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Archetype Grail In M. Yelizarov's Novel "Librarian"

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The article is devoted to identification of an archetypic basis of the novel of M. Yelizarov "Librarian". She contacts the medieval myth about Holy Grail. Numerous similarities between W. von Eschenbach's novel "Parzival" and the novel of the modern Russian writer are found. The conducted observations have helped to identify semantic functions of the ancient layer in the contemporary narrative. Comparing the books by D. Gromov (a Soviet writer) with the Grail, the modern novelist deconstructs the Soviet myth about the literature's salutariness, insisting on inhuman pathos of the biblio-idea of the Soviet culture. The drawn conclusions allow clarifying the disputes on Yelizarov's novel and also to raise an ideological question of the literature's and reading's sacralization – both in the Soviet period and in the present time. In the latter, this tendency is found in the popular literature telling us about the reader and also about advantage of reading in a sci-journalistic discourse. The explanation of this tendency is suggested as well.

Keywords: M. Yelizarov, "Librarian", W. von Eschenbach, Parzival, the Grail archetype, the myth about literature's salutariness, the Soviet aesthetics.

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Michael Yelizarov's "Librarian" (2007) that in 2008 was awarded "Russian Booker" has provoked the most controversial reaction in the critics. Its counter-sides create certain contrast in the novel's interpretations: on the one hand – as representation of a strong nostalgia for the socialist realism aesthetics, on the other – as an anti-utopia that de-sacralizes cultural and artistic values of the Soviet Period (Volodikhin, 2009; Zhironkina, 2009; Latynina, 2009; Nechaev, 2011; Khanov, 2015). This article hypothesizes that "Librarian" is deeply based on the medieval

mythology of the Holy Grail and its identification allows proposing a well-defined conceptual manifestation underlying a certain archetypal core shown in the novel.

As it is known, the Grail myth finds its most complete artistic expression in W. von Eschenbach's "Parzival". It bears reminding that Parzival is an Arthurian Knight, who by his gestures, faith and humility was given an honor to become a guardian of the Grail. Coincidences of the stories of Eschenbach's and M. Yelizarov's characters are amazing, assuming that the

novel lacks any explicit or implicit references to "Parzival" and, thus, makes it possible to hypothesize that the medieval plot forms the archetypical ground where then the 21st century novel has been cultivated. This study is aimed at showing up semantic functions of this ancient artistic layer in the contemporary narrative. We are concerned with conversing of the plot typical for the Medieval Europe that has been actualized in numerous works (in French, German and English literatures of the 12th-14th centuries) under the contemporary Russian literature.

At first, let's define some general points. Both novels are focused on the character who, in turn, is dedicated to perform his noble mission: Parzival is destined to guard the Grail that brings immortality to its server and prosperity and well-being to his kingdom; Alexei Vyazintsev, a character of Yelizarov's novel, is meant to be a "librarian" – a keeper for sacral books which, being read, guarantee the Soviet Union's saving and immortality for the main character as well.

The character's destiny in both novels states the sacral subject per se: in Eschenbach's work the guardian's name – Parzival – comes out on the Graal's stone in the form occasionally emerging signs; in Yelizarov's novel the protagonist's name is mentioned in "Holy Heptateuch" (the collected edition of Dmitry Gromov) which poses it into the head of a heroine who, in turn, by requesting books makes him serve.

After discovering their destiny, for both characters it takes some time to obey it: Parzival raves about those sufferings caused by the quest for the Grail and is willing to give up his sublime mission; Alexei Vyazintsev looks forward to escape from Gromov's fans surveillance.

Both protagonists are quite long in being initiated: having got into the Grail's castle, Parzival, following false beliefs about the knight's proper behavior, fails to ask Amfortas a sympathetic question for what he is exiled,

cursed and forced to expiate his guilt in knight exploits.

Alexei Vyazintsev also resists his duties at first. Indeed, although in the case with Parzival this resistance is explained by his naivete, with Vyazintsev – by his fear and unwillingness to accept responsibilities. In particular, first time he fails to read one of the books following the requirements of its magic effect (carefulness and continuity). Still, similarly to Parzival, having handle his guilty consciousness in the face of those who wait for his missionary, the character finally "passes his exams to become a librarian", though at his second attempt.

By holding their positions, both characters inherit from their relatives: Alexei becomes a librarian after his uncle, a head of magic books' readers, faces his heroic death; Parzival, being the Grail's guardian, succeeds Amfortas, a relative of his – uncle, also.

There is another motive which ties these stories: in both cases the character's parents impede his life choices. Parzival's mother, Herzeleide the Queen, hides her son's knight mission fearing that he will die in battles as his father. In order to avoid the ceremony of Round Table Knighting she dresses him as a fool and in this state he comes to Arthur's royal household. Alexei Vyazintsev's parents also interfere with his professional choice enforcing him to get a "stable profession". As the result, he cannot achieve his professional dreams: he was meant to be a drama stage director, but graduates from the institute as a director for mass performances, an entertainer, literally, – a graduated fool. Thus, both characters undergo one and the same route: fool – knight – guardian for the holy relic and someone who assures its magic influence on that cultural locus to which the character belongs to (for Parzival – it is Christianity, while for Vyazintsev – the Soviet Russia).

Finally, the most important place in both novels is given to the faith. As for Eschenbach, Parzival's discovering of the faith in God means a primary term to perform his duty. The faith is also linked to Vyazintsev's success: "I'll give the God back to you", Margarita Tikhonovna, a Gromov's evangelist, says to Vyazintsev. The mere existence of these books she considers as a proof of God. Similarly, the Grail is also interpreted in the Christian mythology as an attribute of the divine presence. In Eschenbach's he constantly eats wafers given by a snow-white pigeon from the Heavens (which symbolizes the Holy Spirit).

Thus, Parzival's and Alexei Vyazintsev's destinies stay together. Such parallelism is followed seemingly, even in minor aspects of their stories that give an opportunity to achieve the level of ontological relationships, among which one has already been explained: Vyazintsev's image is based on the Parzival archetype – the Savior. Further, it is necessary to identify other analogies:

- Groom's "Holy Heptastich" resembles the Grail;
- perishing Soviet country – the kingdom of Amphora's, a Fisher-King, who waits for his curing;
- the libraries fighting with each other for Groom's books – the Round Table Knights questing for the Grail¹;
- these libraries as such bring the image of the Grail Brotherhood, the members of which sacrifice for the sake of the Holy Relic their lives, but not their memories on the fallen mates.
- the boarding house occupied by old ladies supporting their lives with the help of Gromov's books relies on the image of Munsalvaesche, a castle, where Amfortas remains alive by looking at the Grail hoping for a complete curing after the Grail's Messiah comes. Also these old ladies are waiting for Vyazintsev-the-Messiah who can

give an everlasting life. Moreover, the old ladies manage to turn that seized boarding house into an anarchy castle, what again reminds about Munsalvaesche – an invisible castle which is able to fade from the view of uninitiated characters, but, at the same time, provides the common good. Having caught Vyazintsev, the boarding house assumes responsibilities for providing an eternal defense for the Soviet Union – "from the enemies – visible and invisible".

Thus, the in-depth symbolic concept of "Librarian" is clearly based on the Grail mythology. If so, why such a conventional for the Medieval European literature plot has now got its reincarnation² in M. Yelizarov's novel and what hermeneutic opportunities are discovered by this archetypical basis?

It seems obviously, that the Grail implication shapes the mythology which was typical for the socialistic culture. This is a myth about such life-giving and educating power of reading: a myth which suggests literature being an ideological fundament, a basis for the national identity and unity, while book – a security tool. By making the book equal to the Grail, Yelizarov's novel reconstructs a bibliophilic³ idea of the Soviet Era. Yet, this substantive aspect of the novel can be found even beyond the Grail's reconstruction. It has already been noted by the critics. Still, identifying the Grail myth on the in-depth levels of narration in "Librarian" one shines a light on the fact that is almost hardly seen if not reconstructed: revelation of inviability, fabulousness and abstractedness of this bibliophilic ideology. It means that Yelizarov by comparing the Grail and book not only ironically constructs the myth about literature's salutariness, but de-constructs this myth, equally diminishing this parallel, or, showing its phantom, indeed.

Anyway, Gromov's books in Yelizarov's novel perform differently rather than the Holy Grail in the Medieval mythology. The

Grail's main function is to provide life, to stand against the death and to win over it. Not without reasons the popular culture of the 20th century matches the Grail with a begetting womb of Mary Magdalene, a mother of Jesus's descendants ("The DaVinci Code" by D. Brown), i.e. it has been recognized as a symbol of eternal birth and reincarnation. Such detail is more than a coincidence: in this very context the Grail's image exists in the Medieval French literature – as something that ensures a permanent lifecycle, an everlasting change of its guardians and thus undertaking an interminable renewal and a circular salvation. As against to circular time in the Grail myth, in Yelizarov's novel time is apocalyptic – in the end it just imitates this circle. On the one hand, the protagonist finally says that he will stay forever: measuring the time through a consistent, thorough and permanent reading, he will always guard his Motherland. Still, on the other hand, Vyazintsev's immortality reminds too much of an everlasting death, and the underground batcher where he serves to the Motherland is nothing other than his grave. The time here is being pressed and shortened of any dynamics. Regarding this, let's consider one of the last passages in this novel: the character imagine the future for his Motherland basically describing the Soviet present: *"Медленный грузовик с разболтанным кузовом мазнул по воздуху теплой бензиновой гарью. За дальней насыпью постучал стальными подошвами товарняк. Ветер поднял за чубы высокие травы. Это еще не произошло, но так будет"* (Yelizarov, 2008: 444).

On the backdrop of the Grail, the books in Yelizarov's novel do not ensure life, but rather take it away. There is no wonder why the idea of books referring to Vyazintsev is linked to a complete estrangement of all his human demands, including the one which grounds the

life as such – a food need. The Medieval Grail, first and foremost, feeds its host and guardian.

One more reason to support the idea that Gromov's books are rather in the Death's service than in the Life's one is that their aim is supported by the old ladies seeking to stop the time and to have that dead order forever. We shall also emphasize that the novel lacks that nostalgia for the Soviet culture: in general, it is written as hardly compatible with the life and free self-realization and brewed on fear and deceit.

Another evidence to prove such ambiguity between the Grail and Gromov's books: Yelizarov's novel misses the concept of sympathy so important in the Medieval Grail mythology. In W. von Eschenbach's novel the Grail requires sympathy of his host towards others and, thus, this ability refers to ethic perfection; the books, in the way described by Yelizarov, dictate otherwise – to obey the illusion. The idea of sympathy has been replaced here by the idea of serving the illusion which, in turn, provides the character's life. It has also replaced love: the novel's heroines are ready to sacrifice their femininity to "satisfy man's desires" of Vyazintsev – the way they understand their part in his mission.

As a whole, the requests for Gromov's books draw a certain hell: it is not merely the hell of bloody fights between the libraries, but also the hell for a person being separated from his own "self". The protagonist thunders this deceit down: *«Я слишком часто перечитывал Громова. Книжный имплант, полный искристого счастья, активно захватывал пространства памяти, одновременно обесценивая мое собственное детство»* (Yelizarov, 2008: 342). In the same way he concludes on his destiny: *«Замысел подвижничества и связанного с ним индивидуального бессмертия больше напоминал ад»* (Yelizarov, 2008: 300). The Grail, in turn, creates an immanent image of the Heaven.

So, constructing the "book – Grail" analogy, Yelizarov destroys it at once: the book and literature lose that salutary function. The notion that the literature is able to provide salvation has been disrobed as deceit and illusion. The only function that the literature has been assigned there to is to bring a relief.

Theoretically this function has been described in Terry Eagleton's essay on the Victorian literature development. The British reviewer, we shall remind, considers the literature through the context of its relation to the problem of authority – as a form of social ideology. It is an ideology, which, following Eagleton, always establishes old values – regardless of the "historical nightmare" where we live (Eagleton, 2013: 52). The same is in Yelizarov's work: he "takes to pieces" the literature's relieving mechanisms and thus reveals the myth of its saving features. This task – deconstruction of the traditionalist literary conception and negation of its mythologized image – has been achieved quite through the use of traditionalistic imagery relied on the Grail mythology.

There is not only Yelizarov who explodes this myth (the literature's salutariness): "Librarian" has currently been "accompanied" with Vs. Benigsen's "GenAcide" which reveals the mythology of literary classics as a basis for the national unity. This myth has also been deconstructed in the works by T. Tolstaya, L. Ulitskaya and V. Pelevin.

Still, the myth about the literature's salutary potential has not disappeared. At the moment it is being supported by the mass culture which often describes the reading skill and love as a value and vote of confidence (D. Setterfield's "The Thirteenth Tale", Karen Joy Fowler's "The Jane Austen Book Club", Cornelia Funke's "The Thirteenth Tale", etc.). This myth can be found even in the contemporary sci-journalistic

discourse: this function there refers to its ability to develop our cognitive skills, to keep them away from the screen-oriented culture and to increase their life span and quality (Bavish, Slade, Levy, 2016; Gaiman, 2016).

A guarding verve peculiar to this brand-new myth is obvious. Now it is necessary to criticize its ideological content and to answer the question of what is the basis for the contemporary discourse which establishes cognitive (and not moral and educating as in the case of chronologically former myth) value of reading and considers the literature as a tool for pragmatics. Such analysis is likely to appear, particularly, if we remember similar phenomena – poetry fetishizing in the English and American critics in the beginning of the 20th century. Terry Eagleton does "deconstruct" (following Barthes) its ideological power: "The New Times critics represented a rootless ideology – intelligentsia in a defensive position – which has rebuilt in the literature something that failed to maintain in the life. The poetry became a religion, a nostalgia asylum from the industrial capitalism's estrangement" (Eagleton, 2013: 71). Presumably, the brand-new myth about the literature's salutariness rejects the consumer culture's aloofness being convinced that reading represents a cognitive process and an experimental field to understand oneself and others. Yet, M. Yelizarov destroys this socio-realistic myth about the literature showing a person being separated from himself by the literature. In the context of such observation the novel is seen as a protest against estrangements posed by the collective culture that represses the most common manifestations of the person's freedom. Finally, identification of the archetypical basis in "Librarian" and its semantic functions makes it reasonable to argue the interpretation that links M. Yelizarov's novel to the nostalgia for the Soviet past and aesthetics and for the perception aesthetics in particular.

- ¹ It is important to note: the fighting libraries do not use fire guns. Isn't it a reference to the Medieval battles? Indeed, Yelizarov directly links these fights to the military event in the Russian Middle Ages, particularly, reminding of the Battle of Kulikovo. Identification of the in-depth existence of the Grail myth gives an opportunity to allusions for the European Medieval with its fights for the holy relics and artifacts (the Holy Spear, the Holy Sepulchre).
- 2 No matter, conscious or unconscious, yet, rather the last one: analyzing Yelizarov's interview we haven't found any references to this medieval narration; it is also absent in the critics as well.
- 3 Following Ye.Ye. Prokazchikova in: Prikazchikova, Ye.Ye. (2009). *Kul'turnye mify v russkoy literature II poloviny XVIII – nach. XIX veka [Cultural Myths in the Russian Literature of the 2nd Half of 17th Century – the Beginning of the 19th Century]*. Ekaterinburg, Izdatel'stvo Ural'skogo Universiteta, 528 p.

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Архетип «Грааля» в романе М. Елизарова «Библиотекарь»

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Статья посвящена выявлению архетипической основы романа М. Елизарова «Библиотекарь». Она связывается со средневековым мифом о Святом Граале. Обнаруживаются многочисленные сюжетные сходства между романом В. фон Эшенбаха «Парцифаль» и романом современного русского автора. На почве сделанных наблюдений выясняются семантические функции древнего пласта в современном нарративе. Сделан вывод, что на почве сопоставления книг советского писателя Д. Громова с Граалем современный романист деконструирует советский миф о спасительности литературы, настаивая на антигуманном пафосе книжной идеи советской культуры. Сделанные выводы позволяют внести определенность в споры о пафосе романа Елизарова, а также поставить вопрос об идеологическом характере сакрализации литературы и чтения – как в советское время, так и в актуальной современности. В последнем случае данная тенденция обнаруживается в массовой литературе, повествующей о читателе, а также в научном и публицистическом дискурсе о пользе чтения. Предлагается объяснение данной тенденции.

Ключевые слова: М. Елизаров, «Библиотекарь», В. фон Эшенбах, «Парцифаль», архетип Грааля, миф о спасительности литературы, советская эстетика.

Научная специальность: 10.00.00 – филологические науки.
