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Petrovich and I, and QED

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Petrovich and I once got drunk and sneaked into the ladies' banya to understand what and how and who with whom, who had where and what and why and wherefore, who was to blame, what was to be done (till kingdom come, is it?!), exclusively out of scientific interest, it must be said, anatomy and that, philosophy, mythology, all sorts of other interesting things. The spectrum of Petrovich's and my interests was always vast, far vaster than the expanses of our village and the territories adjoining it. Being lads well-versed, educated, with three or five degrees (we had already stopped counting), Petrovich and I already possessed a global universal all-encompassing knowledge of objects and non-objects, their properties and relations, there was nowt that Petrovich and I did not know or could learn, for Petrovich and I (from early years) had taken a liking to the ancient Greek methods of life, of the knowing of life, and of knowing itself, one of which was the philosophical dialogue in the course of which two persons hurl at each other questions, answers, sometimes glasses empty, often full, sometimes chairs, to establish Istina, for it, the knowing of Istina is possible only in the collision of lad with a chair (that is, with the world) and of lad with lad, but never with himself, for everything that begins with "self", be it, for example, self-reflection, self-admiration, self-flagellation, self-satisfaction, sooner or later runs up against

self-possession and self-destruction, and kirdyk, farewell your honour, you are no longer a lad, but a brain, and your body just a shell for the convoluted noggin-goblin, which can only think and nowt more, like a computa, and it needs nobody for that, for it is so made that it will find an answer to everything, and if it does not find one it will invent one, for thinking, again, is its basic and only property, and if a lad gives in to this noggin-goblin and decides that this noggin-goblin is enough for him to attain the global universal all-encompassing knowledge and know of Istina, if he decides that he can attain all this “himself”, then he ceases to be a lad and becomes a brainy animal and no more, together with his thought he becomes directed more and more at himself, he curls up, he stretches, he removes his own ribs, if only to reach the root of Istina, to collapse into himself.

How it all began, as a matter of fact. Petrovich and I drank, enjoyed the village life and its understanding, kept silent, mooed, oohed and aahed, and Petrovich asks:

— What does a lad want? Eh?

— Eh?

— Think, mate.

— My head is spinning, Petrovich, I can’t think.

— What is it you want?

— Drink I want, Petrovich. Water.

— What else?

— Vomit I want, Petrovich. Hard.

— What else?

— I don't know, Petrovich, die I want. Life is not dear to me.

— Owt to get a laugh out of it. Think, what does the lad in general, the abstract lad with a capital L, that is the lad as a philosophical entity possessing all the properties of a lad, want?

— Petrovich, and do you yourself know the answer?

— Of course I know. But I won't tell you.

— Oh, you, Petrovich...

— You must crawl to it yourself, mate, whether across a minefield or right through a raspberry thicket.

— And what if he, your cosmic Lad, is a Buddhist?

Petrovich kicked me, not spitefully, in a mentorly way, lovingly.

— Thought you'd catch me out, did you? We've been over the Buddhists already, the two of us. You tell me.

I sigh, there's nowt to be done but to quote Petrovich:

— "The Buddhist is the maximally legitimised manifestation of

nogging-goblin, a being whose whatness and thatness consists in being within himself (underlined), a direction into himself (underlined) and self-sufficiency (*in italics*), yet there is nowt pathological in this, in comparison with similar behaviour among non-Buddhists, for the Buddhist's selfhood is pure and expressed by emptiness, that is, by nowt."

— That is, by what?

— By nowt, Petrovich.

— Right.

— And who are you?

— I am that I am, Petrovich, and thou art Petrovich.

— No, mate, thou art a Lad, and I am a Lad.

— Don't kno—

Again Petrovich kicked me.

— Ow!

— Think-think. Buddhist wants what?

— Nowt, Petrovich. Buddhist wants emptiness.

— Right, and emptiness is what?

— Emptiness is he himself.

— And the other way round. That is, it means that...?

— That is, it means that Buddhist wants himself.

— If Buddhist wants himself, and “he himself = emptiness”, then what?

— That means that he simply wants.

— Right. And what does this mean?

— Petrovich, I’m sick to my stomach. My head’s spinning, and now these riddles of yours on top of everything!

— And you, mate, throw up, don’t torment yourself, let the evil spirit fly out of you.

Well, and me what? I stuck two fingers down my throat, and right there in the bushes I chucked up a sloppy heap: good pickled mushrooms, dear rye bread with a bit of garlic, nice little gherkins with dill, our own native moonshine — all of them “former”, I should say, having lost in my stomach all their erstwhile Istinal essence, though, who knows, perhaps having gained one. I wiped my mouth with the towel, shook my head, came to my senses (sort of).

— Better?

— Better.

— Told you! Come on now, go on, next.

— And what next, then, Petrovich?

— Buddhist “wants”, you say. Holding that in mind, say (owt happens, I understand, but...) a Buddhist is a Lad too, so what does that mean?

— That means, Petrovich, that a Lad can simply want too.

— That is clear, that was the question, you need to answer it, and not hand it back to me. Keep twisting it, keep twisting.

— That means, Petrovich, that... — I don’t know, Petrovich.

I sigh, heavily I sigh, more heavily than ever.

— Cards, lay out the cards.

— Petrovich... what cards.

— The givens, you daft sod, of the problem.

— Well, so, 1) What does a lad want? Basically: a lad wants to remain himself, that is, a Lad, otherwise he will cease to be a Lad and then it is neither here nor there and there is no philosophy at all. 2) A Buddhist “wants”, for he is nowt. If a Buddhist can also be a Lad, and the Buddhist in our example is a subset of the Lad, then the Lad too can simply want. So... so wanting does not require an object.

— That’s just the snag. You don’t get owt for nowt. Wanting cannot

exist without an object. It requires both a subject and an object. Keep pressing, keep pressing. The cards are laid out. What does the cosmic Lad want?

— He wants to dodge the answer, Petrovich.

Here Petrovich gave me such a hearty clout on the back of the head, such a one that my teeth fair chattered, and there flooded into me in a furious surge the absolute universal all-encompassing sobriety of reason.

— You, mate, imagine that wanting is also a Lad. If the basic property (not action) of a Lad is the desire to be a Lad, then what?

— So then, Petrovich, evidently the wanting wants to be wanting. And what if it's a Buddhist?

— Oh, forget about the Buddhist, he's of no more use than an auxiliary variable. We don't need your Buddhist, why have you got so attached to him. Twist it further, twist it further! If the wanting wants to be wanting, then the wanting of a lad, what is it? Right, not a property but an action.

It hit me dead clear, hard enough, but I decided to express it even harder, so that Petrovich would believe it.

— Petrovich! I have understood everything. If wanting wants to be wanting, and the cosmic Lad possesses wanting and “wants”, then it follows that in the ultimate sense he wants nowt other than wanting!

— Right, mate! Right! There is no philosopher who would not agree with that. Pour another. And everyone agrees with that too!

We laughed, Petrovich and I, he warmly and joyfully, I with relief, nervously, cold sweat running down my face. Poured another, drank, winced.

— So, Petrovich, and what if the lad is a lass?

This is where it all properly began, my previous account is just a nice little lead-in, an opening gambit; you can bracket it off. Petrovich, to put it mildly, was floored. Despite our total possession of total knowledge, the introduction of the cosmic Lass as an abstraction into our dialogues (and lives) was not part of the plan. Or rather, once long ago we might perhaps have been glad to introduce such a variable.

— What does a lass want, eh? Petrovich?

He is silent, pondering, thinking, one can see how his noggin-goblin has backed into a corner, one can see it, for Petrovich's bald head shows through so you can even see the silhouette of his cornered noggin-goblin on his forehead. I look at him and in me there is no gloating, that, supposedly, I have caught the lad out, no triumph, no sincere curiosity, but simple fear, with a sprinkling of horror, for Petrovich and I, we knew that in the life of every philosopher there comes a moment when on a new page of his philosophical tractate, at the very top, in large letters, there appear two words: "On Women".

— Petrovich? So then, kirdyk to our philosophical system, you and me, curtains the moment we replace the lad with the lass in it. Eh?

Need it be said, Petrovich and I had never in our lives clapped eyes on a lass, let alone a cosmic one, and going daft over abstractions wasn't our sort of thing, for with them, with abstractions, one can only self-satisfy, while making of them a (quaint) device to sharpen the pleasure of said self-satisfaction, which leads (indisputably) to the complete degradation (self-destruction) of the personality and the transformation of the lad from a full-blooded human into a brain. Such activity is not even activity, but just so, an "act", an act of imagination, and in an act of imagination no collision with the world happens. The Lad wants, be it wanting or vodka or Istina. And why does the Lad want? I quote Petrovich (from days of old): "The Lad's wanting arises from a lack, from the absence in him of the object of desire, and this absence implies that a healthy desire (impulse) is always directed not into the Lad's interior, but outwards. The Lad is drawn to the world; the world is his drawer, and he the drawee. Logically one may conclude that, firstly, the knowing of the world is also a craving, a striving towards the satisfaction of desire, a striving towards finding oneself in the world, that is to say in others, that is to say in one's neighbour. (underlined)" Petrovich said to me then:

— Such is male eros, mate.

— At times it seems to me, Petrovich, or rather becomes obvious, that this eros of ours goes a deal too far.

— What now, you don't respect Plato?

Of course, Petrovich and I both respected Plato, in our youth we even named a dog Plato, though he could never hold a dialogue, he only barked and soiled himself. But that was a while back, Plato long since died, and now Petrovich and I will soon be fit only to bark and soil ourselves, the years are not what they were, and the intensive philosophical work takes its toll. The old clock is ticking, as they say, and the cosmic Lass keeps going further beyond the horizon, and no collision with the Lass, that very collision with the world, was in prospect.

It must be said that Petrovich and I are being sly when we say that “in our lives we've never clapped eyes on a lass”, but that slyness is philosophical, rhetorical, not with the aim to delude you, for each of us (and you) has in the plainest way seen a lass, that is to say his mam, even — to Petrovich's and my own shame — in her purest manifestation, but to see is one thing, you can see as much as you like, the act of observation is not greatly different in its nature from the act of imagination, and both these acts take place where? Right you are, right you are. In the noggin.

— But does that even count, Petrovich? Me, when I were nobbut a lad, the things I saw — I even sat at an audience with the Tsar, most like — but only what use is that? Fat chance there, I don't remember a bloody thing, Petrovich. Maybe you do remember, of course, but somehow, looking at you and taking into account our way of life, the sacrifices we

had to make in the name of philosophy, it seems to me you also remember nowt about the Lass.

Silent was Petrovich, thoughtly thoughts he thought, languidly gazed he into the horizon, imagined, no doubt, the cosmic Lass. Didn't drink even, and had not for a long time, so long that I too had stopped drinking, and in a sober state thinking doesn't come at all, only a din in the head and logical chains that shackle and hold the true thought.

— Some vodka, perhaps, eh? Petrovich? I've got hold of some mushrooms here.

Silent was Petrovich, thinking, probably, of his mam, for what else is there to think of? Our mams both had already left us, abandoned and gone from our lives so long ago that in our memory they now constituted no more than a cosmic Lass, more precisely speaking, all our memory in essence was imagination, and all of which the cosmic Lass in it consisted was a scanty image of mam: mam's enormous face above me (or Petrovich), a wreath upon it, mam's enormous airy body in the banya, mam's enormous hand leading me (or Petrovich) across the field to gather raspberries, and other fragments, more resembling a dream, an abstraction, than a sane memory fit for productive philosophical work.

— Petrovich, eh, Petrovich? Don't be silent. Want me to quote you?

I put a hand on his shoulder, stroke it, platonically, but he doesn't even react. I speak quietly, almost whisper:

— “The act of observation is an anti-philosophical act (in italics) unlike the act of living (in italics). In the course of conscious observation the Lad splits into body and observer, and in neither of these parts is there in fact any Lad. In the course of conscious observation the Lad loses control, hands control over to the noggin-goblin and, in a certain sense, dies (underlined twice). The tragedy of the Lad is that his whole life is a vain struggle between the state of observation (in which he is, as it were, dead) and the state of living (in which he is, as it is, maximally alive), and there are only two states in which the Lad is free from the observer and is in a state of pure true knowing, of maximal collision with the world, that is, being borne (dwelling in the womb) ending with being born (coming out of the womb) and—”

Then Petrovich up and hollers:

— Opa!

I thought that was it — lad’s a goner, heart’s seized up, spare a few quid for the coffin, please and thank you — but no! Nowt of the sort, for strong did our Petrovich prove, in both spirit and mind.

— Precisely! Go on, say it again!

— “Strong did our Petrovich prove, in both spirit and mind...”

— No, not that! The previous one!

— “There are only two states in which the Lad is free from the observer and is in a state of pure true knowing, of maximal collision with the

world, that is, being borne (dwelling in the womb) ending with being born (coming out of the womb) and—”

— Precisely! Why was it I said that?

— I, Petrovich, if I’m honest, don’t know. But glad beyond measure.

— But think about it!

— I, Petrovich, thought you had a screw loose, that is, lost your marbles, as they say, but here you are as you are, striking up the dialogue again...

— I have understood it all, mate.

— What have you understood, Petrovich?

— All of it, mate, all of it. I have, if you know the feeling, become replete.

Here he took the opened, but by some miracle still full, bottle and swilled down half of it in one gulp. I wanted to put a couple of clarifying questions to Petrovich, as in how come you’d become replete all of a sudden and why, but I did not put them, and to my unasked questions Petrovich naturally answered nowt, grunted summat, got up and went off along the road at a sporting pace. And me what? I grabbed the bottle and went after him, there and then on the move I pour from its throat into mine, stumbling, I almost fall, my legs are not what they were.

To the lasses' banya Petrovich and me had to crawl through an entire field of raspberry thickets. We crawl, we grunt, we groan with pain, our elbows burn with fire, our hands and mugs are all scratched up, all in raspberries and blood from head to foot. An hour we crawl, a second hour we crawl, a third, and still the raspberries just end not and not — never, it must be said, had Petrovich and I eaten so many raspberries (and shield bugs). One could, of course, have gone by the straight road, straight to the banya, but only just once in our youth out of foolishness we tried that, decided to commit an anti-philosophical (back then, for us cubs, with no “anti”) act of observation, we trudged to the little banya straight along this road, but it turned out to be swarming all over with all sorts of stray dogs, we barely got away, almost left there without our balls attached.

— Collision, — Petrovich muttered, — and so collisional it bursts from the inside.

And I'd gladly keep up the dialogue, but I've no words, nor breath to speak those words, lest I die.

— Petrovich! — I called. — Oi, Petrovich!

Come on, let's stop, like, take a breather, or else later we'll breathe our last, and Petrovich in reply hissed at me, glared, as in quiet you mate, kicked me lightly with his foot, platonically, and crawled on further ahead of me. And me what? And me, I'm quite ready to take a breather, here I'd perish among the raspberry thickets, I'd be fertilising them, so I couldn't think of owt better than to make use of instinct and grab

Petrovich by the leg, and him what? Hang an anchor on him for all he cares — he crawls on, our Petrovich is a go-anywhere vehicle.

— From inside, mate, from inside. Fair gives you shivers, it does.

Petrovich drags me along behind him like ballast, I've dug my claws into his leg through his trousers, soon I'd start tearing the skin, and he'd not care a jot, on he crawls, on he crawls, for strong did our Petrovich prove, not only in spirit and mind, but it seems in body, too.

— Fair drives me on, oh how it drives me on.

And me, Petrovich, it drives me on, drives me so hard that I don't even try to dodge the thorny branches any more but just live in the moment, catching berries with my torn lips straight off the bush, just so as to sweeten, so to speak, my present life, and sweeten it I would have, alas and alack, were it not for the shield bugs.

— Bear up, mate. Soon everything will come full circle, back to where it all began.

I, Petrovich, am ready, as ready as I have never been ready, life, Petrovich, is not dear to me.

— Owt to get a laugh out of it, mate. Bear up!

I, Petrovich, am ready to perform the most philosophical act there is.

— Bear up, bear up.

We're in hell, aren't we, I thought, hardly is this paradise, though who knows these days. Despite our philosophy of dialogue and collision with the world (that is, with human among others), its logic and Istina, I (like any good philosopher) sometimes put it (like any good philosophy) in doubt, and precisely that part of it where collision and the philosophical act occur, in particular when one human being does summat to another human being, and that one in turn does summat in reply, dialogue that is, but not only verbal, but also physical, for judge for yourselves, Petrovich asks me questions, Petrovich gives me clouts round the head, Petrovich kicks me, Petrovich here drags me after him, that is, the equation $I = \text{Petrovich}$ is not quite equivalent in this dialogue, rather $I \setminus < \text{Petrovich}$, and I am in essence an appendage of Petrovich, in this life a passive character, while Petrovich in this life is an active character and oho-ho what an active one, and so there is no equality of the sides in such a philosophy, here either the world submits to you, or you submit to the world, well, or else to Petrovich. By this logic, what comes of it? That even if it is analytically true that $I = \text{Petrovich}$, and both of us lads supposedly ought to have some kind of I, then in our philosophy there is none, for I without Petrovich am not I and Petrovich without me, even if I am his appendage, is also not Petrovich, and the world is not the world, and each of you, too, in essence, if you take us and examine us under a magnifying glass separately, in a vacuum, we're merely noggin-goblins. Had I said this to Petrovich, he would likely have replied:

— All true, mate, I see no contradictions. Had you this vacuum I, you

would have preferred — over life and collisions with the world — self-reflection, as in, what is it about my I that is not right; self-admiration, as in, what a splendid I I have; self-flagellation, as in, what a loathsome thing it is, absolute monstrosity; self-gratification, as in, so what, I'll bash the bishop if I please; self-will, as in, I want to bash the bishop I bash it, drink samogon if I please, torture kittens if I please, what's it to you lot; self-destruction, as in, I am mine and no one else's, if I want I'll croak, as in, what's it to you lot, and then after that it's kirdyk, farewell your honour.

And I would have replied to him:

— Why, that's almost Buddhism, Petrovich.

And he would have given me a customary clout on the back of the head, saying:

— I'll show you Buddhism!

I say this only because I don't remember all that happened next, but remember it with gaps, and only because in a state of spiritual flaccidity all sorts of things happen in and to the soul, all sorts of thoughts visit it, and after all whatever may come I love Petrovich in every sense, I have nobody but him, and I also know that he wouldn't torture kittens.

I remember that the raspberry field came to an end, but I don't remember how long it went on, I remember that we crawled out of it in nowt but shreds of clothing, almost without the top layer of skin, red as

boiled crayfish, by God like crayfish, as if we'd decided to crawl out of our own lake, and there we were, boiled ourselves, two old fools. What a collision that was! I remember that we're standing at the edge of the raspberry field, beside us a wooden village privy, all askew, a bit further beyond it — a heap of muck, ahead green grass, a ditch, and along it a stream runs straight into a little lake overgrown with willows, and next to it, next to the little lake, stands the log frame of a banya, black all over, smoke from its chimney, windows small, as if embrasures, and from it, from the banya, to the little lake runs a planked path ending with a pier.

Then out of the banya, as from a volcano's maw, all in steam a lass bobs up with some strange wreath on her head, there are birch leaves in it and orchid blooms entwined together and God knows what else. She giggles, arms flailing runs along the path to the little lake, on her tiptoes barely touching the boards, as if she flutters like an enormous balloon, and her two great balloons flutter too, going up-down, up-down, behind her only a long train of greenish hair, she reaches the pier — hop! — into the water, splashes go every which way, laughter. After her at once another lass, and another, a third, they run lashing each other with banya whisks, shout summat merry, little feet go patter-patter like scissors, you've no time to see owt, into the water — plop. They splash about, ducking under and bobbing up, whether nymphs or mermaids or kikimoras of some sort, in those daft wreaths of theirs.

Here I no longer even noticed how, bent double, Petrovich was dragging me across the stream towards the little banya, whether on his

shoulder or behind him, like a sack of potatoes, but Petrovich and I find ourselves already right on the banya's threshold, the door small as a child's, a light burning within. Naturally, we bow and tumble in.

The next thing I see — steam, all in steam, like in fog, scorching heat. Like a crayfish, I am, my state no other way to describe, they steam me alive, my mug, my hands, my legs stinging, I can't open my eyes — they've glued shut from raspberry and blood. I know that right there beside me is Petrovich too, muttering summat, crawling forward on his knees, and ahead — a Lass sits, extremely airy, enormous, bigger than the two of us, a Venus in beauty, no doubt, her long greenish hair slithering out from under the wreath, draped across her shoulders and her great balloons, her legs folded together, whether she sleeps, or meditates, or summat else — impossible to make out. Petrovich crawls towards her, mumbling summat under his nose and mumbling, mumbling and mumbling. I myself can say nowt, only gape and stare at Petrovich and the Lass, and what does she do? She up and wakes, sweeps her hair aside off her balloons, and looks at Petrovich, and he, not born yesterday, utters (one of his very first quotes, it must be said):

— Mam... mam... — and he crawls and crawls.

Beyond that I wouldn't even comment, and I'd end it there, remembering this I don't like, and my memory's long been not what it was, not to mention now, but it was all exactly so: his mam or not, I know not, definitely not mine, the Lass spreads her legs, and there's a surprise waiting, not the forbidden fruit beneath a bush of hair, but a

proper still life no mistake, a veritable bush in leaf and bloom with an enormous orchid at its centre, alive. The flower stirred, parted its petals, and snapped at Petrovich — swallowed him whole, as if he had never been. And me what? Strength returned to me anew, it went into my head, I took to my heels away from there, only I smashed my skull against the doorframe. And so I was left alone, all by myself, without Petrovich, whether self-sufficient or summat short of it. Need it be said that to that banya I went no more, never again.

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