

East and West Themes in Remizov's Novel "Sisters of the Cross"

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ABSTRACT

In Russian literature, the writer Remizov took the role of national thinker and philosopher, and explored the spiritual dimension of Russians in his own creation. He has inherited and carried forward the essence of Russian traditional culture and national spirit, and at the same time, he thought hard about the future development of Russia in his novel "The Sisters of the Cross". The purpose of this thesis is to study Remizov's thoughts on the development of Russia in his novel. By means of textual analysis and comparative analysis, this paper explores the intertextuality between the "eastern and western themes" in "The Sisters of the Cross" and other texts and reveals that the writer uses symbolic metaphor to express his dissatisfaction with Peter the Great's reform, especially referring to the negative influence of comprehensive Westernization on Russian culture. The innovation of this thesis lies in the introduction of "The Sisters of the Cross" into the eastern and western texts of Russian literature and a new interpretation of it through specific text analysis.

Keywords: Sisters of the Cross, the East and the West, culture

I. INTRODUCTION

Likhachev believes: "Russian literature (prose, poetry, drama) is Russian philosophy, and it is also the characteristic of Russian creative self-expression... Russian literature is the expresser of Russian culture, and the history of Russian culture gathers various cultures of different nations on the basis of spiritual power... Therefore, the position of Russian culture is determined by its most diverse connection with many other ethnic cultures in the East and the West. [1]⁴² As a result, due to its special geographical location in Eurasia and the impact of the collision and exchange of Eastern and Western cultures in different periods, the Russian nation gradually accumulates and digests the cultural characteristics of the East and the West. And it has also formed a national psychology that fluctuated between Eastern and Western cultures. In Russian literary and cultural traditions, writers also shoulder the role of national thinkers and philosophers. They are exploring the spiritual dimension of the Russians in their creations, inheriting and carrying forward the essence of Russian traditional culture and national spirit, and at the same time, they are thinking hard about the future development of Russia. Therefore, the East and West issues of Russia have always been the center of attention of writers in the development of Russian literature. The first to raise this question was Chaadayev. In 1836, he first raised the question of the choice of the road for the development of the Russian

nation in the "Letters Philosophiques". While at the end of the 19th century, with the influence of the "end of the century" crisis and emotional thoughts, more and more intellectuals initiated discussions on the East and West issues of Russia, and for a while the "Messiah" consciousness rose. Remizov's contemporary writer Bely once said: "Russia is a virgin land, she is neither the East nor the West... She should neither be East nor West, but the East and West meet together on her. In her, in her unique destiny, there is a symbol of the whole human destiny.... This nation has the mission of reconciling the East and the West and creating conditions for true brotherhood among all nations." [2]²¹⁶⁻²¹⁷ However, the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century were periods of drastic changes in the superstructure of Russian cultural thoughts and social consciousness. It was also at this special moment, "Russia had a mood of revelation. These emotions were combined with the feeling of the end of the world and the feeling of antichrist, which had the color of pessimism. The main thing people looking forward to was not the age of believing in Christ and the coming of heaven, but the kingdom of antichrists. This was an extreme disappointment in the path of history and a loss of confidence in the historical tasks that still existed. This was a fault in Russian thinking." [3]²⁰¹ Remizov's works about Petersburg during this period also played the role of social revelation. Because in this "full of disasters and sins" city, the religious beliefs of its people had fallen to the bottom. By dealing with the implied meaning of the city built by

Peter the Great, Peter the Great himself was directly forced into the set pattern of "antichrist". Therefore, Petersburg, built under Peter's will, became a typical representative of the antichrist kingdom.

II. PETERSBURG — THE WESTERN CITY OF RUSSIA

Remizov's attitude towards Eastern and Western issues in "Sisters of the Cross" is also extremely complicated. But what is certain is that Remizov holds a negative attitude towards Peter the Great's blindly learning from the West and the neglect of traditional culture. In the novel, while conducting an intertextual dialogue with the "Petersburg text" in traditional Russian classics, the author is also actively deconstructing the symbolic orientation of the image of "Petersburg" since the time of Peter the Great — Russia can only achieve self-salvation by learning from the West. By rewriting the symbolic symbols of the myth about the doomsday of Petersburg, Remizov pointed out new revelations about the future road of Russia: the future of Russia was by no means in the West. The cultural representation of the road to the future is to maintain the "Russian fantasy of the Orthodox peasants" and the "respect of the folk customs of ancient Rus". In Remizov's art space, Petersburg shoulders an indelible historical memory (Peter the Great learned from the West, borrowed from Western civilization, and fully Europeanized the education). At the same time, it is full of the sufferings of small people living on the margins and all kinds of crimes, carrying the pain of being abandoned by God. In the text, all the characters in the backyard of Bourkoff portrayed by Remizov were forced into desperation by life. In life, death became their only way out. This was the slum of Petersburg, where shoemakers, tailors, bakers, bathhouse attendants, barbers, laundresses, needlewomen, bus conductors, drivers, hatters, shoe repairers, umbrella repairers, painters, shop assistants, waterway repairs, typesetters, young waitresses, etc. lived. The novel especially presents the tragic fate of women in society at that time.

In the novel, the protagonist Malakulin was born and raised in Moscow. His full name is Peter Alexevich Malakulin. It is no accident that he and Peter the Great have the same name. The comparison between Peter Alexevich Romanov and the "nobody" Peter Alexevich Marakulin better reflects the author's antichristian revelation of Peter the Great. When Malakulin was on the verge of desperation, he came to the Alexandrov Gardens and gave the last shout to the tall statue of Peter the Great, "In the Alexandrov Gardens, he sat on a long chair, but as soon as he sat down, he jumped up as if he had been stung by a scorpion, and went away again. He stopped near the monument to Peter the Great. 'Peter Alexevich', he said towards the monument: 'Your

Majesty, the Russian people drink liquid horse dung and spend a ruble and a half to conquer the heart of Europe with cucumbers. I don't need to say anything.'" [4]¹²⁹

The "Bourkoff Compound" where the story of the novel takes place is actually a miniature of the entire Petersburg. "The Bourkoff Compound is the whole Petersburg!" People like to say that when standing in Bourkoff's compound." [4]²⁰ The rhetoric of "repetition" is used many times in the novel to deepen the theme of the East and the West. In his novel, Remizov abandoned the way in which traditional literature completely opposed Moscow and Petersburg. In the Russian literary tradition of the 19th century, Moscow and cities of other provinces have always served as true model representatives of Russian customs that have not been invaded or oppressed by foreign customs. While Petersburg, as the incarnation of European civilization, has become synonymous with "corruption, depravity, falsehood, superficiality, and material supremacy". As the British scholar Orlando Guy Figes pointed out, "In the late 18th century, people defended the long-standing squire culture of Moscow and other provinces against the Europeanized country established by Peter the Great... The core of the keynote of the Russian national narrative in the 19th century is an ancient and romantic ideal of the land underfoot — a pure and 'natural' Russia that has not been corroded by civilization. St. Petersburg is full of deceit and vanity, like a narcissistic prodigal, pitying himself by the Neva River. The real Russia only exists in other provinces, where no one has affected manners and is immune to foreign customs, and preserves the pure 'Russian' virtues". [5]⁷⁵

Malakulin had a dream before going to Moscow in which he had his head cut off. And after arriving in Moscow, he found that his dream had come true. "Plotnikov's office was divided in half, with some copies of Nesterov's paintings hung on one side and two cages with apes on the other. Plotnikov was sitting between "Sacred Rose" and the apes, drunk, vomiting honey all over his body for some reason, and was infinitely sad like a monk... He had no head anymore, his mouth was on his back and his eyes were on his shoulders. He sprung at honey during Christmas, ate honey, ate with beeswax, and ate a lot, so he attracted bees — a nest of bees. He was the hive. He felt scared — He loved sweets. — He felt scared — He was going to be eaten, all his bees would be destroyed, the hive would be destroyed, and he would be eaten. When the first fly appeared in the summer, he would use the fly as a motivation. The whole of Russia will be divided into two parts, each part has its own governor of flies, and the governor with full powers over the army will manage the flies. The flies will be transported from all directions of Russia to Taganka in Moscow through special mechanized packaging in armored vehicles.

Russia's flies will defeat steam and electricity, and Russia will grind England and the United States into powder. He has no head, his mouth is on his back and his eyes are on his shoulders. He is a hive. He doesn't understand or speak Russian. 'I don't need your elephant', Plotnikov said, looking at Malakulin from head to toe with his drunken gaze, and swearing in pure Russian, and people listened to the sonorous and powerful language of the motherland, and they had to be stunned". [4]¹⁰³

In the scene that Malakurin saw, one side of the picture was the sacred Rose, the other side was a cage with two apes, and Plotnikov sat between the two, full of infinite sadness. In this picture, it actually tells Russia's long-term national psychology and the current social situation at that time. Remizov is like a prophet who is arrogant and instructs the world, with a dreamlike sentiment directly pointing to the current situation in Russia today, foreseeing the political constant change of events and social thoughts of that era. Since the 18th century, in the literary tradition, when Russians face the West, they have a real sense of inferiority for their own European identity. So there have been some satirical works represented by such as the poem "Lessons of Poverty" (1729) of Kontimir and "The Brigadier" (1769) of Feng Weixin. The moral admonitions in these works have a clear meaning: for a long time, the comical and blind imitation of Western civilization by the Russians is the same as the "Dongshi Imitates Xishi" (i.e., blind imitation with ludicrous effect), but it has actually become a "Handan toddler" (i.e., copying for copying's sake). In this kind of blind imitation of daily expenses, Russia has completely lost its own national consciousness. In "Letters from a Russian Traveler" (1791-1801), Karamzin directly described his lack of confidence in the European identity of Russians. "Everywhere he goes, he always finds the backward image of Russians in the eyes of Europeans. On the way to Königsberg, two Germans were 'surprised that the Russians could actually speak foreign languages'. In Leipzig, the professors said that Russians were like 'barbarians' and they didn't believe that Russians would have their own writers. The French were even worse. They bestowed the noble French culture to Russians and despised them for imitating like monkeys.'" [5]⁸¹ The Russians were likened to "monkeys" who only knew how to imitate the West, thus revealing the essence of the Russians' Europeanization was only on the surface. The two caged apes, which Remizov mentions here, are not only full of allegories about the current condition of Russia, but also directly express the critical and negative attitude held by the author. If placed in the torrent of history, the ape has a unique meaning in Christianity. "In Christian symbolism, the ape has a derogatory meaning. It is seen as a parody of human images, symbolizing various evils such as greed and carnality

caused by vanity. The monkey locked by the chain symbolizes the devil conquered by the will". [6]⁴³⁵ In addition, in European culture, "the flies are regarded as the embodiment of the power of the devil... The fly is firstly a symbol of the wicked and the demons. They once tortured the Egyptian saint Macarius who was a reclusive monk" [6]²⁵³. In the text, the Russians who are bewitched by the "devil" want to conquer Europe with the power of the devil. It is also the author's endless ridicule and deride of the Russians who are abandoned by God and tempted by the devil. And in the real or illusory scene seen by Malakulin, bees appear. Because in the Western cultural context, "bees are often referred to as the 'Bird of Holy Virgin' or the 'Bird of God'. It symbolizes the soul", but in the above text, the "bee" symbolizes the soul of the Russians, and even the "hive" are about to be completely destroyed. As a representative of the authentic Russians, Plotnikov has lost his head, and he doesn't even understand or speak Russian. This Russian who lost his head, had no direction and even had no foundation cannot help but make people think about the reforms in the era of Peter the Great. Later generations wavered in their evaluation of Peter's reform. Khlaskov once eulogized, "Peter only gave the Russian body, and Ekaterina gave him the soul". And Duke Serbatov also admitted in his notes "On the Decline of Russian Ethical Trend" that Peter's reform was necessary, but perhaps excessive. He believed that it met the needs of the people, but it was too radical and involved too many aspects. Peter was not satisfied with the necessary innovations in legislation, military, economy, education, etc. He also tried to correct personal daily life, advocated politeness, and alleviated the old and rude customs. However, this alleviation led to debauchery and laid the roots of later moral corruption". [7]¹⁶⁹ In the reforms of Peter mentioned above, the children of Russian nobles were given a "Europeanized" education, and the nobles were compulsory to speak foreign languages, especially German and French. This point is well reflected in Tolstoy's works "Anna Karenina" and "War and Peace". In "Anna Karenina", Tori reprimands the children who don't use French to express their toys, because for a long time, proficiency in foreign languages and fluent communication in foreign languages have become the labels of upper class nobles. They even learn to use foreign languages to think. But at the same time, their use of their mother tongue is particularly lame. The author still remembers that Duke Andrei Borkanski in "War and Peace" always speaks Russian with a French accent, and his diplomat friend Bilibin prefers to speak French, and only when he is expressing a more contemptuous opinion does he think of using Russian. Because "the nobles generally believe that Russian is like a devil and must be eradicated when the children are young; even the most childish feelings must be expressed in a foreign language." [5]⁷² Therefore, at the turn of the last century, this long-term neglect of

Russian mother tongue and the traditional culture of the motherland has become a Muscovite who completely forgets his mother tongue in Remizov's writing.

III. THE SYMBOLIC IMAGES IN THE TEXT OF "SISTERS OF THE CROSS"

Various animal images have appeared in the text many times. The deep meaning directly refers to the abandonment and curse of God on this land of Russia, and the Russians have lost their faith and soul. The deep spiritual soul of Russians no longer needs the "elephant". In Western culture, "the elephant is a symbol of victory over death, and only Jesus, a sacred and spiritual elephant, can save him" [6]⁵⁹. In the last chapter of the novel, the old man who appeared mysteriously in Malakulin's disaster reappears and inexplicably tells a story that sounds absurd: "You have been joking. Alexander Ivanovich, a few days ago, Alexander Ivanovich ate a rat in the guild hall of the Afeng Monastery and won five rubles... So he caught a rat, ate it, and got five rubles". [4]¹³¹ On the surface, it is a nauseating trick of eating rats to win money, but in reality it points to the fact that under the impact of the wave of capitalism, there are Russians who can sell their souls for money everywhere. Because "rats are important in popular culture and ideas, they also have a place in symbol history. It is often considered to be similar to the soul. The rat sprints like flying and is nowhere in sight, just as soon as the soul leaving the body at the moment of death" [6]³¹³. The protagonist's strange, dreamlike and absurd experience in Moscow directly allowed him as a witness to witness all the sufferings of Russia abandoned by God. His unusual experience in Moscow is exactly the same as his own dream at the Petersburg Bourkoff Compound. When he was still in Petersburg, he dreamed that he and everyone in the Bourkoff Compound were lying in the yard, but Bourkoff in his dream was bigger than it actually was. "In short, the entire Bourkoff Compound — the entire Petersburg", even the holy Rose, who is wandering in all directions, is there, and everyone is lying in the yard as if lying in a cemetery, "but they are not bones, but living people, not dry bones, but living people, everyone has a beating heart. There are animals lying with people..." It was also at this time that God's voice came, "The time is ripe, the glass of sin is filled, and the punishment is approaching". [4]⁸⁴⁻⁸⁵ Whether it is Malakulin's experience in Moscow or his dream in Petersburg, they all point to the severe disaster and harsh punishment that Russia faces after betraying the faith of God.

Secondly, the hopes of several main characters in the novel to put their hopes on the West to save Russia are naturally unfolded with the development of the plot of the novel, which is contained in the dream of the heroine Verochka going to Paris to become a great

actor and the overseas performance of the clown actor Damaskin. With the help of Malakulin, the narrator expresses everyone's infinite yearning and fantasy for Paris.

"In Paris, Anna Stepanovna can find herself a place in the world, her soul will be sublimated, and she will change her appearance when she laughs.

In Paris, Vera Nikolaevna will cure her illness, recover her health, pass exams, and get a high school diploma.

In Paris, Vasily Alexandrovich will climb up the boom again and breathe fire from his mouth.

In Paris, Sergey Alexandrovich dances and is about to conquer the heart of Europe, Malakulin is also about to find the joy of loss, and to find Verochka.

In Paris, Verochka will become a great actor and will feel at ease.

In Paris, Akumovna will roll there like a rolling stone to get rid of her father's curse. Akumovna will breathe the air she hasn't breathed in nine years, and she no longer needs to see the emperor, no longer needs to drink liquid horse dung.

In Paris, her Vera would not be destroyed, and she had been destroyed long ago at Bourkoff Compound". [4]¹¹⁶

Remizov vividly portrayed the fantasy of Paris of the people in the Bourkoff Compound from the perspective of Malakulin. This is reminiscent of Chekhov's play "Three Sisters". In the work, three sisters who strongly wanted to return to Moscow made the call of "Go to Moscow, go to Moscow". At the same time, Remizov's allegorical attitude towards this is also obvious. In the last chapter of the novel, all the low-level tenants living in Bourkoff Compound regard the overseas performance of the clown actor Damaskin as the inevitable way to save Russia. In their imagination, they "show themselves to Paris, the heart of Europe, the city of great figures, and conquer it with their art..." [4]¹¹³ And as mentioned at the beginning of the novel, the clown actor Damaskin "is a great philosopher who can only say but not do it!" [4]²⁶ However, at the end of the story, everyone puts their hopes on this clown actor who can only boast but has not put it into action. Isn't it a great irony. Therefore, whether it's the fallen actress Vera who is hoped by everyone, or the clown actor Damaskin who relies on juggling to make people laugh, their choices of Russian roads are all in hopeless fantasy, which is utopian, just like soap bubbles in the sun, appearing dreamy and thin.

IV. CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, through the ingenious intertextuality of Greek mythology, Russian folk

apocrypha, legends about St. Petersburg, and other literary classics in the novel "Sisters of the Cross", Remizov provided feasibility for the mythological interpretation of the later Petersburg text, and also added a new chapter to the discussion of Eastern and Western issues in Russian literature.

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