth rather than, as with the pre-Socratic philosophers, arguing their insights came from direct experience and individual thought (AV 53/1/36/15). Philosophy now must become a ‘philosophy of life and at the same time a philosophy of the historical process’ (AV 53/1/36/14). The ideal is now sought in the concretely real, in time and space, which finds its main expression in the idea of the dialectical dialogue (AV 53/1/36/14). The research then leads on to a discussion of the relationship between philosophy and literary form, which unfortunately only survives as a plan (AV 53/1/36/ 16-18).

One can clearly see a convergence of interests with those of Baxtin, Kagan and Pumpjanskij before they had even met. However, Tubjanskij had a great interest in ancient and modern Indian languages and cultures, and from 1920 he began teaching Sanskrit at the Central Institute of Living Eastern languages in Petrograd where, from 1921, he also taught Bengali (AV 53/1/46).⁷ In 1926 he extended his pedagogical activity to Leningrad University. In order to teach Bengali he had to invent the course material from scratch and published the first collection of Bengali literature in Russia (Tubjanskij 1923). Pedagogical work was complemented by research work when, from 1920, he began working at the Asiatic Museum of the Academy of Sciences, then the main Institute of Oriental studies in the USSR, working on Indian and Tibetan Buddhism with his teacher, the prominent Buddhologist Fedor Ščerbatkoj (AV 53/1/46).⁸ This inevitably drew his attention away from European philosophy though, judging from Pumpjanskij’s letter, he continued to participate in discussions at Circle meetings through 1926 (Kagan 2004, p. 658-659).

Buddhism

Tubjanskij’s research at the Asiatic Museum centred on the preparation of an edition of Tibetan Chinese versions of the Indian logical tractatus, the *Nyāya-praveśa*, about which Ščerbatkoj had written for his doctoral dissertation (AV 53/1/2; Tubjanskij 1926; Ostrovskaja 2012, pp. 49-50). Tubjanskij here created a trilingual index of specialist terminology and that facilitated study of the ways in which Indo-Buddhist logical and theoretical concepts were adapted when assimilated into the cultures of the Far East and Central Asia (Ostrovskaja 2012, pp. 50). Such work continued the very different approach to Indology that had developed in Russia as opposed to that in most of the rest of Europe, not

⁷ Konrad worked at the same institute and it was here that his book on Japanese literature was published in 1927.

⁸ Ščerbatkoj is generally known in Anglophone scholarship as Theodor Stcherbatsky, the rendering of the name he used to publish his numerous works in English.

least because Russian studies of Buddhism had begun with studies of Chinese, Tibetan and Mongolian sources in the work of Vasilij Pavlovič Vasil'ev (Ol'denburg 1900; Ermakova 1998, pp. 151-156). Along with Sergej Ol'denburg and Ščerbatskoi, Tubjanskij examined the manuscripts collected by Vasil'ev and prepared them for publication (Ol'denburg, Ščerbatskoj and Tubjanskij 1927a and 1927b).⁹

The differences in approach, which were substantial, gained an ideological importance after the Revolution. As McGetchin notes (2009, p. 148), German Indologists in the nineteenth century 'almost exclusively focused on the ancient India of the pre-Vedic (before 1500BCE) to classical Sanskrit (c.400-600 BCE) periods'. Moreover, important philologists from Wilhelm von Humboldt through Bopp to Whitney refused to take the work of Indian scholars seriously (McGetchin 2009, pp. 148-153). This attitude was not restricted to linguistics. The prominent Belgian Buddhologist Louis de La Vallée Poussin (1869-1938), for instance, championed a religious and mystical understanding of Buddhism, arguing that the 'genuine methods of the Indian thought' are either 'genial but incoherent effusions' or 'pedantic categories' - the 'matrkas' (compilations of technical terms). Western paradigms of scientific thought must therefore be imposed for any systematic understanding: 'tradition must be squeezed through a filter if one wants coherent theories' (La Vallée Poussin 1906, pp. 944). Russian scholars, certainly from the time of Ivan Pavlovič Minaev (1840-1890), refused to seal the ancient world off from the modern, seriously considered the ways in which philosophical thought had developed, and were inclined to appreciate the achievements of Indian scholarship (see, especially, Vigasin 2008, pp. 151-152). Ščerbatskoj and his students adopted a diametrically opposite position to that of La Vallée Poussin (See Chilton and Oldmeadow 2009). Mahāyāna Buddhism was instead viewed as a system of pure logic and reason, and semantic correlations between Buddhism and European philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, and others were established.¹⁰ The implication was that Indian philosophers, and Buddhist philosophers in particular, should be assigned a place among the great thinkers of human history. Not only in India, but in countries where Buddhism had spread, the theoretical conceptions that developed rivalled those of the Mediterranean of ancient times in terms of their coherence and sophistication. The idea that exact thinking was a European preserve was a prejudice that needed to be expunged.

Ščerbatskoj paid considerable attention to post-canonical Buddhism, and published important works on the logical systems and epistemology of important Sanskrit texts, culminating in his monumental two-volume *Buddhist Logic* of 1930-32. Rather than literally translating such texts, Ščerbatskoj argued that the conceptions can adequately be conveyed by means of a European philosophical apparatus. Thus, when the British orientalist A. Berriedale Keith cast doubt on the wisdom of Ščerbatskoj's method on the grounds that it is 'really impracticable to discover with any precision the doctrine which Buddha in fact expounded' (Berriedale

⁹ Ščerbatskoj appears to have maintained a close connection with Tubjanskij while he was abroad, while Ol'denburg developed a very high opinion of Tubjanskij, noting in a letter to Ščerbatskoj in 1922 that 'I have learned to value him very much as a worthy, clever, knowledgeable and pleasant person' (Vigasin 2008, p. 361).

¹⁰ Ščerbatskoj's relation to neo-Kantianism is mentioned in one of Konrad's last articles (1972), but for a full analysis see Šoxin (1998).

Keith 1931, p. 393) the Russian reminded his critic that one must distinguish between systematic and popular texts: '[a]ll Buddhist literature is divided into a sūtra class and a śāstra class. The first is popular, the second is scientific. The first is propaganda, the second is precision' (Stcherbatsky 1932, p. 868). This movement against 'philologism' and for proper philosophical study of Buddhist systematic texts became a fundamental principle of early Soviet Buddhology, and is perhaps most clearly stated in the work of one of Ščerbatsoj's older students Otton Rozenberg (1991 [1918-1919]).¹¹

Such work was also aimed at combating widespread, stereotyped understandings of Buddhist thought in Russia, where the idea of Nirvana was generally understood through Schopenhauer's pessimism and was seen as close to nihilism. Sergej Ol'denburg had begun a critique of this idea in 1899, and in the 1920s it developed into a fully-fledged scholarly debate between Ščerbatsoj and La Vallée Poussin, culminating in the former's landmark study of 1927 (Stcherbatsky 1927).¹² This understanding of Buddhism may have also been common in the Baxtin Circle before Tubjanskij's arrival, and we can see in one of Kagan's articles, published in Germany in 1915, a distinctly negative evaluation of Buddhism as a pessimistic 'religion, asceticism and a general retreat from the world' (Kagan 2004 [1915], p. 157) in which the 'idea of empty chaos is affirmed' (Kagan 2004 [1915], p. 169). By 1923 Kagan had ceased making such categorical remarks, noting that 'it is too difficult to guess and to know what role' Islam and Buddhism 'had played and will play in the creation of historical humanity, which remains far from completed' (2004 [1923], p. 176).¹³ Kagan's early comments may have been coloured by the rise of anti-Semitism in Germany and then current attempts to view the life of Buddha as a source for the life of Christ, reducing the importance of Judaism as a source of Christianity and thus European culture (Marchand 2009, p. 252-279).

Tubjanskij's direct comments on Buddhism in the mid-1920s have much in common with those of the early Kagan. Buddhism, he argued, champions '*pessimism, asceticism and impersonalism*', founding the 'most subtle, philosophically systematic and profoundly worked out theory and practice of self-absorption [*samopogruženie*]' (Tubjanskij 1924, p. 12):

Buddhism sees the main sin to lie in the thirst for life, in the pursuit of personality; it declares the world to be unreal, without essence, 'empty' and teaches the search for deliverance ('nirvana') from suffering, from everything newly-born in the vale of suffering, by means of the true knowledge that reveals worldly illusion and systematic self-absorption.... The idea of divinity, which in most of Europe is considered an integral feature of religion, has no significance for Buddhism – it is simply not needed. (Tubjanskij 1924, pp. 12-13).

He nevertheless appears to have shared Ščerbatsoj's appreciation for the value and sophistication of Buddhist philosophical thought, an appreciation that was clearly strong

¹¹ See also Ermakova (1998: 255-267) and Lysenko (2011) .

¹² For a survey of the reception of the idea of Nirvana in Russia at the time see (Ruocco 2011, pp. 299-352).

¹³ I am grateful to Sergeiy Sandler for drawing my attention to these passages.

enough for him to work with Ol'denburg and Ščerbatskoj to draw up the statutes and plan for a special Institute of Buddhist Culture in Leningrad (Ol'denburg, Ščerbatskoj and Tubjanskij 1927c).¹⁴ Arguments and criticisms characteristic of the Leningrad School of Indologists are also clear in Tubjanskij's 1922 review of the book *Hinduism, Religion and Society in Contemporary India* by the German orientalist Helmuth von Glasenapp (Tubjanskij 1963 [1922]).¹⁵ Glasenapp had presented a distinctly ethnocentric perspective, arguing that for the peoples of the East 'religion is everything', thus 'the ability simultaneously to hold as true different, even views contradicting one another in this form is the specific property of the Asiatic spirit' (Glasenapp 1922, p. 317). Reviewing this book Tubjanskij argued that such claims are based on a superficial assumption that fails to consider Asian conceptions in the light of the comparative-historical method in philology and the results of the history of world philosophy. From Parmenides through to Hegel the same duality of truth as discussed by Indian thinkers has been a constant concern (Tubjanskij 1963 [1922], p. 302). In 1927 he further developed the idea of the importance of the study of semantic parallels between West and East for the scientific study of both European and Asian cultures:

Nobody has yet written a history of European culture through comparisons with that of the far East or India. Nobody has carried out these comparisons, though it is quite evident that much, very much, in European culture would appear to us in a completely different light if we were able to juxtapose one to the other. This task is inescapable, for the comparative method is the categorical requirement of science. We cannot with any surety pass judgement on any phenomenon of European culture while it appears to us as only one of a kind, with which there is nothing to compare, just as it is impossible to judge a language if one knows only one language – one's own. (Tubjanskij 1990 [1927], p. 176)

Such concerns were to permeate Tubjanskij's work for the rest of his life.

Rabindranath Tagore

Apart from Judaism and Marburg neo-Kantianism, the main influence on the young Tubjanskij was the work of the Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore. Though working on Buddhist sources, much of Tubjanskij's publishing activity in the 1920s was centred on that contemporary thinker.¹⁶ Between 1919 and 1927 translations of Tagore's prose, poetry, essays and memoirs were published under Tubjanskij's editorship, with important scholarly annotations and a series of introductions which were landmarks in Tagore scholarship outside

¹⁴ The Institute functioned only for two years, opening in 1928, by which time Tubjanskij had already departed for Mongolia. For an overview see Ermakova (2011b).

¹⁵ It is notable that Glasenapp was a member of the *Nachrichtenstelle für den Orient* (Intelligence Bureau for the East) within the German Foreign Ministry, which employed orientalists to 'inflammé' the East during World War One (Marchand 2009, pp. 446, 449). He was in contact with Indian nationalists working for German support against British rule, and who made contact with one of the founders of the Indian Communist Party, Virendranath Chattopadhyaya in Sweden in 1918 (Barooah 2004, p. 135). In retrospect one may discern certain *völkisch* trends in Glasenapp's 1922 book.

¹⁶ He did, however, find time to translate and edit an edition of Eduard Douwes Dekker's (pen name Multatuli) satirical novel *Max Havelaar*, which denounced the abuses of colonialism in the Dutch East Indies (Multatuli 1927). Tubjanskij's introduction is Multatuli (1927, pp. 3-14).

India, setting his ideas and literary works in the context of both Indian and European thought. He lectured on Tagore's work at meetings of the Free Philosophical Association in 1922 (Belous 2005, pp. 375, 389) and it seems likely Tagore's work was discussed at Baxtin Circle meetings since interest in his work went beyond Tubjanskij, as shown by Medvedev's positive review of Tagore's novel *The Wreck* (Medvedev 1923). Another factor that would have drawn the attention of the Circle to Tagore's work was the fact that Marburg neo-Kantian Paul Natorp had met Tagore on his visit to Germany in 1921 and published an account of the meeting. Here Natorp enthusiastically endorsed the Indian as 'the educator we need at the moment... a warning voice who in truly brotherly spirit, without obtrusiveness and denigrating know-all manner, wishes on his part to help us to realize our grave mistakes and to overcome them' (Natorp 1921, quoted in Kampchen 1990, p. 118).¹⁷

Tubjanskij's earliest published translations of Tagore were those which conform to Natorp's characterization. The first was the Indian's 1916 lecture at Keio Gijuku University in Tokyo, *The Spirit of Japan*, in which he posited a spiritual unity between the civilizations of Asia and warned this was endangered by the rapidity of commercial development and the brutal politics that it involved (Tagor 1919). The most dangerous thing for Japan, he argued, is:

the acceptance of the motive force of the Western civilisation as her own. ... I can see her motto, taken from science, "Survival of the Fittest," writ large at the entrance of her present-day history—the motto whose meaning is, "Help yourself, and never heed what it costs to others"; the motto of the blind man, who only believes in what he can touch, because he cannot see. But those who can see, know that men are so closely knit, that when you strike others the blow comes back to yourself. The moral law, which is the greatest discovery of man, is the discovery of this wonderful truth, that man becomes all the truer, the more he realises himself in others. This truth has not only a subjective value, but is manifested in every department of our life. And nations, who sedulously cultivate moral blindness as the cult of patriotism, will end their existence in a sudden and violent death. (Tagore 1916, pp. 17-18; 1917, p. 78)

Tagore's short 1917 book *Nationalism*, which incorporated the 1916 lectures in Japan, followed in 1922. In his editorial notes Tubjanskij notes that translation of Tagore's use of the term 'Nation' (capitalized by the author) was problematic in Russian in that it encompassed the ideas of people (*narod*) and state (*gosudarstvo*), while 'nationalism' is used in a sense that most closely approximates 'imperialism' (Tagor 1922, p. 90). Indeed, for Tagore 'nation' means the nation state, 'the political and economic union of a people'. It is 'that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose... self-preservation' (Tagore 1917, p. 9). When science and the perfection of organization reach a certain point the nation state enters into competition with other nation states until 'it can

¹⁷ One can imagine an interesting comparison between Natorp's 1920 *Sozial-Idealismus*, which Kagan translated (fragments were published as Natorp 2004), and Tagore's writing about social morality, and between Natorp's ideas about Social Pedagogy and Tagore's ideas about education. In this context one may understand Tagore's invitation to Natorp to visit his newly established Viswa Bharati University in Shantiniketan (Manjapra 2012, p. 59). For a recent discussion of Tagore's educational ideas see Bhattacharya (2014).

stop no longer, for the competition grows keener, organization grows vaster, and selfishness attains supremacy. Trading on the greed and fear of man, it occupies more and more space in society, and at last becomes its ruling force' (Tagore 1917, p. 9). Internal aggressiveness is accompanied by internal discipline in which man 'feels relieved of the urging of his conscience when he can transfer his responsibility to this machine [the nation state] which is the creation of his intellect and not of his complete moral personality' (Tagore 1917, p. 111).

Such passages in Tagore's works of this nature resonate quite strongly with Baxtin's early moral philosophy in which the 'immanent law' of technological development divorced from the 'once-occurrent unity of life' becomes an 'irresponsibly destructive and terrifying force' (Bakhtin 1993, p. 7; Baxtin 2003, p. 11-12). The intellectual tradition from which they derived was quite different from those considered to have influenced Baxtin directly, however. As Collins puts it:

Tagore's ideas of the alienation engendered by the politics of the state versus the unalienated life-world; his juxtaposition of state and politics with society and religion; his critique of the utilitarian basis of modern nationalism; and his insistence that love forms the basis of human nature could all be shown to have affinities with, variously: Marxism, anarchism, Romanticism and Christian theology. But the important fact is that for Tagore, none of his ideas were in fact derived from these sources. (Collins 2008, p. 11)

Tubjanskij sought to uncover the sources of these ideas and became Tagore's Russian champion. Tagore was popularly viewed as an exotic poet in Russia, following the publication of the Russian translation of the collection of poems *Gitanjali*, for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1913, (Gnatyuk-Danil'chuk 1986, pp. 75-119).¹⁸ Tubjanskij argued this was a misunderstanding resulting from the publication of translations of Tagore's work based on English editions, without any contextualizing materials, so that the ideas behind the writings remained opaque. To remedy this, in 1925 Tubjanskij published a selection of poems from *Gitanjali*, which he translated from the original Bengali, and with extensive explanatory materials (Tagor 1925). More broadly, he attempted to set Tagore's ideas within what he viewed as the two poles of Indian thought. The first he termed 'impersonalism', by which he meant 'self-absorption', most systematically worked out in the various schools of Buddhism, but present in other schools of Indian thought such as Vedānta-Shankara. The opposite pole is, 'personalism', which is associated with Śaivism (the cult of the god Śiva), Śakti-ism (the cult of universal divinity, called Śakti, Kālī, Durgā etc) and Vaiṣṇavism (the cult of Viṣṇu) (Tubjanskij 1924, pp. 13-14). Tagore is presented as a champion of 'personalism' in the form of 'optimism, *the acceptance of life and personality, the recognition of personal divinity*' (Tubjanskij 1924, p. 13). The fundamental theme of Tagore's work for Tubjanskij is "the joy of finding the infinite in the finite". In other words, it is the theme of the infinite nature of the finite, *the infinite richness and the values of personality [ličnost']*: not the self-serving *individual* pursuing its own goals in a predatory

¹⁸ On the circumstances of this award see Collins (2007, pp. 76-77).

fashion, but a true *personality*, realizing one purpose in life in a disinterested fashion' (Tubjanskij 1924, p. 19).

This perspective, Tubjanskij argued, was strongly influenced by Vaiṣṇavism (Tubjanskij 1924: 13-14).¹⁹ 'In certain of its forms, Vaiṣṇavism acquired the character of a relatively complete monotheism, the main content of which was the idea of all life as a service to the divine', with the result that ethical imperative came to the fore, leading to a struggle against the caste system (Tubjanskij 1924, p. 15). Tagore was attracted to Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Debendranath Tagore's (Rabindranath's father) Brahmo-Samaj society, which sought finally to cleanse Vaiṣṇavism of the remnants of polytheism, the idea of reincarnation, and the idea of avatars, finally breaking with Vaiṣṇavism on its own grounds (Tubjanskij 1924, p. 16). This theme was further developed in Tubjanskij's introduction to Tagore's novel *Gora*, in which the Russian argues that Tagore presented a realistic portrait of the struggle between reform and Hindu tradition in the 1870s and 1880 (Tubjanskij 1926). Tradition now appears in the form of the Hindu belief in the divine as maternal, that is but a manifestation of a more general 'psychological law' that permeates India: it is 'characteristic to understand every relationship according to the type of relationship between mother and child, every event according to the fundamental form of their biological connection: birth and feeding from the breast' (Tubjanskij 1926, p. 11).²⁰

In the developing nationalist movement Indian patriotism naturally came under this mode of thinking, so that the divine feminine yielded, under conditions of industrialization and the influence of European secular thinking, to the motherland. Indian nationalism thus took the form of a maternal political religion (Tubjanskij 1926, p. 18): Śakti-ism, the divine feminine as primordial cosmic energy, or the cult of naked power associated with 'ecstatic and bloody orgies and human sacrifice' (Tubjanskij 1926, p. 12; see also Tubjanskij 1927a, pp. 10-13). Tagore saw this manifested in the Swadeshi movement from which he recoiled:

[I]t [nationalism] had the character of the cult of naked power, the cult of the might of the motherland [*rodina*], which could not be justified by any other ideals.

Ideologically this cult rests on the ancient Indian cult of power (Śakti), worshipped from ancient times in India in the form of the terrible mother Kālī. Tagore rejects Śakti-ism, as a religious delusion... [he] rightly sees in the ideology of Indian nationalism the rebirth of this cult in another guise.²¹ (Tubjanskij 1927b, p. 9)

Tagore's version of the divine feminine is quite different. Tubjanskij concedes that Tagore locates divinity *within* the world, resulting in a pantheism in which the world is 'already justified', but argues that the idea of the divine feminine as 'loving mother' gives this

¹⁹ Tubjanskij's terminology later proved controversial, on which see Gnatyuk-Danil'chuk (1986, pp. 149-50). In a recent study Kalyan Sen Gupta argues that Vaishnavism was not the main influence on Tagore's ideas. He demonstrates that Tagore was also influenced by ideas associated with the Bauls and Sufis of Bengal, and indeed Buddhism, but argues that 'the Upanishadic endeavour to relate everything to a single ultimate reality' was the principle to which Tagore remained most faithful (Gupta 2005, pp. 9-10).

²⁰ Tubjanskij points out this is not an image limited to India, pointing to the work of Bachofen, but argues it is more pervasive in India.

²¹ On the appropriation of the image of Kālī in the Bengal nationalist movement see Urban (2005, pp. 182-88).

justification a 'concrete content'. Not only is the world in general justified, 'the very flesh of the world is sanctified' (Tubjanskij 1990 [1927], p. 185).

Tagore thus becomes 'a poet of *nature* as the *flesh of the world*, in a much more substantial and content-rich sense than is possible to think from an abstract pantheism' (Tubjanskij 1990 [1927], pp. 185-6). Citing Tagore's 1922 philosophical tract *Creative Unity*, Tubjanskij presents the Indian's religion, and the relationship between ethics and aesthetics that it involves, very much in the sense of that we find in Bakhtin:

In the poet's religion we find no doctrine or injunction, but rather the attitude of our entire being towards a truth which is ever to be revealed in its own endless creation.

In dogmatic religion all questions are definitely answered, all doubts are finally laid to rest. But the Poet's religion is fluid, like the atmosphere round the earth where lights and shadows play hide-and-seek... It never undertakes to lead anybody anywhere to any solid conclusion; yet it reveals endless spheres of light, because it has no walls round itself. (Tubjanskij 1990 [1927], p. 195; Tagore 1922, p. 16).

Tagore finally visited the USSR in 1930, but by this time Tubjanskij had already left for Mongolia, where he was to remain until 1936.

Mongolia

Though he may have imagined it to be a brief interruption, Tubjanskij's work on Tagore was brought to an end in 1927 when the Academy of Sciences agreed to send him to Mongolia charged with the task of 'studying Tibetan literature taught in Datsans,²² and especially that part of Tibetan literature (philosophical and scholarly) that was created by Mongolian authors' (Vasil'kov 1998, p. 110; Koženikova 2013, p. 351).²³ This, Tubjanskij argued in a letter to Ol'denburg, 'contains the richest material, a direct encyclopaedia of Buddhist and, in part, Brahminical philosophy and will have... a great significance for all indology' (Kozhenikova 2013, p. 351). Tubjanskij aimed to pursue this work through contacts with the scholars and teachers at the Gandan monastery in Ulan-Bator, but in conditions where economic, political and ideological pressure had been brought to bear on the monks, by 1928 placing them in an extremely embattled position, this was a difficult and sensitive task (Ermakova 2011a, pp. 33-34). He became conscious that his allotted time in Mongolia was inadequate to complete his work and sought ways to extend his stay (Koženikova 2013, p. 352). He was offered the opportunity by the Soviet Plenipotentiary Representative Office to remain in Mongolia working for the Mongolian Scientific Committee (MonUčKom) as a consultant for Soviet diplomats on matters of Mongolian and Tibetan studies (Ermakova 2011a, p. 33). In 1930, following the removal of the prominent Buriat scholar Cyben Žamcaranovič Žamcarano, he became the Scientific Secretary of MonUčKom (Koženikova

²² Datsans are Buddhist university monasteries in the Tibetan tradition that may be found in Mongolia, Tibet and parts of Siberia

²³ Kozhenikova (2013, p. 351) details a combination of professional and personal reasons for Tubjanskij taking the opportunity to spend time in Mongolia.

2013, p. 353).²⁴ He remained in this post until 1936 for which he was awarded a first-class Order of Labour (Ermakova 2011a, p. 33).

In Mongolia Tubjanskij found a range of new materials in Datsans, including discussions of Buddhist terminology, surveys of various Buddhist schools and new philosophical tracts. He discovered Sanskrit books and manuscripts containing texts that he believed were not even available in India. He worked on preparing translations and commentaries of the most important new materials and in the process compiled preparatory materials for a dictionary of Buddhist terminology (Koženikova 2013, p. 354). Publication of such work in the early 1930s was more or less impossible, however, and so he concentrated on publishing work on historical questions and matters of practical concern. One area that conformed to both was the study of Tibetan medicine, the sources of which he viewed both as an ‘ethnographical monument of the history of the development of certain eastern peoples’ and as a resource that may be ‘used in the arsenal of scientific medicine’ (Belen’skij and Tubjanskij 1935, p. 59). Tubjanskij worked on a manual of associated terms and discussed the problem in some detail (Belen’skij and Tubjanskij 1935). On a more directly practical basis, Tubjanskij published articles on nomadism and cattle breeding (Tubjanskij 1934; 1935a; 1936).²⁵

From the point of view of our current concerns, perhaps the most interesting publication from this period is Tubjanskij’s 1935 article ‘Certain Problems of Mongolian Literature of the Pre-Revolutionary Period’ (Tubjanskij 1935b), which was written in response to a programmatic article by the prominent linguist, ethnographer and then Head of the Mongolian Section of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Nikolaj Poppe (1935).²⁶ Poppe had argued that the study of Mongolian literature needs to focus exclusively on artistic literature in the Mongolian language, but had proven unable to draw a sharp line between such literature and folklore, historical and geographical texts (Tubjanskij 1935b, p. 11). This, Tubjanskij argued, was because Poppe failed to appreciate the *historicity* of the boundary between ‘literature in the narrow sense and written culture in the broad sense’, noting that for literatures of the feudal and pre-feudal epochs one needs to understand literature as meaning all written culture and folklore (Tubjanskij 1935b, pp. 11-12). The insistence on Mongolian language material was also misguided because in Mongolia the Tibetan language played a similar role to that of Latin in mediaeval Europe so that, for the most part, literature of the feudal era in Mongolian largely consisted of translations from Tibetan:

But the overwhelming surplus of translated literature in does not mean that it is in any way separated from social reality or that it fails to express the real ideology of the epoch: it means that, according to its very content, this literature cannot be understood, nor explained by itself in the manner of, for instance, the richest and original layers of Indian, Greek or ancient Scandinavian literatures. As a specifically

²⁴ On the significant scholarly career of Žamcarano and the circumstances of his fall and eventual arrest see Rešetov (1998) and Jusupova (2011 and 2013).

²⁵ Tubjanskij’s work on nomadism (1934) was subjected to aggressive criticism after his death. See Luk’janov (1939).

²⁶ On Poppe’s life and career see Poppe (1983) and Alpatov (1996). Poppe briefly recalls meeting Tubjanskij in Poppe (1983, p. 134-5).

translated literature, Mongolian literature is... dependent in its content and meaning, according to the system of its ideology. It can therefore be grasped only in comparison with the Tibetan literature that arose in Mongolia itself and that reflects the social ideology in a much fuller sense. (Tubjanskij 1935b, p. 15)

In order not to limit literary studies in a way reminiscent of the Formalists, to study the literature of the feudal epoch 'sociologically and historically', as a 'real expression of its ideology', it is essential not to separate Mongolian literature 'from the system and the history of the ideology of the entire society of central Asia of which Mongolia is part' (Tubjanskij 1935b, p. 16). This specifically pertains to the Tibetan literature that bears philosophical and religious ideas but also to Manchu Chinese political and legal texts.

One also needs to consider the issue of the various Mongolian tribes each with their own individual literature. Poppe had argued that a common Mongolian language ceased to exist in the fourteenth century and so from this time one needs to speak of, for instance, Buriat or Oirat literatures. Tubjanskij disputes the nullity of the 'Mongolian literary language', arguing that it retained its validity for much longer, especially among more backward tribes. Moreover, small linguistic differences did not immediately lead to distinct literatures. Rather, each such literature needs to be viewed 'dialectically, as in the process of becoming distinct, first in its folkloric element and then in a written form'. Each literature emerges 'from a common complex unity, made up of the wider circle of central-Asian culture and a narrower circle of inter-tribal Mongol culture, that was already falling apart into larger or smaller groups in olden times' (Tubjanskij 1935b, pp. 17-18).

Mongolian literature arose in and through the assimilation of Chinese and Tibetan semantic material on the basis of a nomadic, largely oral culture, acquiring its own distinct identity. Following a line of argumentation first developed by Veselovskij and elaborated in early Soviet folkloristics and literary studies, Tubjanskij argued that plots and motifs had not been mechanically 'borrowed' from other cultures, but actively adopted, adapted and combined with indigenous material, thus 'alongside borrowed elements, Mongolian folklore includes elements of independent creation, rich both in content and form' (Tubjanskij 1935b, p. 18). One can find literature that is little more than a compilation of borrowed material, works thoroughly worked out on the basis of specifically Mongolian themes, and works that are a synthesis of foreign and 'national cultural elements' (Tubjanskij 1935b, p. 19). Such syntheses often bear the marks of social struggles, particularly as the struggle for independence from Manchu China. Critical engagement, ironic intersections and the integration of oral traditions into written texts, first through religious texts as Buddhism spread throughout the region and then with the rise of written material in the vernacular that played a more specifically literary role (Tubjanskij 1935b, pp. 20-21).

Tubjanskij returned to Leningrad in 1936 with plans to publish a history of Bengali literature and also some of the material he had collected in Mongolia. Such plans were brought to an end when he was arrested in August 1937 for espionage activities associated with his colleague Žamcarano. He was shot in November of the same year.

Conclusion

Throughout his career Tubjanskij combined rigorous attention to the detail of specific cultural phenomena with a universalistic approach to philosophical problems. For all his careful attention to the work of Indian, Tibetan and Mongolian thinkers, he was seeking cultural and intellectual riches that had a validity and value that transcended the context of their production. Whether it was the production of a little-known Mongolian lama or a famous but misunderstood Nobel Laureate that was the point of his attention, the aim was to allow the unique and irreducible voice of Asian intellectuals to be heard and understood beyond their immediate social milieu. The heady scent of exoticism and the fog of mysticism was blown away, revealing engaged intellects grappling with all too familiar social conflicts and ethical dilemmas. When East and West were compared in this sense, the opposition began to break down, the unfamiliar became familiar, and what once appeared natural in European conceptions of the world were revealed as highly conventional. Tubjanskij moved a considerable distance from his early preoccupation with Judaism and neo-Kantianism, but he found familiar ideas and kindred orientations in cultures that were often regarded as fundamentally incompatible with these perspectives.

This is an important dimension of the Baxtin Circle that has generally been overlooked since the development of 'Baxtinian' ideas has too often been separated from the institutional contexts in which its individual members worked and developed their ideas. Just as the project on sociological poetics that Vološinov and Medvedev worked on in the mid-1920s bequeathed fundamental aspects of a philosophy of language and a sociological conception of literary form that Baxtin was to work into his evolving philosophical and literary worldview, so the work of Konrad and Tubjanskij encouraged Baxtin to view European philosophy and literature as sharing fundamental semantic features with all other philosophies and literatures. In reciprocal fashion, Baxtin's philosophical investigations of the 1920s undoubtedly helped other members of the circle to rise above the narrow specialisms of some of their colleagues and to grasp the philosophical significance of their area of study. As we have seen, however, Tubjanskij was steeped in some of the same philosophy as Baxtin even before they met, making it almost impossible to apportion priority among a group of scholars *all of whom* were interlocutors.

Looking at these works as a whole we can see complementary strengths and weaknesses. While we can see continuities between Konrad's and Tubjanskij's discussions of the development of Asian literature on the one hand and Bakhtin's approach to literary history in the 1930s on the other, we can note that in the former the connection to the theory of dialogue and the sociological approach to the formation of the national language is rather more limited. Yet what we do find in the work of the orientologists is an attempt to correlate stages in the development of literary history with the institutional changes in the society of which it is part. Tubjanskij thus examines the role of the itinerant temples in Mongolia and the development of new patterns of trade, the development of publishing and spread of literacy with the development of literary forms in a way that remains poorly developed in Baxtin's work. Konrad's history of Japanese literature similarly maintains this crucial connection to such institutional factors. This should remind us that Baxtin's work of the 1930s is a

synthesis of a number of pre-existing intellectual trends, some of which other members of the Circle specialised in more than he did. His was only one of a number of possible syntheses. Like all thinkers Baxtin's appropriation of his sources was selective, and certain things were left outside of his purview for a number of different reasons. At certain times important things were overlooked. If we want to make productive use of such work we need to recognise both the potentials and limitations of the work of those we study, and to recognise the 'surplus of vision' in the work of interlocutors is one way for us to make use of our own unique positions outside the time and space of those whose work we study.

Supplement:

Curriculum Vitae of M.I. Tubjanskij²⁷

I was born in St. Petersburg in 1893, finished the Classical Section of the Reformatiskii School [*Reformatiskij učilišče*] in 1911,²⁸ and in the same year enrolled at St. Petersburg University, initially in the Physico-Mathematical Faculty, where I completed three courses. I then transferred to the Historical-Philological Faculty. I graduated from the University in 1919 but remained at the university under the instruction of F.I. Ščerbatskoj. In 1920 I became a member of teaching staff at the Petrograd Institute of Living oriental Languages, which was then opening, initially as a lecturer in Sanskrit. I took on the teaching of Bengali from 1921, which I still teach at the present time and also, since the autumn of 1926, at the University. Since 1920 I have also worked as a level-one Research Fellow [*naučnij sotrudnik*] in the Asiatic Museum of the Academy of Sciences. In 1923 I published the anthology *Examples of Bengali Literature* [*Obrazcy bengalskoj literatury*] with the Institute's publisher, as a text book for lectures; several copies of a Bengali-Russian vocabulary for this anthology are held by students but this is not yet published. I published several translations of the works of R. Tagore and B. Chatterji²⁹ from Bengali in the journal *Vostok* in 1922-25. In 1925-26 I finished editing a seven-volume collection of the work of R. Tagore, translated from English and Bengali, among which there is one volume of Reminiscences, which I newly translated from Bengali (I had published it from the English translation in 1924); in the collection *Light and Shade* [*Svet i teni*] I published the first translations of four of Tagore's stories from Bengali. In 1926 I have translated and am presently publishing in Bibliotheca Buddhica the work *The Nyāya-Praveśa of Śaṅkarasvāmin* – publication of the Sanskrit text from the manuscripts held in the Asiatic Museum, with the Tibetan and Chinese translations, and with the Sanskrit commentaries by Haribhadra.³⁰ At the present time I am working on

²⁷ IV 53/1/46.

²⁸ A teaching establishment founded in 1818 for the education of all social ranks and patronised by protestant confessional groups.

²⁹ Rishi Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894), a Bengali poet, novelist and journalist, and prominent figure in the so-called Bengal Renaissance. The surname was spelled Chatterji by the British.

³⁰ The *Nyāya-Praveśa* is a sixth-century manual on the form of Indian logic formulated by the Buddhist scholar Dignāga (c. 480-540 CE) written by Śaṅkarasvāmin (c. 500-560 BCE). For a translation and detailed information see Tachikawa (1971). The commentaries were by the non-canonical author of Jain treatises, Haribhadra in the eleventh century, about whom see Granoff (1989).

preparing the Tibetan-Chinese text of Vasubandhu's *Pañcaskandhaka*³¹ and on preparing the manuscripts of the works of V.P. Vasil'ev for publication.

M.I. Tubjanskij,

2 December 1926.

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³¹ Often translated as *On the Five Constituents of the Person*, written by Vasubandhu, the fourth-century CE Indian monk who was one of the main founders of the Indian *Yogācāra* school of Buddhism.

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