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TRANSFORMATION OF THE CLASSICAL TRADITION IN POSTMODERNISM LITERATURE: WORKS BY JOHN FOWLES

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Abstract

The problem of the relationship of postmodernism to the classical tradition is still one of the urgent problems of modern English literary criticism. The source of the neo-Victorian novel in English literature of the 20th century is J. Fowles. It is, first, about the novel “The French Lieutenant's Woman,” which is considered the first attempt to interpret the classical tradition from the standpoint of modernity. After this “dialogical contact”, Fowles was called a postmodernist, while ignoring the author’s concept, his desire to show that it was the classical tradition that shaped him as a writer. Fowles builds his relations with tradition on the principle of “pull-push”: combining tradition and experiment, he demonstrates the limitations of both classical tradition and post-modern aesthetics. In the novel “The French Lieutenant's Woman,” Fowles creates an example of a historical hermeneutical novel in which the author simultaneously acts as a participant in the events and their interested interpreter. The artistic practice of the author, who is ranked among postmodernists, as often happens, turns out to be much wider than the postulates and calculations of theorists. Moderate Fowles postmodernism is characterized by a desire for dialogue, and intertextuality is a means of formalizing this intention. As a result of a research review of twentieth-century literature, it was concluded that the most convincing such artistic method was authorized in the novel of John Fowles. As a work task, confirming this conclusion, a study on the genre identity of the novel “The French Lieutenant's Woman” was undertaken.

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Keywords: Tradition, postmodernism, Fowles, intertextuality, intersubjectivity, hermeneutics.



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1. Introduction

The study is dedicated to the relationship of postmodern literature to the traditions of 19th century classical literature. On the one hand, representatives of radical postmodernism deny any priorities and metanarratives. On the other hand, it was precisely in the postmodern era that the specific interest in tradition as a sphere of ready-made texts revives. Postmodernism questions this readiness, ironizes it, and deconstructs it. It is impossible to deny the fact that, experimenting with tradition, erasing the boundaries between genres, styles, postmodernists seek to discover the new in the old, thereby updating the cultural experience of mankind. Postmodernism refers to a ready past that has already taken place in order to make up for a fundamental shortcoming of its own content. In a strange way, postmodernism demonstrates its specific “traditionality” and contrasts itself with the non-traditional art of the avant-garde.

The 19th century greatly enriched the culture and, above all, the literature of England of the 20th century. Among representative examples illustrating this situation, the novels “The French Lieutenant's Woman” of Fowles (2002) and others are usually called. Victorianism there can act as a historical backdrop for the development of the narrative, some recognizable details of the Victorian corpus of texts can be woven into modern narration, Victorianism as a concept can become the subject of a parody or nostalgic reflection (Tolstoy, 2008).

The forms and types of interaction between the aesthetics of postmodernism and the Victorian literary tradition are an interesting and relevant aspect of the study of English postmodernism, which many modern Russian (Sarukhanyan, 1987) and foreign (Gutleben, 2001; Kaplan, 2007) literary scholars have addressed.

In English literary criticism, among the works that comprehend the phenomenon of the interpretation of the Victorian tradition in the English postmodern novel, the monographs of Gutleben (2001) and Kaplan (2007) should be noted. Gutleben (2001) in the book “Nostalgic Postmodernism: Victorian Tradition and the Modern British Novel” in the section “Stimulating the New with the Old: The Reviving Art of the Parody in The French Lieutenant's Woman by John Fowles ('Invigorating the new with the old: the regenerative art of parody in Fowles (2002) 'The French Lieutenant's Women') addresses the problem of the relationship between the past and the present in the novel of the writer. In turn, Kaplan (2007) in his monograph “Victorian: history, fiction, criticism” in the chapter “Historical fiction: fake, politics and pleasure” ('Historical fictions – Pastiche, Politics and Pleasure') also analyzes “Victorian” novels.

2. Problem Statement

In modern Russian literary criticism, the question of Fowles's (2002) true relationship to the Victorian tradition remains open. As a rule, in order to answer this question, researchers turn to the author's most “Victorian” novel – “The French Lieutenant's Woman” (while, as a rule, ignoring other works of the writer, in which the intertextual correspondences with the English classics are also noticeable) . Today, in modern science, one can identify several works in which one way, or another addresses the problem of Fowles's (2002) attitude to the Victorian tradition (Sarukhanyan, 1987; Tolstoy,

2008). Trying to determine the “true” attitude of the writer to the Victorian literary tradition, the researchers place on the same level such concepts as “imitation”, “stylization”, “parody”, “continuation of the tradition”, “ironic rethinking”, “post-modern interpretation”, “post-modern shepherd”, “imitation”, thereby further complicating the situation of “Fowles – Victorian tradition”, but not sufficiently clarifying it.

The problem is that Fowles (2002) skillfully combines emphasized loyalty and even respectfulness to the Victorian tradition in his work – and modern postmodern writing techniques. The strength of tradition for this author is like biological “heredity”: he understands that experiments at the formal level are not able to cancel the “old” content.

3. Research Questions

Despite the high degree of knowledge of the work of Fowles (2002), there is still no conceptual approach to studying the problem of the “presence” of the Victorian tradition in the work of this author. The paper proposes a new definition to denote a genre of the most “Victorian” novel of the writer – “The French Lieutenant's Woman”. Fowles (2002) creates a historical hermeneutical novel in which the author simultaneously acts as a participant in the events described and their interpreter.

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4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the article is to determine the artistic method, which is a compromise between the literary tradition and postmodernism.

5. Research Methods

The methodological basis of the work is a combination of historical and biographical, comparative historical and structural-typological research methods.

The key method in the study was the comparative historical approach (comparativism), which allows us to say that any literary influence is associated with a partial transformation of the borrowed sample, that is, its creative processing. The point is that the Victorian tradition largely shaped Fowles (2002) as a writer, but the author does not seek to imitate the reality that Victorian writers monistically understand; before Fowles (2002), unlike the Victorians, there is a double reality: historical life and literature, and he, as a writer of the 20th century, tactfully and responsibly “plays” with tradition.

The historical-biographical method as a way of studying literature is a way of reading a work of art through the author’s personality. In this regard, the facts of Fowles’s biography, as well as numerous essays, interviews, and diary entries of this author, which make him think that he intentionally tried to build his and his heroes’ biography, focusing on the life and work of some English writers of the 19th century (primarily Austen and Hardy).

The structural-typological method of research is aimed at studying the internal structure of the work, exploring it as a system of techniques. It is known that a semiotic understanding of reality in postmodernism is reflected in the definition of “intertextuality”. In this regard, the main theoretical provisions of the concept of dialogism and intertextuality. In the presented study, intertextuality is

considered as a technique that allows the writer of the 20th century to be in a state of dialogue with tradition and become a manifestation of a very peculiar intersubjectivity.

6. Findings

To define a new genre in which a Victorian text becomes a kind of supratext formation, which enters into an intertextual dialogue with modernity, various definitions are proposed: “historiographic metaroman” (Hutcheon, 1995), “neo-Victorian novel” (Shiller, 1997). Letissier (2004) suggests that all neo-Victorian novels are classified as two groups: on the one hand, novels that affirm a post-modernist view of history (the concept of F. Jameson), and Victorian enthusiasm is seen as a regressive movement, on the other hand, novels imbued with faith in the possibility of “revival” of tradition and nostalgia for the Victorian past. In turn, Gutleben (2001) proposes to distinguish two main subgenres in the genre of the Neo-Victorian novel: parody (subversive) and nostalgic.

Victorianism is one of the dominant cross-cutting themes in the work of John Fowles (1926–2005). The common features of the problems and poetics of his works, the variety of philosophical categories included in the narrative fabric, the originality of the post-modern content, the symbolism of Fowles novels – all this became the subject of study in domestic (Smirnova, 2002) and foreign dissertation researchers. Several monographs have been devoted to various aspects of Fowles's work.

As the work of English postmodern writers shows, a postmodern text can enter a variety of ways with the Victorian tradition. This may be, for example, relations of dialogue-reconstruction, dialogue-deconstruction (Tolstoy, 2008), relativization of tradition. Fowles presents a special case, for which, on one hand, the Victorian tradition is an organic component of his work, and on the other, it is the subject of a “lovingly ironic” (Sarukhanyan, 1987) rethinking.

In the novel “The French Lieutenant's Woman,” Fowles (2002) creates a model of the historical hermeneutic novel, in which the author simultaneously acts as a participant in the events and their interested interpreter, realizing the principle of complementarity. He cannot distinctly “rise” above what he must evaluate and examine. As a result of this, the historian simultaneously experiences two situations: he acts as a participant in the process and as an observer. According to Gadamer (1988), a person, in order to understand a phenomenon of the real world of history or to interpret a historical document, must have a certain kind of “historical understanding”. He must comprehend the historical situation in which he lives, and at the same time strive to understand the historical circumstances in which the events of the past unfolded, that is, “get used” to the “text”. It turns out that the researcher should go to the truth, conducting a constant “dialogue” with the “text”, with today's world and the world of history. Dialogue with history is necessary for understanding the essence of precisely modern phenomena.

For Fowles (2002), as well as for Gadamer (1988), in order to find out which prejudices are false, to get rid of prejudice, it is necessary to be constantly engaged in dialogue with the tradition being studied, the text, the event, and constantly question the tradition.

Hutcheon (1995) believes that the ironic distance between the two texts (classical and modern) allows the modern postmodernist novel to be both self-reflective and historical, that is, turned both inward to the new own text and outward to the original text. It is necessary to agree with the researcher, however, in order to reveal the nature of this dialogue, it is also necessary to consider how this “intertextual

dialogue” (Eco, 2006) is realized in a specific work of a specific author. In the novel “The French Lieutenant's Woman” Fowles openly poses himself as an author trying to realize, understand his place in the cultural paradigm. He acts as a researcher, historian of the Victorian era, at the same time feeling himself part of this era and literary tradition.

Against the background of other postmodernists who masterfully stylize and at the same time parody the classical tradition, Fowles (2002) is distinguished by the fact that the Victorian tradition is one of the “elements” that make up his style (Smirnova (2002) calls this feature of Fowl's poetics an “assimilated code”). The writer constantly “feels” the presence of the Victorian tradition in himself, while, distancing himself from what is happening, he acts as a hermeneut. He does not accept the monologism of tradition and at the same time condemns the relativism of contemporary art. Fowles is a writer who responsibly plays with tradition and tries to prove its continuity.

The philosophical and writer's conception of Fowles is dialectical (the enthusiasm for the philosophy of Heraclitus, Socrates, Montaigne, Pascal affected), which accounts for the dual attitude of this author to tradition. Like the postmodernists, Fowles does not have a final criterion of truth, and at the same time, unlike many contemporaries, the author believes in a certain positive beginning, which does not allow him to fall into the relative abyss. The artistic thinking of Fowles as a writer of the 20th century is focused on a varied representation of reality, which is why the author easily exploits a set of game strategies borrowed from postmodernists. However, neither philosophy nor formal experiments of postmodernism become the *ultima ratio* for this author. Fowles's work is a variant of moderate postmodernism, since the author is inclined towards the classical tradition in his worldview, but the poetics of his works are distinguished using postmodern aesthetics. The essence of the post-modern picture of Fowles's world consists in a free attitude to cultural heritage, styles, genres, not in accepting one, but in combining many pictures of the world (Fowles uses the concept of “synoptic view” to define this technique) (Fowles, 2002).

Fowles does not so much create as he tries to preserve and convey the aesthetic concept that he owes to Victorian writers. The author talks about continuity, denies the very possibility of an epistemological break with the worldview concepts of the past. With his concept of the author and reader, Fowles is close to the classical tradition, focusing on which, he considers the author's intention as the center that organizes the work. Fowles considers the reader to be equal to himself, which allows us to talk about the old-fashioned diplomatic conventions of this author, who is ready to recognize the legitimate subjectivity of the reader.

Fowles, unlike many of his contemporaries, is interested in the problem of semantic content, he develops the metaphysics of freedom and is a critic of agnosticism. Expressing ideas about the relativity of things, the author believes in his knowability at the same time. For Fowles, semantic relativism is not ethical relativism. The author understands that rootedness in the past, in tradition, can help deal with the chaos of the present.

The main principle of attitude towards the Victorian tradition in Fowles becomes counterpoint. The intertextual interaction of the Fowlesian text with the source text can occur in different ways. In some cases, the Victorian source can be quoted with reverence, in others – interpreted ironically. On the one hand, the writer picks up and develops individual motives of Victorian authors, borrows some images. On

the other hand, Fowles is not content with direct “tracing”, but transforms the motives and plot situations of Victorian literature, ironically beating them, often creating a parody context. The main function of intertextual inclusions in the works of Fowles is to create a dialogue between the quoting and quoted author, between eras and cultures. The intrinsic complexity of these relationships can be described as juxtaposition-opposition, coincidence-mismatch with a Victorian literary source.

7. Conclusion

The relevance of the study is determined by turning to the question of an authentic description of the Fowles method, which laid the foundations of a new author's attitude and formed a special cultural view of the historical past. The productivity of this approach is felt by contemporaries, but at the same time, attempts to describe the author's method, as a rule, are suffering from one-sidedness: he is credited with excessive traditionalism or is called a consistent postmodernist.

The solution of the stated problems has required reaching an interdisciplinary level, turning to the methodology of such humanitarian disciplines as philosophy, cultural studies and literary criticism.

Against the general background of his contemporaries, Fowles stands out for his special attitude to tradition. For prose, the writer is characterized by “exposure” of intertextual links with works of Victorian literature. The artistic reality of Victorian writers – motifs, images, plot models from their works – organically entered the poetic subtext of Fowles. The writer of the 20th century builds relations with Victorian tradition on the principle of duality: on the one hand, Fowles is characterized by a search for roots, spiritual support in the tradition, in its analytical criticism, and here he behaves like a programmatic “Victorian”, on the other – at every moment of filiation he has an element of freedom (semiotic analysis of the situation). This is due, first, to the dialectic of his writing concept.

Contemporary literature is characterized by an increased interest in the national past, an “obsession with history.” Therefore, the principles of interpretation proposed in the work can be extrapolated to the study of the work of other writers (primarily postmodernists), primarily in terms of intertextual interactions. In our opinion, in connection with many postmodern writers (for example, English), it is necessary to speak not so much about a sharp confrontation between literary styles and trends or aesthetic systems, but about their interpenetration and enrichment. Many authors try to comprehend the tradition of the past from the point of view of the path that English language literature of the 20th century has traveled. They turn to the tradition of the 19th century, at the same time having mastered the stylistic devices, opened and developed by postmodern prose. The relationship between the Victorian tradition and modern writing techniques in a postmodern novel – first in Fowles' novels – should be the result of aesthetic and axiological compromises that overcome both the traditionalist and postmodern approaches to the past.

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