

History of Russian Silver Age literature-centrism crisis

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Abstract. The article discusses some trends in the artistic thinking of the 19th – 20th centuries, the synthesis of nonfiction and fiction in the genre system, as well as literary and critical discussions about the literature crisis. The analysis is based on the articles of literary critics of the late 19th - early 20th centuries. They did not only assess modern literature but also discussed a wide range of issues: problems of nonfiction and its role in literature, literature boundaries, and ways to overcome the literature crisis. The criticism of this period clearly shows that fiction was pushed to the sidelines, the role of “living texts” increased, and very often they became more important than fiction. Consequently, in the late 19th - early 20th centuries there was a shift in the literature functions. The traditional Russian literature-centrism was weakened.

[Krylov V.N. **History of Russian Silver Age literature-centrism crisis.** *Life Sci J* 2014;11(10s):399-401] (ISSN:1097-8135). <http://www.lifesciencesite.com>. 75

Keywords: crisis, fiction literature, nonfiction, document, literary criticism, literature-centrism

Introduction

Russian literature-centrism is an axiom in anthropology and literary criticism. It is manifested in many spheres including policy of literary translation [1]. Since Russian literature has lost its dominant role in culture, it has given rise to a number of consequences such as the status (social status) of a writer, the changed ratio of “classic” and popular literature, a reading habit, emergence of journal culture, the impact of media on the role of literature in the field of culture. [2] This phenomenon, which has been much spoken about over the last two decades, can hardly be related to recent social and political implications in Russia. It is more accurate to say about the global trend linked with a change in the literature functions. Wolfgang Iser noted that in modern society “literature and art have stopped being a cultural paradigm, and their functions have been assumed by the media that truly represent the modern civilization” [3]. But the internal processes are equally important: there are certain attempts to overcome this crisis in literature itself, literary criticism. In this article we will focus on the Russian Silver Age. The Silver Age in modern science is regarded as the second (in the history of Modern Time literature) step in Russian literature-centrism ordeal. By the turn of the 19th – 20th centuries there had been fixed “fatigue from the word, disappointment in it, even distrust in it” [4], the hegemony of literature was thoroughly undermined by non-verbal art forms. [5] However, this era experienced a very interesting and promising theoretical and practical (art) search for new ways of achieving authenticity - these and other issues in the Silver Age became the subject of many reflections in criticism.

Materials and methods

In this respect, the criticism of the Silver Age, especially modernistic, was studied badly. S. Rabinovich marked: “Of all the literary aspects (related to the decade of Russian modernism) criticism and journalism <...> have experienced the largest neglect on the part of scientists; they remain the darkest corners of our understanding of Russian symbolism” [6]. Let us examine some of the critics’ views.

Here are the reflections of Vasily Rozanov: “Literature has taken away from me everything I loved and respected: life itself; and it has involved me in something that I never respected and loved: the external objective life. That is why I have always written feeling hostility towards writing itself and the subjects of writings. This seems to have generated the literary disgust of mine. Literature was my prison that closed sunlight from me; the people I loved; nature. The green field of the desk was my nature, a circle of friends” of art [7]. Rozanov is the extreme expression of anti-literariness, anti-literary attacks that were much written about in the studies about him.

But if we turn to the statements of others, less radical contemporaries, it will turn out that it was a general mood, the general trend of the era. It was characteristic of such sophisticated artists as Z. Gippius, D. Filosofov. The Silver Age criticism put many of the words in quotation marks such as “literature”, “literariness” expressing an ironic attitude to literature in its opposition to the genuine, real life. In the Silver Age there was much speculated about what was superior (what is more important for the reader now) nonfiction or fiction? For example, here is a typical of the post-revolutionary situation reasoning of Z. Gippius (in 1908 she had a column

“From the diary of a journalist” in the journal “Russian Thought”): “My theme is wider than literature. I am now more interested in the spiritual life of all young people rather than in its reflection in art or artistic creation of talented representatives of the younger generation. The majority do not write, or publish, or have any particular talent < ... > Literature is just one of the areas for research. It helps to study, but... you should choose from it the least literary things: they are more valuable. They are closer to life. They are practically human documents, and this is what is more important to us. Blok and even Gorodetsky, their collections of poems represent this kind, but we do not need them now. Gorodetsky, besides his talent, has so much more pure literariness that you cannot get him. And even more interesting are the fragments of authentic “abstracts” of young, helpless “Monday” poor articles in the Rus, sometimes clumsily framed in the literary form of a story scattered here and there...” [8]. This opinion is linked with two life and literary issues of the time: 1) the issue of young people, the decline in morals of the young people (it was much written about); 2) assessment of literary experiments of young writers. In the era of the so-called reaction that followed the first Russian revolution, the level of public morality decreased considerably, murder, and robbery became ordinary things, the masses were penetrated by craving stunning sensations, shows. D. Filosofov wrote at the time (in his review of 1909 to the novel by B. Savinkov “Pale Horse”): “We have got used to literature horrors. Leonid Andreev, Sergeev-Tsensky and many others got us used to that. Besides, modern Russian reality is full of nightmares so that we have lost all measures of normal, healthy life. It is difficult to surprise us now. A personality has turned into a static unit. Cholera, suicides, murders, executions ceased to be a reality, took the form of tablets with facts that we look through with indifference and often not even look through in “boring” newspapers. It is difficult to believe that somewhere there are people laughing, playing, having fun, living a normal life. The fate has shouldered too much burden on the generation that has survived consciously the external and internal defeat of the recent years. Maybe, this generation will never recover. And if it recovers, it will still remain crippled with squeezed soul” [9] (these words from 1909 sound so modern today!). The press of that time wrote a lot about young people. The “Russian School” magazine in 1907-1908 published a series of articles by G. Agraev devoted to the morbid state of the youth (in particular, it wrote about the emergence in Russian cities of different societies “Ogarki”, “Lovi Moment”, etc.) [10].

The intensity of public life in the early 20th century (especially after 1905) led to the fact that fiction paled into insignificance, the role of “living texts” increased, they were often more important than fiction. Observers of many newspapers wrote that, over the recent most disturbing months fiction was pushed to the sidelines, the forefront was occupied by the issues of the day, questions of modernity. Writers could not compete with the simple facts of life.

Results

We argue that the trend of polarization of fiction and the truth was already maturing in the early 20th century. With this we associate several features of the literary life of the beginning of the century:

1. Increased importance of nonfiction in periodicals and continuing interest of first class writers in authentic texts.

2. General democratization of literature with amateurs joining it. This feature was accurately recorded by E. Koltonovskaya in the article “Literature and “Writers of the People””: “The characteristic feature of the current literature is that it is “democratized” not in a serious ideological sense of the word, but in the everyday one. The writer’s role has been claimed by the reader who was passive and silent before. The amateur gradually replaces the serious writer... Journals are filled with all sorts of amateurish works - diaries, memoirs, stories from their private lives, etc. Writers by vocation and profession drown among them as drops in the sea”. E. Koltonovskaya believes that “literature does not need all the raw material: it is simple stuff! But as the material, as a direct voice of life, amateur works are sometimes interesting” [11]. However, the emergence of such texts engendered the “exaggerated” estimate by the critics of the “newcomers” in literature (such assessment was given to B. Savinkov’s novel “Pale Horse” made by Z. Gippius, D. Filosofov).

3. The latest research of the specifics of the genre system of the Silver Age has revealed two opposing processes: idealization and introduction of realist genres (diary, letter, etc.) into literature that are balanced by the desire to create synthetic genres [12]. The process of de-idealization took place at the same time. On the contrary, compared with the turn of the 18th – 19th centuries, it increased and led to the fact that the artist tended to overstep not only traditional genres but also some forms of art and even to overcome the impassable line between art and life. Hence, the influential concept of theurgy as an art form of life itself which initiated relevant research in the field of drama and theatre; the increased role of “living texts” that also became an element of art too and creative life in general [13,14].

4. Finally, by the 1910s, the time of summing up the first results of literature of the late 19th – early 20th centuries, criticism had recorded changes in the functions of Russian literature. F. Stepun in the article “The Past and Future of the Slavophiles” concluded: “Now it is clear to all that lately it (art – K.V.) seems to have lost the importance it had in the previous years: it is no longer the conscience, confession and spiritual conviction of Russia. Previously, the writer was made to describe how life had to be lived. Now, everybody is satisfied to read about how everyone lives. Before, art was a method of construction of life, today the whole world has become a matter for art creation”. [15]. In other words, criticism contrasts the literature of the 19th century, writers of great ideas and active citizenship with modern literature not in the favour of the latter. Similar statements can be found in the modernist and mass newspaper criticism.

Conclusion

Thus, the Silver Age demonstrated “fatigue” from fiction and apparent increase of nonfictional origin as an attempt to overcome the literature crisis. This prompts to make adjustments to the picture of the literary process of the 20th century. Literary historians (P. Paliievsky, etc.) associate the spread of the fact with World War II or with the World War I and the Revolution. But, as evidenced by the facts, the trends appeared much earlier, in the first decade of the 20th century. But at the same time this period was a time when literature lost its philosophical function and when the intellectual elite became aware of this process.

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6/24/2014