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LETTER AS A COMMUNICATION GENRE: CORRESPONDENCE
OF M. GORKY IN SOVIET TIME

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Abstract

The Gorky Epistolary is a life chronicle viewed at the levels of biography facts, the literature process history in Russia and abroad, and the country fate at the turn of the century and statehood. The eventfulness of a letter as a communication genre confirms this. The communicative ability of Gorky manifested itself as a linking element between a human and the society. The analysis of Gorky's correspondence revealed the following characteristics in the field of communication: "a middle man", "arch", "buffer". At each stage of the literary process these modified characteristics confirmed the role of the writer as a world communication figure. In the article the author suggests an analysis of theoretical hypothesis about the specifics of Gorky's letters which are the unique combination of documentary and art within a single text. The analytical process is connected with the purpose of the article: the research of letters in the context of the epistolary development as a communicative genre. This allowed isolating the classification of genre subtypes of letters, including three groups. These three groups include a letter-request, a letter of a reconstructed request, a publicist letter. While analyzing texts, the biographical method, the comparative – historical method, and the method of immanent poetic were used, what made it possible to identify these conditional groups. A general view of the problem of the Soviet epistolary allowed asserting that the writing genre began modifying, turning from the personal property of an addressee into the "link" of a communicative chain in the society.

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Keywords: Addressee, addresser, communication, document, letter, text



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1. Introduction

Studies of the problem of writing letters as a communicative genre is one of the most promising problems of the contemporary literary studies. This problem is addressed in works of A. I. Ovcharenko, L. A. Spiridonova, N. V. Kornienko, I. A. Bocharova, N. N. Primochkina and others. They reveal the meaning of the concept “letter” as a part of manuscript heritage of a writer, an epoch document, a documentary prose genre, and the form of co-existence of culture and power. Despite the fact that some monographs, and a number of articles are devoted to the epistolary, there are no works of generalizing nature devoted to the letters written by Gorky in the Soviet period.

In the contemporary research practice “the approach to the writer’s epistolary is highlighted as a kind of discourse reflecting the high degree of a personality self-revealing” (Frik, 2020, p. 306). The interest in the topic in this stated wording has been arisen by two reasons: the epistolary of Gorky is a part of the XX century culture, and the inextricable link between the epistolary and the world literary process. Now that the letters of the writer are being published in the Complete Works, it is necessary to think over “the contribution of Gorky to the literature theory” (Ovcharenko, 2018, p.236) and consider from a new point of view the correspondence of Gorky, the specificity of which is that both sides became its creators: the addresser and the addressee. This interaction allows us to evaluate the communicative phenomenon of Gorky.

2. Problem Statement

Having taken the statement about the communicativeness of the writer’s consciousness as an axiom, we pose a question about the communicativeness of his genre system, particularly, the epistolary. Gorky as a thinker of the new time subtly felt the reality and responded to it, in fact, “talked” with it. The communicative exchange which depends on the special features of the society is characterized, primarily, by the quality of information from the source to the recipient, i.e., from the addresser to the addressee. Due to the special hierarchy of the society, a direct appeal to the final addressee frequently did not bring the desired result. Then, the third party that can be named a middle man entered the process of informative communication. It is a middle man who became the accumulating guide transmitting the information further, accompanying it with those comments and requests that arose the interest of the final addressee.

In the Soviet cultural era the formula for linking the writer and his addressee (or reader) was transformed into another kind of chain which can be characterized as follows: the reader appeals to the writer, asking for the help in the area far from literature. In this case, the reader became a trustee (i.e., an addresser revealing his secrets or requests) appealing to an intermediary (i.e., a public consignee assuming obligations) so that he brings the necessary information to the recipient (i.e., a final addressee).

In the twentieth century the role of the letter as a means of communication between two persons changed, the letter turned from a personal property of the addressee into a “human” document of a group of persons: each message is considered as a link of a single communicative chain. Starting in the 1920s, in the Soviet society the epistolary practice began to change: a mutual attraction of the private and the public manifests itself. (Private business letters (statements) become saturated with particulars of private life which makes them emotional). This results in a reduction in the distance between the addressee and the addresser,

and further equality in the epistolary. This is the address of one of the recipients: “Dear comrade Maxim Gorky! Yes, exactly, - comrade, despite the fact that you are Maxim Gorky...” (Nikitin, 1934).

The subject of letters throughout the life changes, no doubt, as does the number and the composition of addressees. But the letter itself remains unchanged, with its specific characteristics. Each decade of literary existence brings (or changes) something new that becomes a tradition in the writer’s epistolary. These temporary differences help to comprehend the specifics of the letter genre as a whole.

3. Research Questions

Gorky’s communicative ability is expressed in the fact that he became a link of the social connection between a person and other people, a person and a part of the society, a person and the society as a whole. So it was before the revolution, when people came “to Capri because Maxim Gorky lives here” (Arias-Vikhil, 2017, p. 314). In the history of international communication the role of Gorky was characterized in different ways: an intermediary between the people and the intelligentsia, an arch between the socialist and capitalist worlds, a buffer between the authorities and the intelligentsia. It should be admitted that Gorky was not only an ideologist, but also a conductor of a new, Soviet, culture.

Each of the indicated characteristics is a key concept of the communicativeness of the writer’s consciousness. A proposed scientific perspective of studying the genre of writing letters in its varieties confirming the writer’s ability to be a communication center (or an intermediary) is associated with these characteristics.

Scientific relevance of this topic is that the genre of writing letters in which the writer is an intermediary (“arch”, “bridge”, “buffer”) in the society interested in this role of the writer becomes the subject of investigation for the first time.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this article is to study Gorky’s letters in the context of the development of the epistolary genre as a communicative one. In the article a theoretical hypothesis is tested: Gorky’s letters of the Soviet period are a unique fusion of a document and a text tending to artistic generalization. Combination of traditional and innovative approaches to the analysis of the letter as a historical document and a text of artistic creativity must verify changes of the epistolary genre in 1920-1930s. To achieve this goal the tasks are solved: the analysis of the corpus of Gorky’s letters of 1925-1933; consideration of thematic diversity of the analyzed letters; classification of the presented variants of Gorky’s letters of the Soviet period.

5. Research Methods

Research methodology is determined by the necessity to apply simultaneously several methods. While analyzing letters, the author used the biographical method which allowed revealing the facts of the writer’s life during the analysis of a specific letter; the comparative and historical method which allowed revealing the facts of the life history in the context of historical processes taking place in a particular society and the world community; the immanent poetics method, the goal of which was a holistic analysis of a

specific letter that became the public property. That means that all components of an epistolary text were considered in all the complexity of the context, and through the comparison of parts. Also, during the analysis the author used methodological strategies of dialogicism of M.M. Bakhtin, which means the study of the text possessing “the absolute range of embodiment of the author’s principle” (as cited in Ivanov & Lakerbay, 2018, p. 195). These methods allowed isolating three conditional groups of Gorky’s letters of the period being investigated: a request letter, a letter of reconstructed request, and a publicist letter.

5.1. Request letter

Turning to the writer with a request, his addressee was convinced of his ability to help. Since the 1920s political reality, in fact, has become a kind of “a turning point in individual life relationships” (Isaev et al., 2019, p. 595). Respecting a person, Gorky always responded to such requests. Suffice it to recall his appeals to the prosecutor of the RSFSR (Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic) N.V. Krylenko in order to help E.I. Zamyatin in connection with the unfair cancellation of the production of the play "Attila", or the chairman of the VTsIK (All-Russian Central Executive Committee) M.I. Kalinin in order to help the writer I.V. Repin, who was sentenced to a year of forced labor, or the first secretary of the Leningrad gubkom and gorkom (Provincial Committee and City Committee) of the party S.M. Kirov about the termination of the criminal case opened against the young author L. Panteleev and others.

Let us consider the route of such a letter. On August 10, 1932, Gorky turned to the narkom (People's Commissar) of Defense of the USSR K.E. Voroshilov with a request “to grant a deferment of the call to the Red Army to Georgy Pavlovich German” (Gorky, 2019, p. 189). Regarding the young author as an exclusively talented one, he petitioned for a deferment from the Army, so that German completed work on the second part of the novel “Entry”. The Leningrad writer M. F. Chumandrin also asked about that deferment for his friend. The Commissar of State Security M. S. Pogrebinsky told his opinion about the first book, believing that “this little book must be in every possible way popularized among the broad masses, and, most importantly, I am sure that if translated into German, Chinese and other languages, this would be of great benefit” (Gorky, 2019, p. 626). The request of Gorky was granted, and the author continued to work on the novel. Comments to this letter allowed identifying the biography facts both the writer M. Gorky and above mentioned German, Chumandrin and Pogrebinsky.

Another example, though a negative one, is the letter written by Gorky to the plenipotentiary ambassador of Finland K. K. Enkel. In March, 1925, Z. I. Grzhebin asked the writer to help him in his litigation with the Finnish Economic Committee, to which the publisher loaned 200 000 Finnish marks for refugees in 1921. Grzhebin enclosed the statement addressed to the ambassador to his letter to Gorky. On May 9, 1925, Gorky sent the letter in which he asked for help and confirmed the facts stated by Grzhebin. The answer of Enkel was not found, but given the fact that by the end of 1928 Grzhebin was finally ruined, the writer’s request did not influence the course of events. But creating the letter-request was the fact.

5.2. Letter of reconstructed request

In the number of cases the situation and events preceding the request must be reconstructed. The events reconstruction is followed by either the restoration of a possible text containing the request to the writer, or an explanation of the circumstances which made that request possible.

In some cases it is impossible to completely reconstruct events, since “carried away by the description of the problematic situation, the author may completely forget about the wording of his request” (Matveeva & Shirinkina, 2020, p. 197). Thus, on April 25, 1928, Gorky wrote to his addressee A. A. Bogodurov: “...I won’t be able to do anything for you – especially since you did not give me direct indications on what exactly should be done” (Gorky, 2014, 2017). In the writer’s opinion, the addressee should have indicated either the institution or the person, i.e., where and whom to appeal to for the request to be granted. But partial reconstruction is possible. Such an example is the appeal of the writer to K. E. Voroshilov in the summer of 1933: “I was sent a photo of the project of the Red Army theatre, and the attached resolution on the project approval” (Veselovsky et al., 1991, p. 153). Who exactly sent the photo of the theatre technical project by architects G. Glushchenko and D. Fridman, and the project documents remained unclear, but the request of the unspecified addressee was heard. The writer assessed the project as “something very reminiscent of a country restaurant – a squat building cheaply decorated with a palisade of light columns like a match” (Veselovsky et al., 1991, p. 154). Artistic and imaginative assessment of Gorky influenced the further development of the competition: in the summer of 1933 the second round was held, the winners of which were architects K. Alabyan and V. Simbirtsev. Thus, the political desire of the unknown sender forced Gorky to reverse the situation, when the addressee embodied a different “vision” of the ideal through his denial.

5.3. Publicist letter

Reading texts of young authors, Gorky saw blunders and shortcomings which were repeated again and again. These review letters served as the basis for Gorky’s series “Letters to Beginning Writers” and “Letters from the Editor”. Let us consider the letter from a novice author S. Kibalchich. In October, 1928, his tale “Growth” was published followed by negative reviews. The author sent the book to Gorky in the hope that he would say his “authoritative word”. On March 13, 1929, Gorky wrote: “I also find that your “Growth” is a bad book” (Gorky, 2016, p. 268). A month later, the writer made some stylistic amendments to the typewritten copy of the answer that remained with him, omitted the titles of the works (tale “Growth”, story “Radio-wedding”), crossed out the last phrase of the letter (“I am returning the book and manuscripts”) (Gorky, 2016, p. 269), as well as the signature and date. Then he included it in this form into the series “Letters from the Editor” (1930), where the private letter turned into the publicist one, becoming the public property. In the open review letter the attention was drawn to the non-worked out images and characters of the tale, as well as the weakness and monotony of its language.

Summing up the results of a small excursion into the thematic and structural diversity of letters written by Gorky, it should be noted that the proposed theoretical hypothesis about the uniqueness of the letter as a text combining a documentary basis (in the analyzed letters this is factography of the addressee’s problems) and artistic generalization (in the analyzed letters this is the way of stating the information entrusted to the writer) was confirmed. So, the letter text is considered in a certain structural time lattice: the fact of writing a letter (regardless of its nature) makes the letter a document of the era, and interpreted contents of this letter allows talking about artistic manifestation in a certain text which is named a letter. Due to the author’s communication with the correspondent, the text of the letter is revealed “in the dynamics of forming a creative individuality and personality” of both (Smirnova, 2019, p. 132).

6. Findings

During the analysis of letters from the second half of the 1920s – the first half of the 1930s genre variants of M. Gorky's epistolary were identified. Having focused on three positions especially frequently singled out in the epistolary heritage, one feature should be paid a special attention to. This is a subdivision into a request letter and a reconstructed request letter. Their separation is caused by the specifics of the writer's personal archives. The writer attached many of the requests sent to him to his own letters addressed to those who could help. If the help was granted, the letters were left in the archives of those organizations, the heads of which were Gorky's addressees. Only in 1933, after returning home, Secretariat for managing papers of the writer (including those of business) was created. Thanks to its collaborators many requests remained in a copy in the writer's archives. The following may be regarded as one more result of the analysis: the reconstructed request letters have 1933 as their upper limit. Two left variants have their upper limit in 1936.

7. Conclusion

In the contemporary analytic practice of literature studies "the issues of polydiscursiveness, or the interaction of discourses in a communicative process, are being discussed" (Emer & Akentieva, 2019, p. 135). The epistolary heritage of Gorky as a unique phenomenon both in its volume and its significance in the world culture history conceals variations in genre transformations. The epistolary of F. M. Dostoevsky, who survived forced labor and exile, reflected mental initiation, which led to "changes in his social status, creative self-awareness, ideological position, all artistic practice" (Borisova, 2019, p. 24). Likewise, the correspondence of Gorky reflected similar changes: during the period under consideration the epistolary of Gorky is "both a form and an institute and a social act" (Vyugin, 2019, p. 179). The analysis carried out in this article allows us to reveal the classification of letters which reflects the thematic richness, various aspects of text construction. The theoretical hypothesis about the unique combination in one letter of documentary and artistic principles has been confirmed. Applied traditional and innovative analytical methods (biographical, comparative and historical, immanent poetics, etc.) confirmed this hypothesis.

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