

BORIS PILNYAK'S AMERICANISMS IN THE NOVEL "OK"

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Abstract. In "O.K., an American novel" (as Boris Pilnyak named his work) Americanisms are not only words or expressions peculiar to American English, but also representing the intervention of foreign words into Russian. This is the Russian writer's feeling of freedom and peculiarity, that characterizes the inhabitants of the United States. Besides, introducing foreign words into his narrative is a particular strategy that reveals the basic intention of his work.

Keywords: Americanism; analogy; irony; the English vocabulary.

Boris Andreyevich Pilnyak's creative work is actively studied now in Kolomna State Pedagogical Institute. Analytical article collections (of both Russian and foreign authors) are published here regularly. Boris Pilnyak's poetics in all its structural range is attracting the scientists' attention.

Boris Pilnyak was not an indifferent observer, but an eyewitness who was actively engaged in the life of the early twentieth century. Today he is perceived as a chronicler of the epoch of the global change. The scale of events that produced the deepest impression on the writer in connection with his passion for the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, Bergson, Schopenhauer, together with rooted in his personality admiration for the creative work of Andrei Bely, caused paradoxical artistic thought and experimental nature of Boris Pilnyak's prose.

Numerous articles, monographs and theses (E.R. Abdurazakova, K.B. Andronikashvili, L.N. Anpyalova, A.P. Auer, E.S. Babkina and many other authors [1]) have been dedicated to studying Pilnyak's view of Russian history for he perceived its inner dynamic force ("The Naked Year", "The Salt Barn", "The Volga flows into the Caspian Sea", "The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon"), and revealed its underlying processes, creating vivid images while at the same time evincing a particular type civic-mindedness. Much attention has been accorded to the foreign motives and themes in Pilnyak's creative work, especially regard to the East ("China Story", "Roots of the Japanese Sun", "Rocks and Roots").

For that time the writer traveled a lot: in 1922 he visited Germany, in 1923 – England, in 1926 – China. He visited Japan twice: in 1926 and in 1932. In 1931 Pilnyak visited America at the invitation of Ray Long, the publisher of the popular weekly "Cosmopolitan". Ray Long and Pilnyak drew up a contract to publish the novel "The Volga flows into the Caspian Sea" [2: 184].

"O.K., an American Novel" (as the writer himself defined the genre of this work) was published in 1933. Direct impressions from numerous meet-

ings and events were included in this book of travel sketches. In my opinion, this work is unjustly neglected by researchers, because it has retained a topical relevance for Russia in the late XX – early XXI centuries.

Boris Pilnyak visited the United States at the time of the toughest economic crisis in the history of America. And, at the same time, it was the period of energetic industrial construction in the USSR. Naturally, the parallels between the state of things in the two countries is constantly drawn in the book:

“Of course, America is on the high road of the mankind’s development. This road leads to the new destination – to socialism. These paths to socialism are being constructed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Now the Soviet Union and the United States are playing the chess game of the modern mankind” [3: 451].

These comparisons and analogies open and close Pilnyak’s “American Novel”. The book consists of 43 chapters of variable length. These chapters are enclosed in a kind of compositional ring. The first and the last chapters, framing the book, consist of only three sentences, repeated almost word for word: “4 July, 1776 was the day when the United States declared independence. It was the day when Betsy Ross, an American woman, presented the first U.S. President George Washington with the first American banner in Philadelphia. That was fifty years ago” [Ibid: 452].

“7 November, 1931 is the anniversary of the October Revolution in Russia. It is the day, when Betsy Ross, an American woman, handed the red flag to the Detroit organization of the Communist Party of the USA” [Ibid: 675].

The history of America’s discovery, its economic ups and downs, historical and political documents, the eye-witness experience – everything is organized within the framework of a single narrative plot – the travel notes [4]. This degree of integration is achieved due to an easily understood syntax and vocabulary. The novel is constructed through rhythm, alliterations and sound repetitions. The main stylistic characteristic of the book is associated with Americanisms, that are introduced into the depiction of events by the sure hand of the author.

In Pilnyak’s interpretation Americanisms are not just the words and expressions characteristic of the American variant of the English language. Americanisms are the writer’s feeling for a certain individuality and freedom inherent in the people who inhabit that country.

“Everything is sport for Americans. Sport, records, “O.K.” – are the equivalent concepts for the American people... And there are lots of national flags! Flags are even in cemeteries! They are patriots! They are delighted with themselves; they are delighted with their country, let alone the fact that fathers of the half of them were not born Americans. America is the apex of mankind and civilization, the crown of creation! And Americans have nothing to do with cosmopolitans: “What is Europe or Asia? ...Athens, where is

this? – in Mexico? ... Moscow? – Ah, yes, it seems to be somewhere in Kentucky! Odysseus Voltaire – he is a cooper from 2nd street... – But in general, it is of no importance. America is surpassed by nobody, nothing and nowhere and can never be surpassed! However, if Europeans do invent something, it is only for the sake of America. Everything else is a mere bagatelle, good for nothing!" [3: 433].

Similarly:

"In America – there is *prohibition*, "the dry law". It is not a trifling law, but the one that is included in the precepts of the Constitution of the United States. So, sometimes in unfamiliar places I, a foreigner, had to address a policeman and explain rather through gesticulating than speaking, that I should have a drink with my friends. And every time cops gave the same answer: "O.K., boy! O.K., guy! It is very simple. Go round the corner, the second porch. Tell them – policeman Charlie has sent you! Sure!" [Ibid: 568].

In the USA of the XX century gangsters were one of the original forms of the American freedom manifestation. Pilnyak recounts of one of the most notorious gangster kings – Al Capone, who could not have a talk with the writer from Russia, because on that day he was involved in the mayoral election in Chicago:

"If Mr. Pilnyak stays a little longer in Chicago, Mr. Capone will be at his service" [Ibid: 511].

Al Capone's "tough guys" shot people "on order" with machine guns while a human life was valued at 25\$ and above.

"Al Capone is a great man," – Pilnyak continues and describes in detail the way this bandit is making millions in collaboration with the banker Z, with the Chicago factory owners and merchants as companions. "Al Capone has got *Big business – Big deal!*" He collects tribute from the submissive people and shoots away the unruly. His business is not restricted to vodka and prostitution. Pilnyak gives not only examples of racketeering, but cites the Act on functions of Chicago's Special Court [Ibid: 575] on racketeering that ruled on the following upon:

- "1. *Destroying citizens' property by explosions.*
2. *Deliberate wrecking of houses.*
3. *Collecting money as penalties.*
4. *Throwing bombs*" etc. There are 9 points.

A few years later, in 1935, Soviet writers, Ilia Ilf and Yevgeny Petrov, travelling around America, also failed to meet Al Capone. At that time Al Capone served his 11-year sentence in a Los Angeles prison "not for smuggling and robbery, but for non-payment of income tax on the capital procured by means of robbery and smuggling" [Ibid: 288].

Pilnyak does not hide his attitude to that American "peculiarity". On the contrary, the writer has and expresses his own opinion on every occasion he describes. For example:

“They say that labor is respected in America. I think, what is really respected there is the dollar, and the way it is received is of no importance, it might be even through gangsterism”.

Very often Pilnyak’s Americanisms are ironically or even sarcastically colored when he introduces into his narration political anecdotes, placards, mottos revealing the essence of American morals:

“Time is money!”, “He who does not work more then he receives, does not receive more then he works”, “An accident is wasting time!”

Sometimes Pilnyak states the fact simply:

“In America one should see in a political party he belongs to neither principles, no programs, but a source of existence” [Ibid: 471-473].

The author takes, for example, quotations from the book “Political Behavior” by F. Kant, an American journalist, whom he considers “a person who is not at all of revolutionary inclination”. If you only look at the list of contents of the book, you would grasp what is the book about. The items of the table are laconic which looks very “American”:

“Obey the law, and you will be beaten!”

“You must be true to your gang!”

“To hurt the interests of business is unprofitable”.

“A party is not responsible for bribery in its ranks” and so on.

In addition B. Pilnyak relates the content of some of the book’s chapters. For example, in the chapter “When the water reaches the upper deck, follow the rats” F. Kant gives his explanation:

“As applied to political life, this means that it is foolish for a person, engaged in politics, to continue to adhere to his beliefs as soon as they became unpopular” [Ibid: 582].

Prohibition, prosperity, accident, driver, supervisor, cowboy, synopsis, studio, illusion, hotdog, conference, dancing, car, revue – these words transliterated into Russian, are not just Americanisms, they present foreign speech which added particular stylish key to Pilnyak’s “American novel”.

There were many critical remarks, concerning the vocabulary of the novel. “The usage of English words with Russian flexion is a bad taste”, wrote one of the reviewers. – Americans [*lontchat*] – have lunch, [*dinerjat*] – have dinner”, [*bitchujutsa*] – lie on the beach, and [*baluyut*] – play ball” [6: 10-13].

For Boris Pilnyak the usage of Americanisms is a verbal device, that opens up and develops the meaning of the narrative. “O.K.”, carried out into the title of the book, is the key word of the “American novel”. This word sounds as a refrain throughout Pilnyak’s book and more often than not has an ironic shade, which is spread over to both meanings of the concept “Americanism”. In one of the first chapters of his book Pilnyak gives an explanation of using “O.K.”:

“At the start of the 19th century the USA Presidents were, as usual, generals, military men and not very well educated people. And at a certain

time Andrew Jackson was President. There are two words: "*All correct*" in the English language, which render the meaning "*Everything is right!*" Once some documents were brought for the President to sign them. Having read them he wrote two letters on the documents "*O.K.*", believing that he wrote the initial letters of the words "all correct", the way he heard them, because "all correct" is pronounced [o:l korect]; the same two letters "*O.K.*" have been used since then first as a joke, later on as a habitual expression. So because of the illiteracy of a President, a former general, "*O.K.*" became widespread and institutionalized in America, as "*all right*" in England and "*tamand*" in China" [3: 444, 445]. An American guy smashed his car in an accident – "*O.K.*", lost all his money in stock-jobbery – "*O.K.*", got robbed by bandits – again "*O.K.*". Now Presidents put "*O.K.*" on the laws out of solidarity to their predecessors" [Ibid: 445].

English words are included into the text of the book necessarily with a Russian translation and explanation, but not always in the same detailed way as it was with "*O.K.*":

"*Wall Street* is written in English – the exact translation is "Валовая, Стенная улица" [3: 655]. "There is an American saying "*Keep smiling*" – "*храни улыбку*": American tradition demands from an American person to be always bright, cheerful and smiling [Ibid: 597]. Sometimes, it is "*Efficacy*", *an American word!*" [Ibid: 618].

Sometimes Pilnyak gives a loan translation or a calque of an English word and then offers an explanation to it:

"They call them *tramps*" – travelling down-and-outs, tramps, vagrants – ("путешествующими босьяками, бродягами") [Ibid: 643]. "A Russian driver, if he drove his car for an hour by New York streets the way he does it in Russia, would be all covered with "*tickets*", penalty tickets, like with snowflakes in a snow-storm. And this would not happen only because he would be wrecked within the first five minutes together with his car in the streets of New York" [Ibid: 476].

Another example: "The word 'turn' to show that you have to turn the corner here is rendered by the word 'curve'; if to read it in Russian it would sound as [kurve] in English – [kerv]" [Ibid: 478]...

Once having translated words from English into Russian, Pilnyak uses only English equivalents:

"In Manhattan there are ten *avenues*. If you say it in Russian it would be ten *alleys*. They ran through the city. And then there are almost three hundred *streets*, meaning the same in Russian, they cross the city. And there is not a single avenue in New York where you would not hear the screech of car wheels... Now everybody knows that the distance of three *avenues* and ten *streets* you cover sooner walking than driving a car" [Ibid: 471].

Pilnyak explains *prosperity* – "*a purely American English word*" – only once:

“In spite of the *prosperity* (*prosperity as opposite to crisis*) in the best years of the last *prosperity* there were in America from three to three and a half million unemployed workers” [Ibid: 505].

Then having learned the meaning of this Americanism, the reader understands the text quite easily:

“As for American “*prosperities*” in general, which together with the “*prosperities*” from 1922 up to October 1929 were five in number, American economists put forward as the principal causes of these “*prosperities*” some things not less unusual than “*prohibition*” [Ibid: 590]. “*Prohibition*” was one of the causes of the last “*prosperity*” [Ibid: 592].

An enumerative manner is typical of Boris Pilnyak’s “Americanisms” infused with emotional interjections:

“*Publicity! Advertisement!* Honestly, it often seemed to me, that people in America did not exist to be themselves, but just for *publicity* and *advertisements*... *Advertisements* are screaming, purring, singing arias, scaring, goggling eyes and soothing eyes, knocking down, keeping watch on intersections, in doorways, in toilets, in alcoves. These *advertisements* creep into your nose, eyes, ears, into your food, into your blood and heart; they pick your pocket, pocket, and pocket! – For they all are here to shout: “Buy more! Eat more! Drink more...” [Ibid: 458]. And this “consume more” is yelling even when there is crisis in the USA and more than ten million people are unemployed”.

One cannot but share the opinion of D. Zaslavsky who wrote when the novel was published: “Pilnyak has vividly described, with malicious humor, the way American millionaires live and amuse themselves, the way a healthy man is suffocated by advertisements, and big cities are saturated with oil stench, and the number of cars became so innumerable, that it is easier to walk than to drive a car to get somewhere... That is quite right, but there is nothing new in it” [7].

While writing about Pilnyak’s American impressions that they might be peculiar to Pilnyak, but there was nothing new in them, the critic kept in view that some Russian writers visited America long before him. They were: Vladimir Korolenko who wrote “With no tongue”, Maxim Gorky, author of “The city of the Yellow Devil”, Sergey Esenin, who wrote “The Iron Mirgorod”, Vladimir Mayakovski, author of “My Discovery of America”.

Naturally, neither Russian writers nor literary critics could have foreseen, that in some 70-80 years Russia would become similar to America as it was at the beginning of the XX century.

The content and the plot, the structure and the linguistic shaping of Pilnyak’s “American novel” characterize, first and foremost, the personality of the author himself with his culture, world outlook, and specific language. The English vocabulary, which had been transformed and accumulated by the American culture, was introduced by the writer into the Russian usage

with his own personal ironic coloring. And nowadays when the novel is read by Russian literature lovers it seems to them quite topical.

Though Pilnyak's translations and explanatory notes to some Americanisms appear naïve, these words long ago entered the Russian language and need no explanation now, everybody knows and uses such words as *advertisement*, *publicity* and the like. It's a pity that *prosperity* in its real and individual sense is familiar to a only small part of the Russian population.

So, Boris Pilnyak, with his "O.K.", an American novel" made did his own distinctive contribution to genuinely humanitarian international communication.

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