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Traditionalists vs Village Prose Writers: Phenomenology of a Literary Phenomenon

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The article is devoted to the “village prose”, one of the most popular and significant phenomenon of the Russian literature in the second half of the XX century. Phenomenal nature of the “village prose” is analyzed in its correlation with the “traditional” prose caused by a deep natural orientation of the national literary tradition but not by some teaching. This is precisely why the theoretical-and-literary concept of the “traditionalist” prose is beyond the discourse of the author’s interest, the concept correlating with the village prose writers’ literary text only at multiple strained interpretations and reserves. The presented literary-historical and literary-critical material is large and diverse. It indicates the perception of the “village prose” by the contemporaries, professional critics, literary theorists and ordinary readers. The article also reveals the “village prose” characteristics, which initiate thinking about a real historical-literary status of this phenomenon.

Keywords: traditional prose, tradition, traditionalism, village prose, historical-literary status.

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The birth of the Russian traditional prose in the second half of the twentieth century is a unique event in many ways. Therefore, it caused a strong scientific reflection, which was fixed with two terms at the beginning of a new century, the terms being the “traditional prose” and the “traditionalist prose” (L.V. Sokolova, N.V. Kovtun, et al.). Sometimes the researchers use these terms as synonymous even though their semantic structure contradicts this situation. The adjectives bearing the basic meaning are not absolute synonyms. This fact should be definitely taken into account in philological

science regarding their functioning as a part of the terms.

It is known that the word “traditional” is derived from the noun “tradition”. Accordingly, the “traditional” literature is literature based on traditions, evoked and functioning under the influence of tradition, lit with the tradition (refer to many modern explanatory dictionaries, including the most popular ones by T.F. Efremova and A.N. Tikhonov).

“Traditionalist” is a definition corresponding to the noun “traditionalism”. Traditionalist means ‘peculiar to traditionalism, characteristic of it’.

In this case it is crucial that traditionalism is associated with the theoretical design of certain ideals, no less than certain system of values, which can emerge spontaneously or be cultivated purposefully (reflective traditionalism, according to Averintsev; ideological traditionalism, according to Shilz) but not necessarily conceptualized in academic discourse.

The history of traditionalism is extremely complex and not subject to our research. Only one point is important for us at motivation of terminological preferences. By saying the “traditionalist prose” we must realize that the collection of texts that fall under this definition should be formed under the influence of a rational guideline that is to some extent reflected in the Humanities. In relation to the twentieth century it should be, probably, focused on the opposition against the principles of liberal humanism. However, the “traditionalist prose” should undoubtedly have doctrinal origin or submission.

That is why, from our point of view, the “military”, “city” prose cannot refer to the “traditionalist” literary paradigm of the second half of the XX century, as their artistic philosophy was formed in a live, natural interaction with the literary tradition that is still almost not reflexed upon. This term seems very controversial even when describing the “village” prose. It is enough to refer to F.A. Abramov’s article “The People of a Collective Farm Village in Post-War Literature” (1954) which is a programme one for this literary trend or to remember Rasputin’s understanding of traditionalism proposed in his speech at the ceremony of awarding the Solzhenitsyn prize: “Everything large, deep, talented in any nation’s literature was inevitably conservative in its moral choice...”, – said V. Rasputin. To support his idea the writer recalled the words of William Faulkner, an American classic and novelist who advised the young writers to “throw

away from the studio everything but old ideals of a human heart – love and honor, pity and pride, compassion and sacrifice without which literature is emasculated and killed” (Rasputin 2000, 9). It is clear that the writer speaks about the artistic translation of cordial affections and almost intuitive assimilation of the conservative pathos of the world literary classics but not about doctrinal limitations of literary work.

Essentially, the contemporary history of Russian literature faced the development and enrichment of a classic attitude for updating the principle of continuity in the literature development, the principle ultimately focusing on “the new as the development and continuation of the old” (Davydov 1978, 386). In the second half of the last century the focus on the literary tradition implied a selectively-creative attitude to verbal art experience. The attitude did not exclude the enhancement of values that make up the people’s and society’s heritage. There was a powerful image, illustrating the immutability of the law of continuity for the literary process, in one of the literary-critical reviews by a famous Belarusian writer (documentary, writer, and critic) A. Adamovich: “What happens in literature is interesting: a way forward through the appearance of returning to the former. It resembles a strong rolling wave at the sea shore: two simultaneous movements are inherent to it – carrying forward and casting back, into the sea...

However, this movement forward with a simultaneous return back to the “sea” of the great literary tradition of mankind is, perhaps, the very form of existence of art, which should be in constant search, go forward from itself but return with the same inevitability to the borderline where the art whether begins or ends in order not to repeat or grow numb. And rotting rubbish of false attempts, moves, delusions – everything that failed to become art – is factored out its boundaries” (Adamovich 1973, 215).

Understanding of academism expressed in this metaphor is quite consistent with the definition of the term “tradition” that emerged in the Humanities in the twentieth century: “Tradition creates certain semantic space that includes both areas such as slightly formalized, not fully presented on a symbolic level as well as not formalized at all. On the one hand, tradition has a specific set of articulated semes and images. Its other side (the most important one) faces complexes of national representations, which are latent and do not always emerge on the level of consciousness, being the domain of the subconscious and the unconscious” (G.I. Maltsev’s definition).

Considering all these circumstances, we have to admit that the legitimacy of the term “traditional literature” in relation to the historical and literary paradigm, uniting works that, in their turn, substantially present a basis and historical experience of native culture, evidently reveals the balance of the idea, the characters’ psychology, the plot with the topic, poetics, stylistics, as it was in Pushkin’s and Lermontov’s, Tolstoy’s and Dostoevsky’s prose.

Academism in a formal sphere, in the field of poetics and stylistics is in the concentration on meaningfully determined and justified development of the classical genre system; in the particularities of the topic – the chronotopos that is primarily dependent on real time and space and a real historical person who uncovers him / herself in them; in the most complex and axiologically verified motive structure of the plots; in inheriting the principles of psychology that helped to create the image of “an ordinary man” in all his / her complexity and contradictions as his / her true and real embodiment of strengths and weaknesses of the national character; and, finally, in the renewal of the literary language, enhancing its descriptive and expressive possibilities through the return

of classical purity and clarity, mythological capacity and depth of the word.

Regarding the content, the traditional literature inherited Pushkin’s “capillary sensitivity” (V. Rasputin’s expression) that makes it possible to open new, forbidden worlds, embody existential identity, historical experience of native culture, which, according to Likhachev, are characterized by three main features:

- *sobornost* (conciliarism) as the “manifestation of the tendency to social and spiritual origin”;
- *national tolerance* as “universalism and craving for other national cultures”;
- the people’s aspiration for *freedom*, a person’s pursuit for the *will*, which were historically manifested, first of all, in the peasants’ escape from the power of the sovereign to the Cossacks, the Ural mountains, primeval forests of the North; in the desire to follow the secular laws of “a properly-organized agricultural life of the peasantry”; in the conscious conservation of such main condition of social unity as “the simplest and most powerful family cell” (Likhachev 1991, 16). In addition, the artistic conception of being, offered by the traditionalists and fixing targets and conditions for harmonious human existence, takes into account the content, specificity of answers to the questions common to all mankind, the question being “how to live?”, “what for to live?”, “what is the hidden meaning of human existence?” “how hopeless is a human’s fate?” The answers to these questions directly depend on the eschatological beliefs of the nation and the epoch, which all branches of spiritual production, literature including and the traditional literature in the first place, are based on to a greater or lesser degree.

It is worth while repeating that, from our point of view, in the postwar period three main thematic trends – “military”, “village” and “city” prose – showed the involvement in this literary paradigm on different life material, in different artistic forms, with different semantic dominants without any conceptual constraints. Historical and literary, historical and cultural significance of each of these trends is very difficult to overestimate. Yet, S.P. Zalygin, a well-known writer, publicist, chief editor of the magazine “Novyi Mir” (“New World”) for almost the whole period of the last decade which was the most difficult for the Russian culture, called the “village prose” a central literary event of the era while reflecting on the literary results of the twentieth century. The patriarch considered traditionalism of this literary trend to be the basis for such a high assessment, as it is thanks to it “the Russian classics can sleep if not easily now, but, at least, more easily: they did not reject their will and their spirit in the country as these were continued” (Zalygin 1990, 60). Besides, the village prose writers themselves expressly called themselves traditionalists. For example, at the presentation of V.P. Astafiev’s fifteen-volume edition in 1997 one of the speakers called him a “traditionalist”. The master immediately responded: “Is it bad to be a traditionalist in the literature of Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy?” (Shlenskaya 2008, 213). G. Shlenskaya, V. Astafiev’s old friend, tried to record the most significant conversations with him and argues that Astafiev assumed following a tradition to be the artist’s highest responsibility in face of the great Russian classics: “There should not be any naughtiness, any spontaneous actions in Russian literature; we have no right to do so. Such brilliant literature, such towering titans are behind us. Thus, before depriving them of the readers at least for a day or an hour, each of us is obliged to think hard if he / she has every reason for it” (Ibid., 336).

In today’s literary situation such statements are no longer subject to negative evaluative interpretation. But those confessions were made in those days when the literary space seemed to have been reconquered by the postmodernists forever. To be considered a “village prose” writer or a traditionalist it was necessary to have some courage. Even the fans of the “village” literature considered a basic, extremely conventional nomination to be compromising, reducing. Authoritative critics and literary scholars were not satisfied with mainly “diminishing” semantics, “killing the interest in the phenomenon” (Lanshchikov 1989, 13).

Today the “village prose” is slowly restored in its rights. Its uniqueness is associated with a complex combination of topicality, even actuality of the problems with extremely materialized involvement in the classical tradition, which is specified not by an eventive side of the plot, but by a special feeling of life, and concepts of time and space, a man, his life and death forgotten under the pressure of civilization processes. It is clear that no matter what terms united the “village prose” writers (for example, E. Vertlib considers them to be “ontological” (Vertlib 1992), A. Arkhangel’skii – “metaphysical” (Arkhangel’skii 1992), A. Bol’shakov – “symbolic” realists (Bol’shakov 2002, 2004), L. Sokolova – the traditionalists (Sokolova 2005), N. Kovtun – the utopians (Kovtun 2005)), they all have the qualities and match the requirements, which were first put in the artistic practice by F. Abramov. This was done parallel with theoretical, literary research. They all have been writing for their people to help them “understand their strengths and weaknesses”, doing this in full and complete accordance with the classical tradition. Education was recognized and acknowledged to be the most important task of art. Its prime target is “truth and humaneness, or, one might

say, the increase of good in the world. And beauty” (Abramov, 1988, 475).

It is hard to believe now that during the period of this new literary trend formation even those who supported the “village prose” writers (V. Kozhinov, V. Gusev, V. Kamianov, V. Semenov, L. Kriachko (the journals “Voprosy Literaturny” (“Issues of Literature”), “Moscow”, “Literaturnaia Gazeta (“Literary Newspaper”), 1966-1968) regarded their texts as predominantly descriptive, and mostly interpreted the problems of the most striking, significant works. It is hard to believe that the critics’ and readers’ claims for this literary trend, catalogued in the early 1980s, were seriously discussed: “missed the scientific-technical revolution”, “let the virgin soil slip”, “backward patriarchal way of life instead of contemporaneity”, “language is cluttered up with the dialect words and all sorts of other verbal garbage” (Abramov, 1986a, 437).

The most significant claims of clearly sociologized Soviet criticism of the 1960-1980s were the claims pressed against the central characters of sensational works by V. Likhonosov, V. Soloukhin, V. Belov, V. Rasputin, V. Shukshin, V. Astafiev. These characters were ordinary villagers, mostly old men and women. From the partial readers’ point of view, the characters’ behaviour, outlook and attitude revealed wrong, impracticable, outdated, and untimely ideal. So, F. Levin, for example, asked with a sincere, almost naive perplexity: how can these “uneducated” old people be regarded as a “higher standard of morals and wisdom”? how can a village old woman be asked for advice in the atomic age? (Levin, 1968, 5). The “Russian North” newspaper published V. Esipov’s article that ended with an indignant exclamation: “As it is known, our writers are very proud of their peasant origin, closeness to the people. When this is reflected in their work, in full value verbal art, then honor and praise to them. But is it possible to approach universal

moral problems with *muzhik-type* standards, if to let have it straight? (italicized by us. – N.Ts.)” (Esipov, 1999, 226).

Nowadays they often write that the “righteous persons” and “eccentrics”, created by the “village prose” writers, are epoch-making. Their appearance is a devastating blow not only on the economic system or the “theory of absence of conflict”. Only in 1989, Valery Popov, a well-known prosaic from Petersburg, a careful witness who is impartial to this literary material, dwelt on a retrospective of the socio-literary development in the postwar era. Perhaps, he was the first to write about the emergence of the “village prose” writers on the literary scene regarding it as an event of a special kind. He associated its uniqueness and importance with the emergence of a fundamentally new hero with exceptional abilities and characteristics: “<...> the most rightless people who kept silent for decades cropped up in literature – in Shukshin’s and Belov’s books, – so their voices sounded weightier” (Popov, 1989, 2). Recently they have published F. Abramov’s hot recognition: “I’m not kneeling in front of the people, in front of the so-called “common” people” <...> Thurifying to people, continuous doxology to them are the worst evil. It lulls the people, corrupts them” (Abramov, 1986b, 67).

The “village prose” creators have to fight for their heroes at two fronts: with the literary critical official ideology and with the liberals. The liberals denied a *muzhik* (a male) their attention for two reasons. The first one is apparent in F. Abramov’s diary note, registering the words of a fellow classmate, a famous Leningrad-St. Petersburg cultural studies scholar, that affected a temperamental writer: “It is selfishness, monstrous egoism that is at Mikki’s heart <...> The scoundrel was even indignant that a village and a *muzhik* are too much written about. “The way they live is not as bad as those sympathizing

describe it”” (Konyaev, 2010, 7). The second reason got clearly evident during the discussion about the influence of the age of science and technology on a human, which was held by “Komsomolskaya Pravda” (“Komsomol Truth”) in autumn of 1959. A writing engineer I. Poletaev, one of the discussion participants, wrote: “We live by mind creativity but not by senses, by the poetry of ideas, theories, experiments, construction. That is our age. It demands for a man entirely, without a trace. And there is no time to exclaim: Ah, Bach! Oh, Blok! Of course, they got outdated and were not in the full height with our life” (Poletaev, 1959, 3). It is clear that confrontation of this kind was considerably more serious than public speeches against the orthodox persons of socialist realism who had bored almost everyone with their dull lectures by that time.

However, in 1972 the world will hear Yu. Daniel’s famous ironical dedication to the organizers of “bloodless battles” that is “Liberals”, “the sybarites”, “boiling as Borjomi”:

We, hissing, crawled under the benches,
And, spitting, shuffled psalms;
We’re the shit on pinky cushion –
We’re heroes, we’re liberals!

We miss Russia again
With pasteurized sorrow,
Oh, liberals, the parasites
On pus of humans’ troubles.

(Stanzas of the century 1995, 701).

But who read it then? Dozens of years had passed before the meanings of Yu. Daniel’s poem got demanded by public consciousness, before the voice of “Wagner-Nietzsche-Ibsen epoch” (S. Averintsev’s definition), that offered the humanity rationalist values, romance of roads and the poetry of “world-wide” feeling, ceased to sound as the only sound, exalting a man and

the mankind, before the principal novelty of the character, who was extracted by the “village prose” writers to the forefront of the Russian prose as a complex, ambiguous, contradictory but preserving national moral, ethic and aesthetic ideas son of toils, was fully understood.

...In 1980-s the former leaders of the “youth prose” became the most ardent unmasker of the “village prose” writers. A. Borshchagovskii and V. Kurbatov’s epistolary dialogue contains the recollections of how V. Aksenov tried to declare the “village prose” writers to be the “support of the regime” in literature. However, A. Borshchagovskii, who was honest and knew the situation well, notices that this intention is due to two factors. The first is the following – “Aksenov is utterly indifferent to the people, especially those in the village; he could be attracted to the exotics, some eccentric figure of a bearded guard once, but he could never be inspired with the drama of one million strong village <...>. And then there’s the other one – “they are allowed almost everything”, “they are published, “censorship and the State Prize Committee are merciful to them” mean they are needed by the authorities, they are beloved children, and he, Aksenov, is a genius but a stepson” (Borshchagovskii, Kurbatov 2005, 227).

The blasphemy of new “furious adherents” (S.I. Sheshukova’s metaphor), raging in the beginning of the century, is far behind today. Modern literary criticism remembered how easily, naturally and freely the “village prose” crossed the topical boundaries in the 1970s. This resulted in V. Astafiev’s great novel “Shepherd and Shepherdess”, V. Rasputin’s “Live and Remember”, the text that is the most complicated in its philosophical meanings. Now it is clear that only the creators of the new prose about the Great Patriotic War could rival with the “village prose” writers in their treating of eternal and universal problems. It is also clear that vertex

phenomena, presenting this historical and literary phenomenon, are quite relative to high classics, and not only to the Russian one. In 1996 at a conference in the Australian city of Canberra a famous Canadian philologist enthusiastically compared V.G. Rasputin with A. Camus after he had first read V.G. Rasputin's story on the eve of the conference.

And if only literary criticism is still limited to terminological updating of descriptive analytical methods in the analysis of the uniqueness of the "village prose" (Novozheeva 2007), "the things are moving". For example, during the recent celebration of F.A. Abramov's ninetieth anniversary there appeared V. Novodvorskaya's article in one of the glamour magazines. There is such a fragment in it: "One small sacarium of our Church is decorated as a chapel. A simple bleached white chapel with a cute black head. In the spirit of the Church of the Intercession on the Nerl, Suzdal and Novgorod churches. XII century. Neither jewelry, nor gold. Contrition, the hands in prayer, a bowed blonde head. Earnest, non-ostentatious faith, diligence in hard work, more than modest reward for one's labors, conscience. Quiet candles on scarce northern grass... These are the village prose writers; this is their world that is quiet and dull to bitterness. From righteous Fyodor Abramov to half-dissident Vladimir Tendryakov, from fool in Christ and blessed Vasilii Shukshin to furious Victor Astafiev.

"The village prose writers are far from being rural pastoral. They did not live in ignorance, were honest populists, spontaneous county ascetics" (Novodvorskaya 2010, 79). There are, definitely, inaccuracies in this expanded and, perhaps, excessively sentimental metaphor. However it can be considered as a manifestation of changes in public consciousness, a changing attitude to one of the most complex facts in the history of Soviet literature. One of the

main causes of this fact was stated by V. P. Astafiev: "It was estrangement that gave rise to the phenomenon of the village prose. The most gifted part of the Russian writers became nostalgic about life they had remembered since childhood. What might be seemingly enviable in my childhood? Thus, the book "The Last Bow" turned out to be cheerful. I would gladly live in Gogol's world, where the sky was clear, the relations were peaceful, non-belligerent. People were afraid of God, at least. Well, and one must be afraid. As we are not afraid of God" (Palieva 2008, 147).

The time has come when the uniqueness of the "village prose" must be motivated by uniqueness of artistic philosophy and the picture of the world that manifests itself in absence of subordination to symbols and images of philological science, which, in its turn, has been aggressively laying claim to a certain universality since the mid of the twentieth century. So, the "village prose" writers absolutely undoubtedly cancel the image of carnival that is "itchingly" (S. Nebol'sin's word) sought for in any more or less significant literary phenomenon. A liberated power of this image was obviously preferred to a festive and unifying power of a round dance. This idea was first mentioned in S. Nebol'sin's article, devoted to M.M. Bakhtin's teaching about the word, culture and arts (Nebol'sin 2004, 13). It was this idea that was implicitly present in G. Tsvetov's old article on "circus" motifs in V. Rasputin's later works and V. Shukshin's stories. A. Akhmatova's lines from "Poem without a Hero" about the "yowls" of "this hellish harlequinade" that dry up the soul of silver age can be regarded an artistic argument in favor of S. Nebol'sin's literary observations and G. Tsvetov's literary-critical observations.

Historians of literature and specialists in literary text stylistics will apparently have to interpret the specifics of textual representation of

the category of authorship, which is due to the fact that the “village prose” was the only realization of the Russian peasants’ full-fledged right to a high literary expression. At that, the first educated generation of peasant children used it not for the persistent reminder of themselves, and even not for their own social rehabilitation. Assertions about their complex behaviour are ridiculous. By the time the “village prose” had appeared even L. Trotsky’s long-standing contempt to “muzhik-type” writers was forgotten. The writer’s fundamentally new position towards his reader, his addressee clears up in the semantics of V.M. Shukshin’s famous summarizing question “What is going on with us?” and his “we”, “us”. There is a distant reminder of an ancient cultural sight here. This sight does not distinguish between the “producers” and “consumers” of the action since both empathized with the event. The authors of the “village prose” were ready for such empathy internally, genetically thanks to their ancestral memory. Perhaps, that is why they got the readers’ huge credit of trust and the right to the most rigorous, cruel and bitter truth about Russia.

However, up to the beginning of a new century the academic literary theory was still limited to the formal-thematic approach to one of the most significant historical and literary phenomena of the XX century. It ignored the complexity of the process of transition of the material suggested by life to a work of art and, thus, was limited to the “The Peasant Realism” chapter in a new four-

volume “Theory of Literature”, published by the Institute of the World Literature of the Russian Academy of Science (Theory of literature, 2001, 418-420). This chapter can be probably regarded as a kind of putting an end to a certain stage of literary criticism, the literary research process within which the innovative character of the “village prose” results in the creation of a new character whose uniqueness, exclusivity, and peculiarity are limited to social characteristics (“the lumpen-peasant”).

Changes in the evolution of social consciousness that have recently emerged allow us to hope for actualization of the readers’ and research interest in the phenomena of our literary life, which show ineradicableness of the national tradition, history and national life continuity, give the material for comprehension of complex semantic and associative structure of the constants of Russian culture. Thus, they provoke interest in the “village prose”, the phenomenal nature and substantial value of which are determined, primarily, by the institutional commitment to the idea of continuity, but not by the rational desire to represent the philosophy of traditionalism or some other kind of reflexed programme attitudes in the literary texts. The past decades were not enough to fully appreciate the heterogeneity, depth and complexity, polysynthesis, and evolutionary character of the literary phenomenon designated with the long-suffering term “the village prose”, its rootedness in the historical-literary process.

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Традиционалисты vs «деревенщики»: один феном русской литературы

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Статья посвящена «деревенской прозе», одному из самых популярных и наиболее значительных явлений русской литературы второй половины XX века. Феноменальность «деревенской прозы» рассматривается в соотнесенности его с «традиционной» прозой, возникновение которой обусловлено не доктриной, а естественной, глубинной ориентацией национальной литературной традиции. Именно поэтому за пределы интересующего автора статьи дискурса выводится теоретико-литературное понятие «традиционалистская» (традиционалистическая) проза, которое только с многочисленными натяжками, оговорками может быть соотнесено с литературными текстами, созданными писателями-«деревенщиками». Приводится большой и разнообразный историко-литературный и литературно-критический материал, свидетельствующий о восприятии «деревенской прозы» современниками, профессиональными критиками, теоретиками литературы и обычными читателями. Выявляются те характеристики «деревенской прозы», которые сегодня заставляют задуматься над действительным историко-литературным статусом этого явления.

Ключевые слова: традиционная проза, традиция, традиционализм, деревенская проза, историко-литературный статус.

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