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Literary History after Poststructuralism

(Tolstoy, Chekhov, Bunin, Nabokov)

If we take poststructuralist challenge seriously, literary history inevitably becomes problematic. On the one hand, traditional accounts of particular texts, authors, and major literary trends lose their stability when subjected to poststructuralist critique. On the other hand, historiography as such gets deprived of its claim for scientific objectivity because its meaning turns out to be conditioned by the rhetoric of a particular historiographic narrative.

Some of these problems are, in fact, rather familiar for Russian literature. As G.S. Morson put it, Russian literature has been traditionally characterized by the tendency to formal anomaly.¹ This anomaly can be understood as a constitutive breach between Russian literary texts and literary theory implicit in Western literature. This deliberate deviation from any literary norms makes Russian literature a privileged field for the kind of poststructuralist reading that defines literature as a subversive discourse par excellence. In a sense, it makes such reading inevitable. However, interpretations of classical Russian texts have been overwhelmingly influenced by various forms of essentialist concepts of meaning and structuralist positivism, which resulted in general repression of the subversiveness of Russian literary rhetoric.

History of Russian literature, in its turn, has never been established as a homogeneous all-embracing History, except for those ideological schemes that hardly dealt with particularities of literary texts. As soon as literary history employs close reading of literary works the historical master-narrative encounters numerous problems. The analysis

of a presumably realist work, for example, typically discovers the presence of structures not accounted for in the conception of Critical Realism, various traits of Romanticism, Modernism, Sentimentalism, Classicism or whatever. At that the question of what it means for the historical master-narrative is not usually addressed.

It is significant, however, that in the critical field of the studies of a particular author there typically emerges a generally adopted 'private' picture of literary history. In fact, history of Russian literature is split into a number of quite different histories that are as well established as they are incompatible with one another even in the case of contemporaneous authors. The rhetoric of such particular histories is not realized as such; scholars usually perceive their historiographic accounts as transparent representations of literary history as it objectively happened. Not surprisingly, rhetorically aware reading of the existent literary histories easily uncovers rather elaborate rhetoric constitutive of such histories. What is striking, however, is that the rhetoric of a particular literary history resembles the one found in the literary texts of the author in the framework of whose studies this history is narrated. This resemblance was, however, never explicated.

Although after various forms of poststructuralist criticism it seems irrefutable that every literary text at some point loses its stability and subverts its own conceptual grounding, this does not necessarily lead to the uniformity of literary rhetoric. As early as 1967 J. Derrida asserted that the impossibility to separate, through interpretation or commentary, the signifier from the signified is historically articulated and reading should be aware of the project of text's effacing itself in the face of the signified content.² Derrida suggested then that "the entire history of texts, and within it the history of literary forms in the West, should be studied

from this point of view"³, but this, to my knowledge, has never been systematically done.

On the other hand, studies of the historiographic narrativity have undermined the unquestioned authority of the narrative mode prevailing in classic XIX century historiography although maintaining that history is inconceivable without a narrative.⁴ Historical account has to be grounded in some rhetoric and it seems that the only way to avoid the arbitrariness of this rhetoric in case of the history of literature would be to employ the rhetoric of a particular author as a ground for the history of literature as it appears from this author's standpoint. This approach legalizes the de-facto existent split of the history of Russian literature and it opens up the possibility of critical analysis of these histories therefore allowing to directly articulate their oblique insights.

As my analysis of a number of classical texts of L. Tolstoy, Chekhov, Bunin, and (Russian) Nabokov has shown, each of these writers has his own peculiar rhetoric considerably different from others. This rhetoric remains relatively stable in time, so that, for example, the rhetoric of early and late Tolstoy is essentially the same, notwithstanding the dramatic changes of his ideas. It also proved possible to account for the specific rhetoric of a literary text without succumbing, at least apparently, to one of the essentialist fallacies deconstructed by poststructuralism. If we read the text from the beginning to the end we can discover that each author has his very specific way of dealing with the arbitrariness of sign, instability of meaning, unreliability of signification, incompleteness of the symbolic order or whatever other characteristics of language that *do* get revealed in all their text. Traditional striving of Russian literature towards the immediate expression of universal truth, which is obviously at odds with poststructuralist spirit, only added to the tenseness of its rhetoric.

Since I do not have time here to produce a somewhat detailed analysis of even one literary text, I will confine myself to the articulation of the conclusions of a large series of analyses in relation to the history of literature. It will not, therefore, be an argument but rather an illustration of what such histories of Russian literature may look like, although I do claim that everything I am going to say was carefully argued elsewhere.

According to the dominant history of Russian literature **Tolstoy** represents pure Realism devoid of any residue of Romanticism.⁵ This understanding prevails almost unconditionally, despite the successful attempts to demonstrate the presence of, say, non-realistic structures underlying some Tolstoy's texts. Rhetorically aware reading shows that Tolstoy's works do strive to the immediate contact with historical reality and eventually affirm their immediate contiguity with extra-textual truth. This affirmation, even in late Tolstoy, necessarily depends on 'Rousseauistic' conceptual system. At the same time, Tolstoy's rhetoric powerfully deconstructs this system, demonstrating the inevitability of conventional, artificial, and, hence, false textual mediation. What is still more important is that this deconstruction is not merely an additional dimension of Tolstoy's text. It occurs as a result of an attempt to articulate the historical reality in Rousseau's terms – that is to say, the movement towards reality entails in Tolstoy the negation of the system by means of which this movement is accomplished.

Tolstoy's rhetoric, therefore, demonstrates precisely the impossibility of "pure" Realism. The history of literature in this perspective is a history of simultaneously indispensable and impossible movement towards reality. The existent interpretations of Tolstoy's poetics either ignore this basic contradiction between the conceptual system incorporated in the text and historical reality that his texts strive to attain or suppress this contradiction by ascribing it to inorganic external

influences. One might notice, however, that classical Soviet literary history, teleologically oriented to Realism, reveals its sensitivity to Tolstoy's rhetorical problems. The ambivalence of the notion of reality in this history closely resembles the ambivalence of Tolstoy's rhetoric. In H.R. Jauss's words, although Marxist aesthetics has substituted 'nature' for 'reality', it later ascribed to this reality constitutive features of apparently overcome nature – exemplary necessity and essential fullness.⁶

Chekhov's texts are obviously oriented towards Tolstoy's tradition. However, although Chekhov employs characteristically Tolstoyan themes and problems, his works do not contain anything like Tolstoy's rhetorical self-transgression. On the contrary, the textuality of Chekhov's works is aimed at the deconstruction of all conceivable meaning-generating models eliminating the very possibility to essentialize meaning. In the course of his evolution Chekhov seems to move from metaliterary texts revealing inevitable textuality of strong metaphors of immediateness to texts supplementing this demonstration with questioning rhetorical stability of such metaliterary narratives themselves.

To inscribe Chekhov in literary history scholars inevitably have to essentialize his texts, stop their continuous deferring of meaning and short-circuit their rhetoric with the metaphysically burdened reality. This happens even in A. Chudakov's conception of Chekhov's poetics that maintains that Chekhov, intensifying Tolstoy's Realism up to the limit, destroys all the artificial structures that prevent Tolstoy's texts from merging with reality.⁷ This is a powerful historical narrative, but it does not stand criticism. On the one hand, it is internally contradictory since it hinges on an oxymoronic concept of "arbitrary integrity" that simultaneously establishes the text's immediate link with reality and retains the closeness of its structure. On the other hand, it necessarily

employs the metaphysics of presence that is powerfully deconstructed in Chekhov's works. It seems that Chekhov's rhetoric of pure textuality makes it impossible to explicitly formulate any model of literary history whatever.

This, however, does not lead to the complete impossibility of literary history from Chekhov's standpoint. In Chekhov's rhetorical perspective successful communication is only possible by means of a text that is completely isolated from the meaning intended by the speaker. In this sense, a successful historiographic emplotment is possible on the necessary condition that it functions independently of its intended meaning. Such was in fact the case with the most famous Gorky's formula that Chekhov is killing Realism and will soon kill it to death. Although this formula has been interpreted as indicating Chekhov's destroying the boundaries between text and reality, it can equally well be understood in a different way as suggesting the destruction of reality itself, which effectively deprives literary historiography of the basis for narrativization. Both meanings are present in the formula and precisely due to the mutual exclusiveness it can be considered an adequate account of literary history from Chekhov's rhetorical standpoint.

Although **Bunin's** works are usually described as exemplifying the characteristic Silver Age poetics where life imitates discourse,⁸ the analysis shows that events in Bunin's texts do not repeat discourse literally, they rather reproduce it as a trope. The relation of life to discourse in Bunin's stories is the same as the relation of the metaphorical meaning of trope to its literal meaning. The correspondence between discourse and life is rather rigidly established but Bunin's texts also demonstrate the irreducible conventionality of this correspondence, its dependence on intratextual rhetorical conventions. As a result, this correspondence cannot be legitimately transferred to the relations

between Bunin's text and real life, which strictly differentiate Bunin from the metaphysical conceptions of art characteristic of the Silver Age.

Bunin's rhetoric makes the conceptual system of Tolstoyan kind consistent and stable at the expense of its relations with extratextual world. Whereas Tolstoy's rhetoric transcends the textual boundaries and brings the ethical idea to the reader's world as a universal truth, Bunin's rhetoric remains essentially closed. In Bunin's studies the difference between Tolstoy and Bunin is usually presented as Bunin's movement away from Tolstoy's Critical Realism that entailed rational comprehensibility of the Universe. The attempt to articulate this movement on the level of ideas meets, however, with significant difficulties. A comparative analysis of Tolstoy's and Bunin's texts shows though that Bunin's rhetoric subverts not the possibility of rationalizing the world but the possibility to transcend this rationalizing beyond the limits of a given text.

Bunin's relation to Chekhov can be articulated in much similar way. Bunin rhetoric systematically short-circuits Chekhov's endless chains of signification. This again creates a closed structure whose very meaningfulness is guaranteed by the textual closure. While in Chekhov's story the boundary between text and external reality was unattainable since always deferred, in Bunin this boundary is clearly outlined but its crossing from within is impossible. The closeness of Bunin's rhetoric accounts for the multitude of conflicting conceptions of the nature of his poetics: since the "universal" meaning of this or that element in Bunin's text can only be determined from without, it is practically left to a critic's discretion.

The closeness of Bunin's rhetoric leads to the impossibility to conceive of literary history as of a dynamic process. Any attempt to historicize Bunin turn into the denying of history, and this is manifest in

Bunin's studies. The dominant historical plot in Bunin-oriented criticism is the destruction of XIX century worldview under the influence of catastrophic experience of XX century. In other words, extraliterary history is necessarily employed to inscribe Bunin in the history of Russian literature. Literary history in Bunin's rhetorical perspective entails the employment of non-literary history as a means to transgress the boundaries of closed literary rhetoric.

Nabokov's characteristic narrative paradoxes that break the text's unity from within are routinely interpreted in Nabokovian studies as the text's opening into reality, either metaphysical or aesthetic. It can be shown, however, that the ontologized systems of signification, by means of which this opening is accomplished, although at work in Nabokov's text, are called there into question. Aesthetic utopia as such is impossible in Nabokov's texts where two or more mutually exclusive aesthetic systems collide and discredit one another.

At that, however, in many cases the constitutive feature of Nabokov's language turns out to be its independence from all the aesthetic systems established and undermined in the text. Nabokov's language in a given text often deliberately bears the characteristics that lie beyond the conceptual controversy, it is constituted upon the conceptual gap between controversial systems of representation articulated in the text. It is this transgression that creates the effect of immediate contact with reality beyond all rhetorical complications, and the celebrated visibility of Nabokov's descriptions, of course, only adds to it.

Despite the fact that both Tolstoy's and Nabokov's texts are directed at breaking the textual boundary towards extratextual reality, they do it in distinctly different ways. Whereas Tolstoy's eventual breakthrough to truth depends upon 'Rousseauistic' conceptual system, in Nabokov the transcendental status of literary language emerges as a result

of the rhetorical transgression of all conceptual systems. Just as Nabokov's rhetoric typically allows for the language of the narration to transcend the conceptual problems of the text, Nabokov as a writer is ascribed an epistemological superiority in Nabokovian literary history. In this history Nabokov appears as a writer who appropriates and freely combines various elements of his predecessors' works. This model universally prevails the differences in the particular interpretations notwithstanding. It is even at work when, as in case *Spring in Fialta* and Bunin's *Genrikh*, Nabokov's text actually precedes Bunin's reaction to it.

This rhetoric of this literary history, which can be called postmodern, is teleological and finite. Unlike all the other histories we considered, it strictly differentiates between all non-Nabokov's text, which dwell in the historic 'past', and Nabokov's text, that in fact transcend history as such. However, the analysis shows that while Tolstoy's and Bunin's rhetoric can be inscribed in this historiographic plot, Chekhov's rhetoric does not allow for it. Chekhov's texts demonstrate the inevitable inaugural breach in the realm of the Symbolic while Nabokov's texts take the possibility to avoid this breach for granted. It is Chekhov's rhetoric that contains in itself and problematizes Nabokov's one, not the other way around. Therefore, if we narrate literary history from the standpoint that the more "aware" writer is the "next one" in the historical line, then we will have to admit that Chekhov actually follows Nabokov in this history. This, of course, does not undermine Nabokov's rhetoric of literary history but deprives it of its metahistoric claims thus bringing it back to history.

All the four histories we considered are in a way problematic. It is, of course, hardly a surprise given the subversiveness of literary rhetoric they are based on. It is important that the mutual problematization does not make them identical or even similar. The thing

that seems striking to me is that the outcome of these deconstructive rhetorical analyses, which radically revise most classical interpretations and are for the most part unacceptable for Russian academia even now, does correspond in many ways with what was written in that academia about the history of Russian literature. It is tempting to say that irrespective of their theoretical assumptions literary scholars still perceive the rhetorical complexity of the texts they study and this perception influences the mode of literary history they narrate. It might have something to do with the specificity of Russian literary anti-tradition. This can also be said to testify to the thesis that poststructuralism was always already there. Anyway, I think it has some significance for the topic of this conference.

¹ Morson G.S. *Literary History and the Russian Experience // Literature and History. Theoretical Problems and Russian Case Studies*. Stanford, 1986. P.24.

² Derrida J. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimor and London, 1976. P.159-160.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Kellner H. *Narrativity in History: Post-Structuralism and Since // History and Theory*. 1987. Band 26. P.29.

⁵ *Гуковский Г.А.* Пушкин и русские романтики. М., 1965. С.17.

⁶ *Яусс Х.Р.* История литературы как провокация литературоведения // *Новое литературное обозрение*. №12. 1995. С.47.

⁷ *Чудаков А.П.* Поэтика Чехова. М., 1971; *Чудаков А.П.* Мир Чехова. Возникновение и утверждение. М., 1986.

⁸ This idea is suggested in: *Жолковский А.К.* "Легкое дыхание" Бунина - Выготского 70 лет спустя // *Жолковский А.К.* Блуждающие сны. М., 1994.