

VASILII SHUKSHIN'S DISCOURSE AND EXPLORATION OF RUSSIAN MASCULINITY

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Abstract. This article analyses a key text from the 'village prose' movement in late Soviet literature, both the novella and film of Vasilii Shukshin's *Kalina krasnaia* (1973–1974). The article begins with a survey of the main writers of 'village prose' in Soviet literature of the 1950s to 1970s, and then locates the work of the writer, actor and director Vasilii Shukshin within this corpus. With reference to both the published novella and the film, and by examining in particular the depiction of the main character, Egor Prokudin, the author attempts to show how the motif of masculinity runs through the text and becomes the dominant theme in Shukshin's social and cultural worlds. This motif, furthermore, reveals the deeper level of spiritual significance the work has, and its unique place in the history of Soviet literature.

Key words: Soviet literature; village prose; masculinity; spiritual alienation.

Introduction

Vasilii Shukshin (1929–1974) is commonly identified with the 'village prose' school of writing that emerged in Soviet literature in the 1950s and flourished until the mid-1970s, when, indeed, most of its major works were published. Village prose of the 1950s–1970s produced some of the most interesting, and artistically beguiling, works of the entire Soviet period.

'Village prose' had certain thematic roots in Russian literature of the nineteenth century, especially the descriptions of village life and village people in works by, for example, Ivan Turgenev, Nikolai Leskov and Gleb Uspenskii. As a coherent artistic movement within Soviet culture, however, it emerged from an essay published by Fedor Abramov (1920–1983) in the journal *Novyi mir* in 1954. Entitled 'Liudi kolkhoznnoi derevni v poslevoennoi proze', it condemned the falsification of rural reality in recent novels, and was considered a daring statement at that time. Abramov remained true to his credentials, subsequently producing novels and shorter works that depicted in unflinching detail the daily lives of rural dwellers in the Russian north, his own 'malaia rodina' [1]. Abramov gave 'village prose' its identity and its ideology, which were to be developed by other writers in the subsequent decades [2. P. 18–19]. Without Abramov's lead, it is unlikely that Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008) could have produced 'Matrenin dvor' in 1963, his masterpiece of 'village prose' [3].

Both Shukshin and Abramov shared a rural upbringing; they were born and raised as children in the village, and this well of early experience served both well in their subsequent literary creations. Other 'village writers'

of the 1960s and 1970, such as Vasilii Belov (1932–2012), Viktor Astaf'ev (1924–2002) and Valentin Rasputin (1937–2015) were also from a rural background, and also described the village of their childhood in their subsequent work. Their work above all embodies the role of personal memory as a basis for creation and identity, memory as a means of understanding the huge changes in rural life since their childhood, and to try to understand the importance of the passage of time [4. P. 188–189].

'Village prose' explored other avenues of Soviet reality, and one focus was on recent history, in particular, the collectivization of agriculture in the 1920s and 1930s. Vasilii Belov began a series of novels in the 1970s that showed in great detail the cataclysmic changes enforced collectivization brought to the Russian village, ably supported by Boris Mozhaev (1923–1996), with his trilogy of novels in the late 1980s. The character and personality of the rural dweller, male and female, young and old, concentrated on their relationship with history and the land, with their relationship to the natural world often starkly in contrast with that of Soviet urban dwellers of the time [5. P. 611]. Rasputin's work, in particular, contrasted the rich cultural life of the Russian village with the impersonality and alienation of urban life.

By the mid-1970s 'village prose' had run its thematic course, the nostalgic yearning for a lost idyll reflected in titles such as *Proshchanie s Materoi*, *Poslednii srok*, *Poslednii poklon*, works which also expressed the certainty of the passage of time and inexorability of history. The 'harmony' of an idealized past was replaced by the social uncertainty of the present, and writers such as Belov and Rasputin embraced a cultural and political nationalism in the 1990s that was fed by political instability and social collapse.

Shukshin and 'Village Prose'

Shukshin also described village life, with a sharp eye for the characters that inhabited it. Yet Shukshin was not just a writer. He was also heavily involved in film-making, and starred in and directed films based on his own writings. Moreover, Shukshin was also not a 'typical' writer of village prose, for his characters are often men who have already left the village of their childhood to move to the town, but who are unable to adapt to urban living, and, more significantly, experience a spiritual void in their lives. As Kathleen Parthé concisely puts it, Shukshin's heroes are 'caught between the city and the village, awkward, unhappy, and nowhere completely at home, with no solace for their aching souls' [6. P. 112].

These 'aching souls' find expression in impulsive and irrational acts, such as when a man escapes from prison three months before he is due to be released simply to spend some time in his native village in the Spring, although he knows this will add further time to his sentence (the short story

'Stepka') Other instances include a war veteran who regales urban tourists with his story of almost assassinating Hitler, which of course never happened (the short story 'Milles Pardons, Madame'). Similarly, a villager takes great delight in humiliating visiting intellectuals (or so he assumes) by demonstrating his superior knowledge of certain facts, all derived from reading popular magazines (the short story 'Srezal').

Shukshin's most memorable creation is Egor Prokudin in the story and the film *Kalina krasnaia*. The novella was first published in 1973 in the journal *Nash sovremennik*, which published much 'village prose' in the 1970s (including Rasputin's major fiction) [6]. The film was released in March 1974, directed by and starring Shukshin as Prokudin, and its success was undoubtedly affected by Shukshin's own untimely death in October of that year. The rest of this article will be devoted to an analysis of both the film and the novella, noting where the two diverge in places, but with an emphasis on Shukshin's depiction of Prokudin as representing Russian/Soviet masculinity at a particular time in history and social development.

There is no doubt that a large part of the success of Shukshin's portrayal of Prokudin is the unflinching demonstration of his character's inner pain and anxiety, as the actor shows with his use of abrupt physical movements, strained facial expression and short, clipped verbal delivery. What Prokudin searches for above all in his life is inner freedom, 'volia', and this word, rather than 'svoboda', occurs in the first pages of the story when he is released from prison. When he is leaving prison he recites Esenin's poem 'Mir tainstvennyi, mir moi drevnii', with a clear presentiment of his own death:

...В снежную выбель
Заметалась звенящая жуть,
Здравствуй, мой черная гибель
Я навстречу к тебе выхожу [7. С. 111].

Another tragic cultural and historical reference is when he later arrives in Liuba's village of Iasnoe, and her father calls him 'Sten'ka Razin'.

Egor Prokudin is further surrounded by motifs from Russian literature and culture. Sad songs are sung around a table where there should be merriment, there are paintings on walls and pendants by the nineteenth-century artists Ivan Shishkin, Viktor Vasnetsov and Ivan Kramskoi, the Russian countryside around Liuba's village is filmed as if a direct reflection of a landscape painting by Shishkin or Isaak Levitan. Prokudin is also a man surrounded by history, whether it be the graveyard with nineteenth century graves he escapes into on the run from the police, or the Civil War when he asks Liuba's father (half-jokingly, but in the language and tone of a Stalinist interrogator) if he had served with Admiral Kolchak. Her father angrily replies that he is an 'eternal Stakhanovite' with eighteen official commendations ('pochetnye gramoty').

Prokudin is, however, characterized above all by his alienation. When he rejoins his gang after prison he talks about his 'long-suffering soul' and

‘desired freedom [volia]’, and how his soul ‘weeps’. As a career criminal trying to find a peaceful life and make a clean break with his former gang he is alienated from social norms of behaviour, and he refuses to acknowledge his own mother. His alienation from village ways is exemplified when in the bath-house he throws hot water not on the stones, but on Liuba’s brother, Petro. Prokudin’s alienation, though, goes deeper, for he is referred to in number of variations of his own name, such as Egor, Zhorzh, Zhorzhik, Gore (with some symbolic significance), Georgii, Dzhordzh, Egorushka, as if others are unsure of his real identity. This is also reflected during his first day in Liuba’s home, when he puts on underwear belonging to her former husband. Prokudin later dresses up birch trees in his own clothes, another signifier of lost identity. When he goes to the town in search of ‘debauchery’ he also dresses accordingly. The motif of dressing in different clothes is a clear signifier of shifting identity. At the moment when he seems to have reintegrated with society by driving a tractor and thus establishing his link with the land, he is killed wearing the clothes of a ‘peasant’, shot by Guboshlep, the gang leader, in a birch grove. He dies, finally at one with his native land: ‘И лежал он, русский крестьянин в родной степи, вблизи от дома’ [6. P. 132].

Prokudin’s tragedy is not simply that of an individual. Shukshin has created a character who represents the tragedy of the Russian male in the twentieth century, uprooted from his roots at an early age, the victim of the impersonal social and historical processes of his time, a martyr and a symbol. Shukshin’s camerawork in the film makes this aspect clear: at moments of heightened emotional strain Prokudin’s suffering face is shown in close-up; when he leaves prison the camera shows a ruined church in the background, and when he breaks down after seeing his mother the white façade of a church rises up behind him, offering him some spiritual succour. One of his first actions on leaving prison is to embrace a white birch tree as his ‘bride’.

At the start of the novella Prokudin is described as a ‘poet’ by an old woman he meets. Both in the novel and the film he is associated with Sergei Esenin, ‘the last poet of the village’. As he steps out to meet his former gang, the film includes a flashback to the prison, where an inmate sings to guitar accompaniment Esenin’s poem ‘Pis’mo materi’, written by a prodigal son who has not seen his native village or his mother for many years:

Я по-прежнему такой же нежный
И мечтаю только лишь о том,
Чтоб скорее от тоски мятежной
Воротиться в старенький наш дом.

Я вернусь, когда раскинет ветви
По-весеннему наш белый сад.
Только ты меня уже на рассвете
Не буди, как восемь лет назад [7. С. 156].

Like Esenin, Prokudin is a tragic figure, surrounded by motifs from Russian folklore (dances, songs, the title song which occurs twice), Russian art and Russian literature. He is a victim and an embodiment of Russia's turbulent twentieth-century history, but his suffering ennobles that history, and imbues it with spiritual meaning and value.

Conclusion

Egor Prokudin is a tragic figure, but his fate is shown within a Russian historical and cultural context in order to embody the suffering of the nation in the twentieth century. Through the exploration of masculinity, in the motifs of dressing and cross-dressing, in the uneven duel with the alpha-male Guboshlep, and in the depiction of his inner suffering, Prokudin is seen as a Russian martyr, who nevertheless is returned in death to Mother Russia.

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ДИСКУРС ВАСИЛИЯ ШУКШИНА И ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ РУССКОЙ МУЖЕСТВЕННОСТИ

Гиллеспи Дэвид, доктор философии, профессор кафедры политологии и международных отношений университета г. Бат (Бат, Великобритания). E-mail: d.c.gillespie@bath.ac.uk

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Аннотация. Анализируется ключевой текст жанра русской литературы «деревенская проза» в поздней советской литературе, к которому относится как повесть, так и фильм

Василия Шукшина «Калина красная» (1973–1974). Приводится обзор основных авторов «деревенской прозы» в советской литературе 1950–1970-х гг., а затем внимание сосредотачивается на работах писателя, актера и режиссера Василия Шукшина из корпуса художественных текстов данного жанра. Именно работы Шукшина (его художественные произведения и фильмы, созданные на их основе) позволяют раскрыть особый типично русский дискурс, отличающийся своей естественностью и живостью языка. Анализируется дискурс главного героя повести и фильма «Калина красная» Егора Прокудина, предпринята попытка показать, как мотив мужественности прослеживается на всем его протяжении и становится доминирующей темой в социальном и культурном мире Шукшина. Кроме того, мотив мужественности раскрывает более глубокий уровень духовного значения исследуемой работы и ее уникальное место в истории советской литературы.

Ключевые слова: советская литература; дискурс; деревенская проза; мужественность; духовное отчуждение.