



AESTHETIC LITERACY

an endgame



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Antiquity in A. Losev's Cosmic Somaesthetics
Zvezda Alesha

... weightlessness is a labour, necessary and beneficial to both the labourer and the one using that labour. Secondly, this labour is inconspicuous and costs nothing to the labourer and those who benefit from it. Therefore, allow me to introduce myself to You: I feel like a cosmonaut.

... I repeat: true labour is weightlessness. It's socially beneficial, and a smile lies at its core.
 — Aleksei Losev, 'Weightlessness'

We commence our study by introducing the English-speaking readership to a few of the essential facts and dates of the legendary Russian scholar, Aleksei Fedorovich Losev (1893-1988). It is sad but necessary to admit that almost all anglophone readers will not have heard about Losev's life and work, due very largely to the geopolitical realities of the 20th and 21st centuries.¹³³

Losev's talents were evident in the early, prolific beginning of his writing career, immersed in philosophy, philology, mathematics, and musicology. As a young thinker and graduate of the Moscow State University, Losev wrote a series of notable pieces during the first decade of his service. His interests and output then gradually deepened in terms of diversity and scope: 'Eros in Plato' (1916), *Investigation in the Philosophy and Psychology of Thinking* (1915-1919), 'Scriabin's Worldview' (1918-1921), *Music as a Subject of Logic* (1927), *Ancient Cosmos and Contemporary Science* (1927), *The Philosophy of Name* (1927), *Dialectics of Number in Plotinus* (1928), *Remarks on Ancient Symbolism and Mythology* (1930).

Such a diversity of subject matters can be explained by the fact that, following the precepts of Vladimir Soloviev, Losev set out from early in his life to search for 'a

¹³³ Only a few of Losev's books can be studied in English; see *The Dialectics of Myth* (2003) and *The Dialectics of Artistic Form* (2013). There are also several recent scholarly studies available in English. The majority of the commentators, however, are native Russian speakers. See, for example, Zenkin (2004), Gusejnov (2009), and Dobrokhotov (2011); cf. Bird (2004) and Rosenthal (2004). As our paper suggests, there is a lot of work to be done on Losev's legacy.

holistic knowledge', in the words of A.A. Takho-Godi (*A History of Ancient Aesthetics* vol. I, 4).¹³⁴ During this formative period, already recognised as a wonderful teacher, Losev not only probed into diverse disciplines, but also became intellectually engaged with a range of circles, meeting many notable thinkers, artists, and activists of his time; well, those who had neither fled nor perished during a transition from Lenin's death to the early Stalin era. Meanwhile, the thinker's reputation steadily grew in Europe.

Owing to his daringly anti-totalitarian book *The Dialectics of Myth* (1930), Losev suffered a similar hardship to that of countless Soviet subjects who failed to sufficiently submit themselves to the cruel, self-contradictory rules, lies, and manpower shaping Stalin's regime. The official term was "reforging class enemies": Valentina, Losev's spouse, and Alexei were arrested and exiled into a "corrective" labour camp to build the Stalin White Sea-Baltic Canal, sentenced to five and ten years, respectively.¹³⁵ (in this respect, remember Heidegger, Martin, and also martyrs like Viktor Frankl). The author of numerous texts, practically at the expense of his sight, Losev now looked at the world as a gulag inmate, indefinitely, sleeping with one eye open. Here, in a chain of Russian-speaking people persecuted for their own thoughts, we would like to call upon Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in *The Gulag Archipelago*:

all sources of light, to a degree, can be compared with the sun. The sun, in turn, can be compared to nothing. This way, all expectations in the world can be compared with the expectation of amnesty, but the expectation of amnesty can be compared to nothing.

After the couple's return to Moscow in 1933, Losev's professional life was subjected to rigorous surveillance. No research and teaching work. No way to publish. During these years, Losev primarily expressed himself through fiction (creative writing).¹³⁶ In spite of all censorship and a testing fate, – including losing ten thousand books to a war-induced fire, and then his spouse to cancer, – Losev found strength and meaning in the divine, his feeling of life and scholarly, social, and pedagogical activities. Over time, albeit tortuously inconsistently, as if by the cosmic rule of thumb, the products of his titanic labours brought relatively more

¹³⁴ All translations of Losev, here and hereafter, are the author's.

¹³⁵ The fact of his arrest was reported – albeit incorrectly – by the *Journal of Philosophical Studies*: '... [Losev's] books - substantial and deep metaphysical treatises - were deemed contra-revolutionary, and Losev was banished to the North of Siberia' (Duddington, 1931: 226, in *HoAA* I, 7)

¹³⁶ A collection of his prose in two volumes – *I Was Exiled to the 20th Century...* – was published in 2002 in Russian.

freedom, work, and recognition. Losev was no ‘cyclops’, to use a Homeric word from Immanuel Kant’s *Logic* (1819, 61). Ultimately, a philosopher’s task is neither defined by a pathway to some fragment of knowledge, as one observes throughout Losev’s life, nor by the eking out a career, bound to some local specialisation. Rather, it is a pursuit of what we may still call wisdom, ultimate labour, understanding a greater whole and vital relations between its parts.

Losev’s abiding commitment to philosophical aesthetics is evidenced in *Homer* (1960), *Hellenic-Roman Aesthetics of I-II C.E.* (1979), and *Renaissance Aesthetics* (1978, 1982).¹³⁷ And yet the breadth of Losev’s philosophical persona is evidenced in a masterwork which will concern us here: the massive, eight-volume investigation, *A History of Ancient Aesthetics* (henceforth: *HoAA*).

The following introductory words to the first volume of *HoAA*, written by A.A. Takho-Godi after the fall of the Soviet regime, testify to the effort put into the study:

A History of Ancient Aesthetics was written and published over several decades (I-VIII, 1963-1994), but the preconditions for its realisation were founded in the beginning of our [the 20th] century, and then in the 1920’s. In order to create the work, offering a picture of an ancient *universum* in its holistic diversity, its author had to have knowledge of philosophy, aesthetics, history, art, literature, mythology, but also of mathematics, music, astronomy, not only of the sciences of antiquity, but also of the contemporary sciences, giving credit to the centuries-old mediaeval experience. (*HoAA* I, 3)

Even though Losev started to sketch out the relevant ideas as early as in the 1930’s, the publication of the first volume had to wait until the author’s 70th birthday. In the words of the ninety year-old Losev, he was first and foremost intrigued by the ‘history of spirit’: a source of trials and truth inextricable from ‘the problems of the history of the ancient culture in general’ (Losev, 1983: 28). At the very outset, Losev was aware that a method capable of addressing the demands of expounding the spirit of the Greco-Roman culture had to be sufficiently capacious and robust to synthesise the vast body of surviving materials. In *HoAA*, Losev adopts the method of holistic knowledge throughout, as this was necessary in Losev’s view

¹³⁷ As well as in the translations of the works of Aristotle, Plotinus, Sextus Empiricus, and Proclus. Besides, Losev helped colleagues to translate and edit the first edition of the complete works of Plato in Russian (1968-1972). All in all, Losev is an author of more than 800 works, at least 40 of which are monographs.

to reconstruct the ancient (aesthetic) culture developed in the course of more than one thousand years. This open-ended, hybrid method allowed Losev to take heed of and draw connections, contrasts and parallels between the most diverse and subtle nuances, from the seemingly trivial and philosophical, to the cosmic. The ten-book long exploration¹³⁸ has not yet been translated into any other language, and a review of Losev's master argument in *HoAA* is now in order.

The Principle of Plasticity: Ancient Men and Gods

Let's imagine that the most important thing in being and life is neither personality nor society, as we think nowadays', Losev provokes the reader, 'neither history nor a human, not even nature, but the body, alive and healthy, the beautiful human body' (*HoAA* I, 87). This is to say that a human body is an ideal of everything that is and, therefore, all things are 'to be oriented toward it, to correspond to it, *to harmonise with it*' in a mutual process we call life (*ibid.*). Provided that, as the Ancients held, a human body is made up fundamentally material elements:

... the beautiful in antiquity presents itself in those circumstances when physical elements harmonise with each other in a perfect human body, when the principle of the unified bodily life, which the Greeks called "soul", fully subsumes all bodily elements. A body formed in accordance with this principle is the ideal in question. The phenomenon of beauty transpires as the ideal manifests itself in physical elements. (*ibid.*)

Two things follow from this preliminary claim. Firstly, beauty, on account of the complexity of the dynamic constituents, has to be plastik: material, sensible, formed, and unifying. Secondly, perfect beauty is nothing else than a living human body. Now, while it is not difficult to warrant the cogency of the first claim, given the natures of the arts from music through to sculpture, the second claim appears to us counter-intuitive. How can the most complete beauty be identified with a perishable human body? The reason one may be puzzled by such a question, argues Losev, is that our interpretations of the cosmic, particularly in the (post)monotheistic traditions, are at odds with those of Antiquity. By contrast, the pantheon of Greco-Roman gods accounts for the distinct spheres of being, and the messy order of cosmic life (*HoAA* I, 572). Each god is an overarching

¹³⁸ The text is ten books long, with two volumes being so extensive as to demand division into two books.

element of a given ontological sphere and, concurrently, a living body intersecting with other spheres. Beauty as such, therefore, 'is the Greek *gods*' (*HoAA* I, 87; see 103-4). In somaesthetic terms, each god thus becomes personal.

An identification of beauty with the gods implies that for the ancients, the gods are both *plastik* and *ideal*:

For instance, Zeus is an ideal living human body, an archetype of the heavens, Poseidon – of sea and water Yes, ancient aesthetics at its core is ancient mythology. That is how it began with Homer, that is how it ceased in Neoplatonism. In the beginning, mythology is characterised by directness, in the end – by reflective structure, as *philosophy of mythology*. In the middle – by a relentless, restless fight, sometimes for the myth, sometimes against myth, but always with a tangible tendency to use and think through that enormous intuitive purport which lies at the foundation of mythology. (*HoAA* I, 88)

The Greco-Roman aesthetic culture is thus inextricable from gods and earthly bodies, from immanent mythology – or, in another word, from a sense of the sacred, as Losev sees things. The modern differentiation of value spheres (and methodological optics that insulate, for instance, the claims of somaesthetics from those of politics and cosmology) was foreign to the ancients. Each key philosopher and school of Antiquity rethinks the preclassical mythology.¹³⁹ Whether Democritus' 'dancing' atoms, Plato's timeless ideas, Aristotle's unmoved mover or the blessed, forlorn deities of Epicurus are under scrutiny, in each case the reader of ancient philosophy can always sense the determinative influence of mythology on an ontology.

If Losev is right and the principle of plasticity thus applies to manlike gods as models of beauty, then not only a divine form (or style) has to be characterised by plasticity, but also a divine essence: a divine life, materialised. Ancient gods, as

¹³⁹ Myth, for Losev, is an insatiable source of insight. A myth 'contains the kind of 'subjectivity' and 'consciousness', which in general never and for no-one and under no conditions can become an item of reflection. If 'experience becomes an object of reflection, it stops being an experience and becomes a fairly objective item of reflection' (*HoAA* II, 178). Thus Losev observes that some dimensions of a myth resist reflection, and that it is essential to be aware of 'the positive consciousness of the non-reflexive sides of a myth, also the deepest and most basic' (*HoAA* II, 179).

a consequence, somehow bring together both supra-human and all-too-human traits. In the words of Losev:

These gods are essentially gods, i.e. all-perfect, all-powerful, absolutely wise, ideal creatures. But at the same time they exist in the form of marble statues and they are passionate, vicious, volatile, like humans, and even more than humans. That is what beauty means for the Greeks. It is born of plastik consciousness, plastik both in terms of form, i.e. style, and essence. (*HoAA* I, 89)

A life marked by this plastik sense of divine presence may appear to some readers as absurd, as would have probably appeared to the ancients a popular science intended to measure, historicise, and overcome our distance from cosmos.

With this much established, we can consider Losev's definition of aesthetics. By contrast with the familiar study of our perceptual and artistic powers and environments, it is the discipline that looks into the expressive, somatic forms of being, as well as the endless degrees of excellence of such expressivity. As Losev puts it:

In the history of culture, precisely that which could be called "the aesthetic" implies, above all, that kind of the inner life of a thing, which is necessarily shows through the exterior; and that kind of exterior design of a thing, which would give us an opportunity to directly see its inner life. This means that the aesthetic is, above all, *expression*, or *expressivity*. ... aesthetics is a science of expression in general. That which we call beauty, or the beautiful, is a kind of balance between the inner and the exterior, a kind of fulfilment of the given [*достижимость предназначенного*], a harmony of the inner, set as a goal, and the exterior, as an achievement of this goal. (*HoAA* VIII I, 391)

Let's not lose sight of the fact that Losev's work was subject to meticulous censorship. You are welcome to interpret this key passage, with regard to trees, moss, ashes or Athena Parthenos, but today we would like to foreground consensual material conditions and opportunities as building blocks of relational aesthetics. The grounds on which one may sense the other's inner life, as directly and expressively as possible, the common grounds of such aesthetic literacy

remain pencil-thin.¹⁴⁰ Broadly speaking, then, the way of the artist/guide is to seek labour, skills and balance along the borderlines of quotidian culture – an expansive, risky sense of aesthetics, we already see.

Losev's principle of plasticity, in any case, is nothing else than a way to explicate the foundational basis of a form of consciousness, even 'a type of spiritual life' (*HoAA* I, 99). As far as its modifications go, the principle of plasticity took numerous forms in the course of the unfolding of the Greco-Roman worldview, and its slow, catastrophic ending. It 'had some ugly embryonic forms, and a blossoming, beautiful youth, had a mature and overripe age with its psychological decline, and had a flabby and feeble old age' (*ibid.*). Given the limits and goals of this paper, in what follows we shall catch a glimpse of "divine" Plato, who falls under the category of the mature age of the principle of plasticity.

Men and Cosmos in Platonism

Our view of the cosmos, due to the weight of the scientific discoveries beginning with Copernicus and Tycho Brahe, is irrevocably different from its ancient antecedents. Regardless of school of thought, the ancients did not interact with the cosmos by means of some naturalistic estimation of the empirically observed facts. As Losev notes:

... the whole world or, as the Greeks said, cosmos, was necessarily a living three-dimensional body. The Greek could not imagine an infinite universe, having no limits in time or space; even if he had thought about a physical infinity, then it would spin around the bounds of the cosmos, understood within the parameters of the three dimensions and physically sensed. (*HoAA* II, 727)

Here again we see the principle of plasticity, but now operating as the basis of a telescopic vision of the natural whole. 'Cosmos meets all the requirements of beauty and art,' Losev explains:

Moreover, due to its universality, freedom, independence, eternal movement and peace, eternal creative power and artistic might, its affective [*чувственной*] nature, ... and the

¹⁴⁰ In cosmomedical terms, our health and vitality are coterminous with maximally harmonious relations in our conflicted environments.

presence in it of all forms of matter, from the coarsest to the subtlest, its fateful determinability and divine orderliness, as well as human clarity and understanding – it is the most perfect work of art. It is that combination of the absolute and the aesthetic without which the ancient Greek could not comprehend the utmost foundations of being. (*HoAA* I, 584)

The pre-Socratics would in effect identify the physical cosmos with the gods, Losev claims: ‘gods are consciously presented as the generalisations of cosmic elements and order’ (*HoAA* I, 572). By contrast, in the classical period, with Plato’s epoch-making postulation of the world of ideas, the cosmos and the divine realm enter into a new kind of relationship:

Plato takes everything material in its maximal generalisation and takes everything ideal in its maximally adequate manifestation; in his aesthetics, he gets a model that cannot be designated in any other way than *cosmological*. He takes cosmos to be rather a visible and sensually perceived whole, perceived in the first place in terms of the correct movements of the heavenly dome. Although the very same sensual cosmos is for him a maximally completed, extremely actualised world of ideas. The ideas themselves are beyond the cosmos, but they exist exclusively in order to generate the cosmos. These ideas are in the end only generative ideas of the cosmos and everything that exists within it. (*HoAA* III, 255)

Intriguingly, the cosmos is akin to ‘a border’ – things *here* manifest their inner potencies, the border that is nothing else than the actualisation of the divine realm (*HoAA* III, 186-87). Like the sun, a paralympian, and the blue whale, the objects within the material cosmos are to verge on the divine, if they are to come to fulfilment, or to become in this way maximally aesthetic. ‘The ideas of Plato are in essence gods, not the gods of naive mythology, but the gods translated into the language of abstract unity’, contends Losev: ‘if previously the elements constituted the basis of being, then the same very elements, the cornerstones of being, having retrieved consciousness, soul and mind, and objective structure, obviously are now gods’ (*HoAA* II, 176).

Sidestepping the backstage traditions of ancient astrology and sorcery, and their indebtedness to Eastern and indigenous knowledges, we begin to see the ways in which the principle of plasticity speaks against any overly simplistic attempts to insulate the philosophical from the cosmic, even in the classical Greek period. ‘When ancient philosophy turned into Platonic idealism from the pre-Socratic cosmology’, Losev argues:

... by all means it did not cease to be based on the experience of the living body... Plato immerses his ideas into the depths of the living bodily cosmic being. The same, very familiar, living and divine ... cosmos, celebrated by the pre-Socratics, that very cosmos we observe in Plato. (*HoAA* II, 174).

While Plato, Aristotle, the Hellenistics and Neoplatonists posit their own ontologies and corresponding praxis, it is thanks to the principle of plasticity that each tries to do justice to that which fatefully binds them together – the cosmos and its forces. In the absence of such somatic sense of the sacred, as Losev reflects, a great schism between modern and ancient ontologies emerged (within the tradition of western philosophy), limiting our capacity to relate to the character of Antiquity, aesthetically:

Cosmos is the archetype, men – imitation. That which is in the cosmos is in men too; and that which is in men is also in the cosmos. Macrocosm and microcosm are one and the same thing. One is universal, another individual. ... There is no schism between the cosmos and men, no unsurpassable abyss exists between them. Such a dualism is completely alien to ancient aesthetics. (*HoAA* I, 573)

All of this does not imply any one individual’s factual commitment to the understanding of themselves as an embodiment of such a relational microcosm. Only a fortunate elite amongst the Ancients consistently engaged in philosophical labour, in a flow of highs and lows. (like today)? But the point is that, in Losev’s vision, they did so precisely so as to correlate to the cosmic order; its motions and rhythms, collisions, contractions and iterations, vibrations ‘and peace, eternal creative power and artistic might’. Conceived in the context of mutating imperialisms, the conditions of this somatic order, as well as the ways to attune yourself to it, were all matters of interpretation and debate among the schools and thinkers.

Do you have your own cosmology?



Finally, allow us to point out that, due to Antiquity's precarious geo-political realities and his own ordeals, Losev's work is far from being a naive, armchair study. Slave labour and wars waged to no end – all feature in each volume as perennial human errors, and guide ageing Losev with a chisel, recreating an original likeness of the Greco-Roman aesthetic life that leaves a nostalgic, sweetbitter aftertaste.

In view of revived interest in Antiquity's avenues to the world's secrets, exemplified by the likes of Pierre Hadot and late Michel Foucault, it is necessary to stress that *A History of Ancient Aesthetics* is by far the world's most comprehensive study of the Greco-Roman aesthetic culture, cf. Tatarkiewicz's *Ancient Aesthetics* (1970), Carchia's *L'estetica Antica* (1999), Büttner's *Antike Ästhetik* (2006), and Mason's *Ancient Aesthetics* (2016). None other than Mikhail Bakhtin,¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ 'The author ... considers air the basic element of the body. But he conceives this element, of course, not in its depersonalised physicochemical form but in its concrete and obvious manifestations: wind tossing heavily laden ships, air directing the movement of the sun and stars. Cosmic life and the life of the human body are drawn intimately together by this element of man's existence' (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 365).

in the premortem cycle of interviews (2019 [1973], 46), invokes Alexei Losev as ‘a very serious classicist’: to take one example, while his scholarly peers devote a couple of pages to sophists, Losev offers a 50-page long account of these pre-Platonic anarchists, in a chapter “The Greek Enlightenment”. What we would like to bring to your attention, in closing, are not only the limits of the existing literature, but also the existing cultural barricades, mounted and fortified by cyclopes and their acolytes. For the time being, the body of Alexei Losev’s aesthetic thought will live in his mother tongue, falling from grace like a meteor.

References for this chapter can be found in the Appendix.

SEE: I. 29; II. 32

III. 26

Nietzsche and Aztec Aesthetics

Thomas Leddy

My purpose in these notes will not be to give an accurate account of Aztec aesthetics but rather to see what can be said about aesthetics as a whole by way of looking carefully at Aztec aesthetics.¹⁴² At the same time I am interested in what this exploration can contribute to the larger issues of philosophy and even those of the place of humans in the world. This is not quite the same as Comparative Aesthetics: the point at issue here is not to simply find similarities and differences between Western and Aztec aesthetics but to see what can come of a dialogue between us and the Aztecs by way of their most profound poetry.

We know Aztec aesthetics mainly through the codices and in particular the poetry that now counts as the basis for an understanding of Aztec philosophy. It is prominent that Aztec philosophy gives a much greater position to aesthetics than does Western philosophy.

In looking at *Aztec Thought and Culture* by Miguel León-Portilla (1963), a major source for these comments, I first looked to the index under “aesthetics” and found no entries at all. I then looked under “art” and found a few pages devoted to the concept of art, a few of those same pages to the artist, and a few to objects

¹⁴² This work originally appeared in *Aesthetics Today* (2017).



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