

Philosophy of a Literary Work Language — Through the Example of F.M. Dostoevsky's Story*

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Abstract—Reference of researchers, linguists and philosophers to peculiarities of a literary work language is determined by philosophical issues of the text as a whole. This is topical when translating a well-known classic literary work into another language. It is in such a very case when all obscurities and unclarities in language, sometimes called apophatic ones, are revealed. The term “apophaticism”, coming to philology from theological and philosophical sphere, is especially important when a researcher writes about an author's language. The article deals with Dostoevsky's Christmas story; and the subject of the article is relationship between different types of space in the story. The research methodology implies reference to comparative-historical and typological methods of analysis. Thus, typology with the works of the German romanticist Hoffmann, whose influence on the literary Russia in the first half of the 19th century was quite significant, is justified since both writers blurred the lines between a real world and a fantastic one. The latter also creates an apophatic effect in poetics. Dostoevsky's apophaticism is manifested not only in language but also at the level of different types of space functioning.

Keywords—*philosophy of language; poetics; science fiction; Dostoevsky; apophaticism*

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent times not only linguists and literary scholars but also philosophers referred to language of a literary text. And indeed, language of great writers like, for instance, F.M. Dostoevsky and L.N. Tolstoy, gives an idea of a writer himself, and largely determines a literary norm. Besides, a foreigner getting to know Russian culture starts with reading classical literature which helps to understand the national character. And peculiarities of the world national image are comprehended through a language [1]. Here we recall the famous Humboldt's theory of the people's spirit embodied in language. This issue is topical both for philologists and

philosophers as when translating a text of a famous writer into another language we should take into account peculiarities of the author's poetics, use of metaphors, epithets and other means of expression. And to achieve this, it's necessary to keep in mind linguistic, axiological, and ontological levels of reality.

On the one hand, the language level is very important and here we can speak of a number of works dedicated to Dostoevsky's vocabulary. On the other hand, according to the famous linguist M.Ya. Bloch, the conceptual picture of the world is more difficult than the language picture of the world [2] as the conceptual picture is associated with national characteristics, culture codes, archetypes, etc. Besides, there are some things in Russian poetic language which is difficult to translate into another language. First of all, it is due to a metaphor and apophaticism in the language when we lack words to describe beauty, silence, stillness, etc. In particular, this is clearly observed when analyzing the works of F.I. Tyutchev and S.A. Yesenin, not mentioning the futurist poets' complicated and transcendent language. And facing with such difficulties, it's necessary to refer to philosophy of translation and philosophical issues of the text as a whole.

The researchers have already paid attention to apophaticism of Dostoevsky's language [3] though most of the works dealing with the writer's language are dedicated to his vocabulary and style [4]. However, V.V. Dudkin in his article “The Inexpressible” in the Works of Dante, Goethe and Dostoevsky” analyzes “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man” and indicates that at a certain moment the hero lacks words to express his state. The Divine Principle is described through the image of silence. To our opinion, apophatic nature of the language of Dostoevsky's literary world lies not only behind this but also in special relationship between spatial models of height and bottom contrast and unexpectedness of liminality of a moment which are especially vividly manifested in one short Christmas story.

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The object of this article is the story “The Beggar Boy at Christ’s Christmas Tree”. The article deals with relationship between the models of spaces reflecting peculiarities of the writer’s language.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

F.M. Dostoevsky’s story “The Little Boy at Christ’s Christmas Tree” attracts the researchers with the context of Christmas (holy) theme due to the plot of the story. E.V. Dushchikina in her monograph “The Russian Christmas Story: Formation of the Genre” writes that this story “has gained reputation of a classic Christmas text and, being multiple times reprinted in collections of Christmas stories and reading-books, gave rise to many imitations.” [5]. A.V. Lyapina in her special seminar “Christmas and Easter Motifs in Russian Prose in the second half of the 19th-early 20th century” and in the article “F.M. Dostoevsky’s story “The Little Boy at Christ’s Christmas Tree” in the context of Festive Tradition of the mid-19th century and the Author’s Pedagogical Views” also analyzes this text in connection with the Russian calendar festive cycle [6]. Certainly, this way of looking at the story is based on its plot as it represents classical development of Christmas plots. However, for some reason, this text differs from the other ones with the same theme and especially from the works in which a “Christmas tree” motif can be observed (I.N. Merder’s story “From Life of St. Petersburg Children (The Beggars)” and K.M. Stanukovich’s stories). And the point here is not only that Dostoevsky’s works have great social and moral sense but also in his special poetics and in that how this small but meaningful text is made.

The literary critics, drawing parallels between foreign and Russian traditions, place this story in the large intertextual space. They turn to Ch. Dickens who introduced Christmas theme into Russian literature, to N.V. Gogol (“The Night Before Christmas”) and A.P. Chekhov (“Vanka”). If we talk about Gogol’s poetics, we should take into account M.Y. Lotman’s words in his article “Artistic Space in Gogol’s prose” about the types of spatial models and interrelations thereof: “The heroes of a static and ‘closed’ locus are opposed by the heroes of an ‘open’ space.” [7]. Interaction of the sacred and miracle things with the everyday world in Chekhov’s poetics is a bit more complicated: the little boy Vanka sees his grandfather behind the window to whom he writes a letter but who is not really there. However, here there is a special optics, the child’s vision of the world which is so close to ideas of the Russian fairy tales and those of a search for “the other kingdom.” [8]

III. RESULTS

Everything is different in this short story by Dostoevsky. The researchers begin to analyze the work paying attention to description of the poor six-year-old child and his terrible life: hunger, cold and his sick mother frozen to death [6]. However, a *borderline mortal implied sense* is set here not by this at all. The narrative starts with the author’s small comment in the first part “The Boy with a Hand”: “Children are strange people; they appear in dreams and seem” [9]. After this introduction, the author gives the description of

vagrant boys who walk “with a hand”, i.e. they ask money for food. And in such an introduction, the *metaphysical principle* in Dostoevsky’s poetics appears: an imaginative and figurative vision of the world. The image is given on the edge of ‘it was / it was not’. This may be indeed due to an archetypal character of the child’s image and its folkloric roots. According to folk perceptions, children, orphans and cripples are appeared to be as living beings of the other worlds: they are between *this and the other* world, performing a mediating function. [10]. The second part begins like this: “But I’m a novelist and it seems to me that I created one “story” myself. Why do I write: “it seems”; I know for sure that I have created it but it still seems to me that this happened somewhere and some time, it happened just on the eve of Christmas in *some* big city in a terrible frosty day”. Probably this boy never existed, as the author himself notes, but here a mood and *refraction* of the real life to the literary one is important that casts a reader into a special *borderline* state. This makes us think of special interaction of space types in poetics of the story.

Here, M.M. Bakhtin’s note about the writer’s artistic world is particularly important: Dostoevsky “imagined his world mostly in a space not in time” [11]. The story “The Little Boy at Christ’s Christmas Tree” is worthy of note for its bright contrast between two realities. On the one hand, the little boy really wants to eat and warm up but, on the other hand, there is a fantastical bright Christmas tree to which Christ invites him. In artistic terms, the story would not be so expressive without this contrast in spite of the fact that it has a deep moral sense.

Dostoevsky needed to describe how the boy is surprised with that big world to which he escapes from the close cold cellar; and this world is a wonderful fantasy for the hero: “Ah, what a great window! and a room behind the window, a tree reaching to the ceiling in this room; this is a Christmas tree, and there are so many lights on the Christmas tree, so many golden paper strips and apples, and so many dolls and small horses around the tree. Children, dressed up and clean, run about the room, they laugh and play, eat and drink something. Oh, that little girl started to dance with a boy, what a pretty girl! Oh, music is heard through the window. The boy looks in, *wonders and laughs* but his fingers and toes hurt, and his fingers become completely red and he cannot bend them anymore, and hurts them to move” [9] (henceforth, emphasis ours - M. D.). The hero’s view on what is happening and the child’s perception of reality is very important (everything here, even with a fanciful coloring, is unusual for the boy not for a reader). The dolls in display-windows are the second detail pointing to the boy’s different perception of the world: “And first, the boy thought that they were alive but as soon as he guessed that these are dolls, he started to laugh” [9]. Here we should draw a parallel with E.T.A. Hoffmann’s work whose name has already become widely known in Russia since the 1830s [5].

Let’s take for instance his “The Sand-Man” where the main hero Nathanael is in love with Olympia, a professor’s daughter, who, as it turned out later, is a doll, though the lover always noticed these features in her and she seemed beautiful for him: “...he remained completely indifferent to

lifeless and static Olympia and only occasionally looked at this beautiful statue and that was all". [12]. Here, the motive of the doll is less important for us than the fantastic one that is "weakly" manifested in Dostoevsky's story. It is important how this fantastic element is embedded into not nearly fantastic context (not even romantic one as in Hoffmann's work). It should be emphasized once again that Dostoevsky drew the borderline state (it was / it was not, an event happened / did not happen). Such marginality is also illustrative of Hoffmann's artistic world: "Frankly saying, I think that all those awful and terrible things you are talking about *happened only in your soul*, and the real *external world has very little to do with this*." [12]. Dostoevsky's boy seemed that someone had pushed him and then it turns out that he really pit down to the ground (the question of the reality of events): "*Suddenly it seemed to him* that behind him someone pulled at his coat; a big angry boy stood beside him and *suddenly* struck him on the head, tore off his cap and gave him a kick with his foot. *The little boy fell to the ground*, people cried out, he fainted; then he sprang up and ran and ran ..." [9]

Let's also pay attention to one key word in Dostoevsky's entire poetics: the word "suddenly" which specifically characterizes the spatial-temporal model. According to the fair comment of V.A. Podoroga, a philosopher and a cultural expert, "everything is unexpected, everything is suddenly, and the changes are so sudden that the events cannot but seem catastrophic. The whole world is suddenly and at once ..." [13] The little boy perceives reality in a different way; the line between dream and reality is lost for him. At the end of the story, the element of *miracle*, a fantastic element, is already clearly pronounced as the hero is dead and division of the world into "here" and "there" is especially real: "Christ always has a Christmas tree on this day for little children who haven't any tree of their own at home..." [9]. Moreover, Dostoevsky places his hero in the space of a "transitional" type.

As some researchers note, such type of spaces includes "a ladder, a wall and a door": "Between a closed, tight or compressed space and an open and free space; between darkened and twilight spaces and radiant and light ones, as if their differences come down to various, known according to dream-experience of a space; between the oppressive narrowing of *nightmare* and the width of happiness (Utopia)" [13]. Dostoevsky placed the boy in a cellar: a tight, compressed, cold and damp space: "This boy woke up in the morning in the damp and cold cellar" [Dostoevsky 1958: 361] and then as if *threw* him into *the other space*, the open one. The space of the city is illuminated, which, certainly, is important from the point of view of opposing to *light - shadow*, closeness - openness: "And what a loud sound and a thunder here, what a *light* and people, horses and carriages, and frost, frost!" [9]. But there is more. Before entering another locus, the boy must "overcome" a ladder: "He would have gone even earlier but he, being *on the top, on the ladder*, was frightened of a big dog who was howling out all the day at the neighbor's doors. But the dog was gone, and suddenly the boy went out into the street" [9]. Here again there is a semantically meaningful word "suddenly" which is

used to depict suddenness of the image, to convey the sense of *transitivity state*, to accelerate *the rhythm of the hero's time*. Then another "ascension" takes place, the last one, the ascension to Christ's tree (here the tree is like Axis mundi): "Come to me *to the Christmas tree*, boy" — a quiet voice suddenly whispered over him ... someone bent over him and embraced him in the dark, and he held his hand out and... and suddenly — "Oh, what a light!" [9]. And again, it is worth noting, the bright and even *the illuminated* space opens before the boy. Thus, from the point of view of interaction of different locus, we can speak of double overcoming of space, a rise to a level which is *above* the hero: first, from the cellar to the street and then from the street to the heavenly space. Besides, here there is *the overcoming of a body, a bodily form* - death of the hero like transition to *the other world* (in cosmic sense).

So, Dostoevsky's text shows a *vertical model* of space through ascension (double), as well as a horizontal model which is expressed in the image of "doll" and in "a boy" who *suddenly* pushed the little boy (or it seemed to him). And this reflects the idea of overcoming everyday space, a way from a drab routine life. *The mortal implied sense* is connected not only with the heroes' death (the boy, his mother and other children) but with special optics of the author himself and borderline states — the events on the verge 'it was / it was not'.

IV. CONCLUSION

Having traced the nature of interaction of different types of locus in the story "The Little Boy at Christ's Christmas Tree", we can say for sure that on the one hand, Dostoevsky's text is a "classic" one written on Christmas theme, but on the other hand, - this text has characteristic features of Dostoevsky's poetics, its acting component.

Thus, analysis of the story which is short but capacious and illustrative from the poetic point of view gives an idea of idiostyle and apophatic moments in the text. Apophaticism of this work is manifested first of all in relationship of models of spaces, that of height and bottom, and paradigm of light and darkness. The key word is "suddenly", one of Dostoevsky's favorite words, indicates a special borderline ritual character of the plot. Here, the parallel with the German romantic Hoffmann's works is illustrative and productive since in his poetics we also find a close connection between fantastic and real things which is also a specific feature of the Russian writer's literary system. Blurring the lines between two realities creates an apophatic effect too. Reference to philosophy of Dostoevsky's language allows us to deepen and expand understanding of his poetics and imagery.

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