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## The Motif of the Gift in the Works of Leonid Leonov (1924-1953)

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*The article presents the motif analysis of L. Leonov's works, except for the final novel "Pyramid". Author's manner was changing during the 20<sup>th</sup> century tending to different styles – avant-garde, socialist realism, postrealism. The motif of the gift was considered by Leonov from different points of view, and we attempted to examine poetics of all author's variations of this motif focusing on its religious essence.*

*Keywords: motif analysis; narration; character's structure.*

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### Introduction

The motif of the gift as the disclosure of an artistic right to create something new has ontological significance in the art. In the religious-mythological discourse this motif is represented by two semantic variants: talent and foresight. They are bestowed to a man from heaven marking the "person of God".

Obviously the divine gift is connected with the idea of grace. In the article "Error, God and Literature" (2005) I.P. Smirnov investigates the evolution of understanding the divine gift (talent) in the religious and philosophical doctrines starting with theories of Aristotle and Plato. Revising the ancient concepts in the early and late Christianity (St. Augustine, Nicholas of Cusa), the scientist formulates a thesis about the qualitative essence of grace. Since the "transient sensory perception cannot be relied upon" (Smirnov, p. 34, 2005), and intelligence is

"subjected to the affects" (Smirnov, p. 34, 2005), then the truth is given only to the initiates: the enduring (immortalia) opens only to a believer. In the understanding of Bl. Augustine, grace is appointed by God to all people, but only those who aspire to get it (*many are called, but few are chosen*) will be saved. Those who perish without receiving grace are guilty themselves: God condemns a person for unwillingness to receive the bestowed salvation. The modern theological tradition links the motif of the divine gift with the motif of cognition. Grace is the supreme Dominical gift to a person, and its action opens possibility of understanding God.

### Materials and Methods

The motif of the divine gift is embodied in the texts of both the Old and New Testaments. The gift in the sense of a *talent*, *grace* is metaphorically unfolded in the Gospel parable of

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talents (regardless the fact that the Biblical text a talent means a monetary measure). The modern etymology determines a combination of meanings in a lexeme of the *talent* (values of weight and the divine gift) with metaphorical re-interpretation of the New Testament parable which took place in the ancient times (Chernykh, 2002). The plot of talents is presented in three canonical gospels, but the authors make different semantic accents. We will focus on the Gospel of Luke where the metaphor of talent becomes more evident.

Interesting research of the parable of talents as a sign of selectness was held by E.G. Rabinovich (through a comparison of popular evangelical version of Matthew and the forgotten one – the Gospel of Luke, through alignment of alliterative mythopoetical parallels with the images of Atlant, Tantalus). The motif analysis reveals relations of the idea of the talent with motifs of feasibility-unfeasibility, luck and perseverance of the succeeded ones, sorrow and death of a protagonist who tried to refuse the burden assigned to him and, therefore, was punished. Based on the received results the researcher tries to reconstruct the process of understanding the parable of talents as “the divine grace and free will” that accepts or does not accept duties of those who received the grace: “The talent is a metaphor for grace based on the pre-Christian tradition which being apprehended with obedience and zeal is multiplied with the efforts of the chosen one, and being rejected and “buried” it deprives the person who did not accept election not only of grace, but of God” (Rabinovich, p. 148, 1991).

In the Russian literature the motif of divine inspiration of an artist was designated in the hagiographic texts, when the authorship category was irrelevant. Near to eulogy to a protagonist of hagiology at the beginning and/or at the end of text the author talks about God’s permission to work with a word. The logic of the motif development

is as follows: at first, the author writes about his own mediocrity, then about the prayer and the occurred grace. That is, the transition in the antinomic pair of the motifs *gift – mediocrity* is carried out by inclusion of the motif of miracle. We read in “Life of Theodosius Pechersky”: “... I forced myself to turn to the narration which is beyond my power and that I am unworthy of, because I am ignorant and foolish (*the motif of mediocrity – A.Z.*). Besides, I’m not trained in any art...” (Old Russian Legends, p. 49, 1982). The prayer about the miracle completes the prelude to the hagiographic story: “I was obsessed with grief every day and prayed to God to vouchsafe me to write hagiology of our divine Theodosius” (Old Russian Legends, p. 49, 1982). “The Kievo-Pechersky Paterik” narrates about the circumstances of occurrence of the hagiographic tradition in the First Word. The founder of the monastery St. Simon asks the “great gift” – the *God’s Word* (Old Russian Legends, 1982). Thus, the motif of the gift in religious discourse corresponds directly to the motif of service. D.S. Likhachev referring to the history of the issue in “Essays on the philosophy of art” connects the motif of the divine poetic gift in medieval religious culture (not only in literary practice, but also in theological perusals) with the motif of suggestion, since here “it is not the author who creates his work, but it is instilled to him from heaven” (Likhachev, p. 132, 1999).

In the Old Russian literature the motif of prophecy is involved in the characterization of “God’s people” – holy fools and saints. The gift of prophecy shows special affinity of a person to God and can symbolize a spiritual personal growth and original inner purity (the images of the Blessed). This motif does not only record belonging of heroes to a certain status, but also determines the properties of the existence observed by them: for the gifted with prophecy being is transparent, to other it is turbid.

In the Russian literature of the New Age the motif of the divine gift preserves the relevance in the theme of the poet and poetry. Aesthetics of Romanticism directly links images of an artist and a prophet defining the idea of creativity as cognition of truth and carrying it to the society. The researcher N. Buhks tracing the evolution of this motif noticed that in A.S. Pushkin's "Prophet" (1926) the theme of divine inspiration of the poet reaches the apex, being on the verge of turning ideas into a cliché (Semiotic of Madness, 2005).

In the religious philosophy of the Silver Age (V. Solovyev, S. Frank) categories of the gift and creativity are considered in a way unexpected to the European tradition. In the Renaissance a person gets to the center of the universe, due to his competition with God in the art of creating. Frank reveals this idea at a cosmological level: God endows a human with a talent, thereby suggesting that he will participate in the creation of the world. In this case, the Absolute turns out to be emerging, incomplete and "the private forms of the Absolute realized in life and knowledge of individuals become the crystallization centers, points of growth and development of unity" (Frank, p. 580, 1993). The *motif of the existence transparence* often follows the motif of the gift. In the utopian tradition – from V. Odojevsky to V. Nabokov and E. Zamyatin – it finds ideological connotation. Here the motif of prophecy is transformed into a motif of the mechanization of the society: the power needs the human transparency in order to control him more effectively.

In the mid-twentieth century works-reflections on the essence of the talent and forms of its embodiment appear (K. Paustovsky "Golden Rose"). In Paustovsky's work a mystical component of the gift goes to the background becoming the object of parody. According to the writer, the essence of the talent lies not in the divine grace, but in labor: inspiration is only a part of the working process. The logic

of such approach fits into the world picture of socialistic realism where the mystical component is substituted by the profane one.

Substitution of the sacral with the ordinary becomes even more expressive in the culture at the end of the 20th century. The images of the poet and the prophet are dissolved in mass consciousness: there are professional artists and psychics. At the same time they both are characterized with mythopoetical activity, manipulation with public ideas about art and life. In the article "Something about heart errors" E. Lebedev summarizes: "It has become more fashionable not to work, but to confess on public. Especially it was noticed in fine arts. Artists grew fond of showing sketches, composers told about how music is created, writers argued on how books are written" (Lebedev, p. 240, 1980).

Generally, the motif of the gift in religious understanding appears quite seldom in the modern art: traditional prose (A. Solzhenitsyn, V. Rasputin, V. Lichutin's and, partly, B. Yekimov's works) became an exception (Kovtun, 2009). The special place in this line is occupied by L. Leonov's texts. In his works the motif is presented variously, in early texts it appears not so often. In the article we consider the named motif in the following semantic limits: gift – talent, gift – prophecy, gift – treasure. The last allomotif is metaphorically coordinated with a parable of talents when the talent has been buried by one of the slaves, thereby having turning into a *treasure*.

## Results

In Leonov's stories and novels of the 1920s the divine gift is almost absent. As an exception we can name "The Notes of Some Episodes Made in the Gogulev-town by Andrey Petrovich Kovyakin" (1924) where the character-storyteller represents himself as a chronicler of our days. Researchers of early works of L. Leonov repeatedly

mark the influence of poetics and stylistics of F. Dostoevsky on the author's manner. Along with "The Kovyakin's Notes" the image of the storyteller also appears in "Petushihinsky Break", "Provincial Story", and is considered as Leonov's parody of "the little person" Makar Devushkin: "Thus, the development of the topic occurs in two plans: absolutely serious (the tragedy plan) and ironical (the parody plan) plan" (Isaev, p. 8, 1975).

In the dissertation on the topic "Leonid Leonov's mastery. Art of the psychological analysis in early prose" (1971) P. Philippov inclining toward the version of stylization of Dostoevsky depicts a contradictory nature of Leonov's loanwords and creative discoveries by the example of "Kovyakin's Notes". Detecting the doubtless similarity of some thoughts of Kovyakin and Makar Devushkin the researcher emphasizes the specificity of the Leonov's character: "The humiliated and offended little person did not dare to speak out of his latent qualities and did not think that he had any advantages. The "little" Kovyakin claims to be distinctive, he is assured of his significance, but life rejects him defining the real essence of this individual" (Philippov, p. 24, 1971).

The character's sense of his own significance is just connected with motif of the *acquired grace*: Andrey Petrovich addresses to God with a prayer to help him in his literary work, asks for patience and strength to cope with an artistic task of creation of annals of Gogulev town (Leonov, vol. 1, 1981). Similar to the authors of the Old Russian annals Kovyakin finds equivalents to a private event in the Sacred history, thereby proving the personal right to compose texts. In *Initial rhymes* the character addressing to God compares himself to Tsar David whose gift (playing the lyre, performance of psalms) protects him from enemies (thereby the religious analogy implies the political protection and preservation of the social

status to the contemporary chronicler Kovyakin if God approves of his gift):

Here is Tsar David: he played the lyre,  
And You destroyed his enemies.

And the sounds were salutary

In the mouth of David's psalm (Leonov, vol. 1, p. 287, 1981).

For this travestied character the motif of the gift becomes some kind of an equivalent unit of communication both with God and with the society surrounding Gogulev. By means of the imagined gift he strengthens the idea of his own chosenness that is not appreciable to the contemporaries but having an eternal value in the eyes of posterity.

In the novel "Badgers" (1924) that describes the partisan movement the motif of gift as the innermost essence of a person manifests itself in the light of the love intrigue. A love triangle formed by the protagonists (Mishka Zhibanda, Nastya, Semyon), contradictory feelings toward each other appear as a logic problem to be solved. "The speculative" poetics of the author doesn't offer the only true key to the riddle, since a human soul is a treasure (a treasure is buried, hidden, unknown). When Mishka got intimate with Nastya, he felt that their relationship is only external and they still remained strangers to each other. Nastya, in turn, seeking Semyon's attention does not understand either why he is so far from her. The participants of the illocutionary drama unfolded in the novel see an obstacle in a treasure they are not destined to find: "You are not mine... – restlessly tossed Mishka, ready to strangle her. – What else do you want? – she laughed coldly (Nastja – A.Z.). – The treasure is in you. Give it to me... – Take it..." (Leonov, vol. 2, p. 254, 1982).

In the novel the motif of a treasure is also connected with the motifs of mediocrity and despair: Mishka, with all the originality of his nature, does not possess a gift of penetrating

into the essence of things, he is not given the knowledge. He tries to get to the treasure using the force (“ready to strangle”), the speed (“in search of the treasure with hasty lips he broke off fiery flowers of Nastya’s paporot’...”); it is vision that he lacks. Ya.E. Golosovker in his work “Logic of an antique myth” (1987) considers a binary opposition of motifs of vision – maintenance. These motifs appear in mythological texts concerning additional distribution when one quality forces out another one: blind Oedipus knows more than capable to see, hundred-eyed Argus does not know his fate. Thus, the motif of the gift is realized in the novel in two variants that we have determined: as a treasure (secret, essence incomprehensible for a human – “for where your treasure is, there your heart is” [Mf. 6.21] and as a foresight (in the sense of its inaccessibility to characters).

In the “Thief” (1927) the theme of the treasure becomes a key one, searching for it connects all the characters of the narration. First of all, for the writer Firsov creation of a novel about the life of the society’s lower classes is realization of his creative gift. Secondly, building the structure of the characters of the future work basing on the meetings from his real life, Firsov selects a valuable material on treasure presence. Apparently, the insignificant image of singer Zinka fascinates the writer with its treasure so much that Firsov links with it the destiny of the protagonist (Mitka) and the treasure reveals: “The writer did not have to work long on the treasure: soon Zinka repented her unrequited love in his notebook crying as at the confession” (Leonov, vol. 3, p. 87, 1982).

The degree of the artist’s talent is estimated by the ability to find the buried talents of others or to think them up; simultaneously discovering of someone else’s treasure is equated to its theft, therefore the author (and Firsov) makes the thief the protagonist of the narration. The theft of

money and theft of spiritual mysteries require a similar *talent*, and here again the linkage between the primary meaning of the word (a monetary measure) and its figurative sense (a gift) is especially obvious: “Actually, I am also a thief secretly wandering through life; I bag everything that I like” (Leonov, vol. 3, p. 125, 1982), – Firsov shares his thoughts with Mitka. In the article “Dostoevsky and Tolstoy” L. Leonov expresses the same idea by an antonymous statement: “In terms of the great Russian literature I would designate the role of the writer as the inspector on particularly important cases of the mankind” (Leonov, vol. 10, p. 529, 1984). Differing among themselves from the point of view of their social status, the thief and the inspector have a general seme expressed by the function of searching.

Self-detection of the treasure becomes a special fortune for a “spiritual thief”, i.e. the writer: “...the soul itself will offer you its sparkling” (Leonov, vol. 3, p.128, 1982). Nevertheless, all Firsov’s attempts to entice this sparkling from Agey, Mitka Vekshin and Manka Vyuga remain vain while “many are called, but few are chosen” [Mf. 22.14]. The solution about the fiasco reason lies, probably, in the author’s hints when he characterizes his romantic colleague. In the text Firsov is called a *craftsman*, i.e. he is deprived a blessing talent which would make his thought pathetic. The motif of mediocrity draws together the images of Firsov and a minor official, Peter Gorbidonych Chikilev. However, if the first one connects the difficulties of creativity with resistance of the “material”, the second one is keenly aware of his own lack of talent and starts to revolt against all extraordinary, talented and pure.

The typical nature of the character-talent-hater in Leonov’s art world is considered by L.P. Yakimova as a confirmation of the thesis on the central role of the idea of equality for the writer (Yakimova, 2003). In the “Pyramid”

the image of rebellious mediocrity reaches new height: Chikilev's double, financial officer Gavrilov, dreams of destruction of the genius and talent by socioeconomic repressions as "the genius is an extremely antisocial phenomenon" (Leonov, vol. 3, p. 363, 1982). In the "Pyramid" an old man Dyurso also reflects on sociopolitical significance of the talent and genius. Without claiming to destruct the talent as a driving creative force, Dyurso assumes it to be the source of the future national and global conflicts (in the context of religious symbolics for the talent for the character is the cornerstone of being rejected by constructors): "It is still only a talent, but what if suddenly is a genius in front of us? We may use such a word only for ancient dead men not to cause a dangerous fermentation for insult in workers. Genius, here is the future crizzling of the world!" (Leonov, vol. 1, p. 237, 1994).

Uneasy relationship of Masha Dolomanova and Mitka Vekshin are determined by the motif of the inner treasure: feeling of love-hatred between the characters is fueled with the knowledge of a mysterious treasure preserved by everyone. Opportunity to leave and not to make each other suffer is seen by the characters only through mutual disclosing of the secret: "You have to give everything for me, and what will remain at the bottom of your soul I will take myself in addition" (Leonov, vol. 3, p. 113, 1982); "Do not tantalize me, do not covet, Mitya, take my treasure which is already great while one can neither rob it, nor extinguish it" (Leonov, vol. 3, p.128, 1982). The conflict remains unresolved while without a treasure the character cannot participate in the plot development (Firsov's) any more.

In two subsequent novels ("Skutarevsky", "Road to the Ocean") the motif of the talent reveals on the verge of blinking of several meanings of the word: a monetary talent and a

spiritual talent. Though in "Skutarevsky"(1932) it is more fair to speak about the gift-talent theme while in the centre of narration there is a destiny of a creative person, we will consider the talent as a particular motif characterizing the image of the artist Skutarevsky, the brother of a scientist. Throughout the narration the images of brothers Skutarevsky are regularly compared: what they wanted to achieve, what they have reached as a result, by what means. On the background of his well-known brother-physicist, the artist Skutarevsky seems to be a loser: his talent having flashed at the very beginning of the way, is unexpectedly and incomprehensibly extinguishing. The artist with the lost talent, as a rich man who has forgotten where his treasure is, cannot claim on the status preservation. The hero is shown confused (searches but cannot find – having lost his way), gravitating to the archetype of the prodigal son (as images of two brothers also appear in the parable): "He woke Struff up and, shaking his shoulders, hoarsely whispered to him, semistrangled: – Where is my talent, eh? Where did you hide it? And Struff did not understand half asleep, in his dim pupils the horror of punishment was reflected: – I did not take, I did not take ... you look for it yourself!" (Leonov, vol. 5, p. 167, 1983). The language game constructed on the mixture of homonyms, marks the isolation of Skutarevsky: people do not understand not only new pictures of the artist (the narrator names them *coupons* that hints at financial implications of the talent), but the speech itself.

In the "Road to the Ocean» (1935) the images of protagonists, Kurilov and Protoklitov, are shaded by a set of "accessory" characters, that have subsequently affected the destinies of the central characters. One of these characters, Pakhomov, appears as news from Gleb Protoklitov's past. Pakhomov possesses a valid treasure – the knowledge of Gleb's true origin, of his activity

during the Civil War, and, without burying the talent, uses compromising information in his own purposes: “Without noticing, he had been living four years for percent from his secret. That time people were forgetful; it was necessary to touch the main capital more often” (Leonov, vol. 5, p. 217, 1983). Specificity of the existing relations between Protoklitov and Pakhomov is the feeling of mutual patience. If the first is compelled to be tolerant to the blackmailer not to lose the status, the second, strangely enough, also suffers: the cherished treasure does not give him rest, and he opens it, despite the observance of all conditions by the victim. Further coupling of the motifs of the treasure and patience will be manifested in the final novel “Pyramid”, when the affinity of the treasure and impossibility of its easy obtaining determine the width of the novel’s idea in the head of the narrator. Thus, in the “Road to the Ocean” there is a motif of the found treasure-talent searched for by the characters of the “Thief”, but the finding does not bring happiness to its new owner.

In the “Russian woods” (1953) the motif of the talent is revealed through the opposition of the images of the artist (forester Vihrov) and the trickster (pseudo-artist) – Gratsiansky. The work of Vihrov is directed on preservation of the woods, is constantly exposed to attacks of the former university companion Gratsiansky. During Viktorov’s creative pause, Gratsiansky is also compelled to be silent – he has nothing to tell. Gratsiansky’s lack of talent is assimilated with a fruitless fig tree which is fed with an earth juice, but returns nothing to the nature (then this metaphor appears in the “Pyramid”, in connection with the images of Sorokin and Yulia Bambalsky). Here the motif of the gift/talent is an additional to the motif of despair. Vihrov, a gifted scientist, does not know despair: his spiritual forces are directed on creation (restoration of wood resources). His opponent Gratsiansky, indefatigably denying

protective projects of Vihrov and having become famous only at the expense of these attacks, is driven by a destructive force.

Logics of the chain of the motifs *gift – creation, despair – destruction*, is emphasized with specific social environment of the characters. The Vihrovs including the adopted son Serezha, has a set of acquaintances, the publication of Vihrov’s works causes a particular interest in the scientific world. Gratsiansky lives with his mother and he is infinitely lonely; in scientific circles he is known more as a critic, rather than a researcher. Thus, the following schemes are embodied in the images of the characters: *gift – creation – society* (Vihrov) and *despair – destruction – loneliness* (Gratsiansky). If in “Skutarevsky” the motif of the lost talent participates in creating the image of the prodigal son, in the “Russian woods” the return situation is realized: Vihrov’s happiness if in having a talent and a purpose, he does not wander through life.

### Conclusion

The motif of the talent always marking the selected one in the general mass determines the social and cosmological status of the protagonist. Obviously, it is dependent in L. Leonov’s works. If the miracle can appear being an independent phenomenon, the talent loses its importance if it appears out of the artistic chronotope. The artist Skutarevsky does not know where his talent is and when it disappeared; Pakhomov has found his talent but he does not know where and when to apply it. The valency of the motif of the talent in L. Leonov’s fiction necessarily requires a linkage with motif of cognition (Skutarevsky-physicist, forester Vihrov). Otherwise, we meet its antipode, the motif of mediocrity (Pakhomov, Gratsiansky, Firsov). The motifs of search and despair situations (as reaction to ineffectual movement) become frequent satellites of the talent.

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## **Мотив дара в прозе Леонида Леонова (1924-1953)**

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*В статье представлен мотивный анализ на материале творчества Л. Леонова (за исключением итогового романа “Пирамида”). Авторская манера писателя менялась на протяжении XX века, склоняясь к различным стилевым течениям – авангарду, соцреализму, постреализму. Мотив дара также раскрывался Леоновым с разных позиций, и мы попытались исследовать поэтику всех художественных вариаций данного мотива, акцентируя внимание на его религиозной сущности.*

*Ключевые слова: анализ мотива, персонажная структура; повествование.*

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