

## SENTIMENTAL CONCEPTUALISM OF TIMUR KIBIROV'S EARLY POETRY ("A MESSAGE TO L. S. RUBINSTEIN")

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the work is to analyze the early texts of Timur Kibirov and determine his involvement in the group "Moscow romantic conceptualism" (B. Groys). The article shows that personal friendship with D. A. Prigov, L. Rubinstein, D. Novikov, M. Eisenberg and other conceptualists and soc-artists does not make Kibirov a conceptualist in the exact sense of the word. It is demonstrated that already in the early poems Kibirov overcomes the limited framework of conceptual art, following the path of perception of the tradition of Russian classical literature, inheriting its best examples. During the analysis, the sentimental components of Kibirov's early poetry are shown using the example of the poem "A Message to L. S. Rubinstein" (1989).

**Keywords:** Timur Kibirov; Moscow conceptualism; tradition and innovation; sentimentality and sensitivity; "A Message to L. S. Rubinstein".

### 1 Introduction

Timur Kibirov's poetic work is attributed to Moscow conceptualism (Arkhangelsky 1991, Bogdanova 2023, Those who overcame socialist realism 2023, Epstein 2000, etc.). Indeed, at the external level, Kibirov widely uses those characteristic techniques that can be qualified as techniques of conceptual art: quotability (from verbal, semantic, syntactic or rhythmic up to centonic), allusiveness, intertextuality, metatextuality, parody, "mechanistic" reception, blurring of boundaries in the position of the author and the hero, a cynical perspective of perception of the past, formal and stylistic proximity to soc-art, rhyme-rhythmic negligence, linguistic rudeness, obscenity, etc. However, Kibirov's inner content turns out to be different: unlike conceptual poets, he emphasizes not the formal, but the semantic side of the reception. Therefore, the task of this study is to analyze the poet's early work not only from the point of view of formal expression, but also its substantive side.

### 2 Literature Review

Unlike conceptualists, Kibirov's citation is not ambiguous, but direct, it is colored by the subjectivity of his memories and the lyricism of his perception: "Quotations and icons of various semantic layers, allusive references, garbage of trampled speech are combined by a through lyrical melody" (Eisenberg 1991, 12).

It is obvious that Kibirov "sings over" the popular song and verse repertoire of the Soviet years. But while conceptualism asserts the falsity of the socio-formational structure by denying the primitive and clichés of socialist realist art, Kibirov ignores the phenomenon of "Sovietism" and looks deeper into the soul of homo sapiens, and not homo soveticus. Allusion or quotation, as well as the language of the 1960s — 1970s, are used in his poetry not in a figurative sense (for the purpose of ridicule, denial, parody or reduction), but in a direct way — as direct signs representing their time.

Kibirov's poetic lines dedicated to childhood show beauty and sublimity, lyricism and nostalgic sadness, regret for the lost and

an attempt to return to the past at least mentally. It is obvious that Kibirov's "admiring" is not actually connected with the Soviet past, a bygone system or an outdated ideology, but with individual objective realities that have concentrated the memory of a carefree childhood and a happy early youth. Lyrically nostalgic mood-motifs allow the poet to overcome the denial of the superficially Soviet features of the past, to focus not on Sovietism, but to "get to the very essence" of childhood memories. As a result, the arbitrarily whimsical logic of memory allows the poet to talk about the past not from the perspective of negative denial of the USSR (traditionally a postmodern plan), but love for his past and his homeland of Russia (the traditional plan of Russian literature), Russian culture and literature. Thus, the theme of childhood, which happened to fall on the Soviet period of the country's development, merges with the theme of the beloved past of the motherland, which for Kibirov was primarily reflected and concentrated in the true samples of Russian culture and Russian literature, which are outside the ideological censorship of a particular socio-political system. There is an uncharacteristic fusion of the temporal and the eternal for modern conceptual poetry based on the separation of the 'native'. The theme of childhood is firmly linked with the theme of the motherland, its fate, its history, its present and future, outlining the poet's dependence not so much on modern traditions of conceptual art, as on the traditions of classical Russian literature.

Feelings-memories of childhood provoke the beginning of a lyrical conversation about the motherland, the image of which emerges in Kibirov in the context of all Russian literature: from the "strange" love of Lermontov's "Homeland", through the "wretched" and "all-powerful" mother-Russia of Nekrasov, through Tyutchev's "mind cannot understand Russia" up to the "loose track" by Blok (the poem "The Return from Shilkovo to Kon'kovo").

The image of the motherland created by Kibirov absorbs the high and the low, pleasing and disgusting, natural and urban, attractive and frightening. The image of Russia is being born, in an outsider's opinion, "a so-so country". However, it is he who serves as a support for the poet in his hope of "defeating death". According to Kibirov, the means of overcoming death is not just a "strange" love for the motherland, but its ethical and aesthetic potential, its culture and literature ("A Message to the artist Semyon Faibisovich").

In Kibirov's poems (Kibirov 1998, 2000, 2001), the image of Russia is not the most seductive and attractive. This is not a "wife" (Blok 1989), not a "mother" (Isakovsky 1980), for Kibirov she is a "mother-in-law", "aunt", "woman", "mother-drunk" ("Well if only you were smaller...") (Kibirov 2001, 484). However, even in these verses, behind the external rudeness and sharpness, behind the primitive rhymes, we can again distinguish the motive of sharing a common fate ("you and me"), a filial feeling of empathy for "parental shame" is palpable, words of love for the motherland sound (...I love you...).

The three-fold "higher" essence in Kibirov's poetry is demonstrated by the concepts of childhood, homeland, literature, which to a certain extent exist among themselves in the relations of non-strict synonymy and metonymy.

Already in Kibirov's early poems, one of the most important and very revealing themes for him was reflected — the theme of creativity, the theme of the poet's destiny, which absorbed many different angles and aspects of other poetic themes. It turned out to be connected with all the variety of problems touched upon by the poet in his work. That is why the poems are messages to friends-poets L. Rubinstein ("A Message to L. S. Rubinstein", 1987), D. Prigov ("Love, Komsomol and Spring. D. A. Prigov", 1987), M. Eisenberg ("Misha Eisenberg. Epistle on poetry", 1989), S. Gandlevsky ("Serezha Gandlevsky. On some aspects

of the current socio-cultural situation", 1990), D. Novikov ("Denis Novikov. Conspiracy", 1990), I. Pomerantsev ("To Igor Pomerantsev. Summer reflections on the fate of fine literature", 1992) and others took a special place among Kibirov's texts (Kibirov 1998).

### 3 The entropy motif in the early poem "A Message to L. S. Rubinstein"

The poem "A Message to L. S. Rubinstein" became one of the most popular ("sensational") poems by Kibirov, had its own special publishing fate and an extensive critical press. The poem was first published in the Samizdat magazine *Third Modernization* in 1988 (No. 7). In 1989 — in *Syntax* (1989, No. 26). Almost simultaneously, an excerpt from it was published in *Atmoda* (Riga, 1989, Aug. 21). In January 1990, lines from Kibirov's poem were quoted by M. Chudakova and published in the *Literary Review* (Chudakova 1990, 35–36). In September 1990, the poem was published in the newspaper of the Union of Journalists *Rush Hour* (Leningrad). A separate edition is *Selected Messages* (Kibirov 1998).

In all cases, the poem "A Message to L. S. Rubinstein" did not go unnoticed. The main and almost the only question was to what extent Kibirov "destroys the norm of the image of reality" and how he "disguised the destruction of the norm" (Zolotonosov 1991, 78), where "destruction" primarily refers to the use of swear words in the poem.

Thus, as a result of the publication of the poem in *Atmoda*, its editor A. Grigoriev was threatened with conviction "for a committed act of hooliganism", Kibirov was fined, and the outcome of the case was decided by the "literary expertise" of E. Toddes, which should establish the artistic nature of the use of obscene vocabulary (see: *Rodnik*. 1990, No. 4). And the editor-in-chief of *Rush Hour*, N. Chaplina, received (and subsequently selectively published) a stormy stream of mail from readers indignant about the same thing (Readers' responses 1990).

It was the form of the essay that attracted the most attention from critics and readers. Responding to the logic of the time (the beginning of Gorbachev's perestroika), critics did not analyze the poem, but tried to convince readers of the legitimacy of this kind of form and justified the author in his desire to use one or another "unusual" trope. M. Zolotonosov: "The hierarchy of former times collapsed, everything fell out of its former hierarchical nests, everything equalized in rights, 'words' ... became just words, a thicket of symbols. Profanation in the world of 'things' has led to the restoration of the iconic nature of words. The latter is emphasized by the use of obscene vocabulary. This is not an end in itself blasphemy, but a reflection of the most important shift in the World" (Zolotonosov 1991, 79).

The priority key of the analysis in this regard is the appeal to the formal side of the poem, the discussion of "its complex, inaccessible constructive principle for the majority" (Zolotonosov 1991, 79) (meaning "the game of quotations"). And the main pathos of the poem has been recognized more than once as the emphasized "destruction": "the life-affirming, joyous Renaissance principle is already missing, it has dried up, the irreversible decline of the sacred into the profane, into the dull and meaningless is recorded in the poem ... this is also one of the signs of the destruction of culture and the onset of entropy" (Zolotonosov 1991, 79). The style and style of the poem, according to critics, "serves as a sign of irreparable loss" (Arkhangelsky 1991, 210).

Without dwelling on the very extensive "near-literary" emotional background of the poem's appearance, we note that with all the variety of professional and non-professional responses to it, the analysis of the ideological content and artistic originality of the text still remained outside the scope of critical research.

As for the poem itself, as it appears from the text, the reason for its writing was a dispute that arose during a friendly feast

between the author and the addressee of the message, the subject of which in the broadest sense can be defined as the current state of the world. "The feast is over", but the argument is not over. Therefore, from the point of view of the plot development, the poem is structured as an ongoing dispute with an interlocutor who has already left for Lyubertsy.

The poem is written in four-stop chorus and, according to the intonation pattern, is clearly oriented towards a significant layer of folklore and Russian poetry from G. Derzhavin and A. Pushkin to O. Mandelstam and A. Tvardovsky, preserving not only the "warmth of folk intonations", but also adopting the form of intimate cheerful conversation.

The main theme of the poem is the entropy of the modern world, the entropy of culture, the entropy of ethical and aesthetic values.

The "main word" of the poem was obviously set by the opponent of the lyrical hero (i.e., it was originally "Rubinstein's word"), which explains the unexpressed dialogism of the very first lines of the message. It is with this "hidden quote" that the poem begins: *Leva darling, entropy! Entropy, my friend!..*

The presence of counterpoint already in the first lines, not quite perceptible at once, becomes obvious when the lyrical hero of the poem (the author's character) turns again and again to the main concept of entropy in all the subsequent 24 chapters of the poem and seems to agree with the interlocutor, provides evidence and arguments in favor of the original statement: *Everything passes. It's not forever. Entropy, my friend! Like consumption, fleeting and funny, like hemorrhoids...*

As the plot of the "conversation" develops, the feeling of the entropic nature of modern reality increases. From chapter to chapter, gloomy pictures of the life surrounding the heroes thicken ("drunk girls", etc.), the image of the Devil "in black calico" appears, a reference appears — "today the Scriptures come true...", reminiscent of the coming end of the world, the depressing impression of the decline of modern culture, in particular, literature, grows (*oh... a literature...*). And accordingly, the stylistically neutral word *entropy* is gradually overgrown and replaced by more modern and less traditional, emotionally and stylistically labeled synonyms-substitutes — *shit, bullshit, emptiness, rotting, shit* and author's phrases close to them — *bitch louse, wolf's udder, fish skin*, and even *wooden mackintosh*. The natural and psychological parallelism — an autumn landscape with falling leaves, rain, and piercing wind — reinforces the impression of the approaching end of the world.

At the level of the poetic thesis, the lyrical hero generally agrees with Rubinstein and recognizes entropy everywhere. However, very soon the antithesis begins to sound between the lines (at first imperceptibly) — the theme of disagreement with the addressee of the message, which, at first, reveals itself only at the formal level: *Rage, Leva, noble, but meaningless, apparently...*

The hero is faced with a traditional existential, cultural and literary question not about death, but about overcoming: *What should we do? How to escape?..*

Russian classics have repeatedly raised such questions in the traditions of national culture and literature: *What should we do?, Who is to blame?*, etc. But unlike tendentious democratic writers, Kibirov's speech is "not programmatic and not rationalistic, but organic, its origins are entirely lyrical" (Toddes 1990, 67).

Russian classics and the tradition of Russian life, the hero of the poem seeks and finds the answer to the eternal question: it becomes the *Word* (Gandlevsky 1994, 5).

In this part of the discussion, it is necessary to stop and once again recall that Kibirov is close to conceptual poetry and, therefore, his poems are quotable and intertextual. It was the

poet's belonging to a certain trend in literature, and not the logic of the development of the artistic text of the poem, that made critics, as noted above, talk about the citation of the message as a literary game and literary device. E. Toddes: "The brilliant quoting technique of the author provides strength, game saturation and subtlety of the poetic fabric" (Toddes 1990, 5).

At the most superficial level, it is true: the quote is a sign of Kibirov's poetic manner. However, in the analyzed message, the appeal to literature and literary tradition is dictated, in our opinion, not by the peculiarities of the form, but by the content. Russian literature becomes a question of the existence of Russia (Toddes 1990, 69), hence the logical and natural transition from the problems of Russian literature to the problems of Russian life, where the quote is a sign of the merging of the fate of Russian literature with the fate of Russia, a sign of literary existence and everyday life: *...Why are we crying indecently over our Russia?*

In search of an answer to this question, the hero mentally "weeps" over the fiction of Russian literature, over the "word" of Lomonosov, Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Nabokov, Blok, Khlebnikov, Mandel'stam, Tsvetaeva. But following the literary names in the poem, the image of not a literary, but a "living" life arises. The basis of optimism (*entropy in spite of*) are the nostalgic childhood memories, very characteristic for Kibirov, full of purity and light.

It is noteworthy that the text, written on behalf of the lyrical hero and permeated with the subjectivism of personal memories, leaves the impression not just of uniquely specific insights into the memory of an individual, but a sense of community of memories, perhaps of an entire generation. Starting his memories with the word *remember*, and subsequently repeating it again in the form of a question, the author-hero introduces his interlocutor to these memories, makes him revive the impressions of the past, join him. The plural forms serve to strengthen generalization, allow you to overcome personal subjectivity and give an installation for similarity, typicality, universality of the memory of an entire generation.

Warm childhood memories (*mine and yours*), flavored with quotes from forgotten songs, naive rhymes, children's jokes and phraseologems preserved by memory, give rise to an aura of tenderness and charm in the poem, softening adult ideas about the rough and cruel entropic modernity. The memories of the interlocutor and the lyrical hero form the foundation of the belief that it is possible to overcome decay and emptiness. Therefore, it is difficult to agree with M. Zolotonosov, who believes that the quoted lines (chapter 18) are a kind of "very short course ... of the realities of a bygone era" and "signs of the fundamental lexicon of the 1950s–1980s" (Zolotonosov 1991, 79). These memories not only did not "weaken" or "disembodied", as the critic claims, but they are alive in the soul of the lyrical hero and should stir up the soul of his interlocutor: *What, Semenyeh? Don't you like it? Love is expensive, understand! Let your lips tremble with fear — talk to people!*

The last lines add to the already well-known "embittered" image of the "poetic" Rubinstein, who proclaimed "universal entropy" and "senseless rage", also "curses" and "accusations". That is why the following is an appeal to him: *With belated love, warm them on your chest!..*

The call to a fellow writer to "be kinder, pity and forgive" sounds somewhat pompous and, in fact, excessively serious, which is unacceptable for ironic postmodern poets "by definition", therefore, the following lines of the poem acquire a chastushky color, and now in the guise of a joke sounds "a fraction of the truth": *Lev Semyonich! Be a man — don't shy away from tears!*

#### 4 The Biblical as a way to overcome entropy in a poem

It is in this folklore form that a return to the conversation about the Word that has already begun is indicated. And if earlier we

were talking about the literary word, which in the context of Russian culture outgrows the framework of literature, then in this case we are talking about the divine, biblical Word: *After all, in the beginning there was a Word...*

Images of a *quiet angel*, a *bright tear*, a *crimson Caen moisture*, a *bright lamb* are woven into the sphere of popular folklore images, and the names of Judas, Thomas, Gethsemane, and Holy Easter emerge from the darkness of atheistic memory.

Such lofty and unexpectedly pathetic images seem to be alien to conceptual writing, but at the same time they are like the first words that come across and the last remaining words that, according to Kibirov, there is nothing to replace. "The value of these words is so self-evident that it is already irreducible to irony, but suggests their further lyrical development" (Epstein 2000, 277).

That is why the gentle, compassionate, patient soul of the poet (and the lyrical hero) becomes the key to the future (non-ironic) Resurrections: *We are lumps of evil dust, but the soul is warm-warm! Easter, Lev Semyonich, Easter! Leva, spread your wings!*

In a very uncanonical way, Kibirov has a fusion of the literary word and the Word of God. In the traditions of the Russian mentality, Kibirov's salvation of the world will be served not only by ethics — Soul ("soul of warmth"), but also by aesthetics (culture, literature). Beauty, according to F. Dostoevsky: *Overshadowed by foliage, you and I are small. But you and I will be saved by Beauty, by Beauty...*

The result of this merger is the overcoming of entropy and the salvation of the Universe: the sign of which is the change of features of the autumn landscape with paintings of the first spring greenery: *Easter, Easter, Lev Semenyeh! Listen to the light news! Levushka, repeat the canons of the sticky greenery of the earth!*

According to Kibirov, entropy, which Rubinstein insisted on, turns out to be only one of the life cycles of dying and birth. In full accordance with the traditions of Russian classical literature, the modern postmodern poet asserts not the coming end, but the inevitable rebirth, thereby demonstrating a distinct author's position almost not characteristic of modern poetry. "Thanks to Kibirov, it begins to seem that the cultural instinct is as indestructible and capable as the instinct of life" (Toddes 1990, 70).

The epigraph from Chekhov's short story "The Student", prefixed to the poem, makes one think about the involvement of the dialogue of the characters in all people. The epigraph sets a certain universality to the message, reinforces the seriousness of the meaning with all the superficial buffoonery of the poem's form.

In this regard, M. Zolotonosov's observation is interesting. According to his calculations, "in the poem 666 + 1 = 667 lines: a number that is one symbolic unit larger than the apocalyptic 'number of the beast' ... the 'number of Chaos', which contains entropy" (Zolotonosov 1991, 80). It is difficult to say whether this number of lines in the poem is accidental or conscious, but in any case it is significant, because the addition of one means overcoming the Beast, overcoming emptiness and decomposition, i.e. the affirmation of faith and hope, it seems, so uncharacteristic of modern poetic worldview. This is where one can see the connection between Timur Kibirov's poetry and the classical tradition of Russian literature.

Russian critics and readers' mail have repeatedly raised the question that a person who is not Russian by birth is talking about the fate of Russia and his interlocutor is also not Russian: *At least I am an ordinary chuchmek, you are, sorry, a Jew!..*

Some perceived this fact as an insult (Readers' responses 1990), others defined it as deliberate blasphemy: behind the premeditation there is a "skillfully organized provocation" and

“an attempt to understand Russia with the mind, being outside faith and love for Russia” (Zolotonosov 1991).

However, it seems to us that both statements, which have the right to exist, have nothing to do with Kibirov’s poem. Even in this case, the author does not rely on speculative conclusions about Russianness or non-Russianness, about involvement or non-involvement in the fate of Russia, but continues the long tradition of Russian culture to make a foreign-born artist involved in itself, sincerely imbued with the fate of Russia, concerned about its future and imagining it as his homeland. Non-Russian artists are known by their roots: from A. Pushkin and N. Gogol’ to B. Pasternak and J. Brodsky.

In the case of Kibirov, the voice of his lyrical hero sounds profoundly Russian, and despite the ironically mocking tone, the content plan is quite serious and balanced. In the conditions of modern reality, cynical and disbelieving in ideals, when it is not customary to talk seriously about serious things, the poet chose the most appropriate form of naive simplicity in order not to be accused of following the canons of socialist realist (or simply — traditionally realistic) literature. The chosen form of the naive fool reflected the following of the primordial tradition of Russian classics as accurately as possible. The poem turned out to be “built on the foundation of a universal theme and a classical meter of witticisms, quotations, curses and sentiments” (Toddes 1990, 70).

### 5 Results and prospects

On an ideological and aesthetic level, the “well-forgotten old” became the “new” in Kibirov’s poem. The meaning and main idea of the poem are not reducible to the recognition by the lyrical hero of the poem of the entropic character of the development of modernity set by the opponent, but end with his acceptance of the past, an optimistic statement of hope and hope for the resurrection of man, culture, and the Universe.

Kibirov accepts reality (high and low), accepts the past (his own and the country’s), takes on faith the idea of the future of the motherland. That is why I. Falikov’s ironic assumption — “if Kibirov had started in the sixties, none other than he would have stood in a large luxurious hat with a group of comrades on the famous *Ogonyok* photo cover” (Falikov 1995, 67) — may not be meaningless.

Kibirov’s poem, tinged with vulgar intonations and containing expletive-obscene expressions, ultimately turns out to be a “lyrical confession” of the “best talented poet” of the post-socialist era (Vsevolod Nekrasov).

S. Gandlevsky wrote: “Both Kibirov’s love and hatred are directed at the same subject” (Gandlevsky 1994, 9), at the blasphemous and beloved Russia-the motherland. Ossetian by origin, Kibirov says of himself: *And Russian — or not Russian — I do not know, / But I will die here.*

Thus, it can be concluded that Timur Kibirov’s early poems can only be considered conceptual at the formal level. In fact, the poet goes far from the limitations of conceptualism and, most importantly, follows the tradition of Russian classical and world literature.

However, the opposite opinion may also be expressed: in later poems, Timur Kibirov will manifest himself more vividly as a conceptual poet.

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