

Christopher Marlowe and Konstantin Balmont

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Abstract. The article presents an analysis of the Russian poet and translator Konstantin Balmont's specific interest to the outstanding English dramatist of the Elizabethan epoch Christopher Marlowe. The material is considered in a broad historical and literary context of the epoch with involvement of opinions from A.A.Blok's, B.A.Grifitsov's, M.A.Kuzmin's and others' reviews, V.Ya.Bryusov's correspondence, materials from the Russian symbolists journal "Vesy" ("The Scales"), memoirs evidence of M.I.Tsvetayeva, A.I.Deitch, and M.M.Bakhtin's lectures on the history of Russian literature written down by R.M.Mirkin.

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Introduction

The Russian Silver Age is characterized with essentially increased interest to Christopher Marlowe, a brilliant dramatist of the Elizabethan epoch, Shakespeare's predecessor. An important part in it belongs to "The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus" by Ch.Marlowe in K.D.Balmont's translation [see 1]. It caused keen public interest and made Konstantin Balmont's contemporaries – other Russian writers of the Silver Age (A.A.Blok [see 2], M.I.Tsvetayeva [see 3], M.A.Kuzmin [see 4]) – understand the names of Marlowe and Balmont in a single context.

Main body

The publication of "The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus" by Ch.Marlowe in K.D.Balmont's translation (the first edition of this translation was issued in volumes VII and VIII of the journal "Zhizn" ("The Life") in 1899 [see 1], the second one – in K.F.Nekrasov's publishing house in 1912 [see 5]) was introduced with two articles, one of which "An Introduction to the English Text" [6, p. 3-4] was written by the English psychologist and writer Havelock Ellis, the other one "Some Words about Faustus Character" [7, p. 5-18] by the Russian poet and translator Balmont. In his article H.Ellis formulated textological principles used by English publishers of "The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus", proved the importance of the edition of 1604 in comparison with other later editions which contained additions written by "a good skillful imitator of Marlowe's style" [6, p. 3-4], pointed out that Marlowe's work, divided only into scenes, was "rather a dramatic poem than a proper drama" [6, p. 4].

While considering Faustus character, preserved for subsequent generations thanks to the ancient German folk legend, K.D.Balmont accepted it as "a character of the Middle Ages" when the world

was imagined as "self-contained, strictly bounded", similar to "a ponderous gloomy castle with obligatory high feast halls and damp underground dungeons" [7, p. 6]. Medieval symbols of inevitability were extremely important for Doctor Faustus' story. They showed "tragic character of human soul and evil contact, incurable nature of soul contagion because of the very fact of a man and the Devil meeting" [7, p. 6]. According to Balmont, Faustus character, as well as Don Juan and Prometheus characters, was formed "under the black star" determined with a notion of *demonism* and inevitably bringing all its representatives to the fatal end because of "aspiration to go beyond their own "self", burning desire to *break possibility*" [7, p. 12]. Wishing "to sever the established pattern of being", to change correlation between the world and a man, unite "perfection with imperfection, truth and reason" [7, p. 13] Faustus is doomed to die.

K.D.Balmont recognized high merits of the most famous J.W.Goethe's version of the folk legend which allowed to consider Goethe's "Faust" "one of the most brilliant creations of human mind" [7, p. 15]. However, he saw "a great chaotic collection of facts and scenes lacking in organic orderliness and void of creative harmony" [7, p. 16] in Goethe's work. Consequently the translator focused on "The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus" by Ch.Marlowe and noted that he "caught all main features of the folk legend, preserved its gloomy nature and at the same time was able to give his work that distinctly individual character marking his other dramas" [7, p. 16]. Typical for Marlowe's scenes "touching naivety, definiteness and some old-fashioned heaviness", in Balmont's opinion, make up that basis which allows to be deep in that old historic epoch "when people were afraid of the Devil's crafty designs every minute, when it was possible to go to the Hell and return to the

earth with a smoked face, as it happened to Dante, when the sky was so close to the earth that high mountains to go through it if not broke than turned its blue cover up" [7, p. 16-17]. Balmont even considered some limited nature of Marlowe's tragedy content in comparison with Goethe's "mosaic poem" a merit, not a drawback, because it proved rather "an ordered restraint of literary completeness" than "a limited nature of poverty" [7, p. 17]. In contrast with Goethe, who represented "artificially combined different features of long and rich life full of cool mind observations", Marlowe, according to the Russian poet and translator, conveyed "a separate brightly expressed psychological moment full of unrestrained passion" [7, p. 17-18] arousing deep feelings of readers.

In 2008 during researches on local history in the State archive of Yaroslavl region G.V.Murzo found K.D.Balmont's letter to K.F.Nekrasov, an editor of his translation of "The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus", (State archive of Yaroslavl region, fund 952, list 1, storage unit 24) and introduced it for scientific use. It contained not only financial agreements reached on the eve of the book issuing, but also interesting opinions about Ch.Marlowe as "an amazing poet" and "a wonderful personality": "What about Marlowe (who I, by the way, would like to reproduce as a whole in the Russian language with much more pleasure, because he is not only an amazing poet <...>, but also a wonderful personality), I consider it quite just to get 100 rubles for an act <...>, but as I had translated it not for You particularly and the drama had already been published I agree for <...> 2000 copies <...> with my payment 300 rubles" [cited in 8, p. 149]. Balmont's interpretation of "The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus" attracted V.Ya.Bryusov's attention. The second version of his letter to Balmont between the 20th and the 30th of January in 1898 includes a brief mentioning about it: "Create poems and translate Marlowe" [9, p. 766]. Years later while characterizing Balmont's skill as a translator in "Words about Balmont" (1936) written on the occasion of 50 years of the poet's creative activity, M.I.Tsvetayeva mentioned his attention to Marlowe's plays: "Balmont translated with introductory essays and commentaries <...> Wilde, Christoph Marlowe, Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina, Charles van Lerberghe, Hauptmann, Sudermann <...>" [3, p. 276]. Marlowe was named in mediate correlation with Balmont's creative work in A.I.Deitch's memoirs "Arabesques of Time" (1969): "Thanks to efforts <...> of poets-symbolists a Russian reader knew Shelley and Calderon, Marlowe and Spanish folk songs" [10, p. 350].

It should be noted that K.D.Balmont mentioned Christopher Marlowe in 1899 and in

volume IX of the journal "Zhizn" ("The Life") in the article "The Chosen One on the Earth (In Memory of Goethe)" while realizing his thought that "Marlowe may be said to be an incarnation of lust for power" [11, p. 15; see 12, p. 517]. The name of Marlowe appeared in Balmont's creative work in 1904 in the collection of articles on literary criticism "Mountain Peaks" where it was mentioned among other names of representatives of the Elizabethan drama accepted as the peak of "general poetic development" in the essay "Feeling of the Personality in Poetry": "Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare, Ben Johnson, Webster, Middleton, Beaumont, Fletcher, John Ford, Massinger, Decker expressed all main features of the English Genius, and if there were any great English writers after them then there was never such general poetic development and such irresistible <...> freedom in poetic creative work of England" [13, p. 292]. In the same essay Marlowe was characterized as "Shakespeare's predecessor and competitor" [13, p. 303], "a poet equal to Shakespeare", who created "the first Faustus character having converted a cheap popular German tale into a superb one" [13, p. 293]. Balmont translated and cited a couplet "I hold the Fates bound fast in iron chains, / And with my hand turn Fortune's wheel about" [14, p. 17] from the second scene of the first act of "Tamburlaine the Great" [see 13, p. 294]. The words of an ambitious character Mortimer the younger from "Edward II" (act V, scene 6), who "having planned something excessive faced his execution" and bravely entered into controversy with the inevitable hostile fate, also attracted the Russian poet and translator: "Base Fortune, now I see, that in thy wheel / There is a point, to which when men aspire, / They tumble headlong down: that point I touch'd, / And, seeing there was no place to mount up higher, / Why should I grieve at my declining fall? - / Farewell, fair queen, weep not for Mortimer, / That scorns the world and, as a traveller, / Goes to discover countries yet unknown" [15, p. 95]. Balmont translated this fragment too [see 13, p. 295].

While thinking over love able to make the meanest person eloquent, skillfully pronouncing everlasting words K.D.Balmont illustrated it with a scene from "The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus" by Ch.Marlowe in which the main character, who exhausted "the good he had reached at the cost of the malefic contract with demonic powers", was doomed to eternal condemnation, captured with confusion, horror, despair in his soul, but refusing "in bitter grief to call to the God, to wriggle as a worm in penitential sadness", called by magic Helen of Troy into being, kissed her and by means of it "avoided remorse, the God, eternity of salvation for the sake of eternity of a blessed moment the beauty of which could not be

broken by the very eternity of condemnation” [13, p. 296-297]. In the essay “Don Juan Character in the World Literature”, also included into the collection of articles “Mountain Peaks”, while considering the idea of the first meeting as the beginning of affection Balmont remembered a well-known Marlowe’s verse: “Marlowe’s verse, repeated by Shakespeare, always lives in Don Juan: “Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?” [13, p. 465].

Being captured with Ch.Marlowe’s creative work K.D.Balmont wrote a sonnet “Marlowe” in 1916. It was first published a year later in the author’s collection of works “Sonnets of the Sun, Honey and Moon: A Song of Worlds” and then republished several times in the editions of the second half of the XXth – the beginning of the XXIst century, including Balmont’s volume of the Great Series of “The Poet’s Library” [16, p. 419].

The publication of “The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus” in K.D.Balmont’s translation caused the art and literature critic B.A.Grifitsov to write a review printed in #2 of the journal “Russkaya mysl” (“The Russian Thought”) in 1912. He noted that the issuing of Marlowe’s “Tragical History of Doctor Faustus” would be attractive for those researchers of the world literature, who were interested in questions “about the origin of Shakespeare’s tragedy form or genesis of Goethe’s “Faust”” and that in this case a wish to see “an absolute value of every event” would be rather important than an attempt to appreciate “a comparative value of every literary phenomenon in some progressive row” [17, p. 427]. According to Grifitsov, “The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus” has “not only the outline of Goethe’s various and complex poem, but also the preimage of its details (Faustus’ *servant* Wagner, Spirit *in the shape of* Helen of Troy, etc.)” [17, p. 427]. Comparative poverty and simplicity of Marlowe’s descriptions were accepted by Grifitsov as the only opportunity “to express the sense of tragic nature lost among boundless complexity of Goethe’s *thoughts*”, in connection with this “The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus” and Goethe’s “Faust” were compared as phenomena having their own art value and in no way deserving superficial evaluative characteristics. In particular, the critic saw the merits of Marlowe’s tragedy in the harmonic part of the Chorus (extremely unimportant in Goethe’s one), in efficiency of buffoonery (violation of Pope’s dignity by Faustus in the seventh scene, the Horse Dealer pulling Faustus’ leg off his body in the eleventh scene) which in no way drew away from the main development of the plot (in contrast to episodic scenes in Goethe’s one), in the winning part of the fourteenth (Helen’s appearance with music sounds) and fifteenth (the Old Man’s prophetic speech) scenes, finally, in orderliness of the

very tragic action ending with “calm hopeless words” about predetermined fortune [17, p. 428]. While underlining the interest of the Russian theatre to Goethe’s “Faust” Grifitsov hoped that “staging of Goethe’s poem would remind about a possibility to stage a real tragedy of Marlowe” [17, p. 428].

Another response to the book was M.A.Kuzmin’s review published in #5 of the journal “Apollon” (“Apollo”). He characterized Shakespeare’s epoch as the one charged with “the spirit of anxious life and pompous exaltation” happening not because of “dreaminess or aversion for modern life, as in works of German writers of Romanticism, but because of full-blooded fleshy vitality” [4, p. 53]. Marlowe became the forerunner of the epoch in which every word was full of “ineradicable life, general talent and sensible “sanguineous” joy”, revealing his own gift he skillfully conveyed “greatness of the time” what is especially evident in “The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus” where “many Faustus’ monologues and vulgar scenes have the thrill of really Shakespeare’s epoch” [4, p. 53]. Kuzmin saw the main disadvantages of Marlowe’s tragedy in sketchiness and “some naivety” reasoned by interrelationship with traditions of medieval miracle plays and expressed, particularly, in the description of “these or those displays of the German doctor’s hellish power”, for instance, in the scenes at Pope’s and Emperor’s brought to “visual trickery” [4, p. 53]. The reviewer did not call upon to understand Marlowe and J.W.Goethe as competitors in interpretation of one plot as the tragedy of the English dramatist did not bear a resemblance to the “humanitarian philosophic educational” work of the German writer even in a small degree [4, p. 53]. Having no opportunity to compare the translation and English original Kuzmin confined himself to the general opinion about “the literary effect” of Balmont’s interpretation which partly made one “doubt in its accuracy”, he also noted absence of typical “abundance of Balmont’s decorations the effect of which was not always pleasant in other translations of this author” [4, p. 53].

In the 1920-s M.M.Bakhtin considered the influence of “Shakespeare’s epoch with Marlowe at the head”. He noted the English author’s skill to represent “an absolutely new and original version” of the medieval legend about doctor Faustus. He came to the interesting conclusion that “it is necessary to look for Balmont’s amorality in extraordinary and a little shadowy Marlowe’s amorality” [18, p. 301].

It is known that a separate edition of “The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus” in K.D.Balmont’s translation realized by K.F.Nekrasov in 1912 was in A.A.Blok’s library [19, #2090]. Earlier the edition of the first book of Balmont’s “Mountain Peaks” caused

Blok to think over Christopher Marlowe and other English and Spanish writers of Renaissance. The book was followed by Blok's review in #6 of the journal "Novy Put" ("A New Way") in 1904 in which it was noted in connection with the article "Feeling of the Personality in Poetry": "The peak of individual creative work of Calderon and Tirso de Molina, Marlowe and Shakespeare is reasoned by an ability to act <...>. Quevedo, a writer of Old Spain, was killed with a sword at the duel. Marlowe, blind with jealousy, was killed with his rival's dagger" [2, p. 536].

In his article "Faustus and a Petty Demon" published in December of the year 1908 in the newspaper "Rech" ("The Speech") while characterizing heroes of V.Ya.Bryusov's novel "The Fiery Angel" G.I.Chulkov mentioned "Faustus" <"The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus"> by Ch.Marlowe: "Marlowe's "Faustus" – Goethe's "Faust" – Bryusov's "Faust" – would sound not bad, if not the fateful failure which befell our contemporary. Bryusov's Mephistopheles somehow lost his luster, got silly and became a Petty Demon of the smallest rank" [20; cited in 21, p. 519]. Marlowe is mentioned in the previously published sarcastic A.Bely's review of M.A.Kuzmin's novel "Wings" (in the journal "Pereval" ("The Pass") in 1907). The author of it "shows his aestheticism off": "I can say we have heard about all this. About the aphrodisiac shape of eyes, about Klinger's radiant distance, about Rameau, about Debussy, about Marlowe, about Swinburne, about Russia in old times: we have also heard about hooks, about bath-house attendants, and about other pineapples; and some preferred cabbage to pineapples" [22, p. 50].

According to A.L.Sobolev [see 23, p. 57, 68, 103, 153], the name of Christopher Marlowe can be found in four sources published in the journal "Vesy" ("The Scales") – "Letters from England" by W.R.Morfill in #11 of the year 1904 [see 24, p. 38-39], #1 [see 25, p. 50-51] and #9-10 [see 26, p. 71-72] of the year 1905, in the article by E.K.Tsvetkovskaya (under the pseudonym *Elena Ts.*) "About Whitman, Balmont, Criticism and Honesty" (#12 of the year 1906) [see 27, p. 46-51] which became a response to the previously published article by K.I.Chukovsky "Russian Whitmaniana" [see 28, p. 43-45] and caused his rebuff "About the Use of Bromine. Concerning Elena Ts." [see 29, p. 52-60]. In particular, in #1 of the year 1905 Morfill mentioned the republication of the play "The Devil's Charter" by Barnabe Barnes in England in 1607. He mistakenly took it as the predecessor of "The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus" by Ch.Marlowe known to Russian readers "in an excellent translation of Balmont" [25, p. 50]. In #12 of the year 1906 Tsvetkovskaya considered

Balmont's "crystal perfect translations of Marlowe, Edgar Poe, Shelley, Tennyson, Blake, Calderon, Spanish folk songs" appreciated not only "by unpretentious Russian audience, who more read than write", but also "by specialists of literary word and science of language in England, Spain and France" [27, p. 46-47].

Conclusion

As we can see, having got interested in "The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus" by Ch.Marlowe in 1899 K.D.Balmont did not confine himself to the translation of it and writing an introductory article "Some Words about Faustus Character" to it, but became an admirer of Marlowe for many years the evidence of what is favourable mentions about the English poet in the collection of articles "Mountain Peaks" (1904), in correspondence, and creating of the sonnet "Marlowe" in 1916. By means of Balmont's activity Marlowe was accepted by many of his contemporaries, in particular, A.A.Blok, M.A.Kuzmin, who in later decades got deeply interested in Shakespeare and the Elizabethan epoch in general, A.I.Deitch and others.

Summary

K.D.Balmont's activity, as a matter of fact, marked a new stage in Russian reception of Christopher Marlowe's creative work. He was the first and the only, to present day, Russian writer, who could combine literary criticism, translation, and, in essence, literary understanding of the works by the great English dramatist of the Elizabethan epoch. In the light of Balmont's interpretation Marlowe was understood and accepted by many writers of the Russian Silver Age.

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