



# Thinking eternally and continuously. The Russian experience of Mamardashvili

Svetlana Klimova<sup>1</sup> 

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## Abstract

The philosophy of Mamardashvili can be presented through the prism of his experience of living through Soviet history, which became a “beneficial vantage point”, and through his understanding, not just of deeply theoretical, but also existential Russian themes. His particular style—“the living through thought” in the presence of the other (whether that other was a real or historic interlocutor) reflected a covert protest and spiritual opposition to the zombified masses and to history. In the analysis of his ideas, a special attention has been paid to the mediative—«intermittential space of the self» or the theory of symbols. In this article, an analysis of the symbolic theory of Mamardashvili and Pyatigorsky as well as a comparison of this theory and those developed by Ernst Cassirer, Aleksei Losev and Mikhail Lifshits is provided.

**Keywords** Distinguishing features of thought · Symbolic theory · Soviet philosophy

## Introduction

The life and work of Merab Konstantinovich Mamardashvili could be situated between the three nodal points of Soviet history: the thaw, the stagnation period and perestroika. The inconsistency typical of anyone living in historical gaps between times of transition was also manifested in his legacy. That said, for many he became the embodiment of the intelligentsia’s oppositionism. This may sound strange as Mamardashvili was no social or political thinker. He never “wrote for the desk drawer” and believed it impossible to live “underground” (see Mamardashvili 1990a, c, d, e, f, pp. 172–200). There was something of the “holy fool” or the asocial genius in him. He became the symbol of the “pure philosopher”, filling his life with “eternal and continuous thought”. In a world of simulacra and hackneyed forgeries, Mamardashvili dared to think independently and taught others to

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✉ Svetlana Klimova  
sklimova@yandex.ru

<sup>1</sup> National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia

do so. In this, there is a striking similarity between his life and that of Socrates, namely the need to think and “live by one’s own convictions”. It was this that encapsulated his civic protest and opposition to public opinion.

This had not been immediately clear. If perestroika had not occurred and Mamardashvili had not survived until its initial and most romantic phase, then perhaps there would have been no talk of a “Georgian Socrates”.

“I now know” Mamardashvili told at an International Symposium in Paris in 1988 “that I had a beneficial vantage point which allowed me to witness those things which a European may have ignored” (Mamardashvili 1990a, c, d, e, f, p. 311).

This declaration was also self-recriminatory to that earlier Mamardashvili who had been skeptically disposed towards Russian philosophy as something mainly scholastic and naïvely religious. Chaadaev, Solovyov, Tolstoy, Ilyenkov and yes, Mamardashvili himself, turned out to be Russian Europeans able to think freely in an unfree country, obtaining a “vantage point’ for theorizing.

This does not mean that his philosophy was the offspring of perestroika. Mamardashvili was a rather consistent thinker. The ideas he formulated at the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s remained the object of his attention until the end of his life. As a result of perestroika, the philosopher managed to make franker pronouncements about the main points of Russian history and life in Soviet society, having lived them “from within’ while simultaneously being cognizant of what this experience was. Moreover, he vividly demonstrated to others the particular nature of his philosophical method and understanding of philosophy, which was in no way academic.

For him all academicism was false and indebted to the dogmatic system and its ideology. He was no classical lecturer conferring knowledge “for note-taking” or having an entourage of “student-disciples”. He “spoke through” his thoughts and, for him, this was his major philosophical feat. A philosopher should be at variance with what was the key ideal of a professional Soviet teacher.

In one of his final interviews Mamardashvili ironically joked: “It’s best to philosophize never wearing the philosopher’s hood but wearing a hat or a cap. The kind other people wear. A hood may be too heavy a garb.” (Mamardashvili 1990a, c, d, e, f, p. 24). He knew what he was talking about.

There is something very Russian in this “non-professionalism”. For example, “our teachers”, the German thinkers, were predominantly academic university professors and that in no way diminished their identities or philosophical discoveries. Nonetheless, while paying tributes to the Europeans, these original Russian thinkers preferred the hood to the hat, the *existentials* and the images of literary texts to the categories and concepts of philosophical systems.

Mamardashvili remained outside the academic system in the thaw period and the stagnation and perestroika eras. He consciously dissociated himself from professional philosophy, emphatically warning his listener/reader not to expect “highbrow scholarship” from him. Then, like Socrates, he flabbergasted his listener by the manner of his speech, his stylistic presentation, his merciless erudition. A philosopher who, like Socrates, performed the philosophical act of generating thought before his

public, while at the same time awakening each of his listeners to similar feats. It is well-known what a risky undertaking this is.

In short, it has become clear that only by linking his style of exposition with the core of his theories can one grasp the essence of his theory.

## Philosophical style

Mamardashvili's philosophical style opened up in the final period of Soviet history, when it became possible (and even fashionable) to speak into a recorder (see Oznobkina 1996),<sup>1</sup> to conduct "uncensored" conversations with journalists, to talk to large numbers of interviewers and to appear before non-academic audiences.

It must also be acknowledged that the most thoroughgoing non-political protest was simply the behaviour of a professional philosopher who challenged the academic and departmental methodological dead inertia of the seventies simply by openly and publicly engaging in free intellectual play connected with the problematics of obviousness, meaning and final goals. But this was the very route that Mamardashvili had chosen to take when he began to appear before different audiences with previously unprepared and entirely improvised readings. It was this non-political and anti-totalitarian practice he later defined with his well-known maxim: "Philosophy is consciousness spoken out loud" (see Soloviev 2009, p. 198).

This statement by Erikh Soloviev (a significant Russian philosopher in his own right and a close friend of Mamardashvili's) attests to the importance of the role of Mamardashvili's non-academic style in the Soviet philosophical sphere. The revival of his thought through his dialogic debates with journalists and students and his polemics with his colleagues and others have allowed us to grasp the multidimensional range of his mind far more clearly than his classical articles and his books did. It is worth remembering that his philosophical works on epistemology were written, by Mamardashvili's own admission, in a heavy-going language and in a style leaving much to be desired. Evald Ilyenkov in his written report on Mamardashvili's Ph.D. (*kandidatskaya*) thesis (1961) remarked, *inter alia*:

what should one say to the author of this thesis? That he needs to pay a little more attention to the language, to his written style. Sometimes his language is a little too overwrought, cumbersome, heavy. In part, if truth be told, this is the consequence of the complexity of the subject matter ["Towards a criticism of Hegel's Study of Forms of Knowledge"], a consequence of the fact that it is rather difficult to acquire as much clarity on the matter as much as we all, and as much as comrade Mamardashvili, in particular, would like. For in those

<sup>1</sup> Elena Oznobkina drew readers' attention to the transcription of the sound recordings in which the living speech of the philosopher is audible, full of, "incidental words" and repetitions, but in which "the baroque shell of his thought is fully preserved". All this vanishes when a written text is created. Oznobkina called this process "the organic inner vocalization of the text" (Oznobkina 1996).

parts where he managed to sharpen our understanding of the matter, then the language there is clearer (Ilyenkov 2018, p. 491).

In oral conversation he was more at ease, demonstrably “experiencing philosophy” during the conversation itself. A similar method of communication with the audience was favoured by Evald Ilyenkov who would often seek out young people in clubs, schools, institutions of higher education and give interviews, invoking the need to “learn to think when you are young”.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of being, like Ilyenkov, closer in age to the sixties generation, Mamardashvili was more a thinker of the stagnation period (Mezhuev 2011, pp. 73–85),<sup>3</sup> and very skeptically disposed towards the so-called “thaw”. His rejection of the “thaw” and everything associated with it, he explained, was naturally not due to any allegiance to Stalinism but rather to his almost innate apoliticisim, his indifference to any project or plan of social reform and reconstruction insofar as they all emanated from power. (Mezhuev 2011, p. 76).

He wrote in the 1970s, when not only freedom of thought but even the relative freedom in the modes of its expression were under severe pressure. By definition, a philosopher could only be a diploma-holding specialist, and the best “evidence” for this was an entry in his employment records. Any deviation from canonical thinking carried the risk of being expelled from the profession. Therefore, Mamardashvili could only fully freely express his thoughts at the beginning of the perestroika era.

The perestroika era led him to connect philosophy with life, to enter into a creative debate exposing truth about who and for what each is suited. Embroiled in this debate were not only personalities but also their texts as subjects with which the reader would autonomously establish a dialogical relationship without reducing them to the purely logical or to the purely thematic. This is similar to the dialogue described by Bakhtin:

“Here one encounters integral positions, integral personalities (the personality does not require extensive disclosure—it can be articulated in a single sound, revealed in a single world), precisely voices” (Bakhtin 1986, p. 121).

Mamardashvili loved oral genres: he willingly gave interviews, conducted conversations in a variety of formats but always sought for interlocutor with whom a dialogue would prove to be part and parcel of the development of ideas. Scholars dispute whether he belonged to one or another philosophical school: emphasizing either his closeness to Heidegger or Descartes or his aversion to Sartre, and they would frequently find themselves in the stylistic trap of his manner of free conversation—thought. A conversation does not oblige one every moment to refer to the

<sup>2</sup> See: in <http://caute.tk/ilyenkov/texts.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Mezhuev 2011, pp. 73–85. In particular, Vadim Mezhuev asserts: “If Ilyenkov is, in my view, the main philosophical star of the “thaw” period, then Mamardashvili is the acknowledged philosophical leader of the “stagnation” period, when the popularity of Ilyenkov amongst the young philosophers was noticeably to be on the wane. With this I do not wish to diminish the philosophical importance of either of them. I only affirm that the differences between them may be better understood only by comparing them in the context of these two eras” (Ibid, p. 74).

Other or others who emerge in one's consciousness, that is, to the ideal interlocutor of various eras and generations, but they are always present in a latent manner. In his philosophizing, one can feel the presence not only of his beloved Dostoevsky, but also that of his less than beloved Tolstoy, not only of Husserl but also of Levinas and Buber.

Mamardashvili conducted an unending conversation-reflection with all. Only through conversation-dialogue-reflection can the philosopher consider his profession unique, in which the scholarship is, as it were, 'removed' in a global meta-conversation. Thought is born in some particular

"inner flow of exposition from experience itself, my conscious experience and from how this experience is constituted in man who professionally engages in a reflection upon himself, on his experience or on the experience of others".  
(Mamardashvili 1997, p. 78)

For good reason his favourite expression, in the words of Erikh Soloviev, were the words of Pascal: "The thought of humanity is the thought of one single person thinking eternally and continuously." Most probably, it was a Pascal just surfacing in the mind of Mamardashvili as the name of another with whom he not only mentally communicates, but also to whom he attributes his own thoughts.

So the question arises: was he a phenomenologist, a Kantian or an existentialist? More likely than not he was all three of them and none of them. We can hardly expect to "put" him away in a certain philosophical "cubbyhole." In addition, reality as transcendental and as life, symbol and phenomenon, the search for the meaning of life, and moral reflections are his eternal themes. In this we discover yet another indication of his affinity with Russian thought.

## Consciousness and symbol

The theory of symbols (and of consciousness too) is so vast that it is impossible to chart all of its approaches and names here. Narrowing down the idea as much as possible, we can note that the symbolism of the Soviet period was, on the one hand, the offspring of the philosophical legacy of Vladimir Solovyov and, on the other, of Ernst Cassirer's theory of symbolic forms. Undoubtedly, the roots of these theories can be found in antiquity. The word "symbol" in Greek means «I put», «I link, connect», I create a whole by means of connecting the parts. In this guise it is "common" for the sign system and the cognition of the partial. In Soviet philosophy of the second half of the 20th Century, the understanding of the symbol was very variegated, in spite of the "common Marxist" framework.

Some thinkers like Alexei Losev symbolized all objects and reality itself, alluding to another (transcendental) reality. Some like Mikhail Lifshits, defined the symbol as a means of the spiritual and practical exploration of the world. Others, such as Merab Mamardashvili and Alexander Pyatigorsky, considered the symbol a self-sufficient reality, opposing culture. Regardless, in the interpretation of the symbol many philosophers discovered an adherence to Neo-Kantianism (embodied in Ernst Cassirer) which considered the symbol as a particular mode of spiritual exploration

(designation) of reality. Only some elements of a comparative analysis of these theories have been used in this article.

For Mamardashvili this topic is tightly bound up with the issue of consciousness. Consciousness is always symbolic, insofar as we cannot directly grasp and express its essence. As a result, he creates a certain “symbolic theory of consciousness”. The key sign of this consciousness was the existence of a special mediative space, “the intermittential self” which he defined as the basic grounding “intermittently adopting” various spheres or perspectives. He borrowed this idea from Marcel Proust, and it being one of the variants of the title of the *In Search of Lost Time*<sup>4</sup> novel. It indicates a certain symbolic “sphere of consciousness”, an intersection of meanings, ideas and approaches.

Mamardashvili remarked: “unfortunately, in Russian as well as in Georgian there is no equivalent term for the word “intermittential”. There’s the word “in intermittent, alternating or discontinuous existence”. (Mamardashvili 1997, pp. 80–81)

The intermittential space should be understood as “the sphere of consciousness”—a somewhat “pseudo-topological” notion in which there emerges in man a real potential of creative activity. “Creation is a situation in which someone does something, entering the “sphere of consciousness” or exiting from it” (Mamardashvili and Pyatigorsky 1996, pp. 84–85).<sup>5</sup>

If Descartes considered thought to be foundational and Dostoevsky considered the foundation to be suffering, then Mamardashvili, for whom the main condition of the existential act was the requirement of the “presence” of man in thoughts (Mamardashvili 1990a, c, d, e, f, p. 105), “the intermittential”—discontinuous being (event/co-existence),<sup>6</sup> became the source in which the preconditions of the generation of thoughts and the thoughts themselves converge.

This space—“the sphere of consciousness” from the perspective of Mamardashvili and Pyatigorsky is the sphere of a *symbolic or mythical foundation*. The consciousness of Plato, Marx and also of Mamardashvili are connected by the “common glue of meanings”, which became the foundation for the intermittent space of thought.

Using Kantian or Marxist language, one can equate this with the ideal forms of culture which feed not only into individual consciousness but also into the historical existence of man. For example, Ilyenkov clearly illustrates how the ideal cultural space functions, and by tapping into it one gets a feel for how man reveals himself as both reasonable and responsible. He speaks about the practical sphere of activity, avoiding any psychologizing or mythical symbolizing of consciousness, cogently showing us that the ideal is real. Ilyenkov, in contrast with Mamardashvili, introduced into this schematicism some content too: the idea is form

<sup>4</sup> The novel was entitled “Intermittence du coeur”. This term was one of Mamardashvili’s favorite.

<sup>5</sup> These ideas are the result of the joint creation of the two thinkers.

<sup>6</sup> Some of the text by the author resolves around an untranslatable word play. The words for event (*cobytie*) and consciousness (*coznanie*) can be broken up to offer new perspectives and connections. Thus, *cobytie* permits the author to add the notion of co-existence in the word, just as consciousness (*co-znanie*) permits us to separate the particle *with* (*co*) from the root of the word which on its own means knowledge or science (*znanie*). [Trans. Note].

and content, which unequivocally appears as the product of the historical activity of people. Mastering the ideal content of the symbol, man does not simply think concretely but is also able to differentiate good from evil. This, too, makes the symbol “meaningful”. As Andrei Maidansky noted: “Ultimately, in my personal world of ideas, consciousness is the creation of all preceding human history” (Maidansky 2017, p. 70).

The description of the “sphere of consciousness” as symbolic or mythical became for Mamardashvili and Pyatigorsky a way to criticize not only Ilyenkov’s approach but also Marxism as a whole. They sought to eradicate objectivity and historicity from consciousness and to demonstrate its Kantian autonomy and its lack of prerequisites. A symbol for them is the image of that same intermittent space of meanings, as a result of which humans become, at one and the same time, implicated in consciousness as well as its creator. “The symbol acts as the link between the part and the whole” (Gasparyan 2013, p. 197). For example, such are symbols of certain feelings (pure love, goodness or faith). Without them it is impossible to discover in oneself real feelings and individual meanings. The specific character of symbolic forms, from their perspective, are to be found in their “objectlessness”. Without “images” of love or goodness, or the self which are, a priori, present in the human as symbols, concrete love or deeds which are real and empirical are not possible.

In this connection, Mamardashvili and Pyatigorsky believed that culture does not condition the origin of consciousness since it correlates only with the *theories* of consciousness, but *not with consciousness* per se and is not inherent within it. They indicated that it was not culture which defined the nature of the symbol, but, on the contrary, only by mastering symbols does man move towards comprehending culture. The two thinkers suggest building on “pure” symbols, to replace the “Cartesian subject” and the Marxist “ideal”. Yet, by excluding these universal forms of thought, we risk finding ourselves in that world of “philosophical zombies” as described by contemporary analytical philosophers. In addition, Pyatigorsky allows for the consideration of the “sphere of consciousness” as a theme: “then the hypothesis that the “sphere of consciousness” relates to the world event, to the global object serving as a “universal observer”, is a possible one” (Mamardashvili and Pyatigorsky 1996, p. 86). How this observer differs from Kant’s transcendental subject has not been concretely shown.

As we have already mentioned, at around the same time in the Soviet school of philosophy, other symbolic theories were being developed, for example, those of Losev or Lifshits. Focusing on an analysis of their ideas, one discovers their extraordinary correlation with the symbolist theory of Ernst Cassirer, in spite of all their differences from each other and from the theory of Mamardashvili and Pyatigorsky.

Lifshits’ own theory of myth was honed in his polemic with Cassirer. He criticized Cassirer for the fact that the latter essentially reduced myth to the abstract scheme of the symbol in which only the intuitive and emotional characteristics of primitive thought were reflected, ignoring the content. Yet it was, indeed, precisely this “contentless” aspect of symbols which attracted Mamardashvili and Pyatigorsky, engaged, as they were, in describing consciousness mostly in a schematic and “wordless” way.

What then does the abstract analysis of any symbol result in? First of all, it shows in what way any content of the symbol emerges as a completely empty shell, within which it constitutes and structures itself as a single content, which we shall call “the substance of consciousness”. (Mamardashvili and Pyatigorsky 1997, p. 85)

In Mikhail Lifshits’ analysis of the symbol and its contrast with myth there are many similarities with the ideas of Mamardashvili. But these similarities regard the negative properties. Lifshits has shown that symbols really are, in contrast to myths, “indifferent to good and evil”; formally they reflect only common notions through isolated forms, and they do not explain the *living* core of myths. Rather from Lifshits’ perspective, this is not its merit, but its failure.

One could also have reproved Mamardashvili and Pyatigorsky for this. However, everything depends on the “source of absolutization”, the goals it set itself. Clearly, Cassirer justifiably considered the word “reason” less adequate a term than that of “symbol” to designate the wide variety of human cultures, particularly archaic cultures. “Reason is a very inadequate term... In place of defining man as *animal rationale*, we should, consequently, define him as *animal symbolicum*. It is in this precise way that we can designate what specifically distinguishes the human” (Cassirer 1998, p. 472).

In doing so, the approach of Mikhail Lifshits himself, despite his criticisms, in his explanation of the notion of the “spiritual and practical character” of the ancients (or the spiritual and practical consciousness” or “the spiritual and practical life”), is very much akin to Cassirer’s designation of the spiritual and practical forms of human communication as symbolic (Lifshits 1984, p. 343).

Despite the fact that Mamardashvili and Pyatigorsky strived to distance themselves from any practical considerations, their understanding of the symbol seems more clearly aligned to the very position represented by Cassirer. For them, it is important to see in symbols the mode of the *identity of the different*, the intermittent space without any “cultural component”, essentially, the a priori bare scheme, through the mastering of which human beings begin to think.

Losev also devoted a large part of his attention to symbol theory (Obolovich 2011; Gasparyan 2013).<sup>7</sup> He not only connected (like Ernst Cassirer) but also logically separated the myth from the symbol (Losev 1982, 1990). For him myth was an extremely broad category, it is life itself, albeit filled with deep symbolic content. It is impossible to regard it as a function or as a schema of distorted (illusory) consciousness. A symbol can get as close as it wishes to myth and even merge with it (“every myth is a symbol”), but, at the same time, not every symbol is a myth. It only becomes a myth when it ceases to be a sign. The reinforcement of the function of the sign demolishes the symbol. Mamardashvili and Pyatigorsky wrote about this:

<sup>7</sup> Diana Gasparyan points out the indirect influence that Losev had on the Mamardashvili’s theory of symbols. Losev, in particular, showed that such symbols, for example, as those of the laws of mathematics, despite the fact they are schema of descriptions of ideal objects, demonstrate the real, the whole variety of the phenomenal world (Gasparyan 2013, p. 40). But in this way the understood symbol once again returns us to the Marxist understanding of the ideal which is unsurprisingly objective and real.



Finding ourselves within our semiotic system, the symbols cross over (“transfer us”) from a situation of understanding to one of knowledge (that is, to a situation of the actively operational automatic regime of our individual psychic mechanism). With this we continuously reduce the quantity of symbols in circulation and increase the quantity of signs. Basically, the wealth of experience of scientific semiotization of the third quarter of the twentieth century is the experience of transforming symbols of consciousness into signs of culture (Mamardashvili and Pyatigorsky 1996, p. 101).

One can draw the conclusion that in Soviet philosophy there operated a symbolist theory which then was not acknowledged as an autonomous school of thought and which was close to the Neo-Kantian tradition of understanding the symbol as an a priori form of knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

### “Intermittence du coeur”: literary resonances

Yet, the concept of the “intermittent self”, (intermittent being) includes another very significant meaning reflecting the logic of Mamardashvili ideas. One could call it “culturological”. By all accounts, one is talking about the “co-existence” of consciousness, flowing for some universal (but not phenomenal) law of tension and generating, on the one hand, a uniquely emerging thing that is, *my* meaning, *my* idea whereas, on the other hand, turning out to be similar to thoughts and ideas of *others* in no way connected with me (neither in time, nor in space, nor in culture). The content of the idea is similar because the subject and method of thinking, that is, the act of engendering thoughts, are similar. It is fundamentally because of “intermittence” that an act of consciousness and, at the same time, an act or an evaluation of this act are possible.

A philosopher will very often discuss the possibility of such a crossing-over of consciousness, for example, from an intuitive (personal experience) level of grasping the problem of experience to a categorical or logical level of understanding. This happens due to the existence of the “sphere of consciousness”, already described by us. For example, in order to choose good rationally, it needs to be chosen a priori or intuitively or “subconsciously”. And here there are no causal relationships as to how and why *I* choose goodness or love.<sup>9</sup> Bringing morals and thought closer together, Mamardashvili talks about their integrality or their primordial indivisibility.

Consciousness is by definition a moral phenomenon. It is no accident that in many languages the word “consciousness” and “conscience” come from the same (etymological) root. After all, conscience is not a matter of “why?” On the contrary, it “hews off” the chain of causal arguments. (Mamardashvili 1990a, c, d, e, f, p. 243)<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> In this case, there is no reference to the mythological school in literary studies nor to ethnology.

<sup>9</sup> Mamardashvili believed that the choice of evil could always be causally explained. In this he was clearly influenced by the enlightened ideas of Rousseau.

<sup>10</sup> Despite the fact that Mamardashvili rarely mentioned the “philosophy of dialogue” of Emmanuel Levinas or Martin Buber, this school of thought, was very much in consonance with his ideas. In European thought the ethical turn in consciousness was traditionally also widely marked. In spite of their

And here his argumentation once again compels us to address the images and examples of Russian philosophy in the particular way it is artistically refracted. The switching of an internal register from experience to awareness is possible when a person undergoes an experience (for example fear, passion, pain, remorse) as true suffering, as a falling out of causal time. All this is “accompanied by an estranged view of the world; the world, as it were, expels you from yourself in the moment of this experience, alienates you and it is suddenly clear to you that you sense something, become aware of something” (Mamardashvili 1990a, c, d, e, f, p. 17).

This reasoning demonstrably illustrates the conception of “consciousness-suffering” described by Fyodor Dostoevsky, for example, in his *Notes from Underground*. Certainly, the Russian writer attempted to speak of consciousness figuratively and evaluatively. He divided characters of his novel into true martyrs and egoists, turning his Underground Man into an “intensely aware mouse”. The Underground Man is a nobody; he is not even living a small fragment of his existence amongst people. At the same time, he sharply differs from those who are in “possession” of such an existence. He *understood* the core of what was happening and *his moral nullity* in the proffered circumstances, whereas they did not.

He did not fear spending his energy on thinking, suffering and shame whereas the majority live their inert and puerile lives not making the slightest effort in the sphere of thought. Society does not accept the Underground Man. For it, the culture of already existent norms and rules of life are fully sufficient. Inertia and repetition (of the path already taken), this is their chosen path. In this disconnect they are always “many,” and he is always “one”.

And this tragically paradoxical distinguishing characteristic of the single was vividly described by Mamardashvili in his lectures on Proust, given in a tone very similar to that of Dostoevsky.

Philosophy itself is only about the personal. But “only the personal” is a strange subject. It is at the same time universal and general. After all, all die but at the same time death is the most personal event. And only personal, in the sense that no one will die in your place, only you will die. And understanding is also entirely personal. Only you on your own can understand, no one can understand for you. Understanding is always a sign of the individual state. If it does not exist in terms of the individual, then there is no understanding. You cannot understand instead of me, nor I instead of you (Mamardashvili 1995, p. 69).

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Footnote 10 (continued)

divergent approaches, Levinas connects the idea of the “intermittential self” with the turn from subjectivity to intersubjectivity. Buber identified a very similar meaning in the concept of the “Between”: “a being thinks of the other as other, as precisely that, defined, other being, in order to connect with him in the sphere extending beyond their own spheres. This sphere, emerging from that time when a human became human, I call the sphere of the “between” (des Zwischen) ... The between is not an auxiliary construct but the true place and bearer of the interhuman event” (Buber 1995, p. 230).

Nonetheless, Russian literature teaches both how to die and to understand meaning precisely through the lens of stated truths. One needs to live through the experience of others by means of a sympathetic understanding (and Russian literature gives us this possibility), but truth is disclosed only in the real experience of *one's own* understanding and *one's own* death. Therefore, the figurative language of artistic literature proved to be best suited for Russian philosophical reasoning. In this broader sense this Russian signature style was always reflected in the European Mamardashvili. He loved literary images, metaphors and examples.

“Intermittence du coeur” is the hallmark of another great Russian writer and religious thinker—Leo Tolstoy.<sup>11</sup> Tolstoy, as Mamardashvili would later do, studied the idea of the indivisibility of morals, describing in terms of their integralness such basic concepts of human existence like life, death, love, God etc. He spoke of a new philosophy, a subject matter that can neither be developed nor resolved into its component parts, such as life, death, desire.

Concepts acquired first-hand and therefore it is impossible to construct any necessary chain from these concepts. ... All these concepts are not subject to logical conclusions, they are all equal to each other and have no logical connections. And because of that the credibility of philosophical doctrine is never reached by way of logical conclusion but, instead, solely by the harmonious connective unity into a single whole of all these non-logical concepts, that is, it is reached momentarily and without conclusions and proofs and has just one method of proof—the fact that all other connections, except the given one, are senseless. (Donskov 2003, v. 1, pp. 233–234)

If in Descartes, Kant and Mamardashvili the pre-experiential truth of life is the “I think”, then in Tolstoy it is “I live”. This a priori sense of life is akin to Kant’s “thing in itself”; not only is it knowable, but it must be known. Humans have an intuitive ability to connect together everything as one, not breaking up the integral nature of life into parts. This cohesion is possible thanks to this special sense of life inexpressible through words or ideas, although nourished by both one and the other. Tolstoyan *cohesion* as a universal method of grasping the meaning of life correlates fully with the “intermittential self” of Mamardashvili.

Tolstoy developed the doctrine of continuous life in God: the amalgamation of millions of lives, feelings, experiences in a single ocean of wisdom.

What is important to me and plays a part in my real life is everything that I was directly made aware of and which was revealed to my mind through the thoughts of conscious beings who, communicating with me in this life, or having lived thousands of years ago and expressing in words that which was vaguely lurking in my mind, and thus, acquiring a form of expression made up

<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, Mamardashvili was very unjust to Leo Tolstoy, calling his philosophy “tattered thoughts of an illiterate”. Nonetheless, in his reflections he often reproduced Tolstoy’s own logic of thought (Mamardashvili 1997, p. 84).

part of it. Hence the thoughts of Buddha, Kant, Christ, Amiel and others form part of my life. (Tolstoy 1935–1958, v. 56, pp. 16–17)

Mamardashvili employed a similar approach in his lectures on Proust, drawing together intermittence with the nature of dialogical consciousness:

Our conscious life is arranged in such a manner that if we fully and authentically accomplish some deed, if we have embarked on some path and follow it, then in that which is wrought will turn out to be that which is made by others... If we really think (and this is very difficult), then we think that which others have already thought. This is the law of our conscious life, bursts of the inner, singular fundamental organization of conscious life. (Mamardashvili 1995, p. 28).

Several scholars have here detected a more phenomenological than dialogical aspect, some indicating the complex task of the search for and discovery of symbolic interlocutors with whom Mamardashvili polemicizes. I have already mentioned that Mamardashvili's non-academic manner of thought and expression gives one pause for reflection while in several of his texts there is the "authentic" ("genuine") Kant, Descartes or Proust. As Elena Oznobkina has remarked:

Indeed, the search for historical and philosophical sources and attempts to clarify the work of Mamardashvili by references to some "concrete" thinker or other seems to me artificial and posing the question in such a way is highly inorganic for the style of thinking of Merab Mamardashvili. For it is only he himself who is speaking, whereas the figures on whom he relies, are more likely to be background and, even in a certain sense, phantom figures (Oznobkina 1996, p. 143).

The issue causing a rift in contemporary philosophy is the question of how to understand true philosophy. What should be most valuable: one's own path in it, one's own take on global and "meaning of life" problems or a strict adherence to somebody else's path be that a historical or philosophical one. At times they converge, but this rarely happens. It is here where Russian and European thinkers will frequently diverge. Indeed (pre-revolutionary) Russian philosophy was original through and through, nonprofessional and paradoxical. It was based as much on its symbolism and the artistic word as it was on its metaphysics, connecting the unconnectable: God and thought, life and death, art and philosophy. In this sense, the thought of Mamardashvili is clearly more Russian than European. In his case, this is not about the historical and philosophical aspect of understanding, or customary intellectual coherence. "This is something else which eludes traditional methods of literary criticism and literary history. Here one refers to a symbolic resonance ... besides and above the real sequential connections". (see Soloviev 2009, p. 193).

Such resonances in Mamardashvili are multiple. Some of them are articulated clearly: we find several names that have their "genetic" similarity with Russians, not so much from blood ties as from spiritual ones. The philosopher himself called such a resonance the discovery of a "mental class" of ideas and views or the realization of a "nostalgia for another world" under which one should understand the

conversation about the “transcendental”. The key point for him was itself the *process* of the breakthrough by man to the other world whereas “God” could merely be a symbol, a kind of shorthand for a super-experiential reality necessary more for understanding than for faith.

Cleansed of its Kantian critique, Mamardashvili proposes to think the idea not in transcendence (that is, in its traditionally metaphysical and theological way) but transcendently (by realizing it through a process of transcendentalization (Niznikov 2015)).

## The fate of philosophy in Russia

Being born in Russia strongly marks one’s future destiny, but being born in Soviet Georgia, and more precisely in Gori, is likely to mark it twice as much, for this was the birthplace of one of the most evil men of the twentieth century—Stalin. For Mamardashvili this name was associated with all the very worst, including the image of official philosophy, which was created by those “imposters of thought” such as Kautsky, Trotsky or Plekhanov (Mamardashvili 1990b, p. 2).

I was born in September 1930 in the same city Stalin was born, in Gori: maybe in this one should see some kind of atonement or some divine symmetry... In the sense that completely different types of people doing very different things can be born in the same Gori. (Mamardashvili 1992, p. 70)

In these words, one hears a tacit hint of the prophetic or missionary character of the destinies of many Russian thinkers (poets, writers, philosophers) among whom one could include Mamardashvili. As Erikh Soloviev remarked, Mamardashvili’s unique stylistics and philosophical symbols “could only have been born in a society dominated by total power and total intellectual subordination”. (Soloviev 2009, p. 180).

This “intellectual subordination” was the foundation for the creation of oppositional philosophical thought in Russia starting with Chaadaev and ending with Mamardashvili. These were very different oppositions though. If one compares these two thinkers, then there are far more differences between them than similarities. Chaadaev could hardly have contended with Mamardashvili for the title of original philosopher. He was not one, but he became one who forced others to think independently of their circumstances, whether they fought for the right to have their own visions of history and religion or fought to learn to think responsibly. Chaadaev was destroyed not by the authorities but by society which had no desire whatsoever to love truth more than their motherland, and therefore encountered in his critical calls to independent thought a threat to patriotism and a subversion of social mythology.

By contrast, Mamardashvili’s words on extra-national truth,<sup>12</sup> very far from outward protest or dissidence, were effective in that moment when our country finally woke up and shook off its golden dream of communist mythology and dogmatism

<sup>12</sup> His well-known phrase is known by many: “Truth is more precious than the motherland.”

and wanted truth more than the inalienable right to “be proud of one’s social structure”. Perestroika had begun. Mamardashvili spoke in a targeted and vivid way and his words rang out as prophetic ones. He was tired of using an Aesopian language (totalitarianism, as is known, is above all about the linguistic suppression of man) and he began to address directly those sore spots in our existence and consciousness which required immediate change and “transcendentalization”.

Yet that which he said in his attempt to arouse civil consciousness, based not on a downtrodden national pride and mythology but on the development of consciousness and individual responsibility, was characteristic of Chaadaev’s thinking too. Mamardashvili, very much in keeping with Tolstoy’s position, was highly skeptical of the role of faith in civil communities in Russia. It is well known that Tolstoy directed all his efforts to call for each person, by themselves, to independently know and change the world, first in themselves, to create their own destinies, to live by Christ’s example, countering any external activity from the liberal or revolutionary mood of the masses. For Mamardashvili the principle of greatest import, was the right to freedom of thought. He knew very well the measure of Russian democracy. Perestroika, so it seemed, did the unthinkable. For the first time since October 1917, man was allowed to feel not as part of the mass, not a builder nor an executioner or victim but as a creator of civil life and society, about which Russians had little understanding.

There are no skills for the creation on a give and take basis for the coexistence of various independent social forces and political and economic interests. Therefore, there is all the more need to try to look into oneself and ask: what can you do? Who are you? Where have you come from? ... The main task is to develop and structure the social matter around oneself in a certain way through your own development and enlightenment. (Mamardashvili 1990b, p. 2).

So, we return once more to the idea of the “intermittential self” allowing the connection of people in social communities and the realization of social activity. But only “if we are involved with it,” in a condition to reposition our lives onto a spiritual path. “But this regime never coincides with the parallel plane of our lives, which will always be an intermittent phase or intermittent places in this regime” (Mamardashvili 1997, p. 80).

## Conclusion

I touched only on a few elements of Mamardashvili’s original philosophical reasoning in an attempt to find a Russian “heart” and a Russian mind in his largely European kind of thoughts and ideas. My attempt was to carry out an “explication of our own intuitions,” discovering in his philosophical reasoning and style, as well as in his choice of subject matter and manner of speaking, something very Russian, even Soviet, if not in terms of form then definitely in terms of his emotional intonation and moral content. Indeed, this is the case for the Soviet symbolist school as a whole. His dialogical style of speaking through his thoughts was also Russian.

The art of questioning and reflection entered our philosophical culture thanks to Vladimir Solovyov, Aleksei Losev, Mikhail Bakhtin and Merab Mamardashvili.

The art of polemic on which, like Heidegger, Mamardashvili focused in his lectures on ancient philosophy was the core that provides insight into man. His “polemos” is the substantive basis of that multiformity, which includes consciousness as act, choice and human deed. The ontology of the “polemos” is intertwined both with the concept of freedom as it is with the concept of dialogue (the dialectic of existence). “Only within a polysemantic state, within a state of universal polemos, inside of which in the struggle with existence, or with each other or in the struggle with self are people—and this will define and resolve who is a slave and who is free”. (Mamardashvili 1997, p. 77)

Did he call himself Russian by blood or in spirit? I believe not. He was very much an adherent of the European culture of thinking and he was skeptically disposed towards Russian history. Like the Westernisers, he saw the root of the problem in cultural aberrations, in an undeveloped Russian Christianity: “the Gospel has not been ploughed to its full depth in the popular masses” (Mamardashvili 1997, p. 84). He believed that a genuine work of the mind had not taken place regarding the reception and understanding of both Christianity and the Enlightenment that followed on from it. Instead of Christ there emerged, and became entrenched, a cult of the Tsar ending in the victory of the masses and the personality cult of Stalin.

Russian philosophers were also stuck inside a system of scholastic thinking and unable to create a fully-fledged “intermittent” vocabulary, having a tendency to scale down the rational in favour of faith-based thinking. Notwithstanding the sharpness of his pronouncements, one would probably concord with his criticism of Russian religious thinking as a whole which is really exceedingly prone to myth-making, as exemplified by the coining of abstract mythemes like *sobornost* (“spiritual communality”), *vseedinstvo* (“all-encompassing unity”) and the “Russian soul”. Indeed, Russians have all too often fabricated the “transcendental” as the real, investing in it all their love “for phantoms” (Semyon Frank).

Mamardashvili is correct, too, in asserting that this kind of Russian religiosity did not in the least encourage any autonomy of thought or ethical autonomy which came not from outside like a ready-made product but was created from the inner effort of thought and independent initiative of the individual. Indeed, Russian philosophy failed in its missionary expectations and ambitions. Yet in a remarkable way its venture was continued in the ideas and the lives of the very best Soviet philosophers, including that of Mamardashvili. Indeed, he was no stranger to the prophetic language of Russian thought.

“But if we are to be resurrected then it should be in this life, the new life, the new world is here. All on this side of life. And since everything is on this side, then you, too, are the truth. Each one is that which he could do” (Soloviev 2009, p. 187).

When he sought vivid images for the demonstrations of great concepts, such as honour, conscience, self-sacrifice, etc. then he discovered them not only in works by French or German authors but also by Russian writers and poets.

Mamardashvili was free and dialogical in his polemical condition of an uninterrupted thinking subject, the fact of “existence which “manifests itself as a question”. Does his eternal riddle not consist in this: always to question but never to give a systemic and completed answer? A philosopher, just as all of his “substantive” reality, is created by the act of thinking and cannot exist outside of it. In this sense, he always goes beyond his own limits, where the symbols of God, soul or freedom are extremely conditional, but are themselves a movement towards otherness, whose key is the manifestation of humanity in the human being.

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