

## L. TOLSTOY AND A. CHEKHOV IN THE RECEPTION OF THE READER OF THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY: RECEPTION OF LITERATURE IN THE ASPECT OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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### ABSTRACT

The article devoted to the relations between the writer and his audience. To study these relations we use the conception of «the literary reputation». It is the notion about any writer and his place in literary hierarchy settled in the culture's consciousness and somehow influencing writer's reception by following generations. The article uses the methods of the sociology of literature by expanding the circle of sources. In our article we pay special attention to the public, not only to professional literary critics. It is necessary to identify the factors which influenced the reader's attitude. These factors are the critics and their impact, memoirs of the contemporaries, articles of popular publicists. The object of our article is the literary reputation of A. Chekhov and L. Tolstoy. We attempt to trace the development of Chekhov's literary reputation from the beginning of his writer's career to his death. We also compare his literary reputation with Tolstoy's and Gorky's. Using the methods of social psychology we show the distribution of social functions among these three writers in the minds of the Russian public. These roles are 1) the teacher and ideologist, 2) the friend, who is «one of us» and 3) the prophet, an outstanding personality

**Keywords:** *Russian literature, the literary reputation, sociology of literature, Anton Chekhov, Leo Tolstoy*

### INTRODUCTION

This study deals with the sociology of literature. All the works in the sociology of literature which regarded literature as adequate or inadequate mirror of an era are obsolete nowadays. This particular approach made some literary scholars to treat the sociology of literature negatively. Writer's text is not related with it's era mechanically. It is not narration about writer's contemporaneity where text's relation to reality appears – author often unconsciously reflects fundamental features of collective imagination and collective fantasies. Writer searches the relation between everyday's life experience of contemporary man and the language. This is why, some scholars say, the great authors are more able to represent the life of their contemporaries than the second-rate writers. We must keep in mind that literary work along with author's intentions represents the values of it's time. It is necessary to reveal the kind of these values, their representation in the work of literature, «the way of feeling». And it must be described in terms and notions of the studied period, where all these concepts and the ways of feeling were formed. This («speaking of values») is the foundation of all relations between the author and his audience: in every period of time attitude towards writer was determined by conjunction or conflict of actual values (Gudkov, Dubin, Strada, 1998).

### THE LITERARY REPUTATION

To characterize the relations between writer and society we use the conception of «the literary reputation», initially used by I. Rozanov in the 1920's. He suggested that along with the history and the theory of literature must be the history and the theory of the literary reputations. The theory studies the factors of literary success, classification and terminology, the history deals with facts in their historical sequence and with the sociological causes of these facts. He pointed out some formation patterns of the writer's literary reputation – for example «the rhythms of an epoch» in society's attraction for particular literary phenomenon (Rozanov, 1995). A. Reitblat defines the literary reputation as «conception of the writer and his works, which developed in the frameworks of literature's system and connects the major part of it's members (critics, writers, publishers, booksellers, teachers, readers). The literary reputation consists the characteristic and evaluation of writer's literary work and his literary and social behavior <...> existence of the literary reputations is necessary for structuring of the literature's system, for maintenance of the inner-literature's hierarchy and for providing of it's functioning and dynamics» (Reitblat, 2001). I.E. Gitovich mentioned that «real presence of a writer in a cultural space of another time, which begins after his death, is connected with the phenomenon of the literary reputation. Although this conception is not settled yet as an independent construct, some literary scholars are willingly using it. <...> The literary reputation thus is notion about any writer and his place in literary hierarchy settled in the culture's consciousness and somehow influencing writer's reception by following generations. It is not staying invariable, from the history of literature we know well that sometimes reputation changes so abruptly and therefore expels some names from active culture's vocabulary» (Gitovich, 2005).

As a primary source we use literary criticism. And often it is the only source we have at hand because critical responses are most convenient for analysis – most of them can be easily detected by viewing the main literary magazines and leading newspapers. But this is the only one of the possible sources. To study the relations between the writer and Russian society we must significantly expand the circle of sources. In short, we must study the public, not only professional literary critics. The necessity of studying of the public of the twentieth century has been featured in works of N.M Zorkaya on the material of popular culture, in the sociology of literature studies of L.D. Gudkov, B.V. Dubin, V. Strada, A.I. Reitblat, G. G. Gadamer, S.I Kormilov, V.E. Halizev, L.V. Chernets, M.N. Epstein, H. Jauss and others. In the studies devoted to the relations between the classic literature and popular fiction and the history of reading in Russia it is the works of V.M Markovich, V.V. Prozorov, Y.M. Lotman, M.A. Chernyak.

## METHODOLOGY

The basic principles of such study should be the following points.

First of all. At the foundation of the sociology of literature lies the idea that «the studying of an artistic life makes inevitable the shift to the studying of social and cultural structures of society and to the specific worldview of its separate layers, because it is the fundamental factors of various patterns of people's attitude to art» (Zhitkov, Sokolov, 2005). Careful sociocultural and sociopsychological studying of the epoch is necessary for understanding of the writer's reputation.

Personal opinion of the individual member of the public is determined by many factors: personal friendly or unfriendly relations, literary competition, political views, aesthetic differences, etc. This is a different level but equally important: the reason for the negative theater review can be the failure of one's own play on the same topic, but these factors (usually hidden from the public) have to be taken into account, since the review could receive a response. However, most of the private opinions still feel the effects of their time, the judgment of many people is a reflection of the general trend, and this trend is the object of our interest .

Of course «a work of art is incapable of infinite expansion and the so-called enrichment of it's immanent sense, but it is capable of more: to continuously generate new meanings beside itself, to provoking the

emergence of new artistic concepts of reality, it is no less powerful stimulus to creativity than reality» (Esin, 1991). But the reader's personal experience might be very far from the writer's, the reader may impose on a text a completely random interpretation. A distinctive feature of a contemporary reader is the similarity of his psychological and emotional experience and the experience of the writer, through this due reader understands writer's hints and hidden signals, all that the reader from another time is not able to understand. Reader of subsequent periods, having lost a vital connection with the writer's epoch begins to perceive the text as an occasion to show himself to the world, and thus can forcibly impose on text any voluntary meanings .

It is necessary to identify the factors which influenced the reader's attitude. These factors are the critics and their impact, memoirs of the contemporaries, articles of popular publicists i.e. most respected readers, who actualized according to the needs of the time the content of the writer's work. It is also presence or absence of a suitable group of readers, the appearance of controversial materials, historical events etc. Often the literary reputation of the writer is influenced by random factors .

The next important thing is the correlation between such concepts as a writer as the specific biographical person, a writer as the creator of the artistic world and an image of the writer in the public consciousness. On the one hand, sympathizers of postmodern ideas about «the death of the author» call to abandon the whole notion of the author as a specific biographical identity. On the other hand, the historian of literature can not agree with that, because in practice he constantly faces the fact that reader's representation of any writer as a specific creative personality objectively affects the historical and literary process. Sometimes the image of a writer forms in the minds of readers regardless of the writer, a writer often becomes a slave of his image, which he unsuccessfully tries to alter. Formation of an image is influenced by reader's «horizon of expectation» - readiness or unreadiness of the public to something new, the reader's interest in literature or in the personality of its creator. Sometimes one or another interpretation begins to exist as a fragment of reality, they are no longer perceived as a personal opinion of the particular individual .

And finally, the literary reputation it is always a process, not something static and fixed: «The influence of long-term impact of the literary work on the reader is largely determined by the interaction of objective and subjective aspects of its content. The gap between the content of the classical works, which has great potential of perception, and the author's concept is inevitable. And it grows because the literary work faces new historical contexts of perception, and in the light of them changes the pattern of understanding, reflected in the mirror of art» (Chernets, 1991). Sometimes conflicting and contradictory interpretations (although not contrary to the meaning of the work itself, B. Gasparov named it the bottomless «funnel» which withdraws the different layers of cultural memory (Gasparov, 1995)) eventually form a certain integer.

## **HOW TO PUT THE WRITER IN THE LITERARY HIERARCHY ?**

Initially critics (and Chekhov himself) compared him with his contemporaries: Garshin, Shheglov-Leontiev and others. Then began a comparison with Turgenev («In the twilight» with «A Sportsman's Sketches»), Dostoevsky, Gogol, Goncharov, etc. Even in comparison with the great authors Chekhov was perceived as a «real talent», though not very deep .

In 1895 S. Andreevsky mentioned that Chekhov is seen as «generally recognized prince of our great writers» (Andreevsky, 1895). V. Burenin replied: «If under great writers understand Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, I think, promising the throne of the kings of our native literature to Chekhov is a little risky» (Burenin, 1895). In 1901 P. Pertsov replied to Andreevsky: «Although contemporaries tend to reduce the contemporaneity <...>, we already see that we don't have another Chekhov besides Chekhov. Admirers of Gorky loved him for the qualities which have nothing to do with art » (Pertsov, 1901).

By the early 1900s we may identify three main figures of the literary life: except Chekhov it is Tolstoy, who's reputation of a great artist and thinker, a teacher of life was already indisputable, and Gorky, who burst in literature like a meteor. Numerous books and articles were named like «Chekhov and Gorky», «Gorky and Leo Tolstoy», «Chekhov and Tolstoy». Among the authors of these articles were N. Mikhaylovsky, D. Merezhkovsky, A. Suvorin, V. Burenin, D. Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky and others. N.K. Mikhailovsky in 1902 pointed out that Chekhov and Gorky are perceived as a pair, that they are «at the top of modern literature»: they explain each other by dramatically different traits, but still have something in common (Mikhaylovsky, 1902). The caricature in honor of the 75th anniversary of Tolstoy depicts a «giant among talents», holding in his arms a little figures of L. Andreev, M. Gorky, I. Potapenko, D. Mamin-Sibiriyak and others. But the tallest of them is Chekhov, he reaches up to Tolstoy's armpits, while the rest only to the waist (Apostolov, 1928).

Since almost all of the representatives of the social and literary trends were in agreement that Russia and intelligentsia are «sick», the nation was in need of cultural heroes, who could show the way to the better future. In the minds of readers at the turn of the century Tolstoy, Chekhov and Gorky distributed among each other particular functions. According to the social psychology, a charismatic model of the outstanding figure associated in the public consciousness with one of three abstract images that do not depend on his or her specific personal qualities: 1. The image of the «hero», the teacher, the ideologist, who voices bold ideas, opposes generally accepted trends, speaks on behalf of the society: «We must», «We want to»; 2. The image of the «anti-hero», i.e. of a friend, who is «one of us»; 3. The image of the prophet, an outstanding personality (Bogomolov, 1991). Tolstoy took the place of the hero-ideologist. Crowds of people paid homage to him by coming to Yasnaya Polyana, his every word was regarded as indisputable. Chekhov became a «writer-friend». Gorky took the role of outstanding personality – he, «himself a tramp» came to the cultural life of Russia from the lower classes .

As for Tolstoy, in 1890s and 1900s his authority seemed unshakable, though it stood on the inertia of perception of Tolstoy as artist and on his prophetic manner of communication with the audience (visitors Yasnaya Polyana and with readers of his treatises). The scale of his personality and his ways of self-presentation led to the fact that the essence of his doctrine, very far from the majority of the Russian intelligentsia, was almost unnoticed.

For the generation of the 1890's Chekhov's worldview was very close and familiar. A. Amfiteatrov recalled: «With all my deep respect for the personality of L.N. Tolstoy, with enthusiastic reverence for his spontaneous genius and great achievements in the field of literature and Russian cultural consciousness, I must frankly say that I belong to one of those «eighties», in whose life and progress Tolstoy went almost without a trace, with much less, for example, influence than Dostoevsky, Saltykov, Uspensky and even Chekhov. I put “even” before Chekhov's name not to diminish the size of his talent <...> but because intelligentsia has less confidence and subordination of ideas to it's contemporaries and peers their people than to the apostles and teachers from previous generations. But Chekhov was for me not only a contemporary but the fellow of the first years of my literary career. Really, only the death of Chekhov revealed to me, as to many of our generation, the extent to which he was dear to us and to what extent we, being unaware of themselves, were merged with him by unity of materialistic worldview – who ин conscience, who by instinct, who by discipleship. Of all the writers, scientists, and the bright intellectuals, whom I had to have known in my life, I can not remember the mind, less mysterious, less needy in religion, more convinced in the «historical materialism» than the late Anton Chekhov. <...> His worldview was ours. <...> Tolstoy's religious propaganda was very loud and noisy, but did not bring, in it's positive part, great results, and haven't been taken up by the masses» (Amfiteatrov, 1908).

As to the comparison of Chekhov and Gorky, L.E. Obolensky mentioned that Gorky appeared in Russian literature at the time of silence, when it was late at night and except Tolstoy, who «was busy with matters of personal and sexual morality», and Chekhov, «the singer of the night and dull melancholy», there were no fresh voices. «The rest of the fiction was some sleepy murmurs, chewing the old themes, types, images and ideas». Chekhov and his despair at depicting the images of Russian life is an impulse, according Obolensky, for the self-consciousness of Russian society, «at this point his role as a writer, his particular historical significance, as it seems to me, was over». And then came a fresh powerful talent with the new images. That is why «Chekhov – is the opposite pole of Gorky». Obolensky points out that the ideals of Gorky, in fact, were not interested and clear for the public, especially when the majority of average people, mutilated by «modern civilization and checkbook», has no idea about any ideals. Wide and solid ideal would have been too abstract for the «sleepy crowd» to follow, the average reader needs average ideals, which can be realized now – and Gorky offered such ideals (Obolensky, 1903). His ideal is a riot of strong men for the sake of the freedom, i.e. Gorky drove Chekhov's utopian dreams to a vigorous activity. By the way, social psychology also indicates that the most successful leaders are those who proposing the prospects for the future which is not far enough to seem unworkable or close enough to seem too prosaic .

## CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the twentieth century Russian symbolists tried to fill the same cultural niche of an «outstanding personality». But their «zhiznetvorchestvo» («the creation of life») in comparison to the real life of Gorky was too far-fetched. As for their mystical prophecies, they were too vague for the common reader to give them preference. Once Gorky in the middle of the 1900s departed from the theme of the tramps, he began to losing his popularity.

In that constant dispute with a «preacher» and a «hero», in the society's shifting among the writers of three types, Chekhov's literary reputation was formed .

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