

ALEXEY NIKOLAYEVICH TOLSTOY'S LITERARY REMINISCENCE IN HIS STORY "THE PORTRAIT"

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Abstract

The article explores characteristic features of Gogol's traditions that were frequently manifested in the art of Russian writers. It is well known that Gogol, who played an important role in literal growth and formation of Alexey Tolstoy as a writer, had significant influence to his early works. The purpose of this article is to discuss the principal reasons of Tolstoy's internal attitude to Gogol, and resemblance of a number of stylistic devices in "The Portrait", Tolstoy's short story.

Key words: style, legacy, literary tradition, creative interpretation, artistic debate

A number of researches dedicated to Tolstoy's art explore the writer's artistic bond with Russian classical literature. It could be thought that such statements can be applied to many works of Russian writers of 20th century, that have been more or less influenced by powerful authors. However, regarding Tolstoy's art, it is necessary to highlight «repulsion», that is strictly individual creative attitude of the artist to national writing tradition, "astonishing freedom and liberation of the artist dealing with literary devices". Tolstoy rules these literary devices freely in his own art. Literary tradition as expressed by Tolstoy plays role of modernity and reality full of life. Therefore, it can be a figure of literal transformation and reformation.

[3;56]. Homeland reviewers perceived Tolstoy's relation to Russian literary tradition dubiously. Some reviewers apprehended it as young Tolstoy's deliberate and lucid endeavour to insinuate into "the nature of Russian spirit" and acquire "primal principles of modern life" [3;87].

Recent researchers of Tolstoy are considered to favourably discuss the artist's commitment to Russian classical literature conceiving it as an expression of his war with decadent art.

Currently, it can be said that this assertion was dictated by ideological principles of Soviet literature studies where the writers were divided into soviet and pro-western artists. Although, let us leave the discussion of “what is good and what is bad” in literary reminiscence. Let us demonstrate Gogol’s traditions and their impact on young Tolstoy via one of his short stories. “The Portrait” which was written in 1911, and was heavily influenced by eponymous story by Gogol, unpretentiously stands aside in Tolstoy’s legacy. The story does not attract to itself in respect to its literal richness, Nonetheless, it is notable as a young writer debates with Gogol, the great artist. Once issued in press, Tolstoy’s “The Portrait” neither attracted reviewers and readers of the early 20th century, nor their younger generation.

The author, however, considered the story to be dear to his heart. This supposition can be made as Tolstoy continually made changes to the story. He constantly rewrote it and included to his all collections of stories. According to a contemporary researcher, "The Portrait" is a vivid example of the least Tolstoy’s piece of work. On the contrary, it is a piece of literature which produces itself as a fashionable genre in the literature of the 20th century. Despite these controversies, “the story contains Tolstoy’s cherished idea he was facing during the era of changes in his creative journey” [5;102].

The plot of the story is quite common. A young bondman Ivan Vishnyakov, who is a talented artist, is sent to Saint-Petersburg’s Academy of Arts to study art by the will of his lord. The portrait of the lord would be received as a payment for a three-year study at the Academy. Having spent a long time far away from his homeland, Vishnyakov is reluctant to draw the portrait of his lord. Having been away from humiliation and vassalage for a while, the main character recalls in his memory his lord’s image and “feels slave, and a humanlike creature”. A young artist faces a dilemma. He would either draw a realistic portrait of an odious old man. And this would lead to his eternal slavery. Or, he would draw a fawning picture of his lord receiving a long-desired freedom.

Tolstoy’s story reflects canons of literary mystification. It intentionally projects Gogol’s style. It can be seen in the eponymous title of the story as well as in the plot, and choice of language. Moreover, Gogol is one of the characters of Tolstoy’s “The Portrait”. Gogol’s first introduction to the reader as a character of the story is portrayed as “a round-shouldered man

in high hat and shabby trench coat”. Having closely examined him, the reader finds the stranger is not only “round-shouldered”, but also having “chestnut-coloured” hair, and “with long and black olive-like eyes”. He has a “deep, dull voice and sly lips”. Later, the rest of the stranger’s face with long nose, his sharp chin, pomaded hair and sneaky smile is depicted to the reader.

Having read “The Portrait”, the stranger wears his high hat, with the manuscript in the pocket of his trench coat. When he is going to leave, the author looks at him and “observing the stranger’s nose profile and protruding pocket” suddenly realises who the stranger is. The direct reminder of Gogol is given in the epilogue of the story, where Tolstoy calls him Nikolai Vasilyevich Gogol.

The diary of Vishnyakov-artist, where meetings with Gogol are depicted, comprises most part of the story. These meetings and debates played an important role in the life of the protagonist. Few elements and themes resembling Gogol’s “The Portrait” can be found in this short story. Both stories narrate about artists who draw pictures of old nasty men. Both artists feel disgust and antipathy towards their models. Both artists create pictures where the models’ vice and wickedness are brightly portrayed. Both portraits vividly express the models’ eyes magically manipulating protagonists. Both models-phantoms grasping the frame of their pictures get out of them and scare their artists. In despair, both artists attempt to destroy their creations cutting them with the knife. In addition, both Gogol’s and Tolstoy’s protagonists reside in Vasilyevsky Island, the area of Saint Petersburg. -The intentional analogy is provided by the same quote from Gogol’s story to Tolstoy’s work: “Nowhere used to pause so many people as before the picture-shop in the Shchukin Dvor” [1;146]. On the other hand, Gogol starts his story with “Nowhere did so many people pause as before the little picture-shop in the Shchukin Dvor” [2; 320]. Further, Alexey Tolstoy imitates Gogol continuing next sentence of his story. Gogol-stranger (Tolstoy’s protagonist) explains the discrepancies in the texts as the manuscript which is going to be “yet rewritten several times”.

“The Portrait” can be considered starting point for Tolstoy’s appeal to Gogol’s legacy. Few researchers believe Tolstoy acted mostly instinctively and spontaneously referring to Gogol. In other words, Tolstoy was believed to seek support from the famous author while he was in search of his own style of writing. Tolstoy would not feel shame announcing he was

learning from Gogol. He would not feel shame proclaiming his dependency on Gogol in writing.

There is an opinion that, on the contrary, Tolstoy's appeal to Gogol's tradition is very conscious and is dictated by "the attempt of its own reading in other historical conditions" [5;105]. However, with an evident appeal to Gogol, Tolstoy is ambiguous with his plot. Tolstoy's commitment to Gogol's tradition is noticeable as well as his polemic. As a result, the story has a very unexpected end. While Gogol's protagonist is financially independent and prosperous, for "he constantly received endless orders in the church", Tolstoy's Vishnyakov appears to be a "down-to-earth" artist.

Gogol's protagonist paints pictures on Christian themes counting his job as "the highest and last degree of highest". On the contrary, Tolstoy's main character is left very poor. He needs to labour a whole day to earn for his living. He draws signboards for butchers, grocery shops, and others receiving food in return. Therefore, Vishnyakov can not think of higher art.

It might be suggested that Tolstoy could not except modern aesthetic art which did not depict reality and did not manifest true life. But Tolstoy aimed to exhibit ordinary, coarse and gloomy reality. Prioritising crude reality over spiritual and philosophical problems of higher art, Tolstoy strived to dispute these problems with Gogol. Although, he always failed. Nonetheless, Tolstoy remained heavily influenced by Gogol's legacy for most of his creative life. The issues raised in "The Portrait" were further developed in Tolstoy's other works.

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