

УДК 82-31

The Mythologem of the North in the Early Works of L.M. Leonov (on the Example of the Story “The Death of Egorushka”)

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Received 07.02.2014, received in revised form 17.03.2014, accepted 24.04.2014

The article considers the creative implementation of the mythologem of the North in literature at the beginning of the 20th century. The general interest of artists and thinkers to the phenomenon of the myth, understanding of its profound energy, as well as the need for the myth as a spiritual support, are the typical features of the neomythologization process. Writers turn to the mythologem of the North not only because of the desire to find a new, unusual topic for narration, but also because of its typical heterogeneity, ambivalence, when there is a fine line between holiness and demonicity. In L.M. Leonov's work, this controversy is preserved and even intensified, the place of faith becomes the place of universal desperation. The creative idea of the artist is explained not only by crisis moods of the beginning of the century, but also by social and political reforms of the new rule. The mythologem preserves unchangeable components: mythological space, mythological time, the image of a demiurge, a hero, motifs of challenge and initiation. An eschatological motif presented latently by the author, on the background of the continuing life, appears to be a new solution.

Keywords: Russian North, mythologem, Belovodye, ambivalence, holiness, national landscape.

Introduction to the Research Problem

In the research picture of the world of the 20th century, mythological discourse has become an object of intense study in various fields of knowledge: psychology, philosophy, philology, political science ... Consciousness of the close connection of the myth not only with the Antique culture, but with peculiarities of the human world view in general, penetration of mythological structures into all spheres of life, on the one hand, and an appeal to the mythology as a never-ending

depository of symbolic, allegorical plots, on the other hand, are the typical features of the modern attitude of artists and thinkers to the myth.

The phenomenon of “polimythologicity” (Pivoev, 1993, 37) of the society's consciousness has been repeatedly described in scientific literature, and one of the common points is the observation that this trend is significantly conditional to political, social and economic changes in human life in the 20th century. In the USSR, such an immersive myth has become the mythology of socialism, in Hitler's Germany – the

Aryan myth, etc. Scholars believe the main myth-making impulse to be the feeling of “borderline”, the crisis, which is typical for the turn of the century (Kovtun, 2013). The human fear of the unknown, the sense of an impending, but so far unknown danger, according to Freud, is one of the starting points for myth-making. With the help of the myth people fence themselves out from the unknowable, defining it within the frame of the already known solutions. Thus, the irrational development of the life content is done. A. Gulyga wrote: “The present has always been seen as a loss of something that was available in the past. Only due to the fact that losses were considered to be less significant in relation to gains, the idea of progress survived. Today, the balance of losses and gains threatens to turn into the deficit of the latter: the mankind loses more than it gains. Losses are so great that the idea of superiority over the past loses its meaning – a desire to go back appears, without losing, of course, positive acquisitions of our time” (Gulyga, 2006, 18). At the same time, if these “dictated” solutions are not functional, ineffective, there is an opposite reaction, “alienation” – despair that leads to madness or even death (Kierkegaard, 1988).

In Russian literature of the first third of the 20th century, the feeling of the crisis era or even the end of time, of course, is reflected in a variety of forms. The art intelligentsia was actively creating a new modernist myth where the human, like joking, put on the pedestal not the God’s creation, but the devil, and started to interact with it just as surely as was once the adherent of Christ. In her monograph, N.V. Kovtun said: “A modern artist who creates a home-world, and realizes himself/herself to be a demiurge of another, true reality, and reduces the world of time to the level of an illusion, a mirage” (Kovtun, 2013). Connection with the classical mythology and late Antiquity was doubtless here, since the image of Fatum and the human feeling of himself as a toy in the

hands of gods became very popular among poets and writers of the Silver Age, but there was also something new that made the reader feel the modernity of that fatalistic scenes – the signs of another reality, language, a special refinement in choosing the topic of works: “The situation when the literature of the early 20th century adapted the classics’ stable motifs labeled with an archetypal charge determines a perspective of secondary mythologization—“neomythologization” entering into a dialogue with the mythological structures lying at the foundation of the genre models of the epics” (Kovtun, 2013).

Theoretical Basis and Methods

To ensure the correct understanding, let us clarify the terminology, which will be used in this article. In papers devoted to mythological analysis, we may meet quite different definitions, different scope of concepts related to the mythological attitude. Some eclectics, ambiguity of terms are, surely, one of the typical features of the humanities’ fields creating a constant ground for discussions. In this article, we select as a reference unit the concept of *a mythologem as a minimized myth*. In N.V. Kovtun’s work, we meet the following definition of the term: “A mythologem denotes conscious borrowing of mythological motifs by an artist” (Kovtun, 2013). Of course, the term “mythologem” has a characteristic relation to another, more general term – motifem, which also illustrates the paradigmatic level of the set of motifs, but in a broader sense (Silant’ev, 2001).

In the article, we use several methods, among which we shall primarily note the motivic analysis, structural-descriptive and comparative historical methods. The theoretical basis of this article includes the research works in the field of motif studies of I.V. Silant’ev, V.I. Tiupa; mythological criticism of Eliade, N.Y. Golosovker, E.M. Meletinsky; works of

contemporary scholars about the features of the myth presentation in Russian literature of the 20th century (V.V. Polonsky, T.L. Rybal'chenko, N.V. Kovtun). The classics of literary criticism – B.A. Uspensky, M.M. Bakhtin, Yu.M. Lotman, and the monograph by V. Schmidt “Narratology” played an important role in the understanding of the artistic text. Due to the local specifics of the theme, an appeal to the works of geographers, archaeologists and historians of religion studying real and illusory model of Russian North in the minds and lives of people was also needed (N.M. Terebikhin, S.V. Morozov). Given the large scope of works on studying Leonov’s works, we took into account those works that were dedicated to the writer’s early works, as well as works analyzing mythological component of the texts (A.A. Dyrdin, T.M. Vakhitova, L.P. Yakimova, V.A. Petisheva).

Statement of the Problem

Our article is dedicated to the study of the mythological content in the work of the author, who is the witness not only of the beginning of the century, but, to be more exact, the contemporary of the whole century, L.M. Leonov. His early stories refer to the first third of the century (1920s), his last novel “Pyramid” is dated by the mid 1990s. It is obvious, that during his long creative path the writer had experienced many-sided influence of his contemporaries, had witnessed the falls and rises of Russian social and political life, and therefore, all his works together can be considered as a mirror of the epoch to some extent.

Early works of L.M. Leonov in the context of mythology

L. M. Leonov’s early works were significantly influenced by modernists, especially symbolism. It is where a vivid, rich language, original themes, unusual compositional solutions, interest to the

“borderline”, provocative questions come from. In the story “The Death of Egorushka” the master turns to the exotic topos, and moreover, exotics here is connected not with the beloved oriental motifs since the time of Romanticism (we see turning to the oriental culture in another work of the author, “Tuatamur”). The Russian North, “shamaning Belomorje”, the region which has been considered the land of the magical and sacred since the ancient times (Terebikhin, 1993, 41-42), becomes the setting of the story.

The mythologem of the North as a unique, transcendent place in Russia is being opened step by step, comprised by several components. Here, wild, undiscovered nature, which offers extreme living conditions for an average man, becomes a kind of a substrate of the mythological worldview. It is well known that the Orthodox doctrine was spreading in the northern part of Russia little by little. The beginning of this process is connected with the activities of the venerable Sergius of Radonezh. As N.E. Kamenskaya writes, moving to the North was a search for “a new sky and a new land depicted in the apocalyptic prophecies of John the Apostle”, a breakthrough “to what will be on the other side of the history, when the earth journey of the human will end” (Kamenskaya, 2004, 122-128). Therefore, the North, which was not fully discovered at that time, seemed to be a sacred place for the medieval man, and the difficulty of the way there was compensated by the revelation received after all.

Until the end of the 19th century Solovetsky Monastery, the center of the Orthodox Church in the North, was revered as the greatest Russian sacred place, “the people have got a settled opinion of the Monastery as an ideal sacred community” (Kamenskaya, 2004, 122-128), against the background of other Russian monastic settlements, which were degrading, it was prospering and increasing the area of influence.

Belovodye itself became “a gradual embodiment of the insular heaven in the Old Russian culture” (Gornitskaya).

What has caused that tragic turn of the plot in L.M. Leonov’s story, when the sacred land all of a sudden becomes a possession of devilish forces? In 1920, a concentration camp is created on the Solovetsky Islands, on the place of the Monastery, willed by the Soviet rule that had just come to power: thus, the sacred land becomes the place of torments. If earlier the pilgrims came there on their own will, now they were sent there sentenced under the Article; SLON (Solovki special purpose forced labor camp”) was famous all over Russia not as the sacred land, but as the cruel penal servitude (Morozov, 1988; Morozov, 2004). Leonov with his delicate creative thinking and feeling for topicality could not have ignored this catastrophic transformation and embodied it in a symbolic-allegoric form in his story “The Death of Egorushka” published in 1922.

The narration begins in a form of a tale reminding of the sacred ancient times. Turning to the folk poetic stylization itself is very symbolic – the first decades of the 20th century are not coincidentally called the period of “the stylization boom”. It influenced not only modernists, but also the authors, who continued the line of the classic literature, “passion of the artists of different aesthetic directions for folklore may be explained by the desire to recreate the folk culture by language means” (Khatyamova, 2006, 68). Therefore, turning to the tale form of narration is determined also by the development of the social myth of “getting back to the roots” among the literary community. As I. Smirin notes, “the flowering of the tale narration in the 20-s was prepared by the previous development of folk consciousness and folk speech in literature” (Smirin). Scholars numerously noted that L. Leonov’s early poetics was influenced by famous tale narrators A. Remizov and A. Belyi –

the writer picked up exotic words, occasional words along with the tale form from the famous symbolists.

Sketches of nature illustrating the beginning of the story are characterized by a fine combination of features of different aesthetic types of landscape: “The place is bare and gloomy; it is thrown in the mercy of the wind, it is fated to become the place for the extensive earth despair. Sharp-toothed fires of northern lights blaze over the sky in winter nights over Nyun’yurg. The fire of the never setting sun stays in the sea depth in summer nights behind Nyun’yurg. And small berry cranberry has spread over boggy Nyun’yurg places in all eight differently named directions – the only happiness of the bare place behind the midnight, last borderline” (Leonov, 1981, 60). Lexical repetitions of the island’s name and syntactical parallelism of the phrases serve to focus the attention of the potential reader on the setting. It seems that the author concentrates our attention on the center of all actions and then gradually builds the limits of its mythological space not letting go behind these limits.

On the one hand, in the description above one can obviously note the elements of the national landscape, for which “understanding of Russia as a northern country with all poetic exaggerations” is typical (Epstein, 1990, 156), “all features speak for modesty, dullness and picturesqueness touching with tenderness and melancholy, compassion and bitterness”(Epstein, 1990, 158). Against the dull-coloured background, Leonov introduces the image of the dazzling northern lights highlighting the local colouring – an element of the exotic landscape. Thus, the situation of cognition takes place: in the ordinary, common all of a sudden appears something that gives it a special, almost mystical sense: “Belovodye as the main mythologem has formed a contextual field of the plot-making technique born in the Old



Russian poetics, of including the real island into the surreal “other” world” (Gornitskaya).

Throughout the story, we repeatedly meet with the transcendental content of nature images, emphasizing the closeness of the human in these places to something bordering, inscrutable by the earthly reason. The toponym “Nyun’yug” itself like outlandish cities of another writer of the 20th century, A.S. Grin, determines the response in the reader’s imagination: an unusual name catches the eye, but at the same time it does not allow to search for geographical coordinates of the island.

Functioning of the mythical space is always connected with the image or images of demiurges – in L.M. Leonov’s story among such demiurges are called St. Nicholas, Savvaty and Zosima. The author’s choice was not accidental. In the documents of the 15th century Solovetsky Monastery was called “the house of the Holy Savior and *St. Nicholas*”. The Pomors have written a lot about the cult of St. Nicholas, he is considered to be the patron of navigation and is even called the God of the Sea. In Leonov’s story, St. Nicolas plays as a demiurge within the classical cosmogonic myth: “And in those days when loose damp earth was not more than three days old, Nicolas came all of a sudden,

bypassing the ground with the patrol, on the vague brink of the primordial sea and land and left his footprint...” (Leonov, 1981, 60). It was Nicolas’s footprint, where the first peasant hut on the island was built, the hut of Egorushka’s father, indicating that the father of the protagonist lived in the mythical era, the era of “primary objects and primary actions: first fire, first spear, first house” (Meletinsky, 1976, 173). The motif of the footprint appearing here is also quite curious. It certainly can be interpreted literally, imagining the demiurge as a giant, while a house is built in his footprint. Nevertheless, for the folk tradition different reading of this motif is typical: the soul remains in the footprint, the one going after becomes a spiritual disciple. M. Zhuikova quite interestingly writes about this direction of the motif interpretation, on the example of the bylina “Dobrynia and Marinka”: “One of the central motifs of its plot are magical acts of Marinka: she carves Dobrynya’s footprints (prints of his feet on the ground) and burns them in the oven” (Zhuikova). But Nicolas is not just a man, he is a saint, and therefore his footprint “is not a frozen footprint. It is twinkling of the eternal present. Twinkling of the internal motion in the outer stillness; immortality among constant dying” (Mirkin, 2007).



Further, Leonov elaborates the metaphysical component of the scene: “The days uncaptured by the memory, then flashed like a wild horde, all the hundred of hundreds and all the darkness of darkneses sunk into the *hollow hell*” (Leonov, 1981, 61). Some special transcendence of Nyun’yug’s location on the border between the light and darkness is highlighted, and the very appearance of the island belongs to the mythical time (“earth ... was not more than three days old”). “The brink of the land and the sea” is not only the geography with its landscapes, but the mythology as well: “geographical space at the same time is a religious and mythological space” (Chistov, 1986, 43). The sea itself in the minds of all Russian has been always identified with the “dead zone” (B.A. Uspensky), and “any movement in this locus of the religious-mythological space is equivalent to the real experience of death, or rather, undergoing the testing by the sea-death”.

Other patrons of the island are the saints Savvaty and Zosima. Their names are inextricably linked in the minds of the Russian people, forming typical “duality”. L.M. Leonov gracefully weaves the historical facts about the activities of the saint, which have reached us, into the plot. It is well known that Savvaty was the founder of the

Solovetsky Monastery. Originally he asceticised at the Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery, then moved to the island of Valaam, continuing to look for a more secluded place. He got to know that two days’ sail from the shores of the White Sea there is a large uninhabited island, and Savvaty left the Valaam Monastery to go there.

Leonov’s Nyun’yug embodying this uninhabited island (there is nobody else except for Egorushka’s family and some Samoyed) gradually changes the pole of holiness to the pole penetrated with demonic powers. The mystic beginning is still active, but a runaway monk Agapius addresses the great saints with a request about the death of Egorushka’s son and the request about “testing” with madness and death is satisfied.

Several reasons for such a change of polarity can be identified. Certainly, the dramatic changes in the cultural and political life of the country could not have affected the contemporary literature, and making a concentration camp on the place of the Monastery is a literal embodiment of the mythologem’s ambivalence. The mythologem of Belovodye (a group of islands in the White Sea) was historically never unambiguous. Researcher L.I. Gornitskaya notes: already in medieval texts it is perceived “as not only a paradise, but an infernal locus. Belovodye gets a more complicated semantics, in which the infernal otherworld is significant not less than the heavenly one, and the locus combines the features of both Heaven and Hell” (Gornitskaya). Polysemanticity of the topos is described in detail in N.M. Terebikhin’s monograph: “The road to the North is the ascent to the center of the world, to the top of the World Mountain, surrounded by the waters of the sea-ocean, from which not only shining luminous Promised Land of Heaven is viewed, but the gaping abyss and the abyss of the total darkness” (Terebikhin, 2004, 3). Holy and demonic North, by the antithetical definition of A.G. Dugin, is also

“teleological and eschatological” (Terebikhin, 2004, 4).

The author describes the image of Egorushka itself in the likeness of saints; the phrase “the sorrow of his life” is symbolic (Leonov, 1981, 55). Egorushka is distinguished by “the warmest look”, his head seems to be “shining with the light linen of hair” and ‘quiet unwindy sky lives in Egor’ (inner sense of God): “Leonov’s Egorushka is described as a light deity, pouring rays of heavenly light in the dark world” (Shubin, 2006). In his work Shubin provides an interesting comparison of Egorushka’s image with George the Victorious, who fought the serpent, that is, the former monk Agapius. We believe this view to be perfectly justified and explaining a lot.

The oncoming birth of the son of the main character is also described reverently, similar to the Gospel scene of the notification of the Virgin Mary about the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God: “The mother’s joy will light up the sky first, and second – the joy of the one who saw the world for the first time” (Leonov, 1981, 64). Unlike the household and landscape descriptions of the island, where the writer uses a variety of dialecticisms, occasionalicisms in the spirit of the dialect of the White Sea coast dwellers, the portraits of Egor and Varlam are described in solely solemn tones. Therefore, the common for everybody sacred story develops strictly within the framework of the local colouring. It is created, first, by means of the words specific for the Russian North: malitsa (deerskin overcoat), oshkuy (white bear), horyava-wind, pikshuy (haddock), Izhems, shnyak (fishing boat). Second, well-known words are used describing the phenomena typical for the North: sledges, karbass boat, Northern Lights.

Conclusion

Therefore, the analysis of the functioning mythologem of the Russian North in

L.M. Leonov’s story “The Death of Egorushka”, written in 1920, showed the following features of its implementation in the author’s text. The ambivalent interpretation of the mythologem, which has existed for a long time, in Leonov’s work is emphasized with particular expressiveness due to not only the history of semantic layers, but also the political events at the time of the work creation. It is no accident that a wild northern region, which seemed inaccessible for Travelers gained the mystique halo – people crossed the sea like overcoming death, they went searching for God and, accordingly, the one who had overcome the dead zone, became lifeless himself. But Leonov’s times the infernal status of Belovodye was triggered by a topical solution of the Soviet government about building a concentration camp on the island; thus, the place of meeting the transcendent completely changed its polarity.

In Leonov’s story we see an attempt to struggle for former holiness. Righteous Egorushka with his wife Irinya turns to his patron, Saint Nicolas, but their prayer is not answered, that gives the text a special dramatic intensity, similar to what occurs in another outstanding work of the era, the play “The Life of a Man” by L. Andreev. The death of the child – Varlam Egorych – indicates the end of everything. Although Irinya in a drunken stupor of the funeral and whispers to her husband that another child will be born – but Egorushka is not the same anymore, he has fallen into madness, he is completely indifferent to what will happen next, and this is the eschatologism. Egorushka is dying inside, spiritually, there will not be another end.

Mythical time and space, animalicity of the main characters’ perception, fatality of happening determine the mythologem, which has undoubtedly retained its status, though its is newly read, inscribed in the modern drama of reality.

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Мифологема Севера в раннем творчестве Л.М. Леонова (на примере рассказа «Гибель Егорушки»)

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В статье рассмотрено художественное воплощение мифологемы Севера в литературе начала XX века. Общий интерес художников и мыслителей к явлению мифа, осознание его проникновенной энергии, а также потребность в мифе как в духовной опоре – характерные черты процесса неомифологизации. Обращение писателей к мифологеме Севера обусловлено не только желанием найти новую, непривычную тему для повествования, но и характерной ее неоднородностью, амбивалентностью, где между святостью и демоничностью тонкая грань. В произведении Л.М. Леонова эта противоречивость сохраняется и даже усиливается, место веры становится местом вселенского отчаяния. Творческий замысел художника объясним не только кризисными настроениями начала века, но и социально-политическими реформами новой власти. В мифологеме сохраняются неизменные составляющие: мифологическое пространство, мифическое время, образ демиурга, герой, мотивы испытания и инициации. Новым решением оказывается эсхатологический мотив, который автор представляет латентно на фоне продолжающейся жизни.

Ключевые слова: Русский Север, мифологема, Беловодье, амбивалентность, святость, национальный пейзаж.
