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THE POETICS OF MARK ALDANOV'S ESSAYS

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Abstract

This article addresses the genre features of fiction and documentary prose created by M.A. Aldanov from the 1920s through the 1940s while he lived in the emigration, and the context in which Aldanov's literary sketches were written and published. His sketches and literary critical works are compared and contrasted with Y.I. Aichenwald's and V.F. Khodasevich's essays and literary portraits. Artistic techniques that Aldanov will use more than thirty years later when creating the historical and philosophical work "Ulm Night" may already be detected in the book "Armageddon" and in the collection "Fire and Smoke." Describing the actions of statesmen, Aldanov uses analogies and quotes from the works of Russian literature of the nineteenth century, thereby lending literary depth to the subtext of his sketches. In his essays Aldanov creates a composition that includes epigraphs, prefaces, and sections with titles, united by mood, common motifs, and symbols. Literary allusions are widely used, the psychology of the characters is treated, and the narrator makes predictions about political events or expresses his generalizations in aphoristic form. The creative artistry of Aldanov's style lends credibility and cogency to his essays. This article analyzes fragments of Aldanov's novels, which, taking the form of personal portraits, were published as literary sketches in the periodical press. Book reviews and critical sketches by Aldanov were sometimes transformed into sketches-portraits and biographical sketches. His development of the literary sketch genre and its varieties helped the writer put the crowning touch to his creative and philosophical-journalistic body of work.

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Keywords: Aldanov, essay, genre, narrative, review, sketch



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1. Introduction

Sketch-writing contains a certain potential for the creation of subsequent literary works because in the varieties of sketches “a common narrative strategy is formed, moving from a documentary-sketch foundation to poetic saturation with imagery” (Khudenko, 2017, p. 107). At the same time, it is a well known tradition to perceive a literary sketch as a kind of transitional, “hybrid” phenomenon, common to journalism and fiction. Exploring the poetics of sketch seems unproductive. However the limitations of sketch in stylistic and compositional possibilities are illusory. Perhaps that is why contemporary literary scholars even turn to the forgotten phraseological sketch (Golovina, 2019).

According to the Literary Encyclopedia of Terms and Concepts (Moscow, 2001), sketch is represented by various compositional varieties: sketch-memoirs, sketch-biography, lyrical-philosophical sketch, travel sketch. Frequent use of the root “sketch” as a part of various words and phrases, as well as the use of the categories “literary portrait”, “etude”, “essay” as synonyms only complicates the understanding of all these terms. Even two conferences dedicated to the topic of literary portrait and review did not result in rigorous theoretical definitions of these categories (Perkhin, 2002). Since the sketch was developing while being enriched with the signs of other genres, in particular, the short story, various notes, and essay, and maintaining its analytical and publicistic content, the sketch’s peculiarity became the contamination of various genres’ features, the creation of artistic and journalistic unity of a kind.

In the 2000-s, a lot of dissertations were devoted to the research of literary sketch, a rather demanded genre in the literary process of the Russian émigré community: Tkachenko, O.S. Genre originality of V.F. Khodasevich’s prose; Ripping, M. Y.I. Aichenwald’s literary criticism of emigration period; Shteinikova, N.V. The genre of literary portrait in the creative work of V. Khodasevich; Gromova, A.V. Genre system of B.K. Zaitsev’s creative work: literary-critical and fiction-documentary works; Sorokina V.V. The formation of literary criticism of the Russian émigré community: the Berlin period. Aldanov wrote several dozen sketches, works of literary, critical and publicistic nature, but they have not found their researcher yet.

2. Problem Statement

Literary historians have not had time yet to evaluate the artistic effect of Mark Aldanov’s work in the field of journalistic articles, studies, sketches, and excerpts from novels. The understanding of his documentary-artistic and literary-critical heritage is in the problem field of this study. In this regard, the research objectives included:

- 2.1. To analyze a number of journalistic and critical articles, as well as sketches of different years by the writer,
- 2.2. Correlate Aldanov’s works with the essays of his contemporaries-emigrants,
- 2.3. To reveal the stylistic and compositional features of his documentary and fictional prose, to describe the functions of his literary methods.

In the proposed article, the problem of insufficient understanding of the poetics of the writer’s prose is overcome.

3. Research Questions

The structure of the article is driven by the need to answer the following questions:

3.1. What is the place of Aldanov's sketches in the classifications of artistic-documentary and literary-critical genres?

3.2. Does Aldanov use original literary methods in his sketches?

3.3. Have these methods changed depending on the time of writing, goals, and readers?

3.4. How did the sketches contribute to the development of Aldanov's gift as an artist and as a philosopher?

4. Purpose of the Study

The poetics of sketches by Mark Aldanov, one of the most popular and multi-genre writers of the Russian emigration, has not been sufficiently studied; therefore, the aim of this work is to study the artistic techniques of the sketches written in different years and to reveal their significance both for Aldanov's work and for the development of documentary-fictional prose in general.

5. Research Methods

In accomplishing the above tasks, the researcher was guided by the principles of the comparative historical method and of historical poetics in the contemporary sense of these terms (Shadursky, 2019; Zakharov, 2018; Zavarkina, 2020).

6. Findings

In the process of studying Aldanov's sketches, turning to his senior contemporaries, literary critics, is relevant. Firstly, it is Y.I. Aichenwald, the main literary critic of the Russian Berlin, who perceived the concepts of a literary sketch and a literary etude as synonyms. In the early 1900s, sketches in the interpretation of Aichenwald were called "silhouettes". This identification of concepts is very important in order to understand why Aldanov called some of his sketches articles, etudes, historical stories or essays.

Secondly, this is the literary-critical work of V.F. Khodasevich, a leading critic of the emigre Paris. In his book "Necropolis", most of the sketches have features characteristic of memoirs. At the same time, in several works, along with the elements of journalistic and scientific research, the features of a literary portrait are revealed: fixation on the authenticity and actuality of the portrayed image, weakening of the plot; turning a documentary particularity into a fictional detail; retrospectiveness; free combination of several temporary layers; creation of a reminiscential context. These literary portraits, creating a holistic image of an already formed personality, on the contrary, have turned from a literary-critical genre into fictional-documentary works. We observe such a genre transformation in Aldanov's creative work as well. Let us characterize its stages.

Aldanov's first book, "Tolstoy and Rolland" (1915), was called a critical etude by the author, although it could have come out with a subtitle "sketches" or "literary portraits". In a traditional etude, there is a synthesis of various genre units, signs of reporting and travel essay, journalism and a short story,

sketches from nature and psychological narrative, people are being described, as well as grassroots-ethnographic background. But Aldanov's etude had the character of research, and therefore, to a greater extent can be perceived as a literary-critical work.

Then followed his journalistic books "Armageddon" (St. Petersburg, 1918), "Fire and Smoke" (Paris, 1922), publication of sketches in the periodicals of the Russian emigration, collections "Contemporaries" (Berlin, 1928), "Portraits" (Berlin, 1931; Paris, 1936. Vol. 2), "Earth, people" (Berlin, 1932), "Youth of Pavel Stroganov and other characteristics" (Belgrade, 1934). Most of Aldanov's sketches have commentaries. However, there are very few interpretations. We make up for this shortcoming.

The book "Armageddon" consists of two parts, in the 1918 edition it appeared with an epigraph from the Revelation of St. John and Schopenhauer and the author's introduction. The first part ("Dragon") consists of the dialogues between the Chemist and the Writer. They talk on different topics, discussing the recent political events of the World War and the Russian Revolution, citing Pushkin, Gogol, Nekrasov, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Chekhov; the whole content of their conversation is permeated with the keynote image of a dragon. The second part ("The Chariot of Jagernath") has the subtitle "(From the Writer's Notebook)" and contains the Writer's monologues; it begins with the epigraph-dictum and ends with the verses of A.K. Tolstoy (Aldanov, 2006b, p. 112). This part also contains interpretations of many political events, allusions to literary works of pre-revolutionary time. Its tragic pathos is enhanced by artistic techniques: a ring composition is used (at the beginning a description of the Hindu ritual of the passage of Jagernath's chariot is given, in the finale the same chariot turns into a symbol of power, ruthlessly controlling humanity).

Since essay is a nonfiction genre which is addressed to the general reader and which combines the presentation of the author's position, as well as the possibility of including other genres, "Armageddon", for the most part meeting these criteria, can be called the first Aldanov's book of essays. Thanks to documentary quality, the manifestation of philosophical and journalistic principles in the narrative, on the one hand, and a free manner, various compositional techniques, aphoristic nature, figurative speech, the use of characters, on the other hand, the writer's multi-page statement acquires an artistic character. If the first part is an essay written by roles to avoid didacticism, then the second part is a historical-journalistic sketch in which a historiography of events and portraits of contemporaries are given. This is particularly important to note that one of the writer's final books ("Ulm Night") also contains dialogues that are opening up in a free form and has a rigid, precise structure, similar to the conceptual cycle of essays.

The collection "Fire and Smoke", written by Aldanov shortly after his departure from Russia, includes the author's preface, table of contents, 18 articles which the author calls etudes, and two sketches. The preface says that the etudes have a chance to reach readers only in the form of a book. In many parts of the collection, the theme of revolution (the Great French Revolution and the October Russian Revolution) is revealed, the motive of fire and smoke is manifested, the etudes have a common mood: grief for the victims, loss and faith in a better future for Russia which can be reborn. Most of the sketches contain quotes from Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, references to Griboedov, Lermontov, Shchedrin, Herzen, brothers Aksakov, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Garshin. The conceptual importance, cycle formation shown in the composition of the book, the skill of including different chronotopes in one story are the signs of the second stage of the development of Aldanov's essays and literary sketches, as well as the key to creating works of large epic

genres and seriate novels. Experiments with sketch forms and sketches in the novel's body have already been covered (Mihaylik, 2015), but Aldanov's creative work needs a separate consideration.

In the 1920s Aldanov begins his writing career with a large epic form (novella, novel, trilogy novel, tetralogy). Excerpts from Aldanov's novels are published in the newspapers "The Latest News" and "Today", in the journal "Modern Notes", becoming autonomous on the pages of periodicals, although artificially, formally, but they still turn into portrait sketches. Researchers are aware of a process when an essay can become a "documentary take of a novel" (Kukulin, 2018), but this is not characteristic of Aldanov. In periodicals, he published chapters of his works, usually indicating that these were excerpts from the novel. The choice of a historical person as the main character, the autonomy of a certain chapter of the novel, its deliberate completeness, design under an exclusive title for the publication are all signs of a newspaper or magazine transformation of a part of Aldanov's novel, its transformation not just into a portrait sketch, but into a passage, as into "an independent genre form having its own aesthetic laws" (Stroganov, 2019, p. 95). Such passages truly resemble portrait sketches in their techniques.

Simultaneously with large epic forms, Aldanov uses literary sketch as an independent whole piece of writing, his portrait sketches are often published in émigré periodicals. Aldanov has a lot of such creative portraits indeed. In 1930-s, when he firmly takes his place in the first literary row of the Russian émigré community, his multi-genre publications become an adornment of emigrant newspapers and magazines.

The variety of documentary and artistic genres which Aldanov addressed (these also include answers to questionnaires, excerpts from notebooks) is explained by the breadth of his interests, as well as the ability to write material for different audiences. In the 1920s, 1930s he is a regular contributor to the Criticism and Bibliography section of the magazine "Modern Notes". Aldanov publishes several dozens of articles, which, judging by the sections in newspapers or magazines, can be classified as reviews, but only with a great deal of convention. Working on characteristics of novelty books, he goes beyond the role of a publication's commentator and creates real sketches combining the features of an essay, research, literary-critical article and literary portrait. One of the most striking examples is a review of the book by S. M. Volkonsky "My memories. Kudos. Wanderings. Homeland" ("Modern Notes", 1923, No 17). Characteristics of the memoirs turn into a commentary on the author's personality, even the life of his grandfather is mentioned - the review develops into a biographical sketch. To emphasize the life experience and the author's right to memoirs, Aldanov needed to note that Dostoevsky himself spoke with S. M. Volkonsky, that Tyutchev read his poems in Volkonsky's presence. Aldanov also publishes speeches, memoirs, obituaries and anniversary articles.

In the Russian newspapers of Paris, Berlin, and Riga, Aldanov's sketches appeared with subtitles which "served" as genre identifiers: from the memoirs of a secretary of one delegation, travel impressions, from travel impressions. Moreover, newspaper publications might acquire double titles, one of which contained, for example, a valuation epithet that would not be repeated in the book edition: "The Tenderling: A. V. Lunacharsky" ("The Latest News", 1927, Sept. 29). Finally, whole cycles of sketches on one topic with long factual titles could appear, for example, as it was in the summer issues of the Riga newspaper "Today" (1933): "Speakers of the London Conference that Are Not Listened to", "Paid and Free Advertising of the Bolsheviks on Economic Conference", "Results of the London Conference". Obviously, the more such factual certainty was in the headings, the more understandable is the fact that the

publications' content is exclusively informative and journalistic with a minimum of literary techniques or their absence.

Some sketches, after being published in newspapers and magazines, were supplemented by the author for new publications, as the political fate of characters-contemporaries continued. Thus, the newspaper "The Latest News" published the essay "Winston Churchill" (1927, 21, July 24, Aug. 7). The sketch subsequently became a part of the book "Contemporaries". In addition, other editions of the sketch later appeared: "Winston Churchill" in the magazine "For Freedom" (New York, 1941. No. 2–3), and after the writer's death in the "New Journal" (2006, No. 244). Then Churchill's figure, outlined by Aldanov in his sketch in 1927, will unfold as a literary character, first on the pages of the story "Microphone" (1942) and after the war – in "The Fighter".

The 1927 sketch is dedicated to Churchill, who at the time of writing was the chief treasurer of Great Britain. But even then the author expressed anticipation: Churchill "belonged to a dangerous breed of politicians who are guided by the rule "do not think, but act" (Aldanov, 1994, p. 534), and ambition will allow him to claim the main post in the country, because "the British prime minister has various opportunities to surprise the world" (Aldanov, 1994, p. 534).

A sketch about Churchill written in the 1940s is already a story about the courageous prime minister who saves the British from Hitler. The narrator knows about Churchill's behavior, he knows the routine of the prime minister's working day, his habits: "At work, he sings the only song he knows: "Run, rabbit, run!" – that is if Churchill is in a good mood. <...> All the people who know him speak of his cheerful optimistic character" (Aldanov, 2006a). This song, from a detail which conveys Churchill's mood turns into a symbol of the life-affirming behavior of the leader, the savior of the nation. Aldanov's phrase is in-depth in Tolstoy's style: in one sentence the inner world of the character and the outer world evaluating him are visible. The style which is close to reporting makes the reader fully believe in the author's expert knowledge.

This is extremely important, because even the researchers appreciate essays primarily for their persuasiveness, documentary nature, and forget about the methods of influencing the reader. Thus, in one of the scientific reviews, an author of biographical sketches is denounced for factual errors, but, noting the "ironic and laid-back tone", his style is not actually evaluated (Salman, 2014, p. 252).

Aldanov leaves no doubt: to show how important Churchill is for the UK, he cites the results of opinion polls: "According to the British Institute of Public Opinion, 89 percent of the English stand for the current prime minister"(Aldanov, 2006a). But this documentary solidity is also complemented by the narrator's artistic persuasiveness, his methods of psychologizing characters and manipulating readers'

Aldanov's biographical sketches depicting a historical person are usually named after that person. Most of the writer's sketches have such a title. However, there is a unique case when the title reflects the collective image of the people, and the subtitle is an indication of the space in which this image is formed. The sketch "Soviet People (In Cinema)" (first in "The Latest News" on February 5, 1933, then in the book "Youth of Pavel Stroganov and Other Characteristics") is based on one event: watching a Soviet newsreel with a recording of a parade of the Red Army. Sketch-writers can begin their work as a dynamic story: with a "description of paradoxes" (Mayofis, 2019), with a quick tie; in this case, Aldanov did just that. But further the dynamics disappear from the narrative: the narrator accompanies the viewing with his arguments, quotes from Russian classical literature, resorting to the symbolization of characters and details.

His narrative is woeful. The images of Goncharov and Chekhov, conveying the peculiar types of Russian people, are rejected by the reality of Soviet life: “The tape for a moment throws out and takes away a truly scary, brutal face. Who is it? Who was this man before the revolution? How could such people appear in Chekhov's Russia, in that Russia “where nothing happens”, where Oblomovism was considered a national flaw” (Aldanov, 1994, p. 317). In the content of the frame he is trying to discern the symbolism of events: “On the site of the Mausoleum, clustered around Stalin, dignitaries are standing. Red Square is flooded with people. The picture is symbolic: a rock on the sea. What if a storm suddenly comes? What will remain on the rock? ” (Aldanov 1994, p. 325). Using storm and rock motifs, the narrator turns them into literary symbols. Aldanov writes the sketch back in 1933 and so far does not allow the idea that Stalin is capable of repressions in relation to his associates: “However, it is clear enough that Stalin will not shoot Rykov, Kamenev, Zinoviev, Bukharin, just like he did not shoot Trotsky” (Aldanov, 1994, p. 325). But if Aldanov’s narrator is mistaken in the prediction of particular fates, then in the prediction of the life of the whole country he turns out to be far-sighted: “Here is the psychology of people craving storms on a cliff surrounded by the sea” (Aldanov, 1994, p. 325). The motive of expectation of a storm and survival on a rock turns into a symbol of life for the next two decades: the survival of those who are closer to the leader on the rock. In other sketches Aldanov can explore the “myth about the hero”, but he does not create myths himself (Pesterev, 2015a, p. 46). Combining journalist style and artistic merit, he gives the sketch even more credibility. This sketch concludes with Herzen's words about enslaved Italy: “Everyone is irritated, the innocent are ashamed, everyone is tormented by an impotent desire for revenge, passive hatred poisons, weakens” (Aldanov, 1994, p. 326). This statement at the end of Aldanov’s sketch takes on the significance of a hint of the people’s lurking hatred, it is obvious that the example of Russia of the 1930s is behind the example of the once enslaved Italy. Such a timely historical and literary excursion at the end of the story will make any reader unanimous with the author’s position.

Findings of several unpublished works in Aldanov’s archive confirm that the writer could use small epic forms in different years: for example, the sketch “Mussoliniana” belongs to journalistic texts; it does not contain any signs that are stable for Aldanov’s fictional sketches: an open-type plot, epigraphs, literary allusions” (Pesterev, 2015b, p. 215).

7. Conclusion

7.1. In sketch-writing Aldanov was able to reveal his journalistic gift, the ability of a historian-documentalist.

7.2. In critical essay, sketch-review, with all their journalistic and documentary nature, it was important for Aldanov to speak about the creative evolution of the portrayed artist.

7.3. Aldanov’s artistic sketches’ poetics was influenced by his constant work on reviews, travel impressions, and notes.

7.4. In the portrait sketch, Aldanov takes the position of an eyewitness, and the elements of his analysis, as well as artistic means may be notable for subjectivity, originality in the name of the main thing - creating an integral image of the person depicted.

7.5. Aldanov's journalistic thought was also enriched by his artistic creativity. From the revolutionary journalism of "Armageddon", through the long journey of the novelist, the author reaches the historical and philosophical generalizations of "Ulm Night".

7.6. Aldanov's literary work, carried out in the conditions of freedom, was devoid of formal barriers, and therefore the writer revealed his full talent for the development of documentary-artistic genres.

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