

Between Folklore and Literature: Mastery of A.N. Tolstoy-Storyteller

(on the 135th anniversary of the writer)

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Abstract—The study of the interaction of traditional folk culture and professional art, folklore and literature for more than a century is considered to be one of the main directions of humanitarian knowledge. The article is devoted to the analysis of the author's transformations of Russian folklore in the "fairy-tale" works of Alexei Nikolaevich Tolstoy (1883-1945). The relevance of the research is determined by the special role of folklore images, motifs and plot patterns in the writer's works. The folklore-mythological aspect of the works of the "third" Tolstoy is less studied by scholars, although in a number of works about the writer there are judgments about the general influence of folk culture, folklore borrowings and deep knowledge of the author in the field of folklore. A holistic analysis of Tolstoyan folklorism, its origin, evolution and aesthetics in the scientific literature is absent. The subject of the research is the aesthetic foundations and stable features of the poetics of the writer's works for children focused on folklore and folk mythology. For the analysis of the ways of understanding and transmitting the philosophical and artistic experience of the folklore tradition, in addition to the traditional cultural-historical method, the methodological tools of comparative studies and philological analysis of the text are used. The purpose of this work is to provide a comprehensive description of the phenomenon of folkloric character of A.N. Tolstoy's fairy tales, as a phenomenon of world outlook, and a certain set of artistic techniques of the writer, the specifics of one's literary technique.

Keywords—A. N. Tolstoy; literary tale; folk tradition; poetic detail; poetics of gesture; author's intonation

I. INTRODUCTION

A.N. Tolstoy's artistic creativity is enclosed in the folklore-mythological "frame": the complete works of the writer are prefaced by the collection of lyrics "Sunny Songs", for which the writer received the nickname "pagan", and the last major

unfortunately incomplete project of the author, set of folk tales. After the publication of the lyric collections, readers became acquainted with the cycle "Magpie's Tales", first published by the St. Petersburg Publishing House "Public Benefit" in 1910.

Many times for different literary collections, the author has rewritten the cycle "Magpie's Tales". In the Complete Works, the authors of the comments note that "in 1923, when the State Publishing house published a collection of fairy tales and poems by A. Tolstoy under the general title "Love Spell", the writer again undertook a great reworking process of the fairy tales and divided them into two cycles: the first is "Mermaid's Tales", and the second – actually "Magpie's Tales". The first combines the so-called magical fairy tales, the second – the fairy tales about animals and several fairy tales-fables" [1].

In the mid-1930s A.N. Tolstoy begins to work on a grandiose project – "The Code of Russian Folklore" in five volumes. The writer managed to publish only the first volume in 1940: 51 fairy tales about animals were included in it. Russian children know the fairy tales "Turnip", "Teremok", "Rooster - Golden Comb", "Bubble, Straw and Bast Shoe" which are most often processed by A.N. Tolstoy.

The writer explained the methodology of his work based on folklore material in the preface to the first volume of the tales: "Each narrator tells the tale in his own way: one briefly, another extensively with details; one has a good start, the other has a good ending, and the third has a good middle; one storyteller is famous for juggling, catchwords; another – for interesting details in the story. There are storytellers-creators, true poets, and there are not very talented, simple storytellers. ... I choose the most interesting and radical one from the many versions of a folk tale, and enrich it from other versions with vivid language and plot details" [2]. As a result of this

treatment, the tale retained the immediacy of a folk story and showed the reader a masterpiece of writing.

The researches of O.V. Nagornaya [3], G.N. Izotova [4], L.V. Ovchinnikova [5], S.N. Yermeeva [6], M.V. Ryzhykh [7] and others are devoted to various aspects of the interaction of folklore and literary tales, including the basic plot schemes, the main range of motifs, genesis and typology of characters, the narrative structure. The researches of A.M. Kryukovoy [8], N.N. Ivanova [9]; E.A. Samodelova [10–12]; V.A. Golovko [13, 14] are devoted to the study of individual issues of folklorism and myth-making of A.N. Tolstoy.

II. PECULIARITIES OF FOLKLORISM IN A.N. TOLSTOY'S WORKS

Folklorism and myth-making of A.N. Tolstoy is determined by the author's childhood world. In "A Brief Autobiography," the writer confesses: "<...> I began my first prose experiments – "Magpie's Tales". In this work I tried to express my childhood impressions in a fairy-tale form" [15].

In these "childhood impressions", nature and earth are shown and felt as a single living being. Harmonious fusion of the whole being – of people, animals, plants, life and death – this is the main experience of childhood, reflected in the image of fairy tales. Tolstoy is characterized by a rare understanding of the integrity of life in general – from a "larva" in the "Cracks of the earth" to the starry sky. Moreover, there is the unity of the material and spiritual (ideal) worlds, indissolubility of high poetic feeling of the soul, called "dreamy contemplation" in his works. This is also stated in one of his most sincere articles – "On Creativity": "I, a little creature, with all instincts strive to live in a painless, sinless, happy "paradise" <...> from heavenly child life and from the finest matter of heredity, – creating my potential <...> Man steps firmly on the ground. He carries in himself this little world of infancy, bright as the light of the sky, joyful like a meadow covered with dew, and complex, sleeping mute, because it has voices of millennia. This is the potential of the artist. Hence, there is the eternal thirst for returning to "paradise" [16].

For Alexey Tolstoy, "childhood" and "happiness" are almost synonyms. For the writer, the concept of "happiness" is associated with the children's perception of the world as "paradise". Initially, the world is given to a child in its entirety. He has nothing to desire and nothing to strive for – it is enough to "wake up from the sleep and look back". In the writer's diary written in 1923 we read: "The world is a miracle. Wake up from your sleep and look back – there is a miracle. That is why there is such a joy of awakening in a child" [17].

This idea of childhood as a perfect and complete world found its expression in the "Magpie's tales". Restricted space – space of the estate without the restriction of freedom, cyclical time in accordance with the change of seasons is the formula of "children's paradise". A child's worldview embraces the parental home, native village; the farthest frontier is the place "beyond the river". But this is the whole world. In the same way, the little hero also has time: it does not run, does not even flow, but remains.

The life of a child and the life of nature, the merging and interweaving of these two themes create a peculiar lyrical flavor of the narrative. The child is close to nature; he seems to be dissolved in the world around him. Unity with nature, the feeling of being an integral part of it creates in the soul of the little hero the constant expectation of happiness, of something wonderful, fantastic. A child pays close attention to everything that is happening around. The vision of the real world is connected with his fantastic ideas, coming from the dream and fantasy of the child, from the desire to revive the world around him in the smallest details: in the story live poetic images of a cat, horse, hedgehog, fox, hare, ant. A.N. Tolstoy harmoniously incorporates elements of everyday life into the narration, artistically accurately and succinctly delineates the characters' dispositions. The unfading vitality of the fantastic creativity of A.N. Tolstoy is determined by his ability to "refer to a man, who cannot be understood without understanding the earth and the sun", without understanding nature.

The empirical fullness of childish existence, the harmony of the external and internal worlds, the image of a holistic, inspired Universe has been enriched by the literary and philosophical tradition. The idealism of A.N. Tolstoy is a complex of ideas, according to which the otherness of being unseen with the simple eye is not opposed to the material world, but is regarded as one of the sides of the Universe, God's creation. Such system of views was brought up in the writer by Russian folklore, literature and vivid images of ancient and German romantic idealism.

Fairy tales for the writer were not a stylized amusement or a probe of a pen, but the materialization in the figurative form of archetypical concepts and deep personal experience. Creating his own tales, A.N. Tolstoy looks at the world from the standpoint of mythological consciousness and depicts the diversity, brightness of being as the new combinations, collaborations of mythologies. It is the mythological consciousness of the writer that determines the plot and semantics of the cycle "Mermaid's Tales".

The cycle "Mermaid Tales" tells about the spirits of nature ("Leshiy" – Silvan; "Vodyanoy" – Merman; "Rusalochnka" – Mermaid; "Kikimora" – Female Hobgoblin; "Polevik" – Field Spirit), about house spirits ("Domovoy" – Hobgoblin; "Ovinnik"; "Anchutka") and the demon ("Chort"; "Vedmak" – the warlock). This composition of characters is specific for a particular genre of folklore prose – a folk superstitious story.

One of the main "plot" differences of "Bailichka" from fairy tales is the tragic outcome of events, an unhappy ending that aggravates the dark atmosphere of the story. In the tales of A. N. Tolstoy, this point corresponds to the first tale, which gave the title to the entire cycle, the tale "Mermaid", which sets the twilight-like "tone", outlining the theme of the cycle. Seduced by the angelic beauty and a childish mermaid's happy smile, an old man, in three episodes, breaks the connection with the world and perishes. The terrible tale finale is a realized metaphor of the plot's "core" of the story.

The only exception is the fairy tale "Tit", whose belonging to the cycle "Mermaid's Tales" is rather conditional. "Tit" was written eight years later after the first publication of the "Magpie's Tales", and was included by the author in several

collections of short stories and fairy tales (collection “Delusion” (1917-1918), collection “Wild Field” (1923) and collection “Love spell” (1923)) and became a part of the cycle only in the Complete Works of A. N. Tolstoy. In subsequent multi-volume publications it was printed separately (1958; 1972; 1983). In this tale there is not a single mythological character, there is no motive of meeting a demonic creature. In terms of genre, “Tit” pays off to a parable. In the center of its narrative, there is a certain type of life position, which is moral: the mother-countess sacrifices her life for the sake of her son three times. The main character of the fairy tale appears “not as an object of artistic observation, but as a subject of ethical choice”.

All the fairytales of the cycle are united by the author’s lyrical and ironic sympathy for the “small” domestic and natural demons. The world of the once formidable characters of the spooky superstitious stories “decayed”, “thinned”, became ghostly, the demonic power of the “host spirits” remained in the past: an old oak tree does not turn out to be a Silvan, Anchutka the Heelless without a human help wouldn’t be able to save the mother-in-law, who overate mice, the black cat Ovinnik is the first who laughs at his own wrath. One feels pity for everybody in the tale – for Anchutka and Field Spirit, for the old Silvan, and the unlucky Warlock, for the Wild Rooster and Merman. Once terrifying, now these characters need help and protection – at least through the smile, sympathy and memory of the reader.

A.S. Pushkin regarded folk tales as the most accurate reproduction of the spiritual history of a nation, and A.N. Tolstoy also perceived them in such way. Tolstoy: “A fairy tale <...> must be written so that it appears in all its charm. There is no need for research, no need for quotes, no need for excuses <...> it would be good to point out the very warehouse of the Russian fairy tale and its orientation: the nation creates their hero, the nation conquers its spiritual independence, the nation laughs <...> through a fairy tale reveals a thousand-year history of the nation” [18].

It was the “myth-making” memory of childhood that helped A.N. Tolstoy in his interaction with a child reader, in the development of fantastic, fairy-tale plots, figurative and plastic poetic language.

III. POETICS OF A.N. TOLSTOY-STORYTELLER

Most often A.N. Tolstoy is admired as a talented child: K.I. Chukovsky said that “Tolstoy always thirsted for joy, like a small child, thirsted for laughter and celebration, and those numb, frowning people were organically alien to him” [19]. In a mischievous mood, the writer loved artistic “lies” and hoax most of all, and, more often, –the combination of both.

“Talented child” is not only a household assessment. In the childish disposition is the defining property of A.N. Tolstoy. He himself spoke more than once about the genetic connection of the literary gift with children’s habits and impressions. Psychological source of creativity for him is in children’s lies. In the memoirs of N. Krandievskaya-Tolstoy we read about the point of view of her husband on the nature of creativity: “the artist is by nature a liar”; “lying is the first propensity to write”; “eloquence is art” [20].

According to the artistic principles of A.N. Tolstoy, a childish “lying” fantasy goes back to the mythological source of creativity – to the “paradise” of childhood. In the creative concept of A.N. Tolstoy the connection between art and childhood is extremely direct. K.I. Chukovsky drew attention to this: whatever Tolstoy wrote, the world of his books always reminds of the “Country of Levity” and the “Poetic Kindergarten”. His characters are “mummers boys and girls”, “babies in mind and heart”; the plot is built according to the scheme of children’s lies– like “frivolous, unguarded “anecdote”, “vaudeville nonsenses”, “nice welter and nonsense”; and the main theme is the desire for “heavenly” happiness, for the children’s joy of being.

About the talent of A.N. Tolstoy memoirists and critics often spoke with metaphors from the field of physiology: “he thinks ... with the whole womb” (F. Stepun), “his belly is talented” (F. Sologub), “he distinguishes art with his scent” (L. Chukovskaya). And A.N. Tolstoy was often evaluated with the help of “gastronomic” comparisons as something “tasty”, “juicy”: N. Aseev says that in Tolstoy’s works “the word is “granular, in large crumbs” [21], E. Schwartz recalls: “He did not constrain himself with anything, he was physical in everything. Once he went to a station on the road to the south. A gypsy was sitting on a platform and did not look at anyone; she was putting in bags what she had collected. And Tolstoy, who came out of the carriage, stood above her and frankly, for it is impossible to say that he was observing, sucked in like a pump, absorbed everything he saw. In the same way he looked, wrote, ate and drank, and loved” [22].

Just as often appears in the A.N. Tolstoy’s characteristics of art the epithet “alive”: “Whatever comes up under his pen–sunsets, trees, mares, old grandmothers, children,–everything lives and shines and delights” (K. Chukovsky [19]), “Tolstoy’s talent is narrow and perfect, – his method – staring; his object is a thing and a materialized soul (F. Stepun [23]).

The statements of A.N. Tolstoy himself on the nature of art in the article “Tasks of Literature” (1924) clarify the basics of the writer’s artistic method: “Strictly speaking, there can be no task for literature (fiction). The process of artistic creativity is not done by logical thinking, but by an ecstatic impulse. Art, artwork arises just like a dream – instantly. But there is no place for logic in it” [24]. In short stories, the role of detail is included in the whole work in accordance with a more complex logic than in novels: the concentrated integrity of a small piece of writing is based on the artistic reflection of the most significant features of objective reality in the intense concentration of life material.

Many contemporaries of A.N. Tolstoy noted the “specificity” of the writer’s talent — an extraordinary descriptive power, the “body-material” perception of the world. Yu. Olesha recalled: “As soon as I think “Alexey Tolstoy”, instantly one after another the pictures of the world created by him arise, and this world is so genuine, so real that it even doesn’t occur to me that it was created by the lines; no, it exists - here it is, near! A shoulder of a boyar’s servant almost rubs me, running through the yard in a white shirt with a patch of red cloth under his armpit; Makhno with his long hair under a gymnasium cap is riding a bicycle and almost

bumps into me <...> it almost hurts from the slap that Peter gives to Horn, a commandant of the taken fortress... What is the origin of this miracle of literature - authenticity? The answer that is appropriate to a school would be that the details create it" [25]. More precisely, it is not only details, not only the "real scent" (L. Chukovskaya). What is the secret of the realistic technique of Tolstoy? How does the writer "personify" words?

The author's ways of "personifying" are found in the reasonings of A.N. Tolstoy about the style: "In the beginning there was the Word. This is true, not a thought, not a feeling, but a word - at the beginning of creativity. But even before the word - a gesture. A gesture as a body movement, a gesture as a movement of the soul. A word is a spark arising at the end of a gesture. A gesture and a word are almost inseparable" [26]. Poetics of gesture is one of the characteristic features of the writer's idiosyncrasy, along with heightened attention to various "trifles" and "details".

The artistic task of A. N. Tolstoy is to bring the reader to the character's "muscular" sensation. By the gesture, the author impies not only the gesture of a hand, but also the whole inner state of a person at a given moment, his whole striving. The writer equates the movement of the body to the movement of the soul: the inseparability of words and gestures is a specific author's device. The writer activates the reader's subconscious memory, the "corporeal" memory of all five senses, engaging us into visual-tactile recognition.

Let us see how Tolstoy's childhood theme is revealed in the autobiographical story "Nikita's Childhood" (in the first edition "The Story of Many Excellent Things"), which was written in France in 1920 for the children's magazine "La Baguette verte" ("Green Stick"), then published in 1922 in Berlin, and first appeared in 1923 in the reading for children in his homeland. The story tells about the first years of the formation of a man, where the reader unfolds the chronicle of the basic events of the boy's life during the last year before the beginning of his studies.

The novelty of Tolstoy's prose for children is in the equality of the author and a character, in the coincidence of points of view: of the author and of a child. Before him, in the works about children an author and a hero were divided by the age distance: the hero-child was depicted from the perspective of an adult author; for this reason, the main characters - children - turned out to be clever beyond the years.

The mixture of the important and the minor in the story is clearly traced from the initial title "The Story of Many Excellent Things". All things are "excellent" with no exception. The same goes after: every "trifle" in a story seems childishly large as an important event and an "excellent thing". For a child, as well as for the writer himself, there are no "trifles".

The attitude of A. N. Tolstoy himself to the "excellent trifles" was precisely "childish" throughout the course of his life. A child tells about everything that happens avidly, as the most interesting thing. Every thing and every phenomenon becomes an event in the eyes of a child. From this point of view, it is interesting to look at the last letter of the writer

(January 1, 1945) to a twelve-year-old teenager Andrei Kapitsa, who later became a world-famous physicist.

"Andrei, here's the cannon as the New Year's present for you, - writes Tolstoy. - This is a real copper cannon, which in the XVIII century was put on the nose of a river vessel to protect against thieves. You need to make a carriage for it. You can find a picture of the carriage in the encyclopedic dictionary on the letter "P". Thanks for the luminous objects, they glow very preciously. It is very good to make two small cups that can be inserted into the eye-sockets. In the darkness, a human's face will appear with glowing eyes, like the devil's ones. <...> The cannon shoots only with black powder" [27].

Addressing the child, the terminally ill writer returns to his element: to the world of "excellent things", each of which is an absolute value. Tolstoy and his addressee speak the same language. Thanks to the ability to admire the phenomena of the surrounding world and selflessly to get involved in trifles, the writer does not have to work hard to appear before others, and even for himself - to feel as a child.

IV. CONCLUSION

Fabulous creativity of A.N. Tolstoy plays an important role in the synthesis of children's culture and folk art. The writer is confident that tough logic and edifying morality can achieve nothing in children's literature. Unlike many literary tales, Tolstoy's fairy tales are not instructive, but entertaining. But unlike folklore fairy-tale prose, animal tales receive a psychological "dimension": in the masterfully carved sparkling or lyrical dialogues, the inner world of the heroes is revealed.

Creating the images of fairy-tale characters, Tolstoy does not depict plastic forms, and with a few strokes outlines their features - all in all only a few details stand out. It seems that the writer combines the artistic techniques of L.N. Tolstoy and A.P. Chekhov. He includes the characteristic poetics of gesture, and the art of portraiture at the "junction" of Tolstoyan-Chekhov's "reception", and the ability to find and accurately write into the text the necessary and the only possible for the concentration of meaning detail - all these features of the artistic method of A.N. Tolstoy are happily embodied in his works for children. In his dealing with the "childish" theme, the writer turned out to be a remarkable "innovator": before him, in works about children an author and a hero were divided by the age distance - a child-hero was depicted from the perspective of an adult author. The novelty of the tales A.N. Tolstoy is in the equality of the author and a character, in the coincidence of points of view: of the author and of a child.

In the cycle "The Mermaid's Tales" you can see how in the work of fiction a folklore character changes his "grammar" (stable functions and attributes of the image in folk tradition) and "syntax" (connection of a character and his complex of motives with other characters). The author's transformations of a folklore text are a question of assimilation and interpretation of traditional characters, plots, motives and their inclusion in the new context of the author. The author's transformation of the folklore-mythological image or motive is one of the ways to create a polyphonic text, an ironic game of points of view.

In the cycle “Magpie’s Tales” the folk style of A.N. Tolstoy is conveyed mainly by the syntax of a phrase. The writer replaced not widely used dialect words and archaisms with colorful synonyms from the modern language. According to the Pushkin’s testament, Tolstoy intensifies the action, “mixing” it with the help of verbs, consistently removes everything that hinders the development of the plot. Ironic intonation interferes with the stylization of a folktale: the author’s mockery “softens” the sad endings of fairy tales.

Folklore-mythological characters, appearing in the artistic text, inevitably enter into complex relationships with the literary context. New, not peculiar to the authentic tradition intonations, ironically and humorously marking the author’s assessment of what is told about a character, are added to the invariant image. At the same time, the character’s function in the text partially changes in comparison to the folklore base. Changes of the original folk-tale in the literary text are systematic in nature – from the semantics of the characters to the intonational characteristics. Such changes happen due to the difference in the pragmatics of folklore and literary texts.

In the “third” Tolstoy’s artistic embodiment, a single author’s “gene”, instantly recognizable by style, unites tales of the most diverse nature. The dominant constituents of Tolstoy’s artistic method are – descriptive power (spiritualized materiality and corporeality, the ability to verbally embody the magic of “gesture”, the art of choosing an exact and semantically meaningful detail, a short phrase, precisely found, the only correct intonation) and the immediacy of a “childish” vision of the world.

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