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## FRANK ON BEAUTY

If a philosopher is considered to be without a doubt the most outstanding Russian philosopher and his system to be the highest achievement of Russian philosophy,<sup>1</sup> his philosophical statements certainly command attention. The position of Siemion Frank among Russian philosophers is certainly assured through his penetrating discussion of ontological foundations of epistemology as summarized in the concept of the unknowable.

### 1. The unknowable

We feel, says Frank, that there is the unknowable behind the objective, logically knowable world and we become conscious of the unknowable when we are submerged in it (U xvii).<sup>2</sup> The unknowable is inaccessible to rational knowledge,

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<sup>1</sup> V. V. Zenkovsky, *History of Russian philosophy*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1953, v. 2, 853, 872, seconded by Дм. Чижевский, С. Л. Франк как историк философии и литературы, in Василий Зеньковский (ed.), *Сборник памяти Семена Людвиговича Франка*, München 1954, 162; cf. Роман Редлих, *Социальная философия С. Л. Франка*, Frankfurt/M.: Посев 1972, 7–8.

<sup>2</sup> The following abbreviations will be used:

GWU – *God with us*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1946 [1941].

P – О задачах познания Пушкина (1937), in *Русское мировоззрение*, Санкт-Петербург: Наука 1996, 248–273.

PZ – *Предмет знания. Об основах и пределах отвлеченного знания*, Санкт-Петербург: Наука 1995 [1915].

RM – *Reality and man: an essay in the metaphysics of human nature*, New York: Taplinger 1966 [1956].

T – Космические чувство в поэзии Тютчева (1913), in *Русское мировоззрение*, Санкт-Петербург: Наука 1996, 312–340.

U – *The unknowable: an ontological introduction to the philosophy of religion*, Athens: Ohio University Press 1983 [1939].

to the knowledge that is expressed with concepts. It is a grave mistake to claim that everything can be grasped through conceptual knowledge, through senses and reason. Behind what is conceptually defined, there is the eternal and uneliminable unknown, the unilluminated, the dark, the background and ground of what is known (4). Every thing in all its depth and fullness is greater and other than we know and will ever know about it (19). The world we investigate in daily life and in science is permeated by some fullness, inner unity and livingness, an excess that is absent from conceptual content that forms the essence of what objective being is for us; this excess has the content (22) which is something transrational, the essentially unknowable (23). The definite is always inadequately rendering the reality itself (33); it is always limited (38). Reality – true reality, that is – transcends all that is conceptually expressible (67). Being as such, in its absoluteness is transrational (67), it is the unity of all that exists. All connection of variety in being is the merging and coincidence in transrational identity of what is different, *coincidentia oppositorum*. The unconditional being transcends all that is knowable. But “it is present with ultimate, absolute self-evidence in all consciousness of reality if only we have eyes to see it” (68).

The unknowable essence of reality is revealed only to those who do not seek it (U 73) but experience it (74). Through inward transcendence, the immediate self-being, that is, soul, reaches the sphere of spiritual being (156), the ground through which it finds objectivity and through entering in communion with the spiritual being becomes for itself a spiritual being (162). The primordial ground of reality has value in itself, an objective value, and as such it can endow our spirit with meaning (165). Not only moral value is meant here; moral value is only one manifestation of value as such. In the aesthetic experience of beauty we also see empirically given reality as meaningful and valid by itself, a revelation of the primordial ground of reality (166).

## 2. Beauty

A conceptually unreachable and inexpressible reality does not remain completely hidden from us. Conceptual knowledge, useful and potent as it can be, is not the only possible knowledge we can have about reality. It covers only part of reality and the part which is not the most important, not basic, and ultimate. The unknowable is reachable through aesthetic experience, through nonconceptual perception of beauty in the natural world and in art.

Beauty is a manifestation of harmony and unity of reality. It is a metalogical unity which cannot become a subject of analytical thinking (U 189) and is

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a perfect expression of some mysterious and invisible reality (GWU 37). A picture is beautiful because it is a unity which cannot be explained by separately analyzing its elements. The whole of a beautiful object is more than a sum of its components. Any attempt to see components in it leads to disappearance of beauty. A beautiful object (a picture, landscape, song, face, etc.) is a blended whole penetrated by an inner unity (U 189). The objective world, the world of everyday life, frequently appears chaotic, filled with randomly occurring events, carrying us in an unpredictable direction. And yet there is an underlying unity which breaks through as beauty. It requires a special effort and more than the usual talent to see it. Artists, great artists, have such ability and they convey their vision of concealed harmony in their art. They see it where most of us do not, in familiar things, in common surroundings.

The unity of beauty is intensified when experienced as harmony of separate parts of a whole (U 190; RM 56). In this experience, these parts become truly fused together to constitute a continuous whole, a whole whose harmony is a manifestation of the ultimate reality. In this way, the beautiful is as though extracted from the structure of the objective world and becomes in itself, independently of everything else, an expression of the unity of ultimate being (U 190).

Beauty appears to be, to some extent, a self-sufficient entity, which separates itself from the objective world to express something beyond itself. However, this seems to take place due to the artist's action who in his art rectifies reality by bringing to the fore an imperfectly perceived structure and order. The artist does not produce beauty; he, through his art, makes it accessible to aesthetic experience, frees it from the dust of disorder that clutters the objective world, endows it with the power of influencing our aesthetic sense. Does this mean, as Frank states, that thereby the beautiful becomes an expression of self-sufficient value and self-groundedness of being (U 190; RM 56)? Why should the discovery in the natural world of unity and harmony through beauty lead us to an admission of existence of self-sufficient value and self-groundedness of being? Even if unity and harmony are considered to be values, why should they not be self-sufficient? If unity and harmony are aesthetically detected in the natural world, may it not mean that the being of nature is self-grounded, with no other layer of being in sight? The statement that the beautiful carries in itself the ground of being and expresses reality itself (U 191) can only be made when the existence of such ultimate reality is assumed before beauty is even discussed. Only if reality itself is first considered the seat and source of any harmony and order can beauty be seen as a window to it. At one point Frank defines beauty as that which expresses something that transcends the definable sensory data, which is logically inexpressible and infers from it that beauty has inner unity and harmony (RM 55–56). However, in his struggles with theodicy, Frank claims that evil cannot

be rationally explained. Would an expression of evil be beautiful by the mere fact that it expresses something that surpasses the grasp of senses? Is it not possible that what expresses the transcendental realm is not beautiful, that it is outright ugly? Is it a justified conclusion that the expression of the transcendental must be one and harmonious?

Frank feels that he is justified to conclude from his view of beauty as an expression of the ultimate reality that beauty is the best evidence of some kinship between the inner and outer world, between the soul and the ground of the natural world; this kinship or unity supposedly reveals itself to us in all aesthetic experience (U 192, 194). In that case, those who deny the existence of such a being are either by definition unable of aesthetic experience or are unaware that what they experience stems from this being and its unity with our soul. Frank probably would opt for the latter: ultimate reality knocks on the door of our aesthetic sensitivity and only through our misjudgment of this knock may we say that it is an illusion. Beauty points to the union of our soul and ultimate reality, but we may be and may want to be blind to it. However, Frank seems to overinterpret beauty when he says that everything revealed in aesthetic experience is akin to a living, soul-like being (U 192; RM 57). It may very well be because union and harmony, as the content of beauty, is caused by an intelligible being from a different level of reality than ours, and intelligibility is hardly conceivable without life. But this does not have to mean that this aliveness is experienced aesthetically. Does the experience of beauty really have to be associated with the sensation of aliveness standing behind this beauty?

Aesthetic experience pertains not only to the union and harmony of the experienced object but also to the union of the perceiver and the perceived. Frank says that in an experience of a beautiful landscape, immediate reality is not the external objective reality but the integral unity of consciousness and the object of consciousness, the unity of experience and its content. This immediate reality, he hastens to add, is that which reveals itself to itself; it is life in general (U 75). Feeling the beauty of a landscape or a picture psychology called with an inadequate term *Einführung* (вчувствование, MS 216) should really be called *Durchführung* (прочувствование), an emotionally-psyhic penetration into the nature of an object, an experience that rises above subjective phenomenon and objective knowledge, a phenomenon *sui generis* (MS 219; PZ 357, 361). In this way, experience of beauty is a revelation of a primordial unity that transcends the difference between the self and the world (U 262).

In any event, Frank sees in aesthetic experience a form of religious experience. Through the experience of beauty, the latter leads us to the unity of the ultimate reality, giving us insight into its reasonableness and aliveness, from which point apophatic theology may take over and state that this ultimate reality is even

above rationality and life, even above existence. The aesthetic experience points to the fact that the world is not all chaos and disorder. It has traces of inner unity, an inner harmony as testified by its beauty. In this way, the world is the image and symbol of absolute unity and intelligibility of Divinity (U 221). In its harmony and unity, the world is, as it were, a distant likeness of God; we feel it immediately in the experience of beauty (U 272). And in that sense we can understand Frank's statement that true art is another form of religion.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Poetry

Aesthetic experience tells us that what we see does not cease to be unknowable (U 29). Beauty expresses reality itself in its essential unknowableness (U 191). In Frank's opinion, poetry expresses the unknowable character of the suprarational in the most perfect way (RM 42) and to be a poet means to be able to express in words and make us feel the unknowable and ineffable (U 19). Poetry is the human revelation of the mystery of primordial reality in all its depth and significance. It is the voice of reality speaking about itself (U 234). How do such lofty statements apply to literary criticism?

Frank emphasizes the fact that poetry is a higher art than prose (T 312) since in poetry there is a fusion of style and content: they both constitute, at the same time, the essence of poetic creation, that, in fact, does not exist in poetry separately (T 313, P 262). However, this aspect is hardly seen in Frank's analyses. He castigates Solovyov for his tendency to see in Tiutchev's poetry primarily an expression of philosophical views (T 319), yet he does precisely the same himself. Frank distinguishes two types of poets. Purely lyrical poets, like Pushkin, primarily use formal and musical aspects, and the "artistic substance of such a poet does not need or almost does not need for its embodiment any characteristic content." Another type of poet, like Tiutchev, uses stylistic aspects and also some specific material (316). There is at least possible to have purely formal poetry. More content oriented or philosophical poetry places emphasis on content without losing sight of style; that is, in poetry, according to Frank, the stylistic aspect is always present. However, this could hardly be gleaned from his analyses of Tiutchev's poetry, which he treats as philosophical treatises, as a worldview which happens to be expressed in poetic form that can be practically disregarded. Consider the concluding verses of the poem "Spring":

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<sup>3</sup> С. Л. Франк, *Мысли в страшные дни* (1944), in his *Непрочитанное*, Москва: Московская школа политических исследований 2001, 388. Elsewhere, he states much more carefully that the encounter with beauty is a vague anticipation of the religious experience (GWU 38).

The plaything and victim of the private life!  
 Come, discard feelings' deception,  
 And plunge, vigorous and self-commanding,  
 Into the life-giving ocean!  
 Come and in its aethereal stream  
 Wash your suffering chest –  
 And of divine and universal life  
 Be part, if only for an instant!

Frank sees here an expression of “a pantheistic fusion of personal consciousness with all-unity” (T 327). However, the all-unity in Tiutchev’s poetry is not overly united. Frank says that “in all-unity there are hidden two fundamentally different elements – luminous and dark which ... should be understood at the same time literally and figuratively” (328). The only element that could be considered Frank’s literary criticism is the detection of symbolism in Tiutchev’s poems. Because the principle of light and darkness are metaphysical principles, physical light and darkness are but one expression of these principles. “Metaphysically, light is all that is joyous, light, fresh, alive, fragrant” and their opposites are, to be sure, symbols of darkness (328). Consider a fragment of the poem “Alps”:

Through azure dusk of night  
 Snowy Alps are watching;  
 Their *deadened* eyes  
 Strike with icy *horror*.  
 Charmed by some *power*,  
 Until coming of dawn  
 They slumber, *menacing* and misty,  
 Like *fallen kings*!  
 But when the east reddens –  
 That’s the end of *deadly* spell.

In Tiutchev description of the Alps, Frank sees “two opposing and mutually hostile principles,” as expresses by the words italicized by Frank, but also “the pantheistic ground of this duality – both these principles are divine, beautiful, attractive” (T 329). Again, he offers a purely philosophical reading with complete disregard of poetic aspect of the verses. Examples of such a reading can be easily multiplied.

The problem is not with the results of Frank’s analyses. Tiutchev is a metaphysical, even mystical, poet, and seeing in his poetry competing elements that are somehow united in the womb of all-unity is very much justified.<sup>4</sup> But some-

<sup>4</sup> However, the assessment that Frank’s article about Tiutchev is “the deepest and most adequate analysis” of ideas of the poet (Чижевский, op. cit., 170) is far too adulatory.

thing more could be expected of Frank. He gives such preeminence to poetry as a way of reaching suprarationally the ultimate reality, and it can hardly be seen that poetry, more than anything else, allows us to approach the unknowable so closely. Frank makes a great deal of use of symbolism of Tiutchev's poetry, but symbolism is not a specifically poetic element; in prose it is frequently used as well. "True poetry ... is always symbolic" (P 265), but what is symbolic is not necessarily poetry. Symbolism is inherent to all arts and is by no means specific to poetry alone. The formal or stylistic element of poetry is virtually absent in Frank's analyses. It is left to the reader to appreciate truly wonderful poetic art of Tiutchev, and if the reader does not, so much the worse for the reader: Frank is of no help here. Moreover, he is of no help in indicating how this poetry brings us closer to the ultimate reality. In effect, his analyses ultimately reduce this poetry to a somewhat trite statement that all is one.

Even more disappointing are Frank's several articles about Pushkin. Considering him to be a pure poet, Frank adds that, to be sure, a pure poet also has some views and that he, Frank, will concentrate on these views putting the formal analysis of Pushkin's poetry aside.<sup>5</sup> That is, the presumably prominent element of poetry of pure, lyrical poet turns out to be unimportant in specifying views of the poet with a religious bent. The poetry of the poet should be the primary element in determining how to approach the unknowable, and yet it is not taken into consideration at all. This may be one reason why these articles about Pushkin are undistinguished and hardly bring us closer to better appreciate Pushkin's remarkable poetic art.

Frank is correct in stating that "it would be, to be sure, barbarous to neglect poetic form as something external and nonessential, and be interested only in dry, abstract sediment of thought as the content of poetry – already deep and intimate connection between thought and word convinces us about inadequacy of such primitive treatment" (P 255), but Frank himself comes dangerously close to such an apoetic approach to poetry.

What Frank singles out in his analyses is the symbolic aspect of poetry. However, he also states that conceptual thinking is, by nature, symbolic: it is "inadequate in respect to its object because the object it refers to it expresses through abstract determinations, i.e., through such partial moments of object which find their genuine actualization only in the unity and fullness of the object as wholeness" (PZ 260). In symbolic thinking, "we have not the object itself, but only some presentation, some trace, which indicate the road to it" (263). Because of this symbolic character, conceptual knowledge is knowledge about an object,

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<sup>5</sup> С. Л. Франк, Религиозность Пушкина (1933), in his *Русское мировоззрение*, 213–214.

not knowledge of the object (272).<sup>6</sup> Poetry has here, so to speak, two levels of symbolism. It not only uses words to signify some objects, but the objects a poet describes are symbols of a deeper reality. Scientists use only one level of reality: concepts they use refer, however imperfectly, to objects of empirical reality. For example, Pushkin, whose greatness lies in “turning simple and commonly known phenomena into symbols of the deepest new discoveries” (P 264), uses, for example, the symbolism of wine to refer to the joy of life (270), and Frank urges researchers of Pushkin’s poetry to determine the symbolism of morning, dawn, spring, fall, etc. (272). And this is where the greatest difference between art and science lies: two-level vs. one-level symbolism. When science analyzes wine, it is not interested in its symbolism. Scientific concepts refer to wine by analyzing its chemical composition, physical properties, the impact of climate onto its properties, etc., not the joy of life wine may refer to. If science wants to scrutinize the problem of the joy of life, it does it in a one-level symbolic fashion, the way psychologists try to do, successfully or otherwise. Science is not interested in the problem of whether the reality it discovers is a hint of another level of reality, inaccessible to it for now, or forever inaccessible because of the inadequacy of scientific tools. True poetry is symbolic, i.e., it is characterized by a two-level symbolism, and sees, or at least attempts to hint at, a level of reality different from the level accessible to the eye and rational thinking. True poetry, by its nature, points to something beyond its immediate subject. Science, by its nature, bars itself from going beyond its immediate subject. Science is interested in the problem of wine and the problem of the joy of life as two different problems, albeit not necessarily completely disconnected. Poetry does not have any problem in acknowledging that there are unknowable areas which only indirectly and symbolically (two-level symbolism) can be known: the cosmos as a whole is a symbol of God (U 221). Science does not acknowledge that and, in a positivistic spirit, it claims that time (and, possibly, funding) is the major obstacle in expanding knowledge.

Why is it that poetry is characterized by a two-level symbolism? This is where its poetic characteristics come into play. It would be very difficult to take seriously a description of a chemistry experiment or sociological observations given in verse. The superadded elements of language poetry uses, rhyme and rhythm and other laws of prosody, are not primarily linguistic embellishments but pointers that what is being described represents something else, i.e., the elaborate, first-level symbolism of poetry indicates the existence of the second-level symbolism: not only language does describe some phenomena but these phenomena “describe” or represent some other phenomena possibly of a reality of a different level than the

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<sup>6</sup> Frank follows here Lotze’s distinction between *cognitio circa rem* vs. *cognitio rei* (PZ 272 note 1).



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reality of phenomena described in verse. By the intentional restraint of language, scientific prose has no such pretense, and poetic style, beautiful as it may be, could only obfuscate scientific description. However, the poet may not intend any second-level symbolism, and yet, it is there; scientists may see beyond the described phenomena another reality, although thereby they step over the boundary of science.

#### 4. Science

If the essence of beauty lies in unity, orderliness, and harmony, science can be just as good of a conduit for the manifestation of the ultimate reality. Science thrives in orderliness and regularity, in discovering laws, in subsuming events to established laws, in structuring natural the world with the help of concepts and logic. Scientific reasoning assumes that regularity exists, that the world is the cosmos – an ordered universe – that there are nonrandom regularities through which one event is connected with another so that the entire world can be seen as a structure of interconnected phenomena. Science can be just as good a guide to the ultimate reality which guarantees the reality and permanence of these regularities as art is. It is not that science forces anyone to think in grand ontological and theological terms about reality; science does not inescapably lead to the assumption that beyond the veil of nature there is the unknowable reality. But neither does art: experience of beauty is not a sure guide to divine mysteries, it can just as well lead to extolling human imagination and the creative spirit which has nothing to do with the ultimate reality. Although Frank is right in giving art its due in the process of transcending natural reality through experience of beauty, i.e., order and unity, he fails by not sufficiently appreciating science, rationality, and conceptual thinking as a possible avenue to a reality inaccessible to rational thinking. In passing, however, he admits that such a possibility exists. When analyzing F. Sologub's play, "Hostages of life," Frank says that "the lack of true beauty and artistic harmony [of the play] is not accidental; it is caused not only by a shortage of author's artistic energy, but is rooted in the falsehood of its conceptual plan."<sup>7</sup> That is, a conceptual plan can be a source of beauty, through the conceptual plan creator's creativity can perspire, whether the creator is an artist, a craftsman, or a scientist. A conceptual sphere can be intertwined with the sphere of beauty, the sphere of order and harmony.

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<sup>7</sup> С. Л. Франк, *Мечта и жизнь* (1912), in his *Русское мировоззрение*, 591.

Science is inherently associated with harmony and orderliness. Orderliness of the universe is an indispensable assumption without which science would be impossible. The assumption itself is of a philosophical nature and cannot be scientifically proven since it constitutes the foundation of science. Scientists are satisfied by the fact that the assumption is confirmed by the results they produce, scientific theories, explanations, and products of applied science. Even chaos theory is a theory; even in chaos an order is found which shows that order precedes chaos. Frank himself says that scientific thought is directed toward systematically connected and maximally complete cognition of the world (U 44); cognition is systematically connected, i.e., ordered and harmonious, the cognition that assumes orderliness of the world and orderliness of scientific categories to reflect the former. The essence of science is orderliness, is finding harmoniousness of its subject and using orderly means in its methods. Therefore, science can have as much of a claim about having insight into beauty as art has. This beauty does not become less beautiful when it is expressed in conceptual terms. Science, therefore, can reveal the hidden orderliness, and thus beauty, of the world just as art does. Science goes beyond its domain when it claims that all is conceptually explainable, that the grasping of the whole of reality with a web of concepts and theorems is just a matter of time. But it can be just as good of an avenue to the sphere that exceeds the domain of natural cognition as art is. For many great scientists, the motivation for doing science was of a theological nature: to know better God's creation, to know more about God's wisdom through appreciating the complexity of His creation, to glorify God through their work. For example, Newton did not consider it to be antiscientific to include a theological discussion in his *Mathematical principles of natural philosophy*, and Cantor saw his set theory to be a path leading to the Absolute.

Art is not the surest avenue to God, as Frank claims, just as it is not true that science is not such an avenue at all. Positivist claims about the power and self-sufficiency of science are just as erroneous as the claims about the self-sufficiency of art and the alleged fact of its rootedness in human creativity alone. Art is not a guarantee of getting closer to God, just as science is not a guarantee that we close our way to Him. True, it cannot be dismissed that a child, the primitive man and the poet can reach deeper into the hidden essence of reality than can a sober scientific consciousness (U 135, 189; PZ 363), but neither can it be dismissed that sober scientific consciousness leads closer to the heart of reality. As Frank says, behind the harmony of nature, man seeks its foundation, God<sup>8</sup>; science is just as

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<sup>8</sup> С. Л. Франк, Лев Толстой как мыслитель и художник, in his *Русское мировоззрение*, 470. That is, one way to see God is through contemplation of the visible beauty of the world (GWU 229).

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well suited as art to make us realize that harmony is omnipresent in nature and just as good as art to point to the foundation from which this harmony springs. Science, to be sure, does not speak about God, but can lead to Him through its findings. Science as such does not take upon itself to enter another level of reality, by assuming that there is only one level; but its results can be used to get there by searching the source of harmony, order, i.e., the beauty that science discovers in the world.