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THE IMAGE OF CHRIST AS A NETWORK MOTIF IN THE RUSSIAN LITERATURE

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Summary

This research implements theories of polyphony and dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981), intertextuality (Kristeva, 1993), and network theory (Watts, 2003; Latour, 2007) to analyze the development of the motif of Christ in Russian literature at the end of the 19th - first half of the 20th century.

Keywords: Christ, Russian literature, 19th-20th century, network motif, intertextuality.

Introduction

This research examines the development of the network of motifs and ideas in Russian literature of the 19th – 20th century with a focus on Christian motifs, more specifically the image of Christ. This image has been chosen as one of the most complex and controversial character-idea types that change drastically under the influence of changes in society and predominant political and philosophical ideas being popular at the time the literary work is created. The reflection of these changes in the image of Christ connects literature with real-life communities and cultures, presenting writers and their ideas as nodes in the socio-cultural and historical network of ideas and influences.

According to Watts's (2003) theory of social networks, in order for an idea to spread, we need nodes-innovators (activators) who introduce ideas, and nodes - early adopters. Thus, in terms of the social network theory, writers can be defined as “early adopters”, i.e. “nodes that will switch from an inactive to an active state under the influence of a single active neighbor” (p. 233). That means that although writers do not always introduce new ideas into society, they respond to the ideas that are already brooding and reflect upon them in their work, thus, stimulating other people's critical and aesthetic thinking.

The image of Christ became especially controversial in the Russian literature at the end of the 19th – first half of the 20th century, when active changes in the society induced people to cut off religious ideas as something useless and potentially harmful. The more surprising fact is that exactly during this time of growing atheism among the population, Christ's image, as well as other religious motifs, became very popular and varied in literature. This research focuses on several key literary works of the second half of the 19th century – first half of the 20th century: novels by Fyodor Dostoyevsky "The Idiot" and "The Brothers Karamazov", "Doctor Zhivago" by Boris Pasternak, the poem "The Twelve" by Aleksandr Blok, and the novel "Master and Margarita" by Mikhail Bulgakov, which reflect major changes in the society and culture.

The research is theoretically grounded on Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) ideas of polyphony and dialogism in literary works, the actor-network theory by Bruno Latour (2007), and the idea of intertextuality by Julia Kristeva (1993), who was also influenced by Bakhtin. The concept of dialogism is perceived in this research as connected with the interrelation of ideas and key motifs in the works of different authors, rather than with a dialogue between different characters presenting different ideas within a single novel. Likewise, the actor-network theory that has traditionally been applied to the analysis of dialogues between characters in plays is focused on the development of the central motif and its interpretations, rather than on the interchange of speech utterances between the characters. The research questions that stand up in the light of network theory, theory of polyphony, and dialogism as related to the intertwining of motifs concern three directions:

What is the significance of Christ's image in rendering the author's ideas, and what is the connection between the literary image and socio-cultural and political influences?

How does the motif develop and change from the original version (i.e. The Bible) to its different interpretations? What are major factors influencing these changes? What is left from the original, and what presents a completely new idea dressed up in a habitual way?

Connections between different interpretations of the same image: Are the authors and ideas in dialogical and polemical relations with the original source or with one another's versions?

Theories of Dialogism, Intertextuality, Polyphony, and Actor-Network

The network of literary texts of different authors is created through interconnection between ideas and recurrent motifs. According to Bakhtin's theory (1981), no literary text can be studied independently from the others, since they influence and interpenetrate each other. Moreover, an individual literary work is fully understood only in its relation to other works of the same author, as well as to the works of his/her predecessors and successors. Following Bakhtin (1981), Kristeva (1993) invents the term "intertextuality" that allows explaining specifics of a network of literature. Intertextuality implies different influences on the text that are reflected in the variety of direct and indirect citations, allusions, and reminiscences. Motifs are one of the main characteristics of the intertext.

According to Bakhtin (1981) and Kristeva (1993), intertextuality is created out of various sources. Apart from the writers' influence on one another, literary works are also formed as a result of an author's reaction to certain aspects of socio-cultural reality. That means that a literary work reflects voices of communities and epochs in the author's subjective interpretation. Therefore, as Bazerman (2004) states, each literary work is original only to a certain extent, and it is important to determine a shared cultural experience in an individual text.

Bakhtin (1981) also argues for a relative objectivity of the text, since the novel does not only reflect an author's view and ideology, but incorporates the voices of other people not necessarily

belonging to the author's social class. Thus, Bakhtin (1981) compares a literary work to a discourse of dialogical or polylogical nature. The author reconstructs other voices and opinions in their work, be it the voices of writers of previous generations, fellow-contemporaries' voices or even future voices in the form of hypothetical ideas. Bakhtin (1981) speaks about the polyphonic nature of a novel, since it renders opinions of different characters, quite independent from the author's personal view of the situation. Moreover, the author's voice does not have any advantage over the voices of the characters. When analyzing Dostoyevsky's novels, Bakhtin (1972) re-created a complex network of ideas and character-types as related to one another, introducing the character and idea counterparts. All these characters receive an equal right to voice their ideas and life views, while the author's personality and opinion dissolves into the voices of his characters and socio-historical influences.

Bakhtin's theory can be correlated with Moretti's (2011) interpretation of Latour's (2007) actor-network theory. Moretti (2011) attempted to re-create a network in Shakespeare's Hamlet based on relations of the characters. Moretti (2011) analyzed the play's plot stating that "a network is made of vertices and edges; a plot of characters and actions" (p. 3). According to Moretti (2011), actions are the character's utterances in the system of complex relationships. As novels and other literary genres are not built on dialogue, Moretti (2011) considers that it is more difficult to create a network when analyzing other literary forms. However, Spinuzzi (2008) identifies the actor-network theory's specifics when claiming that "actors-networks are assemblages of humans and nonhumans; any person, artifact, practice ... can be considered a node in the network" (p. 7). Therefore, since an idea is a kind of mental practice, it is possible to analyze the network of different literary works considering recurrent ideas and motifs as nodes instead of actions and speech acts. Moreover, the actor-network theory introduces the concept of rhizome that is "made up of diverse, heterogeneous materials", and "any point in the rhizome can be connected to anything else" (Spinuzzi, 2008, p. 7). Literary motifs can be named rhizomatic, since they develop into new ideas when connecting to other motifs in no particular order. For example, in Pasternak's novel "Doctor Zhivago" the religious motif of Christ in Gethsemane is connected to Hamlet making his choice, while in Bulgakov's novel "Master and Margarita" religious motifs relate to motifs of creation, justice, and guilt. Thus, one node connecting with other nodes can be interpreted differently in dependence on the context, i.e. surrounding nodes.

Irvine (2004) applies the concept of rhizome to Bakhtin's (1981) polyphony in novels, i.e. incorporation of "many voices, styles, references, and assumptions not a speaker's "own" into literary work. The rhizomatic structure has no center, and, according to Bakhtin (1981), there is no center, i.e. a dominant ideology in the novel. The literary work does not claim to be a true representation of the world as it is, but presents different, sometimes ambiguous versions of reality and ideologies.

In this research, the Bakhtinian concept of polyphony is extended from a novel form to all forms of literary works, since polyphony is understood not only as polylogue among characters and ideas of a single novel, but also as the relation of a particular work's ideas and motifs to ideas and motifs of other literary and non-literary oral and written works and voices of discourse communities. The religious motif of Christ coming into the world develops through generations, and in each literary work, it is interpreted differently in dependence on social, historical, and philosophical contexts and ideas provided by the author and his characters. Therefore, it is possible to follow the development of an intertextual network that has started from a single node-activator – text of the Bible, and has been extended through a variety of cultures and epochs, through the prism of individual and collective consciousnesses to find its representation in multiple literary works of

Russian writers, and connect it with other networks of motifs and ideas.

According to Bazerman (2011), who blends Bakhtin's (1981) idea of polyphony and dialogism, and Kristeva's (1993) idea of intertextuality, when analyzing literary works it is important to attend to the five dimensions of intertext:

1. How much one text takes from other texts, and how it adopts this material;
2. The forms of this adoption: direct quotations, paraphrasing or distant similarity in situations;
3. How the text connects with other texts, literary epochs and places;
4. How the author synthesizes and modifies meaning of an intertextual material in a new context;
5. The rhetorical function of the intertextual material in a different text.

Functions and Development of the Image of Christ

The traditional Biblical version describes Christ as an earthly embodiment of a spiritual idea of forgiveness and self-sacrifice for the others' benefit. He is the messenger of God to the people to save humanity from sins. However, Epanishnikova (2007) claims that there is something more in the image of Christ than people usually perceive. Having analyzed the descriptions of Christ in the New Testament, she summarizes them into somewhat different characteristics. Christ is the person, who was named a dangerous rioter by ancient governors, who was followed by crowds of admiring people, who inspired others not only by his preaching, but by his actions, who was decisive and uncompromising, and able to act and experience strong feelings. In the view of these characteristics, it is understandable why Christ and motifs connected with his image were so popular in the Russian literature of the second half of the 19th – first half of the 20th centuries. According to Bakhtin (1981), a literary work reflects socio-cultural reality and the life of communities of certain epochs. What were the epochs of Blok, Bulgakov, Dostoyevsky, and Pasternak?

Novels "The Idiot" (1869) and "The Brothers Karamazov" (1880) were written in a tumultuous time. To name only a few of the historical events, abolition of serfdom, radicalism of political movements that ended in the assassination of Tsar Aleksandr II, different philosophical and political ideas starting from slavophilism and ending with nihilism, liberalism, and socialism. Blok's poem "The Twelve" (1918) was created directly after the Revolution of 1917. The novel "Master and Margarita" (1937) reflects the time of repressions in the 30s. Finally, "Doctor Zhivago" (1956) was written after World War II, but the author's narrative returns to the time of the Russian Revolution and post-revolution years. According to Eco (1989), creating a literary work means creating a universe, i.e. network. All political, philosophical, and socio-cultural trends are presented in the above-mentioned literary works in combination with universal issues, and the image of Christ links the present with the past, the novel universe with real-life events and communities and creates "dialogued interrelation of languages" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 358).

This research attempts to follow connections between the authors' universes as parts of the whole cosmological body of literary and non-literary reality. The image of Christ is interpreted in several ways. First, the main character of a literary work can be more or less associated with Christ ("The Idiot", "Doctor Zhivago"). Second, the image of Christ is introduced as a side-story often narrated by one of the characters (In "The Brothers Karamazov" Ivan tells the legend of the Great Inquisitor; in "Master and Margarita" the story of Pontius Pilate is first written by Master, and then, narrated by Woland). Finally, Christ can appear as a symbol (Blok's poem "The Twelve").

Christ-like Character

Prince Myshkin in Dostoyevsky's novel "The Idiot" was intended by the author as an embodiment of an ideal positive person, who lives in the reality far from the ideal. His title "Prince" and traits of his character make Myshkin close to both, Christ and Prince Hamlet. Like Christ, he sacrifices himself for the good of others, and like Hamlet, he is tortured by the problem of choice that he cannot make because, notwithstanding his decision, someone will inevitably be hurt. However, Prince Myshkin is not able to fight for good, and he is helpless in his attempt to help people. He is humiliated and laughed at by other characters. His last name "Myshkin", a derivative from the word "mouse", intensifies the idea of humility and self-sacrifice. Kovalev (2010) compares the image of Myshkin with the reproduction of Goldbein's painting "Dead Christ" that appears in the novel, stating that Myshkin is Christ, who was not able to resurrect, and who was crushed by the ruthless fallen world of sinners. Myshkin is also compared by the novel's other characters to the poor knight Don Quixote struggling against the mill.

Likewise, Yuri Zhivago, the main character of Pasternak's novel, becomes a Christ-like character through his sufferings. The plot of "The Idiot" and "Doctor Zhivago" is similar in the sense that both, Yuri Zhivago and Prince Myshkin, want to make the world better and fail, both are captured in complex feelings for two women at the same time. One of the women is the embodiment of fertility and pure simplicity (Tonya - Aglaya), another is a vile desecrated beauty (Lara – Nastasya Filippovna). The connections are further shown in the history of the novel. The first draft of the novel title was "The notes of Patrikiy Zhivult", and this name is translated as the "knight of life". It refers us to the image of Myshkin and Don Quixote. The end of the novels is tragic, since both characters are crushed. As Sedakova (2002) mentions, the saint is involved in the force field of social, historical, and political events, and is left powerless and will-less.

One of Yuri Zhivago's poems is entitled "Hamlet", and the main character is presented as the actor on the stage who prays to God: "Take away this cup, O Abba Father, Everything is possible to Thee" (Pasternak, *Hamlet*). The cup is the symbol of the inevitable fate. In another poem "The Garden of Gethesemane" the parallels between Zhivago and Christ are even more evident. Likewise the New Testament, the cup is the symbol of martyrdom, Calvary, the cross, death, and voluntary self-sacrifice. The main character feels lonely and doomed:

And looking at those dark abysses,
Empty and endless, bottomless deeps,
He prayed the Father, in a bloody sweat,
To let this cup pass from His lips (Pasternak, *The Garden of Gethsemane*).

The Story of Christ as a Side Story

Several Russian literary works (Dostoevsky's "The Brothers Karamazov", and Bulgakov's "Master and Margarita") present the story of Christ in the context of the whole plot. The story is only indirectly connected to ideas and actions taking part in the novels. The main purpose of its use is to voice eternal philosophical questions of what is good and evil, who is wrong, why people suffer, etc. that disturb and doom the main characters. Sometimes the author uses a side story in order to reveal some important issues about one of the characters without an explicit description or psychological analysis.

According to Vlasov (2008), the dialogue between Yuri Zhivago and another character,

revolutionary Strelnikov-Antipov, can be compared to the legend about the Great Inquisitor in “The Brothers Karamazov” by Dostoyevsky. Strelnikov is associated with the character of the Great Inquisitor interrogating Christ. Both, Strelnikov and the Great Inquisitor, reject love of God and spiritual values for the service of humanity. These ideas are reflections of ideas of socialism and equal rights that were at the basis of the Russian Revolution. However, the idea of good is based on totalitarianism and terror, and “godless love turns to hatred” (Mochulsky, 1995), since people are forced rather than encouraged to change their ways of living.

In the legend about the Great Inquisitor, however, good and evil are ambivalent to some extent, and the dialogue between the Christ-like character and the Great Inquisitor is the dialogue about the correlation of freedom and power, since power can lead people to freedom and a better life, but it can also stifle their voices. The legend is told by one of the main characters, Ivan, who, like Rodion Raskolnikov from another Dostoyevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment*, is obsessed with the idea of violence for the better good. In the end, both, the Great Inquisitor and Ivan, deny Christ not for the sake of a better future for humanity, but because they are afraid to stop playing their role as rebels and adversaries.

As in “The Brothers Karamazov”, in Bulgakov’s novel “*Master and Margarita*” Christ (who is periphrastically named Yeshua) is not a central character. We see him through the prism of Pontius Pilate’s perceptions. Like Prince Myshkin and Yuri Zhivago, Yeshua embodies the idea of forgiveness and absolute love for humanity. However, he is deprived of the divine nature of the Biblical Christ. He is a real man with physical weaknesses, fears and uncertainties. He is not a counterpart for Pontius Pilate, but rather his interlocutor and later on his defender. Christ’s (Yeshua’s) fate correlates to the fate of Master’s novel that is destroyed by its creator, and then, brought back to life by Woland’s famous words about manuscripts that do not burn. As a representation of the sublime beauty, art and creativity are non-transient, and so is the idea of love for humanity, kindness, and self-sacrifice.

Christ as a Symbol

In Blok’s poem “The Twelve” Christ is not an active character. He appears as a hardly discernible ambiguous symbol. The band of revolutionary soldiers rambles around the streets protecting them from “bourgeois”.

...and wrapped in wild snow at their head
carrying a blood-red flag -
soft-footed where the blizzard swirls,
invulnerable where bullets crossed -
crowned with a crown of snowflake pearls,
a flowery diadem of frost,
ahead of them goes Jesus Christ (Blok, *The Twelve*).

This symbolic image has become the reason of many debates among literary critics and researchers. Perhaps, Blok himself was not quite in agreement with his idea, since he noted in one of his diaries that sometimes he hated this feminine vague concept (Blok, 1918). The majority of literary researchers nowadays are divided into several groups. Some state that Christ of Blok’s poem is in reality the Antichrist (Lavrov, 2000) who came to ruin the world, “carrying a blood-red flag” (Blok, *The Twelve*). Others are less negative, and perceive Christ as a symbol of change (Kotrelev, 2000) and arrival of the new world order as the old hungry dog limping behind the soldiers represents the old world order. This idea can be supported by the number of soldiers, which is the

same as the number of apostles. On the other hand, Christ might be interpreted as a compassionate observer of human beings for whom he sacrificed his life, and they again renounce him for the sake of atheistic ideas. He is “invulnerable where bullets crossed” (Blok, *The Twelve*), which means that he has resurrected once, and will resurrect again. The majority of criticism at present (Lesnevsky, 2000) consider the symbol of Christ in the poem as the embodiment of an idea of forgiveness and compassion standing against blind cruelty and entangled human relations. The last perception connects the symbol with “The Idiot” and “The Brothers Karamazov” by Dostoyevsky, and “Master and Margarita” by Bulgakov. Magomedova (2000) explicitly states that “никакой иной нравственной силы, способной преодолеть аморализм стихии ... кроме этики сострадания, любви и признания ценности каждой человеческой жизни, — этики, которая веками связывалась с именем Христа, — не существует” [there is no other moral force that is able to overcome the amorality of the storm ... except ethics of compassion, love, and recognition of the value of each human life – the ethics that for centuries was associated with the name of Christ].

Blok’s Christ is also connected with the description of the storm in “Doctor Zhivago” that penetrates the novel as one of its key concepts. The wild snow around Christ symbolizes the storm of socio-political changes (war and revolution). In one of the poems in “Doctor Zhivago” we can see similar interpretation:

“It snowed and snowed, the whole world over,
Snow swept the world from end to end.
A candle burned on the table;
A candle burned” (Pasternak, *Winter Night*).

The storm represents the changes that crush people’s lives, and temporarily destroy all that is good and bright. Yet life goes on (“a candle burned”). Although individuals, such as Doctor Zhivago, might suffer and be forced out of life, others will come to replace them. Similarly, in “The Twelve” Christ instills hope even in the doomed future of Russia.

Another possible connection involves the concept of art and creativity in “Master and Margarita”. According to Gasparov (1993), the concept of Christ in the snow storm is related to the idea of freedom of creativity and a total liberation of spirit. In this view point, Christ is the symbol of the coming of a new age in literature and art, as well as new society perspectives. Similarly, in “Master and Margarita”, Master’s novel creatively re-interprets the biblical story of Christ. Thus, although all Christ images in literary works are somewhat different from the traditional biblical character, only Blok’s Christ and Master’s Yeshua can be considered truly revolutionary embodiments of the original idea.

Conclusion

The short comprehensive review of the above-mentioned literary works indicates that intertextuality is the main characteristic of literature as such. A work of art interacts with other works and opinions, with history, culture, and society, and therefore, as Losev (1990) states, a literary work renders not only the author’s idea and personal vision of the situation and problem, but the specifics of communities and the socio-historical process, in which the author participates voluntarily or involuntarily.

Biblical motifs carry on universal truths. The biblical history is interpreted as a timeless circle of the development of humanity in the course of changing epochs and communities. Probably, this is the main reason of the variety of interpretations of evangelic motifs. In the course of “re-writing” the Bible, the original source is marked by multiple varied changes, and each consecutive literary work

correlates not only with the New Testament, but with previous versions and re-drafts of other writers. As a result, the motif as a node gets more and more links, and becomes much more complicated and multilateral than the original plot of the Bible. Thus, not only previous versions influence subsequent works, but later versions have an impact on the perception of the original, so that in the end, the original source and its variations become interchangeable and protract when joining new nodes and networks. This interchangeability is demonstrated in the development of the Christ motif network in the works by Blok, Bulgakov, Dostoyevsky, and Pasternak. The image of Christ is connected with key-concepts of forgiveness, self-sacrifice, compassion, creativity, and freedom of choice, and evolves from the biblical ideal of the Son of God to its earthly incarnations (Prince Myshkin, Doctor Zhivago, and Yeshua). The biblical motif connects with other literary characters such as Prince Hamlet and Don Quixote, and supernatural phenomena (a snow storm in Blok's "The Twelve", and Pasternak's "Doctor Zhivago").

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