

Ilyenkov's workshop of thinking: the Ukrainian experience in reading classical literature dialectically

FOREWORD

“At first sight, the youth and the philosophy are very different.

The youth sometimes pictures the philosophy as an image of a hoary old man who calmly thinks about the mysterious deepness of the universe, of ‘the transcendental apperception unity’ and all these sort of things that require distancing from earthly vanities, their joys and sorrows”, wrote Ilyenkov in his article “What is the Origin of the Mind?”.¹

And then he said that this image is actually false. Because philosophy is not something that distances from the reality, but it is something that comes out of it. Therefore, it is possible not to be connected to any philosophy only if you do not think at all. “The question is whether it will be a true, rational philosophy or its bad ersatz that looks similar to it, but is rotten deep inside. Because the philosophy concentrates in itself a certain way of thinking and makes it clear for a thinking human”.¹

Thinking is not a natural gift. And to develop it to the highest possible point at the current development stage of society, it is necessary to discover the highest achievements of human thought in philosophy, science and art. However, the goal of a one who dares to absorb the highest achievements of culture inevitably becomes learning them not only for oneself as an individual, but also to get the entire society to learn them. That was exactly the goal that Ilyenkov pursued, and afterwards his followers did.

INTRODUCTION ABOUT LEPORT

Literature club *Leport* takes place in Kyiv, in the library of the largest university of Ukraine called National Technical University of Ukraine “Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute” (NTUU “KPI”). Most of the participants are graduates of this university, both of humanities and technical specialties. Some of the participants are post graduates of the Department of Philosophy of NTUU “KPI”, but most of them do not have any special education in philosophy. The average age of the participants is from 18 to 35 years. Our literature club is not an academic formation, but we took part in Ilyenkov readings in Moscow and Kyiv in previous years. Our best essays were gathered into a book “Our Ilyenkov” published in 2016. Our current literary and research activity is based on Ilyenkov’s ideas. But we will talk about it in detail a bit further.

And for now, let us answer the question how our literature club was founded and how it was influenced by Ilyenkov. To do that, we have to step back in history.

¹ E. Ilyenkov “What is the Origin of the Mind? The philosophy and the youth” (1977).
<http://caute.ru/ilyenkov/texts/ums/i.html#t1>

BOSENKO AND THE "PROBLEM GROUPS"

Valery Bosenko (1927 – 2007) is a Soviet professor of philosophy, originally from Ukraine, who made a significant contribution in the dialectical materialism development and pedagogy. He worked closely with Evald Ilyenkov. Bosenko worked towards the same tradition in marxism as Ilyenkov did in relation to the dialectical materialism ("The Universal Development Theory") and pedagogy ("Educating an Educator"). His book "The Universal Development Theory" is an example of "the materialistic reading of Hegel". He also shared Ilyenkov's aim of making the philosophy available for the wide public, especially, instilling it in young people circles, among the students. Bosenko created and widely used a method that came directly from his own teaching practice and called "problem groups method". "Problem groups method" got its name because the participants of the group worked together on solving a certain scientific problem.

"V. A. Bosenko explains that the appearance of the first elements of this method is connected with the name of his most prominent students — A. S. Kanarsky. While being a senior student, this future classical author of Soviet aesthetics gathered first-years around himself and lectured them in dialectics, therefore, he upgraded his own proficiency and expanded the intellectual horizons of his junior colleagues. It is necessary to mention that it was not just a chatter of pseudo-philosophical topics aiming to impress first-years who are not good in philosophy yet, which is not uncommon among the students of philosophy. These were the real lectures which were mindfully prepared by Kanarsky and they differ from the usual ones only because he never read them from a paper as it was done by most of the university teachers, he held them as live communication. These lectures were not included into a schedule, or a curriculum, and they were organised firstly on a totally adventurous basis. At the beginning of a school year Kanarsky simply went to a class during a break and said very seriously that at a certain time and in a certain place there will be a lecture on a certain topic. He did not say to the first-years that he is just a senior student. The first-years who did not know their way around usually came and listened very carefully. Later they got used to it and continued attending those lectures even though they have discovered that they have been played.

Being a principal investigator of Kanarsky's PhD thesis, V. A. Bosenko highly evaluated his method and recommended it (we mean, not its adventurous way, but its creative content) to the post-graduates and students in regards to their philosophical education improvement. These recommendations have produced their results. They did not just mean that almost of the post-graduates of Valery Alexeevich and a lot of senior students tried to do the same practice as Kanarsky did, but also in the middle 70's in the Department of Philosophy of KNU very strong students club has appeared which had an unusual even for that time name "Dialectics, human, communism". Its core consisted of nearly 15-20 people. Club members regularly gathered to discuss literature and held the public discussions. Over time, the faculty began to organize the so-called "Days of Science". These were broad student scientific conferences, the apotheosis of which was the "Impromptu Competition", that in fact was a competition of pre-prepared five-minute speeches on a topic announced in advance. The "highlight" of it was that students, graduate students, and teachers were taking part in it on equal terms. <...>

Thus, it was some sort of a pyramid. The professor works with graduate students. Graduate students work with groups of senior students. Senior students work with junior students. The

principle of the method is that each participant never stops being a student and from the very beginning focuses on active work at the highest level. Often, one was sent to lead the "problem group" six months after he began to study himself. A year later he could lead his own seminars, at first along with the company of friends, then on his own. Also, sometimes senior students from the problem groups even could lecture instead of the professor. <...>

Naturally, the former participants of the problem groups who started to work in other universities after their graduation tried to reproduce something similar to the problem groups. These tries were not always successful, but still there is some positive experience".²

FEW WORDS ABOUT KANARSKY

Anatoly Kanarsky (1936 – 1984) is a Soviet professor of philosophy (Ukraine), a specialist in dialectical materialism and aesthetics. Ilyenkov was the opponent of his dissertation "The Subject of Aesthetics" defense in 1969³, and he also wrote the foreword to his main work "Dialectics of the Aesthetic Process" (1979).⁴

"Kanarsky opposes pseudo-communist positivism, his theoretical foundation is based on the best achievements of the Russian theoretical tradition, which appeared during the life of Chernyshevsky. It is his works on the questions of aesthetics that Kanarsky studies among others in the course of his usual historical research. Kanarsky revised the aesthetic theory of Chernyshevsky, but he specifically notes that Chernyshevsky is almost the only one who, prior to Marx, has highlighted the need for aesthetics different from the need for art. Even Feuerbach didn't address this question in this way. When it comes to the overlap of dialectics, logic and the theory of knowledge, Kanarsky in his research builds his theory on what Lenin once highlighted, and on what Ilyenkov accomplished by following the Leninist task of developing dialectics as logic and the theory of knowledge on the path of revising Hegel's heritage".⁵

CLUB OF PHILOSOPHERS AND PHILOSOPHERS IN CLUB

This is the name of the interview with E. Ilyenkov for the magazine "Club and artistic amateur activity".⁶ Here Ilyenkov expresses his thoughts about the ways of studying philosophy within an informal association that he called the philosophy club. Education in such a club proceeds from the individual interests of the participants, and, as a result, it becomes the form of social self-organization that allows to teach a person how to think.

² V. Pikhovich "In remembrance of Valery Bosenko" <http://propaganda-journal.net/9788.html>

³ Mikołaj Zagorski "On the Legacy of Kanarsky" <http://propaganda-journal.net/9344.html>

⁴ E. Ilyenkov "Dialectics of the Aesthetics as the Theory of Sensory Knowledge" <http://caute.ru/ilyenkov/texts/canar.html>

⁵ Mikołaj Zagorski. Наследие Канарского в контексте современного теоретического мышления. http://spinoza.in/theory/nasledie-kanarskogo-v-kontekste-sovremennogo-teoreticheskogo-my-shleniya.html#_ftn1

⁶ "Club of philosophers and philosophers in club". Interview with E. Ilyenkov for the magazine "Club and artistic amateur activity", 18 (1975). <http://caute.ru/ilyenkov/texts/int/club.html>

“There is no other way to master thinking except for learning all previous philosophy. Of course, the main goal of the club is to lead a person to the level of understanding such works as ‘Logic’ and ‘The Phenomenology of Spirit’ by Hegel, ‘Dialectics of Nature’ by Engels, ‘Materialism and Empirio-criticism’ and ‘Philosophical Notebooks’ by Lenin. <...> If you want to develop a person’s thinking, there is no need to just talk about the achievements of modern science (in this case, philosophy) without showing a way that leads to them, as it is done at schools and universities. After all, the “firmly established truths” of modern science are nothing but the results of hard research that lasted for centuries, nothing but hard-to-find answers to questions that once arose. And before giving answers, it is necessary to show the questions to which these answers were found,”⁶ said Ilyenkov.

This approach is significantly different from academic education, because instead of a passive accumulation of knowledge as a set of ready-made solutions, it assumes an active learning. Each member of the philosophy club during the study should go the exactly same path that human thought has gone through its entire history. And while going this long way, each individual will face all the tasks that humanity once needed to solve. During discussions in the philosophy club, these tasks will inevitably appear as the opposite points of view on the same issue.

“Any real problem that requires using the ‘mind’ is always formulated as a contradiction and is revealed to people in the form of a situation ‘some people say this, while others say the opposite’, so that it is not known which point is right. Only such situations can awaken an independent mind in a person, because it dictates to him/her: ‘Try to figure it out yourself’ <...> If this kind of situation does not appear, even the need for independent thinking does not wake up in a person, and the intellect focuses simply on actions based on already prepared, beaten paths, according to memorized schemes. So if someone puts forward any judgment of the bourgeois ideologist as a statement, the smart leader will always bring this statement to a question, to a contradiction, will show other solutions to the same problem that is ‘resolved’ by this statement, will put forward the counter-statements that took place in history of philosophy, and in this way will create the very situation where ‘some people say this, while others say the opposite’.

Human thought develops only through contradictions. This principle has been considered the ‘core of dialectics’ for a long time. This happens both in the most difficult cases of thought development, and in the simplest ones. And if you create a philosophical club, then this principle should determine the whole atmosphere of its activity, starting from the very first lesson”.⁶

The educational process in the literature club *Leport* is based on this exact principle that is taken from the club of dialectical logic.

ABOUT KYIV DIALECTICAL LOGIC CLUB

In 2004, a club of dialectical logic was formed in NTUU “KPI”. It was founded by the students M. Burik, V. Ponomarenko and a teacher from the Department of Philosophy V. D. Pikhovich, who was a former student of V. A. Bosenko. Members of the club studied works of Marx, Engles, Lenin, Ilyenkov, Bosenko. They paid a lot of attention to learning the pedagogical legacy of A. Makarenko and the idea of Nationwide automated data processing and economics control system by a famous Soviet cyberneticist V. Hlushko. Ilyenkov’s works

played a key role in the education of the members of the club over the many years of its existence, because it was Ilyenkov's work that often served as the first guide to the world of the best achievements of human culture. In 2007, members of the dialectical logic club founded the popular science journal *Propaganda*, which publishes the works of modern followers of dialectical materialism from Ukraine, Russia, Poland, Belarus and other countries.

Also, members of the dialectical logic club annually participated in the Ilyenkov readings. In 2010, the Ilyenkov readings took place in Kiev, on the basis of NTUU "KPI".⁷ In 2016 we published a book called "Our Ilyenkov". It is a book of the best abstracts written for Ilyenkov readings in Moscow that were held in different years.⁸

The youngest members of the dialectical logic club are now the members of the literature club "Leport", being the chief editors of our journal. They also took part in Ilyenkov readings held from 2009 to 2016.

ABOUT THE CREATION AND ACTIVITY OF LEPORT

Leport as a project was preceded by simple forms of student self-organization: poetry evenings, closed literature and film clubs. Two years after the start of such chaotic and unconscious activity, *Leport* was founded.

Leport's website was created in the summer of 2015, and at first only two people were writing materials for it. By the end of the year, the number of authors increased, but soon another problem arose: they had already written everything they knew and wanted. In order to write further, it was necessary to read more, and also to understand why they should do it. The first editorial staff of the site understood at least that they did not like the situation in modern literature, but the reasons for such an assessment were hardly understood. Therefore, the editors decided to gather regularly in order to read works on the theory of art and discuss them. The organization of work was taken from the method of problem groups by V. Bosenko, which we well knew from the lessons of the Dialectical logic club headed by V. Pikhorovich, and which is similar to the philosophy club described in an interview with E. Ilyenkov "Club of philosophers and philosophers in the club".

Fairly soon the discussion of these works led us to the obvious conclusion that in order to understand literature and criticize the state of things in it productively, we need to understand not only theoretical articles, but also their subject. To do so, in our opinion, it is necessary to read works of art that have already been studied in the best examples of literary criticism — that is, classical works. We were familiar with the literary criticism of Chernyshevsky, N. Dobrolyubov, V. Belinsky, so we decided to start with them and made up a program for reading classical Russian literature. This was useful even for the reasons that previously we read Russian some pieces of classics at school or randomly on our own, but in any case not systematically. This time, the necessity brought us to the need to read books

⁷ Ilyenkov readings — 2010. The book of abstracts of the XII scientific conference. https://issuu.com/dnvr_kpi/docs/chteniya

⁸ "Our Ilyenkov" on the publisher URSS website: <https://urss.ru/cgi-bin/db.pl?lang=Ru&blang=ru&page=Book&id=202880>

consistently, paying attention to the development of their artistic strength. Obviously, apart from reading literary works, we were selecting literary and critical articles to read, as well as historical works, in order to better understand the social conditions in which these works were created. We were also watching adaptations, attending performances, throwing themed parties and so on.

Somewhere at the same time, the site of “Leport” had already become a literary platform: we registered it as a public organization. This was necessary because a circle of those who wanted to work with children (“Leportik”) was formed inside Leport: they were reading books together, drawing, singing songs, and, on the whole, creating leisure activities for little citizens of Kyiv. By registering “Leport” as a public organization, we were allowed to hold meetings with children officially, which is very important for parents. Another reason was that by that time the staff of the editorial board of “Leport” had changed a lot, and it was necessary to consolidate its main achievements — this was done in the Charter of the organization.

At the end of the course, which we made open by inviting to attend it through accounts on social networks, we were also re-reading Ukrainian literature according to our own program — this was the summer and autumn of 2017. Late in the fall, after one of the editors had read the book “The Origin of the Novel”, we came up with an idea to figure out how exactly the genre of the West European novel came into being — this question has already been repeatedly raised in our discussions. Kozhinov’s book was used by us as a reference guide, from where we took not only theoretical positions, but also the actual content of our future program — that is, the name of the works needed to be read. Despite this, the real program of studying the development of the West European novel ultimately included not only novels, but also works by Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Milton, etc., which we could not omit by the logic of our learning process. Ever expanding, or narrowing, our program was constantly changing along the way, and ultimately included 23 authors. In June 2019, this program was finished. Conclusions were made from the work we did, and a new program was made up, which covered not only novels, but any European fiction from the first half of the eighteenth century - mid XIX century. Of course, because of this, the program has become more detailed than the previous one, and now it covers more than 70 authors, including Diderot, Voltaire, Russo, Lessing, Goethe, Herder, Schiller, Byron, Balzac, Hugo⁹.

Members of *Leport* also created a few other clubs. Thus, two philosophical clubs were formed called “Garmata” and “Gymnasium”, as well as poetry evenings, film club, and the international online literature club “Fabula”.

The editorial board of *Leport* founded their own international scientific-practical conference on artistic culture and philosophy, which has already been held twice at the Department of Philosophy of NTUU “KPI” — in 2017 and in 2018. Also during this time, Leport created its own almanac of the best articles and stories. The “Leportik” children’s club self-disbanded, which was offset by the fact that all of its former members now work as teachers in a private school.

⁹ Extended reading program of Leport. <https://teletype.in/@leport/H1T1m3fHH>

One of the chief editors of *Leport* O. Demaryov published his own fiction book about his experience in teaching chess to children of the school age. He was inspired by famous Soviet teacher A. Makarenko and professor V. Bosenko.

LEPORT'S BELIEFS ABOUT THE ART

There are a lot of literature clubs in Kyiv alone. This is because there is a certain social need in them. Mostly it feels as an intuitive discontent with the existing situation of modern literature and literary criticism. Once we have created the literature club *Leport*, we aim to satisfy the need of improving the modern literature with our literary activity.

Our mission is to make a human out of a writer through the literature. Most of the literature clubs do everything exactly the opposite. As a result, they get neither a human, nor a writer, but complete nonsense. Indeed, all the really good classical writers became ones because they expanded the boundaries of their craft and became humans. In fact, the reason why they became classics was that they squeezed a writer out of themselves. It sounds strange, but there it is. All of them strived to be writing people, but not to function as “text creators”, “novelist”, “columnist”, “journalist”, “blogger” etc. That is, they aimed to be universally developed people, they discovered life as wide and deep as possible, and they wrote about that.

The main idea of *Leport* could be expressed with a creed “Tradition and method”. It signifies a vital necessity of overcoming writer’s and reader’s narrow-mindedness. That means, each reader should become little by little a writer and each writer should become a reader.

Indeed, not every modern writer can boast a deep knowledge of history of literature. Nowadays it is considered to be useless and unnecessary because writers mainly focused on writing their own things. Without having a basis of strong knowledge of fiction and philosophy, they are guided in their judgment by common perceptions and popular trends. That leads to their ability to cover only one day of literary life, and this is its present day. As a result, they become one-day writers. When midnight comes and the new literary day begins, their books will turn into dust they actually were before that.

As far as we can see, without learning the past, the literature remains defenseless against the present and, especially, the future. Because the most significant contribution into the history of literature was made not by the trendy pieces of art, but by the ones that remained beyond any trends and carried with themselves a unique footprint of an epoch. How is it possible to create such an outstanding piece of art today without knowing all of these things?

And we witness that our time does not raise great writers anymore and the main reason for that is the major issue with thinking. All a person needs is to produce and consume without asking questions. A real social life is disgusting, poor, cruel and a writer escapes from it into his own cozy little world where he can imagine everything working by his own rules, by his own vision. But the tradition to face the reality is not lost and it will live forever, same as it did in all the times.

We do not divide books into “the good ones” and “the bad ones”. We do the literary criticism. And the literary criticism represented in its best samples is always free of that kind of judgment. It is close to the judgement that Spinoza mentioned with his famous phrase: “Not

to be outraged, not to be surprised, but to understand” (“Non indignāri, non admirāri, sed intelligere”).

Which pieces of art become classical? The ones that after hundreds of years remain in the memory of humanity, the ones that are the “growth rings” of history. This is what a writer should aim. He should not just share his opinion or express emotions that makes sense only for himself, but he should write that way so that his masterpiece will have value for people even in a hundred years. For that, a writer needs an open mind and a sensitive heart. And also, he needs to learn from the ones who already did so. But do modern artists want to achieve that goal?

Picasso said the world is crazy and asked why the people expect anything different from him. Picasso should not therefore create art rationally. And of course, he was not wrong, but he was not right either. Yes, social reality is weird, complex, irrational, but it is not a reason to be the one who determines the character of this irrational social reality. Thus, the artist does not owe anything to anybody and describes a reality the way he wants. “I am an artist and that is my vision”. The literature downgrades to the skill of expressing a personal opinion, so that the artist downgrades to the craftsman.

A book appears in that historical moment when life goes out of the boundaries of personal experience, so that it gets impossible to share the knowledge by word of mouth. A book is a form of continuity, a form in which humanity saves knowledge about itself.

So these are the books we love the most, the ones who teach one to be a human in the most universal meaning of this word. But we are talking now about fiction, which has the main goal to teach a person to feel, in other words, to see yourself with the eyes of other people.

To be able to see the outside world with the eyes of another human means to take personally his/her interest, his/her inquiries to the real world and his/her needs. That means to be able to make a universal interest personal, the need of personality, its paphos.”¹⁰

Leport supports that kind of art in general and fiction in particular that gives an opportunity to the reader to realize himself as a part of the whole, to understand humanity as unity, to know a human in one’s neighbor. We support literature as a step, as one’s attempt to get close to himself on the universal level. And it is an attempt because no book could solve this task completely. This task could only be solved in real life.

¹⁰ E. Ilyenkov. “On the Aesthetic Nature of Fantasy” <http://caute.ru/ilyenkov/texts/phanta.html>