

Novels by Gaito Gazdanov and Mental Changes in Literary Consciousness of Russian First-Wave Émigré Writers of the 20th Century

Nikolay Nikolaev*

Department of Literature and Russian Language
Institute of Humanities, Branch of NArFU in Severodvinsk
Severodvinsk, Russia
n.nikolaev@narfu.ru

Svetlana Dulova

Department of Literature and Russian Language
Institute of Humanities, Branch of NArFU in Severodvinsk
Severodvinsk, Russia
s.dulova@narfu.ru

Abstract. *The first wave of Russian émigré writers of the 20th century has attracted attention as an internally heterogeneous phenomenon for quite a long time. There are two generations of this wave traditionally distinguished by the researchers: the older (I. Bunin, I. Shmelev, and others) and the younger (V. Nabokov, G. Gazdanov, and others). The focus, as a rule, is on the formal differences in the legacy of these writers. This publication attempts to describe the essential differences in the artistic worldview of two generations.*

Key words – literature of the Russian émigré community, artistic worldview, Gaito Gazdanov*.

I. INTRODUCTION

Three emigration waves have been traditionally distinguished in the literature of the Russian émigré community of the 20th century, each is associated with a specific historical period in the development of Russia, its internal crises and cataclysms.

The first wave of émigrés was undoubtedly the most massive due to the revolutions and the Civil War, when many philosophers, artists, and scientists who had glorified their names in various fields of knowledge left the country. According to V. Agenosov, it was during this period that “the crème de la crème of Russian literature left Russia” [2, p. 5]: the most prominent representatives of different literary movements (I. Bunin, I. Shmelev, A. Averchenko, K. Balmont, Z. Gippius, Don-Aminado, B. Zaitsev, A. Kuprin, A. Remizov, I. Severyanin, A. Tolstoy, Teffi, Sasha Cherny, M. Tsvetaeva, M. Aldanov, G. Adamovich, G. Ivanov, V. Khodasevich, etc.).

At the same time, when studying the literature of the first wave of emigration two generations are distinguished: the “older” and the “younger”. The representatives of the first one evolved as writers in Russia, they were known to the Russian reader, had their established style and were widely published before the departure both in Russia and abroad. There were groups around them, writers’ circles of the “younger”, the so-called “unnoticed” generation. These are those who were in the making in Russia, but before emigration they had not yet had time to evolve as writers with their own recognizable style. V. Nabokov,

G. Gazdanov, M. Aldanov, M. Ageev, B. Poplavsky, N. Berberova, A. Shteiger, D. Knut, I. Knorring, L. Chervinskaya, V. Smolensky, I. Odoevtsev, N. Otsup, I. Golenishchev-Kutuzov, Yu. Mandelstam, Yu. Terapiano, etc., are among the most talented representatives of this group.

Historical and semantic attitudes of the “older generation” Russian writers are related to “keeping the covenant” of the lost cultural world of the old, noble Russia, “to keep something truly valuable that inspired the past” [1]. They do not face the task of adaptation to the new reality due to emigration. The main motive of their work is nostalgia, and the main themes of their works are the memory, longing for Russia.

The other attitudes characterize the younger “unnoticed generation” (the term of V. Varshavsky) that turned out to be more dependent on the new social and spiritual environment in emigration. Being actively involved in a multicultural and multilingual space, they inevitably found themselves under the influence of various cultural traditions (Russian and Western European). According to the observations of O.M. Dyudina, the “children of emigration” found themselves in a situation of hard time, deprived of strong internal connection with the traditions of the past, they were caught in a completely new environment, both cultural and social one. The chance of the present, the gap in the continuity of time, cultural traditions, social and political cataclysms, assumed the chance of the future... Every young one tried to find his way in the chaos of debris remained from the past, create their unique future that was reflected in their works” [6].

Such based on the biographical details explanation of the writing peculiarities of Russian first-wave émigré writers of the “younger generation” is common for a very prominent series of modern studies dedicated to them. But it cannot be considered sufficient.

The reasons that led to the search for new literary forms and meanings of Russian first-wave émigré writers of the young generation are deeper than the motives of the exceptional biographical plan. They are identified by important epochal tendencies that fully reveal themselves in the novel by G. Gazdanov.

* Nikolay Nikolaev (n.nikolaev@narfu.ru) is a corresponding author.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In modern literary criticism, the originality of G. Gazdanov is seen primarily in the synthesis of various cultural origins that he absorbed. For example, Yu.B. Borev speaks of three cultural epochs in this regard: the Golden Age (Russian classical literature of the 19th century), the Silver Age (Russian culture of the early 20th century) and the Iron Age (period of the Civil War and two world wars) [3, p. 64–65]. Mengwei Tang writes about the synthesis of Russian and Western cultures: “He (G. Gazdanov) ... combining the Russian literary tradition with the discoveries of Western literature of the 20th century, managed to remain a Russian writer and create something that had never been encountered in Russian culture” [14, p. 173]. And in the attempt to prove this thought in the literary attitudes of G. Gazdanov, other researchers find features that bring him closer to J. Joyce [8, p. 74-81]. And others, seeing him as an existentialist writer, find in his creative research tendencies that make it possible to relate them to the works of Albert Camus [13, p. 534], Marcel Proust [10, p. 185].

All these observations are both fair and scientifically valuable. But they do not explain, in our opinion, the main thing – the causes that entailed profound changes in the fundamental principles of artistic representation in Russian literature that can be legitimately talked of, proceeding from the legacy of Russian first-wave émigré writers meaning the younger generation.

The numerous observations on the poetics of G. Gazdanov’s prose, presented in modern literary criticism, do not provide an answer to this question. For example, the absence of a plot in his works, to which L. Dienes turned his attention [4, p. 133], the peculiarity of the narrator’s manner, expressed in irregularity, discontinuity, assembly of the text [9, p. 55].

But all these data fit perfectly into the hypothesis of a fundamental change in the artistic worldview that characterizes the creative searches of the younger writers compared with their predecessors, the older generation of Russian first-wave émigrés of the 20th century. In our opinion, this global process reveals the peculiarity of G. Gazdanov’s prose.

III. MATERIAL AND RESEARCH METHODS

The researchers of G. Gazdanov’s works had already studied the issue of the changing worldview to some extent. For example, O.M. Dyudina writes, pointing to existentialist tendencies in Gazdanov’s prose: “literary existentialism forms an artistic model of the world based on the sense of catastrophe, crisis, loneliness, existence “on the border” of life and death, existence and non-existence. Human life appears to be a continuous chain of ordeals, the hopeless horror of existence” [5, p. 12–13].

The artistic model of the world (the equivalent of “artistic worldview”) is mentioned here as an attribute of a literary school, movement, direction (“existential tradition”) that, in our opinion, is a “delusion”. “The literary worldview” (“model of the world”) bears the imprint of an

epochal and cultural-national scale. Its changes can be understood only in this global context.

One more ambiguity found in the given above quotation and related to the most common in the modern research practice is the will to describe the changes in the “worldview” through its specific substantive aspects (“a sense of disaster, crisis, loneliness...”, etc.). Such observations can indicate the expansion, refinement, and elaboration of the traditional worldview, and not necessarily its fundamental transformation, qualitative structural change.

In our opinion, the fundamental changes in the artistic worldview as a whole take place at the level of the consciousness that recreates and interprets it. More precisely, a new artistic worldview arises only when searching and finding a fundamentally (qualitatively) new spatiotemporal position, with the help of which the world can be other than it was within the traditional approach. In the history of literature, such changes are accompanied by crisis processes [12, p. 449-462].

All the above mentioned will be fully understood during the discussion of the issues mentioned in this paper. In this publication, it is important to emphasize the peculiarities of our approaches to the understanding of historical changes in the artistic worldview that we attribute to our innovations. To reach the aims of the research, biographical, cultural and historical analysis of the novel “An Evening with Claire” (1929) by G. Gazdanov was carried out.

IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

The prevailing mood in the prose of the older generation of Russian first-wave émigré writers of the 20th century, longing for the past, being strongly connected to it, and suffering due to their outcome, can be designated as a “lost paradise” in terms of meaning. Being caught out of the dream world, they fully focus on it in the memories, thoughts, hopes, and search of values. This is a look from the emptiness, from darkness into the world of light and semantic fullness in where they previously existed and then “fell out” of to appear in their present state of being nowhere that allowed finding this bright “worldview”.

Such an arrangement of the depicting subject and the depicted world formed (structured) as a literary model has been formed in the Russian literary consciousness quite for a long time. It is often found in the Classical period of Russian literary development: in “Oblomov’s Dream” by I.A. Goncharov, in the charm of the “nests of gentlefolk” in the novels by I.S. Turgenev. The motives of the irretrievably lost bright past are heard in Russian song poetry, in Russian romance songs of the 19th century. However, the formation of this tradition took place at the end of the 18th century, in the creative atmosphere of the participants of the circle of Lvov and Derzhavin with their understanding of the life of happiness [11, p. 85–91]. It is this traditional for Russian literature model of the artistic world that is actual for the works of the older generation of Russian first-wave émigré writers.

The novels by G. Gazdanov change this model dramatically. Researchers note significant disengagement of

his hero from the world he portrays. He clearly does not focus on the pain of losing the past, like his predecessors in the émigré literature.

The first novel by G. Gazdanov “An Evening with Claire” (1929) is written in the first person. S.G. Semenova notes: “Almost like future Camus’ Mersault from “The Stranger”, he is disengaged of everything he sees around him; to be more exact, he seems to be deprived of the usual hierarchy of interests in the world: people, their sufferings, the horrors of war do not touch him, but some side, marginal things in resonance with his inner state become an exciting event for him” [13, p. 534].

It is a special kind of disengagement, it rather indicates a shift in the point of view of the hero that takes the world in its other value-conscious dimension. The hero considering his state of mind talks about the strangeness of his reaction to the events of the external world: “I still was not able to immediately respond to what was happening around me. This ability rarely manifested itself in me – only when what I saw coincided with my inner state, but these were mainly the things to a certain extent still and at the same time necessarily distant from me and I should have a personal interest in them. It could be a slow flight of a large bird, or someone’s distant whistle, or an unexpected turn of the road behind which there were reeds and swamps, or human eyes of a tame bear, or awakening me cry of an unknown animal in the darkness of a black summer night” [7, p. 122].

The writer emphasizes the paradoxical nature of the hero’s position in the world where he “immediately reacts” only to “still” and “distant” things in which he “did not have a personal interest”. A normal reaction of any person residing in the real world should be exactly the opposite, the one described in the abovementioned novel fragment.

But the fact is that the narration is not at all on behalf of a person residing in the real world. Nikolay Sosedov lives in the real world, in the historical time, the time of great events and changes. The narration is on behalf of his peculiar alter ego that observes not only events of the real world, but also the inner world of Nikolai Sosedov. However, that is not all. The narrator’s deep self also focuses on its internal experiences, including events related to the real world where Nikolai Sosedov resides. This, coming from the depth of consciousness, mediated perception of the real world and real events creates the effect of its paradoxical vision, paradoxical reaction to it, mentioned above.

At the level of the literary form and plot, all these things create unusual effects. As for the lack of a traditional plot in the works by G. Gazdanov, L. Dienes observes that “there is no plot because there are no causal connections there” [4, p. 133] and “any attempt to create a scheme of life in the work of art as if it has internal practical logic and a sequence of events is doomed to failure” [4, p. 132]. The plot in G. Gazdanov’s works is a “scattering of plot motives reproduced from one work to another” [5, p. 8].

What did G. Gazdanov want to achieve, creating so complicated artistic work?

His predecessors in terms of Russian literary tradition, the older generation of the first-wave émigré writers, looked at global historical changes with a view of a person that survived them. It was a completely organic form of the real world understanding based on a very strong Russian literary tradition.

In the first novel “An Evening with Claire”, G. Gazdanov managed to overcome the energy of perception of the global changes in the world, set by the previous literary experiences. In the field of his representation (artistic comprehension), there are not only global changes seen by the eyes of a person that survived them, but also the consciousness of a person, transformed during the comprehension of the experienced global changes. It became possible thanks to the position found by him in the depth of human consciousness that sheds light on all these changes of external and internal existence distantly.

The literary formalization of the position of the depicting one is the way to the discovery of a new literary worldview allowing Russian literature to move on to its next historical level of understanding of existence.

V. CONCLUSION

The change of the worldview and the mechanisms of the process, found in G. Gazdanov’s prose, are most likely not his discovery. Changing the perspective of the image due to the new position found in the course of the artistic interpretation of the existence probably belongs to the whole generation of writers, each of them solving the problem in his way, based on his aesthetic experience. This should be attributed not only to the young generation of Russian first-wave émigrés but also to their contemporaries, the writers who created their artworks in Russia, although they all were in completely different life circumstances, literary schools, tendencies, styles. However, in the literature of Russian emigration, these changes are presented more clearly due to the peculiarity of the situation in which the generational change took place and the active immersion of young writers in multicultural and multilingual space. The change of the worldview is an outstanding event in the Russian historical and literary process. However, the description of this phenomenon goes far beyond the objectives set in this publication.

REFERENCES

- [1] Adamovich, G. (1996). *Odinochestvo i svoboda* [Solitude and Freedom] / Preparation, introduction and notes by V. Kreyd, Moscow, Respublika. Cit. ex: Adamovich, G. Electronic Library. <https://www.litmir.me/br/?b=128108&p=1> (access date: 22.06.2019). (In Russ.)
- [2] Agenosov, A.A. (1998). *Literatura russkogo zarubezhya* [Literature of Russian émigré community] (1918 – 1996). Moscow, Terra. Sport. (In Russ.)
- [3] Borev, Yu. (2008). *Zametki o Gazdanove* [Notes on Gazdanov]. *Gaito Gazdanov v kontekste russkoy i zapadnoevropeyskikh literatur* [Gaito Gazdanov in the Context of Russian and Western European Literatures]. Moscow, IMLI RAN, 62–66. (In Russ.)
- [4] Dienes, L. (1993). *Rozhdeniyu mira predshestvuet lyubov ... (zametki o romane “Polet”* [The World’s Birth is preceded by Love ... (Notes on Novel “Flight”)]. *Druzba narodov* [National Cohesion], 8: 131–139. (In Russ.)
- [5] Dyudina, O.M. (2000). *Poetika Romanov Gayto Gazdanova: dissertatsiya na soiskanie uchenoy stepeni kandidata filologicheskikh*

- nauk [Poetics of Gaito Gazdanov's Novels: Thesis for the Degree of Candidate of Philological Sciences]. Moscow. (In Russ.)
- [6] Dyudina, O.M. (2014). V otsutstvii avtoritetov: aspekty tvorchestva Gaito Gazdanova [In the absence of influencers: Creative Aspect of Gaito Gazdanov] [Electronic Source]. *Proza.ru*. <https://www.proza.ru/2014/01/15/920> (access date: 12.12.2018). (In Russ.)
- [7] Gazdanov, G.I. (1996). *Vecher u Kler* [An Evening with Claire]. Collected Works: in 3 Volumes. Moscow, Soglasie. V. 1, 39–154. (In Russ.)
- [8] Kibalnik, S.A. (2011). *Gayto Gazdanov i ekzistentsialnaya traditsiya v russkoi literature* [Gaito Gazdanov and Existential Tradition in Russian Literature]. Saint-Petersburg, Petropolis. (In Russ.)
- [9] Kuznetsova, E.V. (2009). *Tvorchestvo Gayto Gazdanova: 1920–1950 gg.* [Creative Activity of Gaito Gazdanov: 1920–1950]. Astrakhan: Astrakhanskiy universitet Publ. House. (In Russ.)
- [10] Nechiporenko, Yu. D. (2000). Tainstvo Gazdanova [The Mystery of Gazdanov]. *Vozvrashchenie Gayto Gazdanova* [Return of Gaito Gazdanov]: nauchnaya konferentsiya, posvyashchennaya 95-letiyu so dnya rozhdeniya. Moscow, Russkiy Put, 179–186. (In Russ.)
- [11] Nikolaev, N.I. (2008). U istokov novykh russkikh literaturnykh predstavleniy o “shchaste” i “udache”, “sluzhbe” i “sluzhenii” (“Fortuna” N.A. Lvova) [At the Root of the New Russian Literary Ideas of “Happiness” and “Success”, “Duties” and “Service” (“Fortune” by N.A. Lvov)]. *Vestnik Pomorskogo Universiteta. Seriya: Gumanitarnye i sotsialnye nauki* [Bulletin of Pomor University. Series: Humanities and Social Sciences], 4: 85–91. (In Russ.)
- [12] Nikolaev, N.I., Shvetsova T.V. (2017). “Crisis of action” of the Russian literary character in literary discourse. *Man In India*, 97 (10), 449–462.
- [13] Semenova, S.G. (2001). *Russkaya poeziya i proza 1920–1930-kh godov: Poetika – Videnie mira - Filosofiya* [Russian Poetics and Prose of 1920-1930's: Poetics – World Vision – Philosophy]. Moscow, Naslediye. (In Russ.)
- [14] Tang, Mengwei. (2016). Khudozhestvennoe svoeobrazie romana “Vecher u Kler” Gaito Gazdanova: mezhdru traditsiy i avangardom [Artistic Peculiarities of Gaito Gazdanov's “An Evening with Claire” Novel: Between Tradition and the Avant-Garde]. *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo pedagogicheskogo universiteta* [Tomsk State Pedagogical University Bulletin], 7 (172): 172–178. (In Russ.)