

LITERARY CRITICISM OF HUMOR MAGAZINES IN ESTABLISHING OF THE LITERARY HIERARCHY

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ABSTRACT

The article uses the methods of literary studies, historical psychology, history and cultural studies to analyze the problem of formation of literary reputation and literary hierarchy on the material of the beginning of the 20th century. The aim of the article is to find out how public influenced the formation of literary hierarchy. Humor magazines are a specific source that reflects features of mass reader's reception of writers. It is a material which rarely reflects in other sources and requires a specific form of analysis. The article uses rare primary sources, introduced here for the first time. It also tries to show the connections between the M. Nordau's theory of degeneration and the attitude of humor magazines towards Russian modernists. Consciously if not, humor magazines found in literary production of decadents the same symptoms as Nordau did in his book. And the Nordau's idea of «critical police» proposes a convenient way of describing that attitude.

Keywords: *literary hierarchy, humor magazines, literary reputation, Russian literature, public, reader*

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of the writer's popularity in Russia in the early twentieth century is determined by many factors. These are an artistic level of his works and the influence of individual critics with certain literary tastes. But the writer's popularity may eventuate not from the quality of his works.

This is often fashion for a writer. So, Chekhov's glory was given "standing ovation" at his appearance [Skabichevsky 1905]. After Maxim Gorky, "ovations" in relation to the writers have become commonplace, though not long: Leonid Andreyev, Evgeny Chirikov, Konstantin Balmont, and so on, in turn, were all the fashion.

That is why early in the twentieth century there were critique attempts to discuss cultural problems of literary reputations, sometimes strange and unusual.

It should be noted first of all that literature reflects the fundamental features of collective concepts and collective fantasies, symbolically embodies the ideologies of the time. It is this basis on which the relationship of the writer with his readership is build [Laurensen D., Swingewood A. 1971; Berger 1977; Borenstein 1978; Ward 1974; Cavelti 1976 Schonert 1985; Jameson 1981; Krylov 2014; Safiullina 2012]. Critic L. E. Obolensky notes that the interest in this or that writer characterizes primarily the society "who are carried away by him", and by the features of the writer, we can judge about the mood, needs and spiritual state of society [Obolensky 1903].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To understand the literary reputations of the writers of the early twentieth century in Russia, which determined the literary hierarchy at the beginning of the formation of mass society in the country, it is not enough to refer only to the articles and books of professional criticism. What are the reasons of it?

In 1880s professional criticism of so-called “thick magazines” in Russian literature formed the reputation of writers. As noted by I. Kondakov, the distinguishing feature of literary criticism in Russia as a cultural phenomenon was its “struggle with the literature” - the struggle for influence on the minds and the moods of the reading public, for hegemony in culture and social life, the criticism advocated the unification, including art phenomena that were to reflect the life only that way but not otherwise [Kondakov 1997]. By the early twentieth century, the situation had changed dramatically - the Russian public at large to be given the “right to vote” contributed to the glory of a writer, all the more so that it was the beginning of the twentieth century - the time of active participation in the life of the mass of human culture [Khrenov 2002 ; Zorkaya 1976]. All this fundamentally changes the methodology for the study of literary process and range of materials used.

But where is this opinion fixed, where could it be preserved?

For example, in the Russian humor magazines «Шут» / “Shut” (Jester), «Будильник» / “Budilnik” (Alarm Clock), «Развлечение» / “Razvlecheniye” (Entertainment), «Оса» / “Osa” (Wasp) and others, humor is focused on mass tastes, “intellectual proletarians” - officials, journalists, doctors, high-school teachers. These publications can give a representative and interesting picture of tastes of public at large.

The results of continuous examination of annual sets of these publications show that literary and would-be literary life had become a part of everyday life by the turn of the twentieth century. Laughter requires instant recognition, the literature at the beginning of the twentieth century is known so that there is no need to explain, anticipating a comic verse, what are “In My Dreams” or “Vanyushin’s Children” - everyone knows that these are the plays by Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and Sergey Naidenov.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In their feuilletons comic publications referred to the names that firmly entrenched in the literary hierarchy. The characters of parodies and satirical articles appeared to be “canonized” literary men having received the status of classic during their lifetime. Such writer was Lev Tolstoy.

Tolstoy in the last decades of his life was perceived by the public not only as a writer but as a teacher of life with his moral preaching who put erring humanity on the right track. And hence the focus of the magazine humouristics proved to be not so much the features of his poetics as the most expressive aspects of Tolstoy's teachings:

“ - And tell me, don't you know what Lev Tolstoy's opinion about women ... - Do you know that he was against marriage! - I'm not talking about marriage, but about women in general... For example, concerning the statues and paintings depicting the bathers ... - Yes, yes! By the way, this is a very interesting question! The interviewers have missed this and do not ask his opinion on this subject! - I think that he cannot give a negative answer on this point! - Do you believe that he does not mind the image of bathers? On what grounds? - For goodness' sake, he is for the “simplification”, and only what can be simpler than the bather's costume! - However, he himself does not wear a bathing suit! - So it could be for a different reason: he is an old man and he is simply cold ...” [Oskolki (Fragments) 1910 №25]..

The objects of parody are three aspects of Tolstoy's teachings, that determine the perception by mass public of the man of wisdom from Yasnaya Polyana: 1) critical attitude to marriage reflected in the story

“The Kreutzer Sonata”; 2) specific understanding by Tolstoy of the tasks of art, most fully expressed in his treatise “What is Art?”, in particular, rejection of the demonstration of the naked female body, 3) Tolstoy’s preaching of simplification, in a lower light literary narration towards walking in “bathing look”.

Another characteristic feature of Tolstoy's teachings which could not be overlooked by humouristics was vegetarianism: “Striking inventions begin: one of the characters of stories by Gorky, that is, a tramp, has invented ... a vegetarian coat. The vegetarian coat is made not from “meat”, but almost from paper. It is said that it, nevertheless, keeps warm. Having learned about the invention, the Moscow reporters immediately ran to Lev Tolstoy to get his opinion of the vegetarian sheepskin coat. Of course, a great writer praised the vegetarian coat out of his kindness!” [Oskolki (Fragments) 1901 № 36]..

These examples illustrate the change in perceiving Tolstoy, happened in the minds of the general reading public. Tolstoy-the teacher of life has replaced Tolstoy-the writer once and for all. The enormous authority that Tolstoy had is the authority of a public figure having the necessary influence in the eyes of the public so that his point of view on all issues became the subject of the public’s keen interest. It is no coincidence that in the two feuilletons there precisely Tolstoy’s view appears to be in the spotlight. It is appropriate to recall also the letters sent in a stream to Yasnaya Polyana, with requests to represent his attitude to the most diverse topics or give advice in a difficult life situation.

Anton Chekhov was the second after Tolstoy in public conscience. In early 1900s, the adoration of Chekhov in Russia can be compared only with the attitude to Pushkin. Neither Tolstoy nor Gorky caused such adoration.

Chekhov’s admirers from Yalta who were called “antonovkas” (a play on words - a word is derived from the name of the writer Anton and at the same time it indicates a sort of apple) became not less well-known than Chekhov himself: “They are found in the city of Yalta and engaged in “adoring” the author of “Three sisters” Chekhov. In Yalta, where A. P. Chekhov lives, an army of unbearably hot admirers of his talent called there by “Antonovka” has been formed. They are chasing along the seafront of Yalta after the writer, studying his suit, walk, trying anything to attract his attention, etc. - In short, make a number of absurdities. <...> Trying to shake off somehow, Chekhov has given them his unnecessary jacket backed with fur, and the admirers are wearing it now put on the pole with ribbons around the city, performing light dances around the jacket ...” [Strekoza (Dragonfly) 1902].

That humouristics has defined the characteristic features of Chekhov's poetics - long before serious criticism or study of literature did it. As noted by A. P. Chudakov, the impersonators noted odd and “unnecessary” details, Chekhov’s system of leitmotifs, pauses (which continue “five minutes and a half”), sounds, independent life of the material world, and others. [Chudakov 1999].

Chekhov's prose was recognizable as well. As the writer E. Petrov notes: “It is very easy to parody Chekhov. One can simply dictate stories “in imitation of Chekhov’s” (a story a day) to a stenographer. And the horror is that they will be similar to the original for all their impenetrable mediocrity, and they can be printed” [Petrov 1939]. Many Chekhov's devices were parodies by A. Izmailov: “I threw my hat on the balcony and walked to the arbor. She was standing by the pillar, tall, pale in the moonlight, with a austere, beautiful face. “It is wet after the rain”, - she said distractedly, with a shake in her voice, and I have realized that she was saying: “I love you”. Then I silently hugged her and began longingly kissing her moist lips, hands, eyes. She told me she had loved me for a long time that I was the best in the world, talented, strong, handsome, and there were uninteresting dull characters without color around, and her husband was the waiter, and she asked me to take her with me” [Izmailov 2002]. . As noted by I. Sukhikh, making a parody of the fact that “the main instrument of the emotional impact proves to be the structure of the speech – “rhythm system of phrases, famous triple repetitions that create a singsong-

melancholic melody of Chekhov's prose, the situation smacks of memories, always attaching a sad, nostalgic tinge to the story: there are no winners in the dispute over time" [Sukhikh 2007].

Against this background of the recognized writers (Tolstoy, Chekhov) there appeared strange young people – the modernists. And the readers had to understand how to treat them.

In 1890s, the modernists are often characters of legends to drawings, sketches, humorous poems. They ridiculed the image of not only the authors-symbolists, but wider - the image of a decadent as a person in general whose appearance, behavior are showed off from the common representation. The fact that the decadents ended up on the pages of comic magazines indicates that by the early 20th century a decadent image had been formed in the minds of Russian society. And if the literary production actually of Russian modernists, with some exceptions, remained the property of the small number of connoisseurs, the figure of the decadent as a strange man who writes incomprehensible (and therefore funny) texts deeply entrenched in the minds of the reading public.

This new cultural phenomenon demanded to be explained. And mass consciousness, a sensitive barometer of which was a humorous magazine, tried to interpret "strangeness" and "ambiguity" of the modernist poetry by desire for deliberate originality: "- Women's eyes, legs, arms, lips were sung of. I will sing of what no one have sung so far in a woman! <...> I will sing of women's nostril. And not even just the nostril - green nostril! - Why green?! - This is more original ..." [Oskolki 1900 № 36]. However, there were also more prosaic explanations, the phenomenon of decadence was often interpreted by humor magazines as an expression of mental affection and weakness of mind. The authors of satirical articles, intentionally or otherwise, succeeded here Max Nordau, who saw similar symptoms in the "new art", and whose book "Degenerating" had a great influence at the turn of the century. Avryl Pyman wrote: «Nordau defined the subject of his book <...> as a pathological condition not inconsistent with talent, or even genius. He considered its appearance in art in the second half of the nineteenth century as symptomatic of a social disease which in France (and afterwards in all other civilized countries) had been labeled "fin-de-siècle", but which might be more justly termed "fin-de-race", or even "fin-de-classe". The symptoms of "degeneracy" Nordau defined as unhealthy nervousity, moral idiocy, "cyclic" states of depression and exaltation, mysticism, childishness, atavism, an intellect so enfeebled as no longer to be capable of thinking in terms of cause and effect, and extreme subjectivity, sometimes passing into diagnosable egomania» [Pyman 1994].

From this point of view Russian society were not immune against that new disease. And the symptoms similar to those marked by Nordau, were found by the authors of Russian humorous press, to have committed themselves to the role of "critical police" challenging unhealthy phenomena by their being ridiculed. So, many authors alert against the dangers that lie in wait for the public not ready for clash of artistic practice of modernists. It was necessary to begin the struggle with making a diagnosis. And we read in the feuilleton "Writers' Diseases": "Occlusion of cerebral arteries. This disease state affects all decadents of literature" [Oskolki 1900 № 36]. Another diagnose is made in feuilleton by Grack with the characteristic title "The Experienced or the Story of a Psychopath. Psychopathic Play in 5 Acts", the character's name of which is Barbara Dekadentovna [Oskolki 1901 №6]. In the "Announcements", decadent became like harmful insects, being obviously "the symbolic epidemic" carriers: "The liquid to eliminate the decadents, symbolists and impressionists. The price per vial is 50 k." [Oskolki 1910 № 58 (№ 1516)].

The reviews on works by modernists were placed in humor magazines as well. The humorous review on Andrew White's novel "Silver Dove" says that the character of the novel first "was in love with the lovely, nice, interesting and intelligent young lady Katya, but then he deserted her and had intimacy with dirty and ugly baggage Matrona". The reviewer advances the following suggestion: "The character of the novel could not find satisfaction in love to a beauty because a beauty was far from nature, because she

had too much artificial grace. Much better <...> is the case if to fall in love with speckled and snub – nosed Matrona, with her underarms, which reeked of “direct” sweat”. One calls Oscar Wilde to be Bely’s predecessor, who also wanted to “see beauty, not where it is universally recognized, but where personal ego sees it” [Oskolki (Fragments)1910 № 34 (№ 1542)].

SUMMARY

So, comic press was a mirror that reflected the tastes and moods of the general reading public. Without claiming, in contrast to the professional critics, to be thoroughly analyzed, it recorded the most recognizable features of a variety of cultural phenomena of early twentieth century. All this makes reference to the production of humor magazines being prerequisite for the in-depth examination of the readers' preferences and a place of the writer in the literary hierarchy.

The authors and readers of comic magazines reflected on what was inherent in “teachers of literature”, i.e., Lev Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov, pinpointing the “weaknesses” of their literary personality and poetics. The reader of the early twentieth century had to embed unusual representatives of modernist trends into the literary hierarchy, to work out new evaluation criteria. Then what are the recognizable features of the image of a decadent and how can they be appreciated against the background of those who have been recognized as “classics” during their lifetime? Note: 1) The reference to “the habit of all authors-decadent” lies in the fact that they do not condescended to the interpretation for the astonished reader of all “strangenesses” contained in their works, often due to the fact that they themselves could not explain them; 2) reproaches upon decadents-writers who had not been able to do without “poring over” unsolved mystery, who went on the way of other writers that filled their works with mysteries and riddles; 3) mysticism opposed to the generally accepted aesthetic norms 4) references to the name of Oscar Wilde who had a reputation of a radical aesthetic provocateur in the general public, as one of the sources of influence on Russian decadents.

CONCLUSION

Humorous publications were a kind of “critical police” in literature. On the whole, the general reader’s point of view of the problem of the literary hierarchies presented in humor publications, can be considered as the position of “common sense”, having its own restrictions and advantages, but being extremely important for the study of the literary process, so long as it shows how divergent an officially accepted history of literature (in which Tolstoy, Chekhov and modernists are equally important in the hierarchy of the writers of early twentieth century) and reading history of literature to have clearly built a hierarchy are: Tolstoy, then Chekhov and modernists are excluded from the literary process at all.

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