

The Literary Hero and the Types of Heroes in Russian Literature of the XXI Century

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Received: 02 July 2020

Accepted: 17 March 2021

Published online: 25 April 2021

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Abstract This paper is devoted to the problem of the evolution of the literary hero and the types of heroes in Russian literature of the XXI century. The admiration of the person being described and the desire to redirect this feeling to the reader make the style of the work of contemporary Russian writer Zakhar Prilepin realistic from the prism of modernity (neorealism). Prilepin sets himself the task of talking about the fate of a person who faces many difficulties in his/her desire to fit in the modern world where human values have transformed beyond recognition from what they were in the literature of the 19th and 20th centuries. Prilepin then gradually moves to comprehend a more global problem: is fitting in even possible in the conditions where absolutely everyone is carrying a bit of hell with oneself? Prilepin seeks to get an answer to this question on a truly epochal, historical scale. This paper also discusses the role of Prilepin in the context of modern Russian literature, aiming to determine the transformation of modern Russian prose based on Prilepin's works. Prilepin's views on the formation and development of the literary process in the 21st century explore the peculiarities of the hero and the specifics of the writer's artistic world. He categorizes the types of heroes as follows: provincial, rebellious, intellectual, and others. The paper, thus, attempts to analyze the main features of the imaginative system in the works of Prilepin in the context of neorealism.

Keywords Writer Creativity Literature Modern Versatility Specificity New era Genre Concept Personality Transformation

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1. Introduction

Zakhar Prilepin is a writer who openly speaks on topics of public concern. An essential element of his work are his reflections, marked by love or dislike, on classical and modern Russian literature. Known as a compiler of prose and poetry anthologies—“War” («Война», 2008); “Revolution” («Революция», 2009); “Ten” («Десятка», 2011); “Litperron” («Литперрон», 2011); “Lemon in jail” («Лимонка в тюрьму», 2012); “Zakhara Prilepin’s Library. Poets of XX century” («Библиотека Захара Прилепина. Поэты XX века», 2015); “Lemon in the war” («Лимонка в войну», 2016)—Prilepin has also authored “Conversations with Russian literature” (“Named Hearts”) («Разговоры с русской литературой», 2009), a collection of interviews with leading Russian authors, and “Knigochet” («Книгочёт» 2012), manuals on the latest literature, with lyrical and sarcastic digressions.

2. Relevance of the research problem

A writer with international fame has the ability to influence the formation of the literary biases of his/her readership: «Каждый раз я слышу от людей: читать нечего; помогите разобраться, что происходит вообще? Народ растерян: прозы нет; поэзия умерла... Я рассказываю подробно: такой-то пишет про это; вышла такая-то книга; ну и вообще о том, что творится с литературой...» (Prilepin 2018: 232).

According to Prilepin, one can generally find “everything in the world of thought” in Russian literature; it forms a major portion of the world literature, is even “the strongest” among all forms of literature, and is “more expensive than oil and gas.” For Prilepin, classical Russian literature is part of the nature—“divine” as well as “his own,” and “to compare his work with the Russian classics” is both incorrect and inappropriate.

“The Hero of Our Time” («Героя нашего времени») and “Anna Karenina” («Анну Каренину») are Prilepin’s two most beloved novels of the 19th century—he rereads those every 5 years, and every time, they become more beautiful (Prilepin 2018: 237). Despite the fact that Prilepin is deeply convinced of the viability of the modern Russian literary process, he is not ready to seriously list the books of his contemporaries with the classics such as “Divine Comedy” («Божественной комедии»), “Candida” («Кандида»), and “The Captain’s Daughter” («Капитанской дочки»).

The fact that “many modern writers ... do not read books themselves” is “paradoxical” in Prilepin’s view. If the writers “in the time of A.S. Pushkin and N.V. Gogol” did not read the work of their contemporaries, wanting “to waste time” only on “really high-quality products,” they deprived themselves of the classics of the Golden Age of Russian literature (Chernjak 2010: 106). The modern Russian literary process can be characterized as extremely heterogeneous, and in the words of M.A. Chernjak as “motley, controversial, and multifaceted” (Chernjak 2010: 40). Such “versatility,” which inevitably entails the emergence of “new names, genres, concepts,” is not in the least connected with the natural adaptation of literature to the

general socio-cultural situation and to its updated readership. It is unusual that this adaptation occurs through the inevitable appeal to the past, to its deepest foundations. Many trends in the 2000s have existed before in time.

3. Methodological framework

Russian literature of “today,” according to Prilepin, is “the surest thermometer” showing the “complete disintegration of values” at a time when “it was just a move to talk about normal things” and “everything is a logical” (Prilepin 2018: 241). According to Prilepin, when the “failure” that was observed in the literature in the 1990s when “a thinking person, a reader ... found himself in some wasteland” was overcome, “literature began to regain its position” (Prilepin 2018: 242).

However, at the same time, “several generations of writers appeared one after another, who allegedly don’t read each other” and if they do, “they don’t say much about these topics” (Kamilova 2016: 243).

Prilepin clearly demonstrates this “breadth” of modern Russian literature in his collections and anthologies. Let us dwell on the collection “Conversations with Russian Literature” (“Named Hearts”), with the obvious exception of its educational functions, the report of which would be autopsycholism. Much can be learned from “Named Hearts,” for instance, the degree to which the readers sympathize with the artistic text depends on the manifestation of certain psychologically related features in the text’s author. The appearance of the various authors in the collection is quite distinguishable.

“Named Hearts” is a collection of Prilepin’s interviews with modern authors, the choice of whom he calls as “deeply subjective.” He speaks only with those who seem “interested” to him, with whom “fate has confronted him”; therefore, the book is “isolated parts of a huge literary mosaic.” At the same time, Prilepin explains that the book contains no interviews with the “living classics” of Russian literature like Valentin Rasputin, “prose writers and poets of the older generation,” and “prominent critics and editors”; therefore, the collection does not claim to be “a comprehensive portrait of literature.” In the “Preface” of the book, Prilepin draws the readers’ attention to the fact that the list of questions he selected for “conversations” with different representatives of Russian literature is about the same, and that he “did not try to argue” with any of the interviewees, but they “just listened” to each other, representing “a voice-over.”

From the very beginning, this “voice” is distinguished by a surprisingly respectful, “cautious” tone, as one of the first authors Prilepin interviews is Leonid Yuzefovich—his “literary teacher,” a person endowed with “impeccable taste and hearing,” and a “real master.” Yuzefovich’s conversations with Prilepin are somewhat comparable to that of Leonov’s—there are “verandas, add-ins, dead ends, spiers” («с верандами; надстройками; тупиками; шпилями») in them and “the most amazing, rhyming, charming, secret structure of the world is important” («более всего важна удивительная; рифмующаяся; очаровывающая; потайная структура мира»). Yuzefovich, the writer, in Prilepin’s opinion, is the creator of accidents that develop into a “kind of divine irony,” with which the author imparts a “philosophical sound.”

Yuzefovich does not see himself as a “thinker,” considering that his “understanding of life is dissolved in the details of life itself” («понимание жизни растворено в подробностях самой жизни»). Such self-characterization is quite similar to that of Prilepin: “I definitely do not have my own philosophy. I am a person, not thinking, but emotionally reacting to some things” («Своей философии у меня точно нет. Я человек; скорее, не размышляющий; а эмоционально реагирующий на какие-то вещи»). It is noteworthy that there are several similar references in the text of this interview, and in the book as a whole, and it is these references that receive our special attention.

Yuzefovich and Prilepin also have similar views on the awareness of the significance of the historical past. Yuzefovich believes that “the broader historical reality a prose writer operates on, the more he sees coincidences” («чем более широкой исторической реальностью оперирует прозаик; тем больше он видит совпадений»), and that “the past has a lot to say ... because it is noticeably eternal” («прошлое многое может сказать; ... потому что в нем заметно вечное»). Prilepin, who invariably seeks answers to pressing questions in the 19th and 20th centuries and devoted a whole book to such “historical coincidences,” adheres to the same opinion (“No Stranger’s Troubles” «Не чужая смута», 2015). It is also obvious to Yuzefovich that the writer should foremost be concerned not with “what stories he chooses” for narration, but their appearance on paper “on time.” Conforming to these views, Prilepin also states that “some things need to be read on time,” contrary to the conventional wisdom that in modern Russia “there is absolutely nothing to read” («читать совершенно нечего»).

However, there is a noticeable discrepancy in the views of Yuzefovich and Prilepin, which is no less important for identifying certain autopsychological dominants in “Named Hearts.” Yuzefovich is convinced that “a writer should not have political views” because “political engagement requires truncation of reality” whereas for Prilepin, it is obvious that the creator “would be foolish and despicable to ignore politics and sociology of the day” («было бы глупо и подло игнорировать политику и социологию в наши дни») “On figs then this writer is necessary?” («на фиг тогда нужен этот писатель?»). It is much more important for Prilepin not to convince his interlocutors and readers that he is right, but to receive comprehensive answers to his questions concerning Russia and Russian literature—their past, present, and future.

4. Results and discussion

Zakhar Prilepin offers themes of reflection to his “literary peers,” representatives of the “new era”—“the next tectonic shift” («очередного тектонического сдвига») (Kamilova 2016: 245). With each of the “young” authors, Prilepin talks about relatives and the writers of interest to him and is interested in the degree of everyone’s involvement in the modern literary process.

Andrei Rubanov’s opinion of Eduard Limonov, one of the favorite artists of Prilepin, as a “whole” person who is “able to keep his word,” clearly resonates with that of Prilepin. Rubanov notes the quality of Limonov’s prose, which of course, appeals to Prilepin: “His personal experience is at the forefront of his work” («Во

главу угла у него поставлен пережитый личный опыт») (Prilepin 2018: 261). Note that this element is also characteristic of the texts of both Prilepin and Rubanov. However, Prilepin does not share the opinions of Rubanov that are not worth “publicly discussing,” neither does he talk about Rubanov’s desire to treat the literary process “rather as an attentive consumer than as a participant” («скорее как внимательный потребитель; нежели как участник») (Prilepin 2018).

German Sadulayev’s statement that he does not have time to read the works of his contemporaries that are littered with garbage also did not find favor with Prilepin. Prilepin is of the opinion that writers should “delight in language and culture, politics and religion, and the nation” and a book written by another should be “perceived ... as another coin thrown into a common piggy bank.” At the same time, Sadulayev’s view of the war in Chechnya, for Prilepin, is so clear and close that “all the horror created by the Russians in Chechnya” was “much more clearly understood not from what he saw or from communication with dozens of Chechens, but from the book of German Sadulayev” («куда более ясно понят не из увиденного и не из общения с десятками чеченцев; но из книги Германа Садулаева») (Prilepin 2018: 265). There appears to be a certain psychological relationship between the two authors, since they were physically on different sides of the barricades during the Chechen events, and it is also impossible to call the events experienced by them as biographically close. In a conversation with Sergei Shargunov, Prilepin’s interest in women’s prose is clearly visible, especially, the distinctive features that exist between women’s and men’s prose. Shargunov’s statement, “female physiology, the female nature of glamor by definition,” which Prilepin quotes in interviews with Anna Kozlova, Tatyana Nabatnikova, and Vasilina Orlova, apparently shows his aim of determining as accurately as possible his own attitude toward them and this issue in general. At the same time, it is impossible to state unequivocally that Prilepin conforms completely with the views expressed by Shargunov.

It is interesting that despite the extremely poor representation of female writers in “Named Hearts,” Prilepin notes with particular feeling that among all of his interlocutors, only two women “pronounced those clear and sensitive thoughts,” that “I would like to formulate myself first, before them.” This recognition precedes the conversation with Tatyana Nabatnikova, in whose work Prilepin particularly emphasizes the “goodwill” and “restraint” of the submission. At the same time, her judgments are distinguished by their rigor and peremptoriness (which, of course, reveals the psychological relationship of which Prilepin speaks).

Nabatnikova is certain that “it is senseless to lay claim to someone else’s place,” even hers, “the one and only, nobody can take.” Prilepin, in turn, declares: “I do not envy anyone. I am not jealous of either success or strangers’ biographies. I have everything—Motherland; children, readers, friends. And if something is not enough for me, I will take it away” («Никому не завидую. Не завидовал ни чужому успеху; ни чужим биографиям. У меня всё есть—Родина; дети; читатели; друзья. А если чего-то мне не хватит; то я заберу») (Kamilova 2016: 266).

Both Prilepin and Nabatnikova are ready to argue with the truths, which the majority thinks of as capitals. Prilepin, for example, does not like the adage “a thin world is better than a good quarrel” («худой мир лучше доброй ссоры»), since “the notorious political correctness often pushes the sore into the depths, and then breaks

through with a purulent boil” («пресловутая политкорректность часто загоняет болячку в глубину; и она потом прорывается гнойным нарывом») (Kamilova 2016: 267), and “a good quarrel aggravates the relationship and helps eliminate latent mistakes” («хорошая ссора обостряет отношения и помогает устранить подспудные ошибки»).

Prilepin also abhorred the expression “start with yourself”: “Start with yourself—one of the most disgusting phrases for me ... I will eat bread, love my wife, and if I need to punish a villain, I will start with him, not with myself” («Начни с себя—одна из самых отвратительных для меня фраз... Я буду есть хлеб; любить жену; а если мне нужно будет наказать негодяя; я начну с него; а не с себя») because “if I start with myself, he will run faraway” («если я начну с себя; он далеко убежит») (Prilepin 2018: 268). Prilepin also conforms with the writer Anna Kozlova in rejecting the “half tones in life and in prose.” He notes that the writer works “with taste and without false tact, with amazing energy, with cynicism, and sometimes with passion demonstrating amazing honesty” («со вкусом и без ложного такта; с поразительной энергетикой; с цинизмом; а порой и со страстью демонстрируя удивительную честность») (Prilepin 2018: 268). Certainly, some features of Kozlova’s style, indicated here by Prilepin, can also be attributed to him. For the uncompromising Kozlova, it is obvious that “the only way to keep one’s mind is to treat what you are doing as not quite serious” («единственный способ сохранить рассудок—относиться к тому, что ты делаешь; не вполне серьезно»), since “there is nothing more terrible than someone who is wrapped in a scarf with pills, drunk with fake vodka, a graduate of the Literary Institute, who has been telling for 2 hours present about their genius” («нет ничего страшнее какого-нибудь заматанного в шарф с катышками; упившегося паленой водкой выпускника Литинститута; два часа рассказывающего присутствующим о своей гениальности») (Prilepin 2018: 269).

Prilepin also believes that a writer who treats himself/herself as “the best Russian writer of the last 10 years” risks becoming a “patient of a hospital for schizophrenics.” It is interesting that male prose, according to Kozlova, differs from female prose precisely in the fact that “a man rarely has enough spirit to treat himself skeptically as the author” («у мужчины редко хватает духу отнести со скепсисом к себе как к автору») (Prilepin 2018: 270). It is worth noting that in some texts of Prilepin, we once noted signs of combining different gender consciousnesses—male and female—when trying to find some literary inconsistencies in his and Vera Polozkova’s works.

The choice of these two authors was not accidental; it was determined primarily by the fact that the authors at the beginning of their creative paths were really interested in each other’s work. Prilepin called Polozkova “the first poetess of Russia.” Polozkova, in turn, was inclined to see in Prilepin not only an interesting writer, but also the embodiment of a truly masculine view of the world: “He is cool; he is victorious” (Jakovskaja 2018: 28).

Certainly, the author’s personality is reflected in different ways in the epos and lyrics: each kind of literature has its own specific features. Therefore, we will focus, first of all, on the titles, where the seal of the author’s personality manifests itself most clearly when the distinction is made between “male” and “female” literature in the modern world.

5. Conclusion

The analysis reveals that the majority of the works of the authors interviewed in the book “Named Hearts” are autopsychological in nature, and that they do not just recreate abstract images of a man with female traits or a woman with a male feature set, but combine these two oxymoronic principles. Trying to make sense of it, Polozkova notes: “I think that there is no female or male poetry. If you are talking to people as you are with your peers, it doesn’t matter if you have more—male or female” («Я думаю; что не существует женской или мужской поэзии. Если говоришь с людьми; как с равными себе—не важно; чего в тебе больше—мужского или женского») (Prilepin 2018: 272). All this makes it possible to understand that the prose writer and the poet tend to combine in themselves a polar incompatible. In addition, Prilepin is interested in observing such personality traits in other writers.

Furthermore, “hierarchies in modern literature have developed with minimal participation of the writers themselves” whereas “traditionally ... literature was perceived as a field of general work” (Jakovskaja 2018: 102). Not trying to idealize the modern literary process, Prilepin nevertheless comes to an unequivocal conclusion: “There is good literature in Russia. Do not think that all of it consists of what is heard. Russian literature is much wider” (Prilepin 2018: 242).

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