

# Comparative Aspect of Interpreting the History of Russian Literature in the First Third of the 19th Century (on the Basis of Zhukovsky's Translations)

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*Abstract. The article considers the comparative aspect of teaching classical Russian literature of the first third of the 19th century to the students of the bachelor's degree program based on the poetic translations and versifications of English and German writers made by the Russian poet V. Zhukovsky. Zhukovsky's translations are interpreted in the context of E. Husserl's reader-response criticism and phenomenology using theoretical and translational universals and considering intertextual connections. The poet's translations and versifications reveal the features of his creative individuality and national identity and open the way to the formation of Russian cultural topoi.*

**Key words – Zhukovsky, comparative studies, Russian literature, self-identity, topoi.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

The field of comparative studies in the literature is the essential aspect of the study of basic classical literary texts of Russian literature studied by the bachelor's degree program students with major in philology. In modern literary studies, there is an idea of exhaustion of the traditional model of comparative studies in literature, the need to replace it with, for example, the synergistic paradigm of humanitarian knowledge (R.F. Bekmetov) [3]. The largest in Russia literary theorist V.Ye. Khalizev denies methodological monism and asserts a special significance of the development of non-directional approaches in literary criticism to avoid rationalisation and schematisation when understanding the solid building of a literary text [5]. He recommends drawing on "non-directing" experience even in the textbooks on the theory of literature.

It seems to us that such approaches can be appropriate in certain existential dialogue conditions that arise in the distinct and inseparable existence of the world's national literatures of later eras, pluralism of scientific methodologies is sometimes important and necessary, however, it does not deny the eternal significance of a proper comparative interpretation of literary phenomena. In our opinion, interpretation of a literary text in the context of immense humanitarian paradigm and a "non-directing" approach to phenomena in literature when applied in the bachelor's degree programme leads to disorientation of students. They should get fundamental knowledge in the field of history

and literary theory, including assessment, for example, of a colossal role of literary interaction in the making of Russian Romanticism of the first half of the 19th century, the key era that determined all future literature development in Russia.

The purpose of this article is to interpret some of the included in the bachelor's degree program literary translations and versifications of the famous Russian poet of the first half of the 19th century, V.A. Zhukovsky. These works are considered in the context of the intertextual approach and in accordance with the provisions of reader-response criticism, based on the achievements of modern translation studies.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Except for the comparative approach, bachelor's degree program students with major in philology will get a distorted view of the nature of Russian classical literature formation with numerous aberrations associated with ignoring the real facts of direct and indirect literary influence. In the work "Culture and Explosion" ("Kultura i Vzryv"), Yu.M. Lotman reveals the property of essential intersection of cultures and, consequently, literatures as the most important component of the cultural sphere and the emergence of a special stress field in the process of interference of "self" and "other" waves and transformation of "other" to "self": "Culture dynamics cannot be represented either as an isolated immanent process or as a passive sphere of external influence. Both of these tendencies are realised in mutual tension from which they cannot be treated separately without distorting their essence. Intersection with other cultural structures can be done through different forms. Thus, to invade our world an "external" culture must cease to be "external" for it. It must find a name and place for itself in the language of the culture into which it rushes in from the outside... undergo renaming in the language of an "internal" culture" [6, 116].

In the first half of the 19th century, Russian poets and writers experienced the strongest influence of ancient and new European literature, which, however, did not deprive them of their originality. The paradox of Russian classical literature of the Golden Age is that the interpretation and transformation of the European creative experience led not

to the parade of more or less talented epigones but rather to the formation of true national geniuses. The comparative aspect of the research reveals the original features of the Russian artists' creative personality, the secret of the mentality, depth of the national spirit, contributes to the acquisition of national identity that is extremely important for Russia in recent decades when our country again faced the problem of national self-identity.

In this regard, poetic works of V.A. Zhukovsky, woven from adequate translations and free versifications of sometimes the same source, are extremely significant. His translational multivalence reveals layers of borrowings which, through the nature of their perception and reproduction, reveal the secrets of the poet's inner world and, at the same time, deep topoi of Russian culture and national identity.

In recent decades, Zhukovsky's translations have received wide coverage in the scientific literature, in the works of S. S. Averintsev, V. E. Vatsuro, A. S. Yanushkevich, R. V. Iezuitova, etc. The researchers analysed the poet's creative method, the peculiarities of the problems and poetics of the translated works at ideological-thematic and semantic levels, the features of their artistic originality and revealed the principles of psychology, the role of Zhukovsky's lyrics and ballads in the development of Russian Sentimentalism and Romanticism. The poet's creative heritage was studied in the context of his religious and philosophical aesthetics and principles of Christian ethics. At the same time, the wealth of Zhukovsky's experience as a translator has been insufficiently studied, it requires further consideration both in the artistic and aesthetic, and moral and religious aspects.

This work includes selected, central to the understanding of the Russian poet's creative system, translations of lyrics and ballads interpreted as a special blend of European traditions and stable signs of Russian culture that developed during the times of ancient Russia. Some translation strategies of the poet and their metamorphoses are investigated; the pragmatic potential of poetic texts and penetrating them archetypal ley lines are revealed.

### III. METHODS AND RESEARCH APPROACHES

*Principles of reader-response criticism.* Since the relations between the original author and translator are the relations between the donor and recipient, the most expedient way of interpreting the poet-translator's works is the way based on the achievements of philosophical hermeneutics of M. Heidegger and H.G. Gadamer, based on the principles of reader-response criticism. The concepts of "horizon of expectations" and "reader-response distance" allow us to realise the nature of the understanding and artistic transformation of "other" creativity in subjective-lyrical and epic-genre formations of Zhukovsky as a recipient poet.

*Phenomenological method.* The phenomenology of E. Husserl caused the emergence of theoretical-literary ideas on updates in the process of the reader's perception of "non-

thematised reality", semantic lacunae, reveal of the hidden potential of a literary text. This approach is especially important when analysing translational poetics, when a creative versification or translation, as close as possible to the original, on the contrary, opens up new semantic spaces. Regarding the filling of the so-called "empty spaces" in the perception of a text or in the interaction of texts, it is possible to speak about the doubleness of discoveries in the sphere of both the source and the "secondary" text in the process of translation.

*Intertextual method.* The fruits of translation practice inevitably imply rich intertextual connections that lead to the appropriate approach in the course of understanding the problem posed.

*Methods of translational analysis.* Study of the poet-translator's activities logically determines the appeal to theoretical and translational universals: source text, translated text, translation adequacy, translation units, transformation, hermeneutical translation model, the pragmatic potential of a text, mental aspect of a translation (within the framework of procedural translatology).

*Topological approach.* The topological approach to the literary text is based on the concept of "topos" borrowed from ancient rhetoric and first proposed by E. R. Curzius in his fundamental work "European Literature and the Middle Ages" (1948). In modern science, in the narrow sense, "topos" refers to the spatial characteristics of a literary text. In the broad sense, "topos" means cultural and civilisational signs captured at different levels of a literary work text structure. In the work, the term "topos" is used precisely in this very sense.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Many phenomena of European culture and literature of the end of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century got a second fast-paced and full life in Russia: Russian Russoism, Volterianism, Ossianism, Byronism, Russian Gothic, and other philosophies appeared. None of them passed without leaving traces, and none of them escaped assimilation into Russian element, none of them remained intact after the interpretation by the creative personality of the Russian author. As rightly noted by M.M. Bakhtin, the cultural area has no inner territory and the whole consists of countless borders. The intersection of these boundaries allows us to reflect on the personal characteristics and artistic originality of each Russian author in a new way [2].

In other cases, the very nature of the talent requiring samples for translation and imitation as a "fuel" that ignites the spirit of creativity, points to the so-called "Russianness". Plasticity and openness to influences, free assimilation with any cultural traditions of the West and the East, "universal responsiveness", according to F.M. Dostoevsky, the ability to remain yourself, to express your national essence in the borrowed forms came through in the genius of V.A. Zhukovsky, a poet, translator and creator of the ballad genre in Russian literature. Even N.V. Gogol in "Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends" ("Vybrannye

mesta iz perepiski s druzyami") (1847) noticed this Zhukovsky's paradox: passing through the personalities of European poets, he preserved his own identity.

When studying Zhukovsky's works, the comparative aspect is inevitable, as many of his lyrics, poems and the entire corpus of ballads (not to mention Homer's "Odyssey") are direct translations or free versifications of the works of famous and sometimes secondary European writers. Zhukovsky appears to be the leader of the European sentimental and romantic literary tradition in Russia.

In the first lecture on Zhukovsky's works for bachelor's students, we always turn to one of the best examples of his early lyrics – the translation of T. Gray's sentimental elegy "Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard" (1750), produced in 1802. The first stanzas of the source in English and the first stanzas of the translation by Zhukovsky are analysed. Zhukovsky's reproduction of the stanzas, rhythms, metrics, and euphony of Gray's elegy is surprisingly accurate. Then the problematics of the work is interpreted. The cause of reference to a particular work is always significant. Zhukovsky's choice of Gray's elegy is not only due to aesthetic reasons (the birth of Russian Sentimentalism), but not less than due to the general cultural problem of self-identity of a nation in the whole, and self-identity of each individual that became relevant in Russia in the early 19th century. It is this very potential of the "non-thematised" depth of the source text that opens up a partial mismatch between the "horizons of expectations" of the author and the translator, that determines special fruitfulness of the secondary work creativeness.

S.S. Averintsev calls the work of Gray-Zhukovsky "a British mirror for Russian self-consciousness". He connects the appeal of the Russian poet to the "cemetery" elegy with the consciousness of self, one's dignity, and the unique significance of each person, arising in the Russian nation in the face of its creative intelligentsia. Averintsev points at the particular significance of the cemetery image in Gray's elegy, it is "a place for the graves of unknown, nameless people who, under the circumstances, were not able to express themselves except in a narrow, strictly private circle. And this makes the secret of human dignity, human dignity as a secret, the implied theme of the poem. And this, in our opinion, at least partially explains why specifically Gray, specifically English culture, were needed for Zhukovsky and arising Russian self-consciousness represented by him" [1, 263].

To prove his position, the scholar cites controversial from our point of view opinion of the famous philosopher, poet and literary figure of the Russian Silver Age, Vyacheslav Ivanov, that the Slavs drew upon the revelation about the human person from the depths of the English spirit. This position was formulated in the article "Byronism as an Event in the Life of the Russian Spirit" ("Bayronizm kak sobystie v istorii russkogo dukha") (1916). It must be admitted that it is not quite like that. The Slavs and Russians have learned the God-likeness of a person from the deep-rooted Christian teaching, not from the European literature. The English literary tradition was necessary to express the

consciousness not only in liturgical genres and spiritual writings but also in highly artistic texts of the secular literature.

The image of the cemetery as a place where everyone is equal, a place, where the benefits of wealth, fame, social status mean nothing, is typical of the Russian orthodox homiletics tradition. Perhaps, the cemetery is a *topos* both of a model of space and a civilisational sign of the Russian national Christian culture. Zhukovsky's literary predecessors in Russia, writers, and representatives of the Enlightenment D.I. Fonvizin and N.I. Novikov were insisting on the idea that the bones of nobles were not different from the bones of bondservants, as death equalises everybody. The idea of a society free of social classes was extremely close to the consciousness of arising Russian literature, precisely in the key of Christian anthropology.

However, in times of Zhukovsky, this idea did not take the form of expression corresponding to the time, new literary directions and personality of a contemplative, mystically enlightened Russian poet. That is why the confession filled, full of subtle reflection nuances and the gentlest lyricism Gray's elegy became the discovery and revelation of new art for Zhukovsky. The amazing harmony of content and form, bold psychologism and fluidity of Gray's lyrical meditation fell in line with the aesthetic search of the Russian poet and his melancholic nature.

Zhukovsky's perception of the English author's works includes not only a blurred dream of some kind of a free of social classes unity of people but also quite distinct social pathos. Researcher A.S. Yanushkevich associates Zhukovsky's "The Village Cemetery" (Selskoe kladbischche) with village discourse, sees the autobiographical layer: vivid, certain impressions of his native Mishensky village and the social aspect of the Russian village world: sympathy for the bondservants [7]. That is how the idea of Gray-sentimentalist's free of social class equality is transformed in the consciousness of Zhukovsky-humanist in Russia.

In connection with social search and expectations of Zhukovsky and in the light of the receptive diachronic aspect interpreting the work, we can see new unexpected intentions: it was Zhukovsky who later became tutor to the future Tsar Alexander II the Liberator that abolished serfdom in Russia in 1861. Thereby, in the future, nominally sentimental Gray's theme acquires a real social content in Zhukovsky's poetry. Thus, the so-called "scissors of horizons" arise, and the pragmatic potential of the text is revealed unexpectedly.

Along with the included in the program Zhukovsky's translations of lyrics by European writers, the bachelor's degree program students also study the ballads translated by him. It was Zhukovsky who became the originator of the ballad tradition in Russian literature.

In the lecture devoted to Zhukovsky's ballads, we always turn to three translation versions of the famous ballad "Lenore" (1773) by the German poet G. Bürger, one of the "Lenore" translations (1831) is adequate, it is close to the original, two translations, "Lyudmila" (1808) and

“Svetlana” (1812), are characterised by gradual transformation of the German severe spirit into the heart-felt Russian one. Frantic in its desperate rebellion against God, Lenore first turns into suffering melancholic Lyudmila, and then into meek and innocent Svetlana. The distance between Zhukovsky’s Svetlana and Bürger’s Lenore is about the same as between Brunhild from the ancient German epos “Song of the Nibelungs” (the end of 12th – the beginning of the 13th century) and Yaroslavna from the ancient Russian literary manuscript “The Lay of Igor’s Campaign” (12th century).

At the same time, in terms of lyrical pathos and moral, the image of Svetlana is extremely close to the image of Yaroslavna from a work of Kievan Rus times, although more than six centuries have passed between “The Lay of Igor’s Campaign” (“Slovo o polku Igoreve”) dedicated to the unfortunate campaign of Novgorod-Seversk Prince Igor against Polovtsy and Zhukovsky’s ballad. The traditional national topic comes through the contours of the European romantic poetics, and its persistence as a repository of cultural memory has long been recognised by medievalists as well as by the researchers of Russian literature of the New Age.

The very nature of such a transformation reveals the difference of mentalities within the unity of the general Christian theme of visitation for murmuring the divine providence. On the one hand, following English and German romantic poets, Zhukovsky opens up a new world of folklife for his reader, forms of verbal folklore, but on the other hand, the very nature of folk worldview, psychological types of folk are different from the European ones. The pathos of the wrathful rebellion, the direct murmuring against God is absolutely not typical of the Russian folklore, it is impossible for a Russian girl, traditionally brought up in the ideals of humility, meekness, and obedience to the will of God. The poet does not even hold on to the image of Lyudmila still murmuring the providence, he embodies traditional values of Russian culture and entrenched features of national mentality in the image of Svetlana. As a result, Zhukovsky completely excludes the theme of murmuring and introduces the theme of complete trust in the divine providence of the quietest heroine.

Besides, the nature of Bürger’s ballad translation reveals the creative individuality of melancholic, contemplative, dreamy, aestheticising reality Zhukovsky-idealistic. In general, we will not find the notes of tragedy in his lyrics, and if they appear in some works “to death”, “to decease” of someone, then they will certainly turn into sublime lyrical pathos associated with the eternal life lived for God. Death only means temporary separation from loved ones, but it is surmountable in the sacrament of the Eucharist, connecting the living and the deceased, as the Christian poet asserts. The poems about death usually include a motive of waiting for a meeting outside the coffin, and such works have a bright sound. The same is in the ballad “Lyudmila” by Zhukovsky, the tragic turns into the lyric one, he removes the Bürger’s eerie signs (the gallows with the corpses of the hanged criminals), replaces “ein luftiges Gesindel” with

“silent shadows”. The very light, airy rhythm of the ballad relieves its plot stress.

Through the plot of the German poet borrowed in its turn from Scottish verbal folklore, the world of Russian folk-life surprisingly comes to light, artistic elements of Russian folklore are represented in the ballad. The ballads “Lyudmila” and “Svetlana” are the examples of the hermeneutic model of translation, when a second generated text is created based on the nationally determined interpretation of the source text. This is reflected in the transformations of the form in the translation. It is interesting to compare the ballad “Lyudmila” with the source, in particular, when reading its fragments in German during the lecture for the bachelor’s degree program students that allows the students to feel the difference in the sound of the works for real.

M.V. Dubenko points to the rejection of some translation units by Zhukovsky: “For Russia, the folk ballad was not typical, so Zhukovsky had to create a completely new phenomenon: a literary ballad of the Russian type. In “Lyudmila” he completely refuses to use low-colloquial vocabulary and slang words, as well as sound writing, which has become one of the main features of Bürger’s “Lenore”. The poet is likely to agree with the opinion of V.R. Spencer, who, in the preface to his own translation of the ballad “Lenore”, notes that such an accumulation of sound effects can be very appropriate for the German language, but when translated into English, it loses its descriptive functions and sounds at least ridiculous. Thus, Spencer justifies his refusal to transfer the Bürger’s “trap trap trap”, “klingelingling” and “hurre hurre, hop hop hop!” in his translation [4, 20]. Apparently, Zhukovsky considered that such refrains in Russian would contradict the general musical element and the fluent rhythm of the ballad.

It should be noted that in the Zhukovsky’s work there is triple artistic refraction: the popular Scottish ballad “Sweet William’s Ghost” was a model for Bürger and its transformation to the ballad “Lenore” was known to Zhukovsky, as well as English translations of Bürger’s work by V. Scott and W. Spencer, H.J. Pye and J.T. Stanley. In the translation of the ballad “Lyudmila”, the Russian poet also uses some of the findings of English translators, like them, he removed those artistic methods that did not correspond to the nature of the Russian language. Intertextual threads penetrating European poetry helped Zhukovsky to create versifications that reflect both the nature of the Russian language and the Russian mentality.

The translation of F. Schiller’s ballad “Ritter Toggenburg” (1797) by Zhukovsky in 1818 is also interesting. In the ballad “The Knight Toggenburg” (“Rytzar Togenburg”), the Russian poet carefully changes the source in many details retaining its plot, general spirit, and style. Using a few subtle accents Zhukovsky changes the image of the knight’s beloved who became a nun and devoted her life to God. In the translation of the ballad, the motive of inaccessibility and heavenly heights, the angelic likeness of the beloved are preserved, but the notes of heartiness and soulfulness appear in the words addressed to the knight, the

cold politeness of the gracious maiden disappears. Like stern Lenore in the Zhukovsky's interpretation, Schiller's heroine acquires the features of feminine gentleness that is much more consistent with the national mentality than the polite arrogance of a medieval Beautiful Lady that condescendingly accepted the worship of a knight in love with her.

After returning from the crusade, some realities of the knight's life also change. In Schiller's ballad, the hero, having learned about the monastic tonsure of the virgin, simply settled near the monastery without any special status. In Zhukovsky's translation, the knight becomes a "monk". After his beloved, he takes the monastic vow, lives in a "keeil" as befits a monk. Moreover, there is one remarkable touch in the ballad: the knight Toggenburg is "covered in cilice" [8, 134]. This significant detail clearly indicates the ascetic feat borne by the hero. In the Russian monastic asceticism, in the name of killing the flesh, monks sometimes wore the so-called "cilice". Cilice was a very coarse dark clothing made of goat hair and worn on the naked body to wean and wound it, not giving themselves bodily peace. The worship of the knight acquires features of a spiritual feat.

In the consciousness of Zhukovsky-translator, service to a certain highest ideal is persistently associated with the reverence as an image of holiness: the knight seems to become a saint – the saint who pleased God with a monastic feat. This creates a kind of contradiction in the ballad with a field of semantic tension. The knight looks at the monastery being saint, which, by the way, is "glowing" in the Zhukovsky's work, waiting for the beloved, "angel of silence" and experiencing "passionate torments", the face of the deceased hero is touched with a seal of despondency, the mental state of the hero does not correspond to the spiritual feat accomplished in bodily asceticism with the help of a cilice in the keeil.

The implication of a true monastic service to God that aims to triumph over the martyrdoms, included in Zhukovsky's ballad, combined with the despondency and love passion of Toggenburg, causes some cognitive dissonance. Perhaps, the emergence of this dissonance is due to the nature of the original ballad. The medieval knightly cult of a Beautiful Lady as an element of courtesy was of at least a playful and partly conventional character. It was a part of the etiquette for a knight, according to which the knight in love or conditionally in love had no right to demand mutual feelings from the lady, but he was obliged to behave in accordance with her wishes, glorify her at tournaments and make chivalries in her honor.

The original text of Schiller has already had that contradiction that is more clearly revealed in the Zhukovsky's translation. The love and service of Toggenburg appear to be not a graceful play of worship, but a feeling of the greatest power against which all earthly things truly fade. That means, in essence, it is about divine love, about worship to the Absolute, the insatiable striving for the Deity.

This subtext is natural for Zhukovsky not only as a Christian but also as a person who personally knew the power of the greatest love for a woman, Maria Protasova. Friends that knew about the amazing feeling of love, the inner spiritual kinship of the poet and his beloved, compared Vasily Zhukovsky and Maria Protasova with Dante and Beatrice, Petrarch and Laura. Marriage was impermissible because of the close relationship, and the feeling of the poet turned into the sacrificial service of his beautiful lover that multiplied and affirmed his living faith. She became the "angel of silence" in his life. The autobiographical layer of the text opens up the new pragmatic potential of Zhukovsky's translation and allows to overcome cognitive dissonance in the key of the poet's life's vicissitudes which cannot be resolved in Schiller's ballad.

#### V. CONCLUSIONS

The indicated features of Zhukovsky's nature of work on German and English originals contribute to the identification of some creative individuality features. The comparison of the Russian poet's translations with the sources allows for the cultural codification of his worldview and creativity by interpreting the accents and nature of the versifications made by the author in the process of creative recreation of the original. In addition, when studying Zhukovsky's works, the comparative aspect helps bachelor's degree program students to understand his way to self-consciousness through folk art in terms of national identity, formation of topoi of classical Russian culture based on the Russia-specific mentality, the path of cultural construction in Russia in the process of creative assimilation and the recreation of the best samples of European literature on the example of artistically perfect translations of Zhukovsky-recipient of European artistic values.

The creativity of every Russian writer of the 19th century, regardless of their engagement in translations and versifications, cannot be adequately assessed in all its forms beyond the comparative and contrastive analysis approach to the study of their artistic heritage.

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