

Crisis of Biographical Methodology in Russian Science and Criticism of 1920-1930

Valerij Anatoljevich Cherkasov

Belgorod State National Research University, Belgorod, Russia

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Abstract: In this article the basic tendency in the comprehension of the biographical meaningfulness of fictional works by Russian literary scholars and critics, who lived in the period 1920-1930 is considered. By that time side by side with the radical biographical method of the M.O. Gershenson's school there existed the antibiographical approach to fictional works, which was developed by formalists and was radical too. V.M. Zhirmunsky and B.V. Tomashevsky tried to reconcile these contradictory views in the theory and practice of literary criticism. The mythopoetical interpretation of the writer's biography in D.S. Merezhkovsky's essay "Dante" (1939) is presented as an alternative for the biographical method.

Key words: The biographical method • The legendary biography of writer • The biographical personality of writer • Mythopoetics

INTRODUCTION

Literary genre of biography started to dominate in the 1st half of XX century; before that time it was merely peripheral phenomenon. To illustrate this point it is sufficient to give statistical data on spread of biography genre in Anglo-Saxon world of literature which were collected by P. Kendall in his monograph "The Art of Biography" [1]. By his estimate in the USA between 1916 and 1930 about 4800 biographies were published, 300 per year at average. In 1929 in the time of biographical boom 667 new biographic works found their way to the audience, this happened in the country with population of 120 million people. In 1962 when population was 180 million the same number of new biographies was published, among 16448 titles considered as total number of published books [1]. Paramount significance of biographies in world literary evolution of the first half of XX century is manifested by attempts of serious theoretical understanding based on the look from "inside" which were done by such masters of the genre of 1920-1930 as A. Maurois [2], G. Nicolson, V. Woolf [4], E. Ludwig [5] etc. In our opinion the most illustrative in this regard are observations made by V. Woolf on account of the texts of one of the most influential biographers, L. Strachey [6], who among other constructive particularities of "new biography" [7] mentioned, firstly, its lesser, in comparison with typical biographies of previous Victorian

age, volume and secondly, attitude of the author to the hero as equal to him and as sequence of this attitude, (thirdly) - freedom of author's thoughts about him which is manifested in selection of "appropriate" for creation of hero's image biographical data about him - not in narration of all known for the moment and chronologically ordered facts, as it was characteristic of Victorian writers.

Unique opportunity to consider as if through a prism various aspects of actual in the period between two wars biographical problematic is given by highly analytical reviews from "outside" position made by such professional literary critics as J. Johnson (his speculations on the genre's characteristics of biographical essay, sketch, literary portrait [7], M. Longaker (thoughts about the influence of socio-political situation during World War I on ideological contents of post-war biography as genre) [9, 8]; E. Johnson (remarks about modern interest in "personal history" as the reason for popularity of the biography) [10, 13]; R. Littell (about scientific status of biography) [11]; Bernard DeVoto (criticism from ethic point of view of psycho-analytical method used in biographies written by S. Freud and his numerous followers [12] etc.

For us the most significant is polemics of J. Johnson against anti-biographical trends in world biography genre and his conclusions about constructive significance of biographical background [8] while studying the personality and creative work of the author; and critical

and eagle-eyed analysis by E. Johnson of biographic approach of one more significant biographer of 1920-1930 (besides mentioned Strachey) of the French writer A. Maurois ("He does not hesitate to assume an identity between an author and whatever seem to be autobiographic traits in his writings..." - E. Johnson wrote [10]. Significant because they testify at least the ambiguous attitude of western scientists and critics to biographical methodology.

1920-1930s is a break-point period in world literature study when positivist methodology which was focused on causality between the views of a writer and his biographical identity and which dominated all over XIX century gave a way to numerous anti-biographical literature studies methods: phenomenological (Heidegger), spiritual-historical (Husserl), existential (Marcel, Sartre), structural (Jacobson, Trubetskoy) etc. [13]. Russian study of literature is no exception: though biographical approach was still significant and dominated in works of such prominent scientists and critics as (M. Gershenson, Yu. Tynyanov, V. Khodasevitch, L. Grossman, D Blagoi, N. Brodsky etc.) [14-17] anti-biographism as literary technique was recognized by the representatives of very different branches of Russian literary thought: from formalists and sociologists to symbolists with their mytho-poetic discourse.

In our work we are going to characterize main methodological approaches based on anti-biographism in Russian literature study and criticism of 20-30s both in mother country and abroad (Russian emigration).

Main Part: The fighters against biographism as scientific method in the beginning of 1920-s were the formalists. In their opinion it is no point in seeking in the literary works for biographical meaning because between literature and reality there is no direct relationship. Especially illustrative is the position of B. Eikhenbaum who pointed out in his work "Young Tolstoy" (1922) to inevitable distortion which must affect spiritual life while putting it in words and arrived at the conclusion about principal non-verification of such statements of Leo Tolstoy on account of his spiritual life which were made by him in youth diary in the text which traditionally is regarded as documentary [18]. Another formalist Yu. Tynyanov focused his efforts on description of the phenomenon left in a literary work after elimination of biographical identity of a writer. In the essay "Blok and Heine" (1921) the scientist focuses his contemporaries' attention on paradoxical situation formed around biographical identity of Blok as a result of expansion of literary identity of the poet: the last one to

such extent pushed out from readers' consciousness the first one that became spiritually immortal after physical elimination of mortal shell [19]. Thus, Tynyanov for the first time in history introduced the idea of "lyrical hero" or literary identity" into scientific use [20].

Opposition to biographical approach formed by formalists proved to be very fruitful in the scale of world study of literature. The traces of their influence can be found in the appeal of American literary critics R. Wellec and A. Warren, the authors of fundamental "Theory of literature"(1949) "to outline the history of literature as a form of Arts" refusing among other things from the study of an author's biography [21]. However for such prominent Russian academics of 20-30-s as V. Zhirmunsky and B. Tomashevsky radical anti-biographism of formalists was unacceptable. In their methodology they strived to combine biographical approach and studies of formalist character. Zhirmunsky in his program article "The tasks of poetics" (1919) gave grounds (argued) about the appropriateness of biographical approach in the framework of study of poetics of a literary work [22]. In his article "Literature and biography"(1923) Tomashevsky pointed out to the phenomenon of "authors with a biography": the authors who created around their name a legendary biography. The last, in the scientist's opinion, performs a constructive function in the works of these writers and therefore can not be ignored by the researcher.

In Russian emigration circles the most prominent alternative for biographism was symbolists' discourse with particular mytho-poetical interpretation of writer's biography. Biographer-symbolist is interested not in specific individuality of a writer but transparent through him out-of-time essence: not biography but a mythological hero. A very colourful example of such mytho-poetic interpretation of a writer's biography is Merezhkovsky's essay "Dante" (1939) which will be the object of our analysis for the rest of this article.

In Merezhkovsky's opinion "angelization" of Beatrice in New Life is very conditional - it is effect of youth immaturity of the author, influenced by Provance theory and his unanswered love [24]. Following this mind-set the author destructs Dante's mythology focusing on subject plan at the expense of authentic symbolic plan. Such effect was achieved thanks to use of the following main techniques:

- *appeal to common sense* based in its arguments or conclusions on those sensual or rational data which are obvious for most people.

- *re-writing* of the plot of New Life in the *palimpsest* way. Refusing from authenticity of the concept of "angelization" of Beatrice in New Life Merezhkovsky re-constructs, somehow overlapping the love story of this work, the "true" feelings of his biographical Dante in a manner "it did not happen but it could happen anyway".
- *focusing on erotic plan* in the text of New Life expressed in *symbolist images of Dante*.

In Merezhkovsky's opinion in the process of creation of Divine Comedy Dante cardinally changed his views on love and relations with Beatrice of New Life period. The author refers to his own interpretation of the Dante's encounter with Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta and with Beatrice in the Earth's Paradise of "Purgatory". In his opinion these episodes are linked by the motive of Dante's fainting not only to each other but to that episode of New Life where the hero "almost fainted" after having visited by his friend's advice a house of some newly-wed bride and seen there, among other donnas, Beatrice [25]. This reaction of Dante is explained by Merezhkovsky psychologically: Dante is shocked when he has learned his own sin standing in front of Beatrice loving him. Anger and reproaches towards Dante expressed by Beatrice in the Earth's Paradise of the Purgatory in psychological plan mean jealousy (her Earth's love) but in symbolist plan it means *divine* character of this love because the poet's beloved had become immortal, turned into Divine Spirit, in Merezhkovsky's opinion [25].

The whole Divine Comedy in Merezhkovsky opinion testifies the wish of Dante to restore broken by him status quo between his earth and heaven love to Beatrice. Achieving this status quo in the form of obtaining "divine flesh" eliminates contradiction between love and church marriage: Simone de Bardi and Gemma Donati as any other engaged people can and must take place beside their husbands in the single whole free spiritual love. Then, in Merezhkovsky opinion, it will become "Permanent Testament of Divine Spirit" [25] or the Kingdom of the 3rd Precept.

Thus, the psychological interpretation of symbolist images of New Life and Divine Comedy allowed Merezhkovsky to create principally new artistic reality, which ideally suites his concept of Dante as a prophet of oncoming revelations of Divine Spirit. In our opinion psychological-biographical investigation of Merezhkovsky can be called as such conditionally because the author deals with some extra-sensitive reality in which specific human individualities do not exist, there

exists Life transformed into Word or the Word itself being the God, as it was said. The criteria of truth in regard to speculations on this issue can be the own revelations of the prophet from other world, which are added by Merezhkovsky's own belief in his messiah-like gift. From practical point of view such approach leads to destruction of the underlying causality of psychological-biographical interpretation between literary and biographical facts through the expansion of his own and raising many doubts - in the terms of authenticity of Dante's concept - ideological content.

CONCLUSION

Summarizing the review of the main biographic concepts of 1920-1930s it is worth mentioning that in this inter-war period of 20 years in Russian science and literature a very strong opposition to biographic approach existed. It was a result of deep dissatisfaction with traditional method of listing facts from the author's life found in his statements which was especially explicit in the works of Gershenson. All mentioned above writers and researchers who followed the anti-biographic approach shared the opinion that it is unacceptable to identify the hero from a literary work with a personality of the writer. This belief was connected with common idea about dominating esthetic value of literary works conflicting with practice of biographers who considered literary work only as a secondary material to study the writer as a person.

Inference:

- Eikhensbaum, Tynyanov and other participators of OPOYaZ radically denied any biographical importance of literary works - including diaries, lyrics.
- Anti-biographical radicalism of OPOYaZ members was unacceptable for such scientists as Zhirmunsky and Tomashevsky. Both agreed that literary works could be a source of an author's biography. But in the same time they restricted subjective tyranny in interpretation of the texts having fictional status, accepted by the representatives of Gershenson's school, demanding critical verification of the contents of these texts.
- Russian literary emigration of 1920-30s are characterized by mytho-poetic interpretation of literary works and the author's biography, genetically similar to symbolists' creativity. Anti-biographism of mytho-poetic approach to a biography is based on assumption of non-relevance of dichotomy between

literary and biographical identity of a writer, focus on out-of-time, universal features of a personality of a writer. For example, in his biographical essay "Dante" Merezhkovsky implements his concept of the 3rd Precept in spite of authentic contents of such works of Dante as *New Life* and *Divine Comedy*. As a result the writer creates Dante-mythological-hero which was different from specific biographical identity of the great Italian in the same degree as mentioned concept of Merezhkovsky differs from deconstructed by him personal mythology of the author of *New Life*.

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