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Phenomenological Aspects of Russian Verbal Culture: the Book in the Creative Mind of V. A. Zhukovsky

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the ‘the writer and the book’ problem, which is studied from the viewpoint of the phenomenology of the Russian culture, and is a case study of the Russian poet V. A. Zhukovsky’s personal library stored in the Scientific Library of Tomsk State University. The study is based on the idea that the active interaction between the creative process and the author’s range of reading is crucial because the poet’s library and his preferences as a reader function as an essential system modelling his outlook and works.

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1. Introduction

The ‘writer-reader’ problem has many aspects. It involves writer’s range of reading reflected in his epistolary, diaries, critical views, the system of his aesthetic values based on public opinions in periodicals, articles on the anniversary of the writers of the past and the present. The writer’s library becomes a wonderful addition to this material; however, unfortunately it is very rarely preserved in its original form.

V. A. Zhukovsky is a very representative figure in the formulation of the problem since the book seems to be more than a book in his biography; it is the capacitor of his spiritual quest, creative ideas, and the object of numerous translation experiments; it is, in effect, a laboratory for creative work and, to some extent, a writing table as many drafts of Zhukovsky’s works are found on the pages of the books from his personal collection. It is

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noteworthy that all the aspects of the issue have found most complete expression in his creative mind. Perhaps the uniqueness of the research problem formulation is that Zhukovsky's library stored in the collection of the Scientific Library of TSU and the library of the Institute of the Russian Literature of the Academy of Sciences of Russia is not a mere collection of books belonging to the poet. His creative laboratory containing over 3,000 volumes recreate the spiritual odyssey of the great Russian poet, journalist, critic, 'genius of translation', teacher of the heir, the future Emperor Alexander II and a remarkable Russian thinker.

Thus, the aim of the article is to present a core principle for the study of Zhukovsky's library which involves the technique of a constant correlation of the book-reader with the text-writer that allows to get an insight into the nature and tendencies of the creative process. This approach allows to prepare a real commentary to the widely known texts and to introduce to the scientific world the Russian classic writer's texts that have never been published before.

2. Methodology

The principal method is a phenomenological and comparative approach to the study of Zhukovsky's written heritage. It is supposed to be really a unprecedented one in the history of Russian Literary criticism. The approach has been shaped as a result of a nearly forty-year long study of V. A. Zhukovsky's library in terms of different aspects: its contents, the reader's notes on the pages of the books, drafts of well-known as well as unpublished works by the poet, an interaction between Zhukovsky's library and archive, and a reflection of the writer's reading preferences in his own works (*The library of V.A. Zhukovsky in Tomsk, 1978-1988, Pt. 1-3*). The approach is believed to be an unprecedented one because all studies of other Russian writers' personal libraries have resulted in the catalogues and bibliographical, as a rule, descriptions of separate publications. An available description of Zhukovsky's library which, as matter-of-fact, is a bibliographical reference book is example of such traditional approach (*ibid.*, 1981).

3. Discussion of Results

Already at the beginning of his writer's biography, while studying at Moscow university boarding school, 16-17-year-old Zhukovsky never parted with books related to the issues of moral self-improvement. The reference books for all boarders were the works of their mentors, late Moscow Masons: *A Treatise on Self Knowledge* by John Mason translated by I.P. Turgenev, *Spiritual Knight* by I. V. Lopukhin and *On the Inside of the Church*. Each of them contributed to the development of the original system of self-observation and the concept of the 'inner man'. In 1799 Andrei Turgenev, Zhukovsky's close friend, translated *An Excerpt from Franklin's Notes* that described daily plans of the American educator, and for many it became a code of moral self-improvement. They gave a strong impetus for *Franklin's Diary* by Zhukovsky which was started in 1804 and continued for almost half a century. It is significant that in 1847, young Leo Tolstoy, completely unaware of the existence of Zhukovsky's diary, started his *Franklin's Diary*. It is worth mentioning that reading became the source of spiritual quest for a young poet and gave rise to the development of the basic principles of psychological lyrics associated with the problem of the 'inner man', which shaped the content and philosophy of the writer's library reflecting young Zhukovsky's striving for self-knowledge. Numerous references to the works of ancient and modern authors, marginalia in such books as *Tusculan Disputations* by Cicero, *Essay on Man* by A. Pope, *Night Thoughts* by Young, writings of Plutarch, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, Juvenal, Addison, Montaigne, Vauvenargues, La Rochefoucauld, Rousseau, Engel and Garve acquired a methodological value ('it is useful to get self-knowledge in the writings of true philosophers explaining this theory of knowledge.'). So 'Notes while reading' became necessary part of the overall program of self-improvement, self-observation and self-education.

The second area of reader's strategies of the young poet was associated with reading and comprehension of the vast number of works of the founders of European aesthetics and criticism. The 16-volume *Lyceum, or Course of Ancient and New Literature* by Jean Francois La Harpe, a 5-volume work *The Principles of Literature* by Charles Batteux, voluminous works of the English literary theorist Hugh Blair, French critics Antoine Thomas and Jean-François Marmontel, German aestheticians Johann Eschenburg and Christian Garve, the works of Rousseau, Voltaire - all this was not only read, but literally 'digested' all by Zhukovsky since all the books preserve his numerous marginal notes. However, the most important document of the poet's aesthetic self-determination is

presented by the extensive bulk of notes made around 1805-1811. The Summary of the History of Literature and Criticism, consisting of six notebooks and including such sections as Epic Poetry, Lyric Poetry, Satire, Drama and Theatre, Critical Remarks on the Poets, is an elaborate system of extracts from these works. However, the author of The Summary does not seem to be limited to these extracts since the term 'extract' does not provide full explanation of its meaning. Zhukovsky gave a compressed translation of important points, most of them furnished with his comments in the Notes While Reading or using *nota bene* marks. These reflections constitute a sufficiently large part of the text, and they seem challenging to the genesis of Zhukovsky's aesthetic principles and his attitude to existing theories. Increase in polemical comments from the first book to the last one deserves special attention (Zhukovsky, 1999-2014. V. 12); still the general tendency of aesthetic self-determination of 'Columbus of the Russian romanticism' places special emphasis on poetic ideas of freedom and emotional impact of art on the reader's soul. The very concept of soul becomes a cornerstone in world modelling of the poet's aesthetic consciousness. 'The soul spreads its wings,' 'ambassador of soul, take heed of my soul,' 'When I think of my being a man, // My soul always rises to heaven,' - these romantic aphorisms matured in Zhukovsky's creative laboratory and became inextricably linked with the terms of reading. Numerous entries on the margins of The Discourse on Old and New Styles of the Russian Language by A. S. Shishkov published in 1803 became the refraction of a new aesthetic position of the young poet in understanding the Russian literary and historical processes of the 1810's, in the collision between archaists and innovators anticipating the advent of Arzamas (Yanushkevich, 2006).

The third area of Zhukovsky's reading interests in the period around 1805-1810 is often regarded as the time of establishing his poetic identity. According to Vladimir Solovyov, Zhukovsky's elegiac and ballad creativity truly becomes 'the birthplace of the Russian poetry', a kind of symbiosis of reading and creation. The problems of style and national epic become the key element of creative reflection of the future romanticist. In this respect, the most impressive manuscript is the anthology entitled Examples of the Style Selected from the Best French Prose Writers and Translated into Russian by Vasily Zhukovsky (1800-1806). The section Narrative opening the anthology recreates not only the range of authors interesting for the translator, such as J. J. Barthélemy, B. de Saint-Pierre, F. Fenelon, J. F. Marmontel, L. Vauvenargues, B.-G.-E. Lacépède, G.L. Buffon, J.-B. Bossuet, A.-L. Thomas, J.-F. de La Harpe, E. Flechier, but also a great number of subjects, among them travel, natural and philosophical sketches, characters, eloquence, landscape sketches.

As it concerns the narrative, the section contains two strategies to describe the history: a show (scene) and a story (panorama). The second section entitled Pictures contributes to the development of the general concept of the narrative style and its *kalokagathia*, i.e. the organic connection between ethical, philosophical and aesthetic principles. Zhukovsky used to repeat the words of Buffon: 'The style is a man.' The vivid embodiment of this aphorism is the poet's stylistic experiments concerning understanding of the works of French authors focused on selection criteria, translation and narrative strategies.

No less interesting in this regard are the ideas of the epic poems The Spring and Vladimir. Unfortunately, only detailed plans of these large-scale works have been available to the researchers so far; however, these plans represent the reflection of the creative laboratory that paved the way from reading to creativity. Referring to the popular genres of the descriptive (narrative) poem about the seasons and historical epic of ancient Russia, Zhukovsky relied on the foreign and Russian literary tradition, from Homer's Iliad, The Tale of Igor's Campaign (the versification of which he created later), and chronicles to the latest works of natural philosophers and historians. So, making an extract from The History of the Russian state, Zhukovsky outlined the historical sources that were referenced by N.M. Karamzin. On the left side of the blank manuscript sheets, Zhukovsky wrote a synopsis of the book of the German historian Andreas Gottlieb Masch about the mythological pantheon of Western Slavs. In the same way, he comprehended the works of the German historian Ludwig Albrecht Gebhardi about the history of Wends and the Swedish historian and archaeologist Hans Erich Thunman about the history of northern peoples.

In his letters to A.I. Turgenev, the poet expressed insistent requests for Schlözer's works, which resulted in further polemics (Nikonova, 2012). As examples of the genre of miraculous and historical poems he referred to such sources as epic by Wieland and Voltaire, ballads and poems by Southey, Walter Scott, Iliad, Edda, Song of the Nibelungs, etc. In short, creative experiments were based on an impressive reader's experience, where the poet and the reader were inseparable in the process.

‘How to teach yourself to think?’ is one of the most frequent questions in Zhukovsky’s Diary; the answer is as follows, ‘I think reading and diligence will help not to miss a single event leading to reflection’ (p. 11). ‘How to educate yourself and what method to follow in reading’ (p. 34), ‘Read the moral article in the Encyclopedia and then write your own’ (p. 34), ‘not to read only one poet, but all of them at a time; the individuality of each will become perceptible by comparison. For example, Schiller as the author of ballads should be read in comparison with Bürger as a philosophic poet, in parallel with Goethe and others; and as a tragedian, with Shakespeare. The reading of Racine’s tragedies should be interspersed with reading Voltaire, Corneille and Crebillon <...> Or perhaps it is better to read poets in a chronological order, so that this reading was going on a par with the history, and the history would explain the very spirit of the poets, and then continue to read comparing their styles. The first reading should be philosophic, the second should be aimed at aesthetics: the both approaches combined would have made the idea complete’ (Zhukovsky, 1999-2014. V. 14, p. 36). These and many other comments by Zhukovsky as a reader were charged with methodological significance; by means of reading he constituted himself as a creative person; it was not only the study of the classics, but also the way to gain his own style with the best foreign classical literature in view.

His famous quotations were reflected in his creative work: ‘... a translator of poetry is always a rival of the author’; ‘The translator of the poet is to some extent the creator himself’; ‘I have almost everything written by someone else, however, it’s also mine...’ On the pages of his books we clearly see how the poet struggles with the original text, which was neatly expressed by Pushkin in connection with the translation of Byron’s Prisoner of Chillon: ‘Zhukovsky’s translation est un tour de force [the miracle of skill. - Fr.]. In the fight with difficulties he is an extraordinary strongman.’ Zhukovsky’s translations of Herder’s *Le Cid*, Werner’s tragedy *The Twenty-Fourth of February*, excerpts from Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and *Oedipus* by Sophocles made directly in the books are outstanding examples of ‘translator’s reading’. Hard to read, perhaps made in the rough on the road, with lots of options that correlate with other translations, the marginalia is a real treasure house for researchers. Deciphering texts, their dating, search of autographs in archives, finding the traces of these ideas in the epistolary and diaries represent challenge for research investigators. However, for Zhukovsky this can be interpreted as the organic combination of reading, reflection, translation and creative inspiration converting ‘foreign’ to ‘own’.

The library contains about thirty different editions of Homer’s *Odyssey*, the translation of which took seven years of Zhukovsky’s life and which became a classic of translation (The library of V.A. Zhukovsky, 1981). Not knowing the Greek language, he learned the spirit and aroma of Homer’s epic with the help of numerous European and Russian translations of literature on Homer. The notes in his books, translation sketches, calculations of poems and tables reveal not only the titanic effort aimed at penetration into the poetic world of Homer, but the impetuous spirit of faith in the book as a source of poetic inspiration. Zhukovsky created the world of books, where every edition of Homer had its destiny, was thoroughly assessed and gained impetus for a more precise and more ardent quest for inspiration thus piercing the very core of the ‘odyssey’ of human life, for Zhukovsky was able to present the Russian culture with the ‘odyssey of modern times’ in the form of the book about wanderings of a man on the roads of life and his eternal fight with the vicissitudes of fate.

Preparing himself to teaching, Zhukovsky literally shoveled piles of pedagogical literature. In creating his arrangement of *The New Testament*, he became a fervent reader of theological literature and the works of the Church Fathers (Dolgushin, 2013). The book for him was not only the object of reading; it was personified and animated with his thoughts, flight of creative inspiration and eventually turned into a close friend, companion, and co-creator. We do not know the last words of Zhukovsky, but probably after Pushkin, he could say, ‘Good-bye, my friends, my books!’

4. Conclusions

The study of Zhukovsky’s library materials and his reader’s strategies is a fertile ground for problem statement of the psychology of creativity and the creative laboratory of the writer. His range of reading, his notes, the history of his translations recorded in the pages of the books from his library, its organic linkage with teaching, social, philosophical and religious thought of the period suggest the consideration of this problem in terms of the phenomenology of culture. A study of the books from the poet’s library that preserve traces of his reading and thoughts accompanied by a study of his archive materials allow to gain an insight into the peculiarity and an

enormous theoretical and methodological substrate of his romantic method. Besides, it enables one to prepare a more detailed and well-grounded realistic commentary to his well-known texts.

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