

Higher functions & “Height” Psychology:

Vygotsky (Ab)Uses Leon Trotsky and Friedrich Nietzsche

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Those who do not know who Vygotsky is should probably know that Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) is the most popular Russian psychologist, whose works and ideas are widely known and actively discussed all over the world. Those who know who Lev Vygotsky is might probably know that he is a founder of “cultural-historical”, or “socio-cultural” psychology or, even worse, “cultural-historical activity theory” (also known by its abbreviation “CHAT”). At this point problems immediately start since none of these expressions actually occurs in Vygotsky’s writings. Some might argue that it is not really essential how exactly one refers to the theory of Vygotsky. Perhaps, this is true, may be not quite. In any case, the problems with Vygotsky’s legacy do not end here.

Looking for the name of the theory and the guiding metaphor

Thus, even more important question than the name of the theory is the one of its primary object and research method. Indeed, what is it that makes Vygotsky's theory distinctly "Vygotskian" and dissimilar to the great many of other psychological theories before him? Finding an answer to this question seems to be equal to identifying the place of Vygotsky's thought not only in the history of psychology, but also in contemporary scholarship and related social practice. Seemingly an easy question, it does not have an apparent and easy answer, and quite a few scholars—Russian and Western alike—despite a number of interpretations of "Vygotskian" legacy out there, keep confessing in "non understanding" Vygotsky, who still appears quite a puzzle for them (Elkonin, 1989; Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991; Veresov, 2007).

Under the circumstances, it might be reasonable to turn to Vygotsky's writings and find the solution there. As surprising as it might appear, there is no ready solution to this problem in Vygotsky's texts. There are several reasons for that.

First, Vygotsky has never published a book that would summarize his intellectual quest and present his theory (if only such theory ever existed) in coherent and systematic form—pretty much like his contemporaries did such as the scholars associated with behaviourist, gestaltist, and several other theoretical innovations in psychology of the first half of 20th century.

Second, in various writings Vygotsky did refer to his theory as distinct and innovative endeavour, but during different periods he would radically change the name—rather, self-identification—of the theory, which seems to follow his intellectual evolution, the dramatic "crisis" in his theory development, and the radical revision of his thought that took place around 1929-1932. Thus, Vygotsky's earlier writings of the mechanist period of 1920s abound with references to his emerging theory and its method as "instrumental" or the theory of "cultural development", but the whole outlook and terminology change in 1930s. Thus, according to recently published archival notes, Vygotsky of this major crisis of 1930s was desperately looking for the name of the theory and contemplated several options.

"We are missing a name: Not instrumental, not cultural, not significative, not structural"

A document from Vygotsky's private archive that was recently published by Ekaterina Zavershneva under the title "NB! We are missing a name" appears particularly interesting from our perspective. This document, written on scratch paper and dated approximately 1930-1931, gives us insight into Vygotsky's tremendous and seemingly fruitless effort to clearly identify and formulate the name of his psychological theory. The document reads:

NB! We are missing a name, a designation. It should not be a [mere] label ([such as] intuitivism). Not instrumental, not cultural, not significative, not structural, etc. Not only because of the [danger] of confusion with other theories but also because of the internal lack of clarity, e.g., the idea of analogy with instruments = only scaffolds, dissimilarity is more essential. Culture: but where is culture itself from (it is not primordial, and this is obscure)[?]. So:

1) for the method the designation
method of double stimulation.

2) for theory as a whole

a) psychology of higher functions, i.e.

b) historical psychology or

c) historical theory of higher psychological functions.

Because the central concept for us is concept of higher function:
it contains a theory

a) of its development, b) of its psychological nature; c) of the method of its investigation
(Zavershneva, 2010a, p. 30).

Let us take a little pause here and reflect on what this document means.

First, it is clear that attribution to his theory as “cultural” (even worse: “social” or “societal”) is out of question for Vygotsky of 1930s: he explicitly states this—“not cultural”—and even provides his reasons for denouncing “culture” as an explanatory principle: culture is not primary, not primordial, its origin is obscure, it stems from something else and historically evolves, therefore, it is changeable, not solid enough as a conceptual tool that helps us understand what we are now and, furthermore, needs to be explained itself. This is very important.

Second, the document clearly shows that at the time of its composition Vygotsky was certain that quite a few of concepts do not qualify as the main objects of his theory. These were:

1) instrument,

2) culture,

3) sign and

4) structure (by that Vygotsky at that time on a number of occasions meant German term *Gestalt* and related movement in international scholarship famously known as Gestalt psychology).

Third, it is apparent that roughly three years before his death Vygotsky was still struggling for identifying the conceptual core of his theory, and, then, the whole conceptual framework was in constant flux during the subsequent years. As we argue elsewhere¹, this is the adequate description of Vygotsky’s thought up until his death in June 1934.

Fourth, even so, we can see that as of early 1930s Vygotsky is able if not to define, give the name to “his theory”, yet he identified its object, its “central concept”. This concept, according to this document, is formulated as “higher function” or, a line above, “higher psychological function”. All three words are interesting and deserve our close attention.

¹ Van der Veer & Yasnitsky. Vygotsky, the Published: Who wrote Vygotsky and what Vygotsky wrote?. Manuscript, prepared as book chapter, currently in press.

“Higher”? “Psychological”? “Functions”?

Function, as correctly argues Zavershneva, is a very vague concept that increasingly loses its meaning and importance for Vygotsky: he keeps using it in 1930s, but it dramatically and clearly loses its status of the “central concept”. Thus, it was in October 1930 that Vygotsky announced a “new course”, i.e. new research program focused on the study of the complex systems of highly interrelated functions as opposed to isolated functions such as memory or attention:

In the process of development, and in the historical development in particular, it is not so much the functions which change (these we mistakenly studied before). Their structure and the system of their development remain the same. What is changed and modified are rather the relationships, the links between the functions. New constellations emerge which were unknown in the preceding stage (Vygotsky, 1997a, p. 99).

The importance of the radical departure from research on isolated functions to the investigation of the systems of functions as a whole is confirmed by later private archive records. Thus, in a document titled “Consciousness without word” that Vygotsky scribbled presumably in mid-1932 he unambiguously criticizes the previous focus on functions and regrets his ignorance of the systemic approach that—as we now know (Yasnitsky, 2012)—he borrowed from the works of German-American scholars of gestaltist and holist orientation:

Our deficiency is not a deficiency of facts, but the untenability of the theory: in the analysis of our crisis this is the main difficulty, but not a departure from facts. This is *contra* A[.]N.[Leontiev.] Consequently: salvation is not in the facts but in the theory. We introduced the systemic point of view too late... Now I understand all this more deeply (Zavershneva, 2010b, p. 54).

Notably, his thought developed and two years later after the introduction of “systemic point of view”, in early December 1932 Vygotsky openly and unambiguously rejected his earlier strict distinction between the “higher” and the “lower” functions. Thus, in his notes that he sketched in preparation for a research meeting with his closest associates (archival document titled “Symposium, December 4, 1932”) Vygotsky expresses this self-criticism this way:

1. The necessity of a new stage of inquiry does not stem from the fact that a new thought has occurred to me or a new idea has caught my interest, but from the necessity of developing the research itself—new facts prod me into searching for new and more intricate explanations. The narrowness, bias, and schematism of the old mindset led us to the wrong assessment of the essential principles that we mistook for the secondary ones: interfunctional connections. We focused attention on the sign (on the tool) to the detriment of the operation with it, representing it as something simple, which goes through three phases: magical—external—internal. But the knot is external and the teenager’s diary is external. Hence we have a sea of poorly explained facts and a desire to delve more deeply into the facts, i.e., to evaluate them theoretically in a different way.

Even more importantly, he continues his self-criticism as follows:

2. The higher and lower functions are not built in two tiers: their number and names do not match. But our previous understanding was not right, either: the higher function is a mastery of the lower (voluntary attention is the subordination to it of nonvoluntary attention) because this means exactly—in 2 tiers (Zavershneva, 2010b, pp. 41–42)

Psychological/psychic (also translated as “**mental**”, “**intellectual**”) is a very curious word in “Vygotskian” discourse. The history of reception and social construction of this terminological couple presents an interesting case and an object of study in itself for an historian of science. For instance, the title of Vygotsky’s second post-war published book of 1960 referred to “higher psychic functions” on the very cover of the publication (Vygotskii, 1960). Thus, it is commonly believed—at least so among the contemporary Russian psychologists—that Vygotsky postulated “higher psychic functions” (*vysshie psikhicheskie funktsii*) as the central notion of his theory. As we now know from our discussion of the notion of functions, this is not correct. Even less correct is the attribute used in this phrase: “psychic” as those related to psyche (*psikhika*). German scholar Peter Keiler was the first to thoroughly and meticulously investigate this terminological problem and to come to a fairly surprising conclusion that Vygotsky in fact never used this expression in his writings. Instead, he was constantly using another, slightly different phrase: “higher psychological functions” (*vysshie psikhologicheskie funktsii*). We might dismiss the difference between “psychic” and “psychological” as minor and irrelevant. By doing so, we would disagree with Keiler, who adamantly insists on the importance of this terminological distinction for Vygotsky and even provides a somewhat questionable interpretation of the meaning of this distinction (for discussion see Keiler, 2012). And yet, the difference between “psychic” and “psychological” for some or another reason in fact was quite crucial for Vygotsky, who gave clear indication of the importance for this distinction for him. Thus, in one of his archival notes of 1933-34 (titled “NB! On Zaks and Kogan. Intellect and Dynamics”) Vygotsky unambiguously distinguished between the two notions:

Consciousness determines life ..., but it derives itself from life, and forms its component: ergo life determines life [itself] through consciousness. As soon as we separate thinking from life (from [its] dynamics)—[i.e.,] consider it as a concept of the **psychic** rather than the **psychological**—we block to ourselves the way to investigate and explain its paramount characteristic: to determine the way of life and behavior, to act, to influence (Zavershneva, 2010b, p. 48)

This distinction appeared also crucial for the editors of Vygotsky’s publications starting from his posthumous collection of works that was released at the end of 1934—beginning of 1935 under the title “Thinking and speech” (Vygotskii, 1934a). In these Soviet publications—those of prewar and mostly of postwar, i.e. Cold War period—Vygotsky’s original phrase “higher psychological functions” was quite consistently (although not in all instances) replaced with the phrase “higher psychic functions”. Subsequently, this phrase was postulated to present the core object of Vygotsky’s theory, which, as we see, is completely erroneous. This topic, as interesting as it is, is related to the history of reception and

social construction of Vygotsky's theory; therefore, it is clearly beyond the scope of the present discussion of Vygotsky's ideas proper². So, let us not digress and return to the main topic.

“Higher/(the) Highest”

In sum, it appears that what is left from the commonly believed to be a set in stone phrase “higher psychological/psychic functions” does not stand the test of historical analysis of Vygotsky's texts. Thus, what we are left with is just one word out of three—neither “functions” nor “psychological”, but the “higher”—which, as strange as it might look, appears to qualify as a candidate for the central although pretty vague concept of Vygotsky's thought throughout his life. The word occurs in Vygotsky's texts many times and on different occasions. Yet, it is not unproblematic either. The Russian word Vygotsky uses—*vysshii* (in masculine singular) or *vysshie* (plural)—does not allow us to unambiguously determine what grammatical form and, therefore, what the meaning of the word is. Thus, as compared with *vysokii*, i.e. ‘high’, grammatically, the word can mean either a comparative, i.e. ‘higher’, or a superlative, i.e. ‘the highest’. Our analysis of the use of the word in Vygotsky's writings suggests that he would use it in both meanings interchangeably, depending on the context, which also complicates our task understanding the meaning of the word and the actual idea behind it.

For instance, *vysshie* (i.e. higher or the highest) in Vygotsky's texts can be two types of “higher behavior” (or “higher forms of behavior”) such as

- (1) the “processes of mastering external means of cultural development and thinking”³ (Vygotsky included in this category language, writing, counting, drawing, etc.) and, on the other hand,
- (2) the “processes of development of special higher psychological functions that are neither distinct nor clearly determined”⁴ (according to Vygotsky, this category included voluntary attention, logical memory, concept formation, etc.).

In the very beginning of 1930s Vygotsky acknowledged the vagueness, inconsistency and heterogeneity of these two subgroups, but was still arguing that he could explain their apparent incompatibility with the help of the schemes of instrumental and, then, sign-aided mediation (Vygotskii, 1983, p. 24).

The multitude and diversity of the various kinds of the “higher” are not limited by this very general categorical distinction and on numerous occasions in Vygotsky's texts we come across somewhat obscure expressions such as:

² Suffice to underline that the confusion between “psychic” (alternatively: “mental”, “intellectual”) and “psychological” in the so-called “Vygotskian” literature is very much persistent, despite all critical literature that has accumulated up to date. Thus, for instance, the most recent French translation of Vygotsky's manuscript that is scheduled to come out in 2014 still bears the word “psychic” on its cover:
<http://ladispute.athesles.org/individualitepsychologie/histoiredudeveloppementdesfonctionspsychiquessuperieures>

³ Original: “процессы овладения внешними средствами культурного развития и мышления”

⁴ Original: “процессы развития специальных высших психических функций, не отграниченных и не определенных сколько-нибудь точно”

- a) about word (and generally language): “higher (or the highest?) stage in the development of the man” («высшая степень в развитии человека»), “higher sign” («высший знак») and “higher stage of human development in comparison with the highest expression of action” («высшая ступень развития человека по сравнению с самым высшим выражением действия»),
- b) about concept: “the highest form of generalization” («высшая форма обобщения»), “the higher/highest form of thinking” or of “intellect” («высшая форма мышления» или «интеллекта»),
- c) about thinking: “the higher plane of thinking” («высший план мысли»), “the highest and idiosyncratic kind of activity and consciousness” («высший и своеобразный тип деятельности и сознания») (specifically, about thinking as opposed to perception and memory),
- d) about monologue that historically developed later than dialogue: the “higher, more complex form of speech” («высшая, более сложная форма речи»),
- e) on various other occasions: “higher forms of development” («высшие формы развития»), “higher floor of development” («высший этаж поведения»), “higher structure” («высшая структура»), “higher age level of development” («высшая возрастная ступень развития»), “higher point in animal development” («высший пункт животного развития»); this is the phrase used to describe “quite human-like phonetically speech” of the anthropoids), etc.⁵

Therefore, we see that “vyssee” as “higher” or “the highest” is abundant in Vygotsky’s discourse as a very important word, furthermore, as a guiding idea, however, not as a strict and clearly defined notion, but as diffuse and vague image, reminiscent of those that he discusses in his “Thinking and speech” in relation to the “complexive thinking” (or thinking in “complexes”) (see, e.g., chapter 5 of Vygotsky’s book).

One needs to distinguish these—vague and quintessentially “Vygotskian” instances of *vysshii*—from several other important uses of the word in Vygotsky’s discourse, borrowed from other contexts and scientific disciplines. Thus, in various places in Vygotsky’s writings one comes across expressions such as “higher nervous activity” («высшая нервная деятельность»), “higher primates” («высшие приматы»); typically, in the context of the discussion of Wolfgang Köhler’s experiments with anthropoids) and the like. These phrases are set expressions widely used in scholarly discourse that are beyond the confines of complex semantic field of “higher/the highest” in its distinctly Vygotskian meaning. Indeed, “higher nervous activity” is the expression that entirely belongs to and associates with research program of Russian physiologist, Nobel Prize winner Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936). In turn, “higher primates” is the designation of human-like apes, or anthropoids.

And still, there is an expression in Vygotsky’s texts of the last two-three years of his life that is clearly distinct from the logic of his theorizing about “higher forms of behavior” etc. and, at the same time, bears some—albeit distant—resemblance to it. This is Vygotsky’s phrase “higher centers” («высшие центры») that Vygotsky used in his speculations about the structure and functionality of brain cortex of the humans and “higher animals”. In these contexts, we see how Vygotsky revisits his earlier and fairly

⁵ All these examples of the “higher/highest” can be found on the pages of just one book—“Thinking and speech” of the edition of 1934—that by no means present a comprehensive and full list of all possible uses of this word in Vygotsky’s texts.

naïve and mechanist “reflexological” and “reactological” views on the physiological basis of “higher forms of behavior” and include “higher in functional relation centers” («высшие в функциональном отношении центры») in his theoretical analysis (Vygotskii, 1934c, p. 38).

Vygotsky’s expansion into the topics traditionally associated with physiological, psychiatric and neuropsychological research and practice and, thus, even further expansion of the semantic field of the word “higher” (and its derivatives) is characteristic of his later texts on paedology, defectology and psychoneurology of 1933–1934. These topics, along with his search for the ways of investigating the processes of meaning-making and cognizing constitute cumulatively the core of the most advanced and the last period of Vygotsky’s theory formation until his death in June 1934 (see, e.g., chapter 7, “The laws of the development of nervous system” in Vygotskii, 1934b; see also Vygotskii, 1934c, 2001, pp. 132–151). And yet, these later developments of Vygotsky’s thought are only peripheral additions to the main line of his thinking about the “higher” phenomena and processes. So, what is this main line? Let us discuss it further.

“Genius” and Other Extraordinary People

Very early in his life Vygotsky got interested in the topics of the unusual, the extraordinary, something that overcomes the natural, average capacities and abilities of a “normal” person. Numerous traces of this interest to exceptionalities can be found in his early writings on literary criticism, such as his essay of 1916 on Shakespeare’s Hamlet (Vygotskii, 1965) or his 1920 essay on Leo Tolstoy’s rebellious and Promethean interpretation of the secret of the genius of Shakespeare in its social making⁶. Perhaps the most straightforward and clear-cut evidence of this interest to super-normal human powers is Vygotsky’s encyclopedia article titled “Genius” (i.e. the quality of being a genius, *genial’nost’*) that he wrote for the Great Medical Encyclopedia (Vygotskii, 1929). According to this encyclopedia entry, the quality of being a genius is “the highest degree of giftedness that reveals itself in the maximal creative productiveness that has exceptional importance in social life”⁷. In this paper Vygotsky speculates about “idiosyncratic structure of personality of a genius, amazing force and tension of his creativity that greatly surpass those of the norm”⁸ and, referring to Italian psychiatrist Enrico Morselli (1852–1929), expresses an opinion that “apparently, genius is an evolving, progressive variation of human species”⁹.

This “progressive variation of human species” is of considerable interest to Vygotsky, and not only from merely theoretical standpoint. Thus, for instance, super-normal human capacities became the object of a longitudinal research project in the virtual research laboratory of Vygotsky-Luria at the moment when, in mid-1920s, they met Solomon Shereshevskii (1886—1958). Shereshevskii, a correspondent of one of local newspapers at the time, turned to Luria and Vygotsky with the request for consultation about his extraordinary memory that allowed him to remember considerable amounts of

⁶ See online in PsyAnima journal republication of 2013 in the original and in translation into several languages: <http://www.psyanima.ru/journal/2013/1/index.php>

⁷ Original: «высшая степень одаренности, проявляющаяся в максимальной творческой продуктивности, имеющей для соц[иальной] жизни исключительное историческое значение» (РЕФ, ЛСВ, 1929, с. 612)

⁸ Original: о «своеобразной структуре личности гениального человека, поразительной силе и напряжении творчества, превосходящих в огромной мере нормальные»

⁹ Original: «повидимому (sic), гений—эволюционирующая, прогрессивная вариация человеческого типа»

information—verbal or visual—without ever taking notes or using auxiliary aids. Later, Shereshevskii devised specific techniques and strategies for remembering that even further advanced his mnemonic abilities and eventually became a professional mnemonist. The phenomenal memory of Shereshevskii triggered Vygotsky's acute interest in the phenomena of eidetism and synaesthesia and was described in the sixth, the last, chapter of A.N. Leontiev's book "Development of memory. Experimental investigation of higher psychological functions" (Leontiev, 1931) and, later, in Luria's famous book *The mind of a mnemonist* that summarized several decades of research and observations (Luria, 1968). Shereshevskii apparently had quite an impression on Vygotsky. Thus, as we know from his daughters' childhood memories, Vygotsky developed a mnemonics that allowed him to remember up to one hundred unrelated words and upon request to reproduce them in random order during their family private gatherings and public lectures (Vygodskaya & Lifanova, 1996, pp. 312–313).

Another character with extraordinary psychological abilities that so much attracted Vygotsky was Roman Arrago (1883-1949), a phenomenal mental calculator who, like Shereshevskii, took part in various shows, concerts and public events during which he seemingly easily performed the most complicated mathematical operations in his mind, i.e. without any visible auxiliary means and aids¹⁰. Vygotsky met Arrago in April, 1934—just a couple of months before his death. The notebook with detailed recording of their conversation has preserved in Vygotsky's private archive (Zavershneva, 2010b, p. 53).

Yet another source of Vygotsky's inspiration of the period of 1932-1934 was brilliant and eccentric poet-futurist Velimir Khlebnikov (1885-1922). As it is clear from Ekaterina Zavershneva's publication of Vygotsky's notebook of October 1932, he was planning to dedicate to Khlebnikov and his artistic creativity the whole section of his unwritten book on consciousness that he was contemplating about around 1932. Thus, Zavershneva notes: "As for the case of Khlebnikov (which also appears in *Thinking and Speech*), it pertains not to a "normal" but rather to a supernormal or "genius" version of development, to how poetry and verbal creativity open up new possibilities, a new freedom for man" (Zavershneva, 2010c, p. 64). The kind of freedom that is meant here is the freedom of thinking from the confines of the language. As poet-futurist, Khlebnikov often expressed his dissatisfaction with the existing linguistic "tools" readily available in any given language and ventured creating from scratch whole new "tools" of his own. In his notes, Vygotsky discussed Khlebnikov's "attempt to fuse words, creating new paths from thought to words, through new meanings of words" and remarked that "Khlebnikov himself compared this work to paving a road from one valley to another; he spoke of a (more) direct route from Moscow to Kiev not via New York, and he called himself a railwayman of language" (Zavershneva, 2010c, p. 65). The "genius of Khlebnikov", from Vygotsky's standpoint, is in the poet's creative rebellion that allows him generate new cultural—esthetic and linguistic—forms through the destruction of the older, traditional ones. Velimir Khlebnikov's poetic world is densely populated with a wide range of neologisms—the new words that the author deliberately created in order to express new, unique and specific images, ideas and emotions. Among these neologisms one might come

¹⁰ On Arrago see Soviet journal *Science and Life*, N5 1968, article titled "Actor-mathematician" by Arcady Gromov; in translation online: <http://stepanov.lk.net/mnemo/arraarte.html>

across the word “overman” (Russian: “zachelovek”) loosely meaning the “man of the future” that possesses certain abilities not yet available to the present human being.

In turn, we have no evidence of Vygotsky ever discussing an “overman”. Yet, a few of his texts are rich with references to the “superman” used in quite similar sense. It appears this word, its cultural context and the imagery behind it are extremely important for us in our quest for Vygotsky’s thinking about “higher processes” and, generally the core of his entire theory, as inconsistent and dramatically changing as it was during the most productive decade of his life from the beginning of Vygotsky’s career in Moscow in 1924 until his death in 1934.

The Superman of Friedrich Nietzsche

References to a “superman” can be found in a number of Vygotsky’s texts and, judging by the context, this idea appeared quite important to Vygotsky. Thus, for instance, in one his letters of 1927 to his closest collaborator Alexander Luria Vygotsky wrote about his excitement with a new book contract that would give him an opportunity to “sketch psychological theory from the standpoint of culture and superman”¹¹.

The references to “superman” abound in the various Vygotsky’s texts intended by their author as book-length treatises, book chapters and other, relatively minor publications that span not less than from 1923 to 1930¹². Furthermore, we have all reasons to believe that in a number of posthumous editions of Soviet period these references for political reasons were replaced with phrase “new man”, which Vygotsky used in essentially the same sense as “superman”¹³. The source of this idea of a “superman” and, ultimately, Vygotsky’s acute interest in this idea is pretty obvious, and Vygotsky in a number of places in his written works indicates the author. Thus, for instance, in his original version of the manuscript of the “(Historical) Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology”—before it was ruthlessly censored in the Soviet publication edited by Mikhail Yaroshevskii (Zavershneva & Osipov, 2012a, 2012b) 2012b)—Vygotsky wrote:

<Here we have the only instance where the words of the **paradoxical psychologist**—who defined **psychology as the science of the superman**—are justified>: in the society of the future, **psychology will indeed be the science of the <superman>**. Without this, the

¹¹ Original, in Vygotsky’s letter to Luria of July 26, 1927: «изложить в общих чертах психологию в аспекте культуры и сверхчеловека» (REF Выготский, письма, 2004, с. 11).

¹² Some half dozen Vygotsky’s texts with references to “superman” have been identified. These texts include such as ‘Pedagogical Psychology’ (REF 1926), ‘The Psychology of Art’ and ‘The (Historical) Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology’ (all book-length works), ‘The Science of Psychology’ [Psikhologicheskaya nauka] (1928); ‘The Socialist Transformation of Man’ [Sotsialisticheskaya peredelka cheloveka] (Vygotsky, 1930) (both—book chapters), as well as a paper, ‘Psychology in Our School: How Psychology Should Be Taught’ [Psikhologiya v nashei shkole. Kak nado seichas prepodavat’ psikhologiiu], which Vygotsky delivered before the second All-Russian Psychoneurology Congress at a joint session devoted to psychology, reflexology, and pedology held January 9, 1924. For the discussion of these texts see (REF Zavershneva, 2012).

¹³ Thus, for instance, the comparison of published book with the original typescript version of the text revealed that the references of “superman” were changed into “new man” in Vygotsky’s “The Psychology of Art” that was first released in the Soviet Union in 1965 (see REF Zavershneva, 2012, p. 61, footnote 15).

perspective of Marxism and the history of science would be incomplete. But this science of the <superman> will nevertheless be psychology; we now hold in our hands the thread that leads to it (emphasis added; quoted after Zavershneva & Osipov, 2012a, p. 82 all editorial deletions restored in angular brackets, all substitutions of “superman” for “new man” restored here)¹⁴.

This “paradoxical psychologist” is German thinker—philologist, psychologist, and philosopher—Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), whose impact on Vygotsky and the entire generation of Russian intellectuals of the first third of the 20th century was as profound as it was diverse and, in many instances, inconspicuous¹⁵. For the extended and fairly detailed discussion of Russian Nietzscheanism of the time one should see the series of published works by and under the editorship of Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal¹⁶. For our present purposes it will suffice to point out several most important ideas and features of Russian Nietzscheanism. Thus, according to Rosenthal,

The works of the “philosopher with hammer” touched deep cultural chords, reverberating with, reinforcing, and reactivating ideas indigenous to Russia. His striking slogans and memorable images stayed with people long after they read him. Nietzsche was the spark that fused discrete, seemingly contradictory, elements into new amalgams, such as Nietzschean Marxism and Nietzschean Christianity. Some of these were unstable and transitory. Others endured and evolved, but one idea remained constant: art can create a new consciousness, a new human being, a new culture, and a new world. Nietzsche imbued radicals of various persuasions with visions of total transformation against which liberalism and evolutionary Marxism seemed pallid (Rosenthal, 2002, p. 2).

Further, Rosenthal thus continues on Nietzschean Marxism:

Bolshevik intellectuals did not confine their reading to Marxist works. They knew Russian and European literature and philosophy and kept up with current trends in art and thought. Aspects of Nietzsche’s thought were either surprisingly compatible with Marxism or treated issues that Marx and Engels had neglected. Nietzsche sensitized Bolsheviks committed to reason and science to the importance of the nonrational aspects of the human psyche and to the psychopolitical utility of symbol, myth, and cult... The Soviet obsession with creating a new

¹⁴ Original: “<Здесь единственный раз оправдываются слова парадоксального психолога, который определял психологию, как науку о сверхчеловеке:> в будущем обществе психология действительно будет наукой о <сверхчеловеке>. Без этого перспектива марксизма и истории науки была бы неполна. Но и эта наука о <сверхчеловеке> будет все же психологией; мы теперь держим у себя в руках нить от нее” (REF Zavershneva & Osipov [PsyAnima], 2012, p. 71)

¹⁵ The scholarly literature on Friedrich Nietzsche is simply enormous and fairly diverse. As a starting point reading on Nietzsche, his life, thought and legacy perhaps one of the choices is the classic and eye-opening book by Walter Kaufmann characteristically titled “Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist” (REF).

¹⁶ REFs: Rosenthal, Bernice Glatzer (Ed.) (1986). Nietzsche in Russia. Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press
Rosenthal, Bernice Glatzer (Ed.) (1994). Nietzsche and Soviet Culture: Ally and Adversary. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
Rosenthal, B. (2002). New myth, new world: From Nietzsche to Stalinism. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

culture stemmed primarily from Nietzsche, Wagner, and their Russian popularizers. Marx and Engels never developed a detailed theory of culture because they considered it part of the superstructure that would change to follow changes in the economic base (Rosenthal, 2002, pp. 2–3).

Eventually, the core of Nietzschean ideas also migrated to the Stalinism of 1930s and, according to Rosenthal, “Nietzsche’s thought affected the aspects of Stalinism that explanations based on class conflict, rationally calculating ‘economic man’, or modernization theory cannot account for” (Rosenthal, 2002, p. 3).

Concerning the concept of “superman” (*Übermensch*) in Nietzsche’s seemingly self-contradictory and ambiguous writings and thought, one is foremost invited to get familiarized directly with Nietzsche’s works, such as “Thus spoke Zarathustra” (*Also sprach Zarathustra*). Nietzsche’s “superman”—that perhaps more correctly should be translated from German “Über-mensch” as “overman”—makes his first appearance in Nietzsche’s “Also sprach Zarathustra” with such words directed to common people (like all of us):

I teach you the *Übermenschen*. Man is something that should be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?.. What is the ape to man? A laughing-stock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman... Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman—a rope over an abyss (quoted after Kaufmann, 1974, pp. 309–310).

Somewhere else Nietzsche warned his readers about the dangers of oversimplification, trivialization and misunderstanding of what he meant by his “overman” and mistaking him for the “best men” known to the people,—all of them pretty distant from the ideal of an overman and “all too human”, to Nietzsche’s taste:

The word “overman” as the designation of a type of supreme achievement, as opposed to “modern” men, to “good” men, to Christians and other nihilists... has been understood almost everywhere with the utmost innocence in the sense of those very values whose opposite Zarathustra was meant to represent—that is, an “idealistic” type of a higher kind of man, half “saint”, half “genius”. Other scholarly oxen have suspected me of Darwinism on that account (quoted after Kaufmann, 1974, p. 313).

Vygotsky was no exception to his contemporaries, and Nietzsche’s various influences on him can be traced as early as in his first written works: those on Jewish culture, history and tradition, literary and theatrical criticism. And yet, Vygotsky’s conception of superman and its affect on his thinking about human psychology seemed to derive not directly from Nietzsche, but rather from one of those Nietzschean Marxists, namely, Leon Trotsky (1879-1940).

Vygotsky's Superman as the Voice of Leon Trotsky

Trotsky was perhaps one of the most prominent and brightest authors who expressed the Bolshevik version of Nietzschean ideas on “superman” as someone free from the bounds of class society and biological laws (e.g. genetics, sexual and deep subconscious drives). The references to the same quote fragment from Trotsky’s chapter 8 of his book “Literature and revolution” (1923) can be found in at least three major book-length texts of Vygotsky of 1920s. These quotes invariably concluded his discussion in such works as “Pedagogical psychology”, “The Psychology of Art”, and “(Historical) Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology”. Vygotsky quoted this fragment from Trotsky almost verbatim, thus we have all reasons to believe the author considered it highly important and foundational for his own thought. This is the somewhat lengthy fragment of Trotsky’s text:

Man at last will begin to harmonize himself in earnest. He will make it his business to achieve beauty by giving the movement of his own limbs the utmost precision, purposefulness and economy in his work, his walk and his play. He will try to master first the semiconscious and then the subconscious processes in his own organism, such as breathing, the circulation of the blood, digestion, reproduction, and, within necessary limits, he will try to subordinate them to the control of reason and will. Even purely physiologic life will become subject to collective experiments. The human species, the coagulated Homo sapiens, will once more enter into a state of radical transformation, and, in his own hands, will become an object of the most complicated methods of artificial selection and psycho-physical training. This is entirely in accord with evolution[...]

Man will make it his purpose to master his own feelings, to raise his instincts to the heights of consciousness, to make them transparent, to extend the wires of his will into hidden recesses, and thereby to raise himself to a new plane, to create a higher social biologic type, or, if you please, a superman.

It is difficult to predict the extent of self-government which the man of the future may reach or the heights to which he may carry his technique. Social construction and psycho-physical self-education will become two aspects of one and the same process. All the arts – literature, drama, painting, music and architecture will lend this process beautiful form. More correctly, the shell in which the cultural construction and self-education of Communist man will be enclosed, will develop all the vital elements of contemporary art to the highest point. Man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser and subtler; his body will become more harmonized, his movements more rhythmic, his voice more musical. The forms of life will become dynamically dramatic. The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise¹⁷.

¹⁷ See the source online: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/ch08.htm . Cf. original: Человек примется, наконец, всерьез гармонизировать самого себя. Он поставит себе задачей ввести в движение своих собственных органов – при труде, при ходьбе, при игре, - высшую отчетливость, целесообразность, экономию и тем самым красоту. Он захочет овладеть полубессознательными, а затем и бессознательными процессами в собственном организме: дыханием, кровообращением, пищеварением, оплодотворением – и, в

Direct quotes to Trotsky ceased to exist in Vygotsky's works from around 1927 when Trotsky lost his power within the state and Communist party authorities and was subsequently exiled to Kazakhstan, and, then, abroad. Yet, the core ideas on the "superman" of the future that Vygotsky presented quite in opposition to Nietzsche remained virtually unchanged and fairly in line with Trotsky's prophetic description of the "new man" of the socialist future.

Thus, the earliest known discussion of "superman" belongs to 1923 and has preserved as a paper, "Psychology in Our School: How Psychology Should Be Taught" [Psikhologiya v nashei shkole. Kak nado seichas prepodavat' psikhologiyu], which Vygotsky delivered before the second All-Russian Psychoneurology Congress at a joint session devoted to psychology, reflexology, and pedology held January 9, 1924. This is how this paper ended:

[E]veryone says, on the other hand, that psychology is truly now on a path toward the achievement of a rationalization of the body's most elemental and blind forces and the mastery of the entire conscious and subconscious apparatus of the mind and that it will subordinate it in the same way that the world of outside forces is subordinated. Here, the boldest dreams will pale in comparison with reality in the course of, perhaps, a few short years. Trotsky talks in this regard about the consciousness of the new man, the superman, but not in the Nietzschean sense of the word, not a new biological breed, but a socially organized superman, enlightened through and through, in every cache of the most elemental forces of the body, freed from the most terrifying enslavement—enslavement to the self—and from the most bitter dependence—on one's own nerves and mind—by subordinating to himself the play of the body's inner forces as he does the outer forces of nature (quoted after Zavershneva, 2012, pp. 55–56).

In 1930, in Vygotsky's paper titled "The Socialist Alteration of man" the tone, quotations and phraseology somewhat change, but the voice of the unmentioned Trotsky can still be pretty strongly discerned:

необходимых пределах, подчинит их контролю разума и воли. Жизнь, даже чисто физиологическая, станет коллективно-экспериментальной. Человеческий род, застывший homo sapiens, снова поступит в радикальную переработку и станет – под собственными пальцами – объектом сложнейших методов искусственного отбора и психологической тренировки. Это целиком лежит на линии развития. [...] Человек поставит себе целью овладеть собственными чувствами, поднять инстинкты на вершину сознательности, сделать их прозрачными, протянуть провода воли в подспудное и подпольное и тем самым поднять себя на новую ступень, – создать более высокий общественно-биологический тип, если угодно – сверхчеловека. До каких пределов самоуправляемости доведет себя человек будущего – это так же трудно предсказать, как и те высоты, до каких он доведет свою технику. Общественное строительство и психо-физическое самовоспитание станут двумя сторонами одного и того же процесса. Искусство словесное, театральное, музыкальное, архитектурное – дадут этому процессу прекрасную форму. Вернее сказать: та оболочка, в которую будет облекать себя процесс культурного строительства и самовоспитания коммунистического человека, разовьет до предельной мощности все жизненные элементы нынешних искусств. Человек станет несравненно сильнее, умнее, тоньше; его тело – гармоничнее, движения ритмичнее, голос музыкальнее. Формы быта приобретут динамическую театральность. Средний человеческий тип поднимется до уровня Аристотеля, Гёте, Маркса. Над этим кряжем будут подниматься новые вершины.

Whenever the alteration of man and the creation of a new, higher level of human personality and conduct is under discussion, it is inevitable that ideas about a new type of human being connected with Nietzsche's theory of the superman are mentioned. Proceeding from the perfectly true assumption that evolution did not stop with man and that the modern type of human being represents nothing more than a bridge, a transitional form leading to a higher type, that evolution did not exhaust its possibilities when it created man and that the modern type of personality is not the highest achievement and the last word in the process of development, Nietzsche concluded that a new creature can arise during the process of evolution, a superman, who will have the same relation to contemporary man, as contemporary man has to the ape.

However, Nietzsche imagined that the development of this higher type of man was subject to the same law of biological evolution, the struggle for life and selection based on the survival of the fittest, which prevails in the animal world. It is for this reason that the ideal of power, the self assertion of the human personality in all the fullness of its instinctive power and ambition, rugged individualism and outstanding men and women, formed, according to Nietzsche, the road to the creation of a superman.

This theory is erroneous, because it ignores the fact that the laws of historical evolution of man differ fundamentally from the laws of biological evolution and that the basic difference between these two processes consists of the fact that a human being evolves and develops as a historical, social being. Only a raising of all of humanity to a higher level in social life, the liberation of all of humanity, can lead to the formation of a new type of man.

However, this change in human behaviour, this change of the human personality, must inevitably lead to further evolution of man and to the alteration of the *biological type of man*. Having mastered the processes which determine his own nature, man who is struggling with old age and diseases, undoubtedly will rise to a higher level and transform the very biological organization of human beings. But this is the source of the greatest historical paradox of human development, that this biological transformation of the human type which is mainly achieved through science, social education and the rationalization of the entire way of life, *does not represent a prerequisite but instead is a result of the social liberation of man*. In this sense Engels, who had examined the process of evolution from the ape to man, said that it is labour which created man. Proceeding from this, one could say that new forms of labour will create the new man and that this new man will resemble the old kind of man, 'the old Adam', in name only (Vygotsky, 1994, pp. 182–183)¹⁸.

In sum, the future "psychology of superman" that Vygotsky ambitiously and triumphantly announced in early 1920s as his primary and most immediate goal in science remained pretty much on his agenda as of 1930. It is interesting and pretty instructive to see how it developed further during the first half of 1930s—until his death in 1934.

¹⁸ See also online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/works/1930/socialism.htm>

The “Height” Psychology (*Vershinnaia psikhologiia*)

As we know, around mid-1932 Vygotsky was desperately looking for the name of their psychological theory that would allow to clearly distinguish it from a number of other contemporary psychological theories. We are still not certain whether such name was eventually coined, although there are some reasons to believe that Vygotsky was pretty close to the ultimate solution of the problem of self-designation. In December 1932 during research meeting with his associates and collaborators Vygotsky finally pronounced the key phrase:

Our word in psychology: away from superficial psychology—in consciousness, being and phenomenon are not equal. But we also oppose depth psychology. Our psychology is a peak psychology (does not determine the "depths" of the personality but its "peaks")¹⁹ (Vygotsky, 1997b, p. 137)

The reference to “peak” (alternatively: “height”, “summit”, “mountain-top”) in this context is highly reminiscent of Nietzsche’s programmatic pronouncement that “he who can breathe in the air of my writings knows that it is the air of the heights” (see Nietzsche’s “Ecce Homo”, vii). On the other hand, it highly resembles Trotsky’s words about the average human type of the socialist (and Communist) future that “will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx” and, furthermore, Trotsky’s Bolshevik prophecy that “above this ridge new peaks will rise” (see above). In this case we seem to have a formidable testimony of the theory’s principal author that confirms its Nietzschean-Trotskyan origin and immutable core focused on the set of ideas revolving around the notions of a “superman”, overcoming human nature, supernormal and extraordinary abilities and controlled human bio-social evolution.

Vygotsky’s research program of “height psychology” of 1932-1934—despite its foundational similarities with his earlier revolutionary pronouncements of early 1920s—in a number of respects is quite different from all his work of 1920s. In contrast to the “instrumental period” of 1920s, Vygotsky’s 1930s is the period of dramatic shift from research on tool-mediated behaviors and activities to attempts at understanding the deeper mechanisms that stand behind these behaviors. Thus, along these lines in his programmatic presentation of December 1932 Vygotsky mentioned “the path toward internal hidden developments as a tendency in modern science” (Vygotsky, 1997b, p. 137). The last two years of his life Vygotsky was approaching the grand theory of consciousness that was to put into order the multitude of ideas, hypotheses and findings, but this was never fulfilled. Vygotsky never materialized his “height psychology” in either theory or in practice: it remained at the level of mere sketch and wishful thinking of a bunch of “the dreamers” of the post-revolutionary time.

The summative assessment of Vygotsky’s general contribution to psychology and specifically the theory of consciousness that he was most intensely engaged with during the last two years of his life,

¹⁹ Original: Наше слово в психологии: от поверхностной психологии — в сознании явление не равно бытию. Но мы себя противопоставляем и глубинной психологии. Наша психология — вершинная психология (определяет не «глубины», а «вершины» личности).

can be found in one of the personal notes discovered among his archival documents. This is how Zavershneva presents this quote in her English publication of 2010:

The series “Manuscript Progress” includes an entry that apparently can be regarded as the last one he made before leaving for the hospital. The entry “Conference (Zaks)” [Konferentsiia (Zaks)] begins with someone else’s words: Vygotsky quotes some science functionary who asks why he needs a big auditorium, what he is going to talk about; then come fragmentary notes from a symposium (a discussion of the clinical cases of Kogan and Zaks), and then the text changes direction, as it no longer runs lengthwise down the page but instead runs across it. It is a very personal entry that indeed runs at right angles to the entire text, above it. It reflects the mood with which Vygotsky said goodbye to what had constituted the purpose of his life:

NB! Pro domo suo

This is the final thing I have done in psychology—and I will like Moses die at the summit, having glimpsed the promised land but without setting foot on it. Farewell, dear creations. The rest is silence(Zavershneva, 2010b, p. 58)

In order to shed light on this—fairly pessimistic and somewhat cryptic—self-assessment of Vygotsky’s contribution to psychology we suggest comparing it with the statements that Vygotsky made in the first and the last chapters of his last, posthumously published, book “Thinking and speech”, where he equally pessimistically asserted:

We perfectly well understand the inevitable imperfection of that first step in the new direction that we tried to make in this work. But we see its justification in the fact that it, in our firm belief, moves us ahead in the investigation of thinking and speech in comparison with that state of this problem that had formed in psychology when we began our work. It uncovers the problem of thinking and speech as the key problem of all psychology of man and directly leads the researcher to a new psychological theory of consciousness. However, we touch upon this problem only in the few concluding words of our work and interrupt the investigation at its very threshold²⁰ (Vygotskii, 1934a, p. 3, in our translation from Russian).

This statement is mirrored in and further clarified by the concluding words on the last page of the book where Vygotsky clearly stated:

In conclusion of our investigation, we cannot but dwell in a few words upon those perspectives that unfold beyond its threshold. Our investigation leads us closely to the

²⁰ Original: Мы отлично сознаем все неизбежное несовершенство того первого шага в новом направлении, который мы пытались сделать в настоящей работе, но мы видим его оправдание в том, что он, по нашему убеждению, продвигает нас вперед в исследовании мышления и речи по сравнению с тем состоянием этой проблемы, которое сложилось в психологии к моменту начала нашей работы, раскрывая проблему мышления и речи как узловую проблему всей психологии человека, непосредственно приводящую исследователя к новой психологической теории сознания. Впрочем мы затрагиваем эту проблему лишь в немногих заключительных словах нашей работы и обрываем исследование у самого ее порога.

threshold of another, even vaster, even deeper, even more grandiose problem than the problem of thinking—the problem of consciousness (Vygotkii, 1934a, p. 318, in our translation from Russian)²¹ (for the discussion of Vygotsky’s theory of consciousness see Zavershneva, 2014).

The similarity and parallels between these fragments and their imagery are as striking as they are obvious: Written in the same period, they provide us with Vygotsky’s perception of his work as unfinished, abandoned at the “threshold” of the ultimate goal of his life. Thus, the history of Vygotsky’s (and his collaborators’) theory of consciousness is the re-enactment of the old biblical plot, when the hero, who brought his people from slavery to the Promised Land, has to die without ever setting his foot on the new terrain. And although the settings and guiding metaphors in these two stories—the one of Vygotsky (and his research team) and the other of Moses (and “his people”)—are quite different, in both cases the mission was not entirely accomplished and the hero tragically dies.

Vygotsky’s Treatment of Nietzsche and Trotsky: Use or Abuse?

We have demonstrated the transformation of the core idea of Vygotsky’s thinking from his earlier proclamations about the need in the “psychology of superman” to the more mature “height psychology” and, then, to Vygotsky’s documented acknowledgement of his failure to create such psychology. The question, then, remains how consistently Vygotsky developed this proclaimed “height psychology” in the footsteps of Nietzsche and Trotsky in his scholarly research, theory, and practice. This general question can be subdivided into two: How faithful was Vygotsky to Nietzsche? How closely did he follow Trotsky? In the following, we will first discuss Vygotsky’s interrelations with Nietzsche’s and, then, with Trotsky’s ideas.

Vygotsky and Nietzsche

Vygotsky always maintained that it is only through deliberate and conscious effort that the attainment of higher levels of human being and existence is possible. This axiomatic base and theoretical standpoint necessarily suggests the indivisible unity of the theory and systematic practice directed towards the perfection of the humans, and requires consciousness and, even more importantly, *self-consciousness*, or, using a term that is somewhat compromised from the standpoint of the contemporary psychological mainstream, *introspection* and *self-observation*. Despite his later objectivist denouncement of the method of introspection and self-observation, Vygotsky of his early period of art and literary criticism (roughly 1916-1923) demonstrated fairly impressive mastery of his variation of the method of self-observation—that he referred to as the *method of the reader’s critique*—that involved a thorough and objective exploration of the work of art on the basis of his personal and direct encounter with an artistic

²¹ Original: Мы не можем в заключение нашего исследования не остановиться в немногих словах на тех перспективах, которые раскрываются за его порогом. Наше исследование подводит нас вплотную к порогу другой, еще более обширной, еще более глубокой, еще более грандиозной проблемы, чем проблема мышления — к проблеме сознания.

form (Marques, 2012). This profoundly personal and individualistic standpoint tends to bypass the age-old tradition and rely on self-observation and personal intuition that Vygotsky executed in his literary works and praised in his early youthful review of Leo Tolstoy's critical essay on Shakespeare—the one in which its author lambasted the entire tradition of Shakespearean scholarship, all “eleven thousand volumes” of laudatory works on this, in Tolstoy's assessment, rather mediocre author²². Here, Vygotsky's approach is highly reminiscent of Nietzsche's militant call for “revaluation of all values” that, in turn, to some extent takes place in Vygotsky's unfinished manuscript on the crisis in contemporary psychology and some of its derivatives published during Vygotsky's lifetime (see discussion in Zavershneva, 2012).

And yet, Vygotsky's thinking of his “instrumental period” of 1920s demonstrates notable deviations from Nietzsche's psychology and his original call for a superman. Like Nietzsche, Vygotsky is utterly teleological and understands superman not as an available entity, but rather only a potentially evolving human type. Therefore, Vygotsky's “psychology in terms of the superman” cannot be understood unless as a project in the making, whereas the final goal of this project is not yet known and can be thought of only as a desired possibility. However, unlike Nietzsche, who leaves no doubt that superman is exclusively individual enterprise, for Vygotsky this idea is transformed through the lens of the idea of the “new man” of the future socialist society. Therefore, Vygotsky's notion of “superman” applies to larger population of common people that require massive and collective “socialist alteration”.

Following Trotsky's utopian vision that “human species, the coagulated *Homo sapiens*, will once more enter into a state of radical transformation, and, in his own hands, will become an object of the most complicated methods of artificial selection and psycho-physical training” and that it is “self-evident that the greatest efforts of investigative thought and of creative initiative will be in that direction”, Vygotsky proclaimed the advent of the “new psychology” that he intended to create and relate “in the light of the superman” (Vygotskii & Puzyrei, 2004; Vygotsky & Puzyrei, 2007). However, Vygotsky seems to have totally lost the psychological dimension of the Nietzschean superman, and got apparently diverted into speculative daydreaming, propagandist demagoguery, and objectivist theorizing equipped with the vocabulary of “reflex”, “stimulus”, and “reaction”. In sum, Vygotsky's critique of Nietzsche seems to be a perfect illustration of Nietzsche's complaint that “the word ‘overman’ as the designation of a type of supreme achievement, as opposed to ‘modern’ men, to ‘good’ men, to Christians and other nihilists... has been understood almost everywhere with the utmost innocence in the sense of those very values whose opposite Zarathustra was meant to represent”.

Vygotsky and Trotsky

On the other hand, Vygotsky neither seemed to closely follow Trotsky's guidelines for the new psychology of the future. According to Trotsky, the new man will overcome the unconscious, subdue to his will not only physiology, but also the mind, and will eventually, through systematic collective experiment create himself as a new—the first artificial self-created—species. This will be possible,

²² See online at <http://www.psyanima.ru/journal/2013/1/index.php>

according to Trotsky, only as a result of inseparable unity of theoretical work, experimental research and social practice. As an outcome, a new generation of brilliant and extraordinary people—judging by our contemporary standards—will emerge. Apparently, Vygotsky’s theory and practice was in fact quite far from this overly optimistic “height psychology” of Trotsky.

Thus, in his research practice of 1920s, Vygotsky kept using the vocabulary of “higher” and “superior” psychological processes, but defined these in terms of either “cultural” or “volitional” functions such as voluntary attention or logical memory that normally evolve during the course of the children’s development by the end of their adolescence with relatively minimal schooling. In order to demonstrate how the development of such “higher”, “cultural” functions takes place Vygotsky and his associates organized a series of studies in which, in fairly mechanistic fashion, they modelled the process of “cultural development” with the help of auxiliary tools that helped the subjects of their studies perform certain mental tasks. These “psychological tools” were equated with the impact of culture on psychological development, expressed in terms of somewhat advanced “stimulus-reaction” behaviorist model, upgraded to the triad “stimulus—sign- (‘tool’- or ‘instrument’-)-based mediation—reaction”.

Another example of Vygotsky’s empirical research—the research of early 1930s—is his and Luria’s study of the affect of the rapid change in the economic formation on the psychological functioning of people. Thus, Luria and Vygotsky in 1931-1932 earnestly attempted to demonstrate that the transition from “feudalism” to “socialism” that allegedly took place in Central Asia during the process of Stalinist forceful collectivization of local population led to the increased psychological performance of these, originally “primitive” and culturally underdeveloped, peoples. The participation of foreign scholars in these studies revealed gross methodological errors and ended with massive criticism for scholarly and political mistakes (Lamdan, 2013; Proctor, 2013; Yasnitsky, 2013; Ясницкий, А. / Yasnitsky, A., 2013). Indeed, research on national minorities considered as “primitive” or psychologically underdeveloped would be considered as politically incorrect even in our days. A few theoretical treatises were drafted during this period, virtually none of these finished and prepared for publication by Vygotsky and his team. Quite obviously, no operationalization of the potential “new type of man” was given in the theory and the anticipated superman of the Communist future was totally lost in these experiments.

In sum, despite frequent direct references to Nietzsche and Trotsky or indirect allusions to their ideas, neither of these authors’ ideas were sufficiently developed in Vygotsky’s empirical research, theoretical work or social practice.

Towards “Height Psychology” of the “Overman”

The main problem with Vygotsky’s attempt at “height psychology” is in the profound terminological confusion directly related to the lack of clarity in his interpretation of the foundational concept of this “new psychology” in the making. A radically “new psychology” seems to necessarily requires new conceptual framework. By extension, a new general psychological theory requires original and idiosyncratic methodological toolkit, that is, a system of research method specifically crafted for the purposes of this distinct theory. According to his various writings, Vygotsky was aware of this as it

follows, for instance, from his archival record “NB! We are missing a name”, in which he discussed the missing name not only for their theory, but also for the main research method. And yet, despite of his awareness of the importance of clearly defined distinct terminological apparatus, Vygotsky chiefly failed to do so in his theoretical work. Thus, as we have demonstrated the notion of “higher psychological functions” was never defined, remained vague and never achieved terminological rigidity, and kept evolving until Vygotsky eventually rejected it. Even worse, while still using it, Vygotsky never resolved the ambiguity of the Russian word “vysshii” and continuously confused the two, quite distinct meanings implied in it: the meaning of comparative “higher” and that of superlative “the highest”. Thus, for instance, while announcing the Trotsky-style the “new man” or the “new science” Vygotsky obviously had in mind the superlative “the highest”, like in the context of his December 1932 proclamation that their psychology, as distinct from other theoretical trends, focuses on the “peaks of personality”. Quite in contrast to such maximalist and essentially Nietzschean statements, Vygotsky apparently uses Russian “vysshie” in relation to psychological functions, processes, systems, etc. in the sense of comparative “higher”, that is those that are more advanced than other—presumably “natural”, inborn, and, therefore, not cultural—phenomena and processes. Needless to say, these “lower” processes and phenomena were never clearly and unambiguously defined in Vygotsky’s writings either. Therefore, as a result of this terminological substitution and ambiguity what we presently know under the banner of “Vygotskian psychology” has lost the “peak”, or “height”, superlative dimension of the original ambitious proposal of Vygotsky and, thus, following his distinction between “depth”, “surface” and “height” psychology, can be described as the superficial, surface psychology—precisely the one that he called his associates to stay away from. On the other hand, it is exactly for this reason the psychology of Vygotsky—who identified such “higher functions” as “logical memory” or “voluntary attention” of a typical adult of industrially developed Western society— despite its enormous revolutionary potential, was quite successfully ‘appropriated’ by a wide range of mainstream cognitivist or cultural psychologies that totally ignored the superlative “overman” basis of his original proposal.

The case of Vygotsky’s proclaimed search for the “psychology of the superman” or “height psychology” and his eventual failure to establish such psychology is as dramatic (if not tragic) as it is instructive. Indeed, this history raises quite a number of interesting and thought-provoking questions. Thus, one might wonder how and why Vygotsky’s belief in the “superman” and repetitive declarations of a radically new psychology of the future were in fact realized in a series of experiments that had virtually nothing to do with his ambitious proclamations and never resulted in a theory that would have any resemblance with the inflammatory writings of either Nietzsche or Trotsky. This is a question and, possibly, an interesting task for future research to the specialists in the history of science, specifically, in the field of the so-called “Vygotskian studies”. Yet, the “Vygotsky case” poses even more interesting questions to the contemporary psychologists and practitioners, for instance, in the field of education.

A contemporary psychologist interested in pursuing the line of research that originates in Nietzsche—Trotsky—Vygotsky’s ideas might pose a number of specific questions that need to be answered first, before any research starts. Thus, first of all one might want to define those “peaks” that, according to Trotsky and Vygotsky, need to be surpassed. We could think about instances of supreme performance by physically, intellectually, or emotionally gifted individuals such as top athletes, the most prominent

scholars, thinkers and intellectuals, and famous artists respectively. These would cover the three relatively different domains of human beings, namely, body, cognition and intellect, and emotional sphere. To this yet another group might be added that would comprise strong-willed individuals such as top-rated politicians, and, thus, the fourth major domain, the will, would be involved in future “overman psychology” research. Apparently, there is notable overlap between these groups. And yet, it is obvious that each of the representatives is quite far from the future ideal of an “overman”, whose abilities, level of development and force of consciousness surpass those of contemporary man. Then, the question arises: how can we study something that does not exist?

Another, related question is that of the practical aspect of the “height psychology”, most notably, its applicability in education. Vygotsky’s announced “height psychology” is in principle practical and applied, although in reality it never was anything of the kind. Still, the unity of theory and practice is an essential requirement for this ambitious proposal. The most direct consequence of this requirement is a practical question. We know that discovery of various psychological processes may be possible by virtue of self-observation and self-directed deliberate practice. This is a condition that seems to be necessary, but hardly sufficient. So, even more complex problem emerges: how can master one’s psychological processes? For instance: how to learn to control own emotions? This is particularly problematic when we think about basic and everyday negative emotions such as irritation, anger, fear, anxiety, frustration that we encounter in our communications with the members of our immediate families or our closest friends. Then, how can one learn to control own flow of thought, as circular, repetitive and annoying as it might be? How to surpass procrastination and the loss of will? Finally, how possibly can one master unwanted and spontaneous drives and desires, like, for instance, the sexual ones? The questions remain open.

Here we have to face yet another problem. The practice of “height psychology” is hardly conceivable of an individual’s voluntary and conscious effort of self-improvement. Yet, the role of the other is not obvious. Trotsky mentioned collective and collaborative experiments. If we suppose that he was right, then, here is another question: What is the role of the other in the development of such—even the most basic—superhuman psychological abilities? On the other hand, the opposite question is quite valid: How is one supposed to bring up a human with superhuman powers without being a superhuman him- or her-self? It seems, a practitioner—researcher or teacher—is required to participate in this practice not only as an outsider of the process somebody else’s development and growth, but also needs to always remain the subject of constant self-improvement him- or herself. Possibly so. But how exactly this constant self-improvement can be achieved?

So, as we see the questions and problems keep mounting. The theory and practice of “new psychology” remains in its initial stage. Yet, it is inevitable if only distinctly Vygotskian psychology is ever to materialize. Future will show if such Vygotskian psychology is to eventually arrive as an inseparable unity of theory and concrete practice.

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