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The Rhetoric of Proust's Early Aesthetic Manifestos

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Marcel Proust's non-fiction heritage includes several texts that are usually seen as the future novelist's attempts to formulate his views on the nature of art and to clarify his place in the literary life of the time. This article examines Proust's most accomplished anti-symbolist manifesto, "Contre l'Obscurité", and three fragments describing different aspects of the creative experience. The purpose of this research is to investigate the rhetorical aspects of Proust's reflection on the creative process and to establish the pragmatics of this sort of writing in the context of the novelist's formation. While tracing the rhetoric strategies Proust uses to distance himself from the artistic trends of his own generation, the article proposes to read these early drafts not only as a theory of art but also as a manifestation of the author's doubts and ambitions regarding his literary project. As proved in this article, Proust in his debuts is most original and most modernist not when he is trying to imitate art theorists or critics but when he is touching upon the struggles of a young author (fear to lose inspiration or to be unable to finish the major work, problems of finding literary identity, relationship with the readers).

Keywords: Marcel Proust, French literature, aesthetic manifesto, modernism, symbolism.

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Research area: philology.

In the non-fiction heritage of Marcel Proust a special place is occupied by several texts written in the 1890's and dedicated to abstract reflection about the nature of creativity, on the state of literature and art problems. It is noteworthy that, in spite of the Proust's reputation as an intellectual, philosophizing writer, he had very few such "theoretical" articles and essays. Virtually all the information about the literary and generally aesthetic position of the writer is indirectly retrieved by researchers from texts, in which the reader cannot be sure that he is

dealing with a direct statement of the author, but not a speech of a fictional narrator or character. (This uncertainty is ironically played out in the fifth book of the Proust's novel, "The Captive", where Albertine parodically sets out the ideas of the narrator). In this article, we focus on the rare examples of Proust attempts to speak as directly as possible. First of all, it is the article "Against the uncertainty", 1896 ("Contre l'Obscurité") (Proust, 1971, 390-395), and the unpublished fragments that were published posthumously under the title "True Beauty" ("La Beauté

véritable”) (Proust, 1971, 342), “Poetic creation” (“La création poétique”) (Proust, 1971, 412-413) and “The decline of inspiration” (“Le déclin de l’inspiration”) (Proust, 1971, 422-423). Even these titles seem unconventional for Proust who in his critical prose usually uses proper names in titles, whether these are the names of the reviewed authors, opponent critics or mistresses of salons.

We will not dwell on the very concept of art in the works of the future author of the “Search”: Proust’s aesthetics is described in detail. A starting point of our study is the study of A. Henry (Henry, 1981) that showed that the Proust original ideas of the aesthetic are dependent not only on the obvious influence of Ruskin, but also on the ideas of the German Romantics acquired in his youth. In the Russian literature the works of A.N. Taganov are devoted to this subject, and we share his point of view, according to which “the artistic system of Proust has initially “focusing” character. Emerging at the intersection of traditions, rationalist and irrational tendencies, it incorporates a variety of manifestations of literary life, and then distinctively “breaks” them giving them a new direction” (Taganov, 1993, 27). A.N. Taganov also considers the conditions of formation of the Proust aesthetic position in the context of crisis of naturalism associating romantic and platonic aspects of this position with rejection of dominants of the previous literary era common for the generation. Thus, Proust was never really an original theoretician, his reflection is interesting not by the novelty of ideas, but by their combination and transformation. Vocabulary of the texts of our interest brings quite traditional axiomatics to the fore: “truth”, “beauty”, “life”, “depth” appear as indisputable and almost synonymous values. However, if we analyze the pragmatic aspects of the same articles and fragments, there are questions, the answer to which cannot be reduced to a direct description of the Proust views.

The most obvious of these issues is why Proust so strongly distances himself from the Symbolists? Part of the explanation is the biographical context, the distribution of forces in the literary field typical of young Proust, where he saw Anatole France and Jules Lemaître as a source of support and as role models, and they both in their critical publications held a skeptical and puzzling position in relation to the Symbolists, especially the younger generation. The article by Proust, however, does not completely coincide with the same remarks of his teachers.

Let us note that in the article with such a polemical title Proust does not mention by name any of his “opponents” and does not cite a single text. In apologetic reviews more typical for him, he always cites phrases from the works of authors who are considered close, although he is often inaccurate and freely handles with the context. This suggests that Proust’s selection and “dosing” of other people’s names and words from his earliest experiments becomes an instrument of conscious manipulation of the reader: the rejected are deprived of the right to be called. A. Compagnon remarked that the characters-creators in the “Search” – Bergotte, Elstir, Vinteuil – have no rivals because “they represent a synthesis of many artists” (Compagnon, 1989, 25). In a sense, the strategy of the critic Proust is directed at the other side the same effect: a name and identity are given only to those whose art he recognizes as real, so there can be no literary competition on equal terms. (Namelessness of the narrator of the novel, as well as a variety of pseudonyms, under which Proust chose to publish articles acquire additional connotation in this setting.)

Instead of real opponents in the “Against the uncertainty” a dialogue is conducted with imaginary “young poets” with the explicate comments invented by Proust. “Youth” in this text plays a specific role. The article begins with an ironic remark that “every twenty-year student

who is engaged in literature, each fifty-year gentleman who is not engaged in literature” asks whether a student belongs to the “young school” (“la jeune école”) (Proust 1971, p. 390). The fictional gentleman expresses bewilderment: “I must confess that I do not understand anything, I have to be devoted... On the other hand, I have never had so much talent; now almost everyone is talented (Ibid). This preamble is used exclusively to show in the very next sentence that the author does not wish to associate himself with the twenty-year olds or the fifty-year olds. In his other early texts he also emphasizes self-awareness of the author who is aware of his youth, but is devoid of generational identity. Together with this article was written an unfinished sketch of the moralizing essay “Seduced Youth” (“La jeunesse flagornée”) (Proust 1971, 395-396), which consists of the reproaches towards the “youth” that does not think, does not read anything other than fashion manifestos, and whose talent is reduced to reproducing of ready-made techniques, etc., and towards the critics of flatterers who convinced young poets that they are all, without exception, are talented. A demonstrative pose of the young moralist apparently turned out to be rhetorically not too productive, and in more mature texts it was completely discarded, but it is one of the most important elements of an elaborate self-marginalization, taking yourself out of the context of the literary process, which is based on the Proust literary career. The same is with all the Proust anachronistic remarks about the history of literature, the desire to reject any external “periodization” motivated, as shown by L. Fraisse (Fraisse 2006, 162), by the primate in the Proust consciousness of the “platonic mystery of art” and the mysterious true novelty that cannot be guessed at the moment of fashion emergence or the tastes of the literary youth.

Despite the abstractness of naming the object of criticism in the “Against the uncertainty”, there

is no doubt that they are the Symbolists (and the term itself is in the article). But by this time, if, as is customary, to count from the manifestos by Moréas written in 1886, symbolism as the movement is ten years old, the living “fathers” of the direction, Verlaine and Mallarmé are over fifty, and Moreau is over forty, so for a twenty-five year old Proust, in fact, it is not about new trends, but about one of the main components of the cultural environment, in which he grew up. Proust, in our opinion, in contrast to older colleagues was well aware that the tone of the era is already set by the “children of Mallarmé” (Smith, 2000). Imitating the patronizing tone of France and Lemaitre, Proust not only joins his mentors in the literary struggle, but also tries to design a version of the subject of the statement, which would be free from fixedness in time and generation, which anticipates the age-related ambivalence of the narrator of the “Search of the Lost Time”.

In the “Against the uncertainty” the objections to the Symbolist art are based on the game with the symbolist terminology. The direct and figurative senses of the notorious “uncertainty” – a literal physical “obscurity” and “inaccessibility to comprehend”, “incoherence” – are played by means of light images. The model for the poets must be Nature that does not hide the sun, the stars, the moon, and the “unified and dark”, profound meaning of which is presented in “a personal and clear” form (Proust, 1971, 395). The task of art, therefore, is to be light and dark, clear and impossible to understand at the same time just as light and dark at the same time a moonlit night is, borrowed by Proust to illustrate the total arsenal of the Romantics and the Symbolist.

Another line of argumentation touches upon problematics that is even more important to Proust. In the intentional “obscurity” he sees a fear of “vulgarity”, a desire to protect a zone of

pure art. The logic of his objections deserves to track it carefully. Concern about how to protect art from the profanes is meaningless, as the very thought of the vulgar is vulgar; “any regard to the vulgar, whether to indulge it with availability or to avert with obscurity”. The artwork created with a regard “would mercilessly show the desires to please or not please the crowd and these desires are mediocre and, alas, would attract the readers of the second rate” (Proust 1971, 394). Let us pay attention to this hierarchization of the readers: in Proust’s works it is not motivated by the quality and nature of the works. A “second-rate” reader in the Proustian aesthetics is not identical with the “mass reader” searching for the light, the accessible and the familiar; he may, conversely, be a fan of the most complex and innovative art. Proust is looking for a method to distinguish between the types of aesthetic experience: he went on, apparently, to gradually discover that he does better with the help of not theorizing, but creating characters with different aesthetic strategies.

This is the real line of division between Proust and the Symbolists. Proust and Mallarmé, as noted by F. Rosengarten (Rosengarten, 2001, 172), operate with the same categories and even words, share a common ideal, but they are different in understanding of the writer’s relationship with the public. According to the researcher, the reason is that Proust believes in clear to all, universal laws and, accordingly, requires from the art to appeal to all, not to the chosen ones. In our view, in addition to this belief, there is another Proust’s belief that is fundamentally different from that of the Symbolists, relativistic and much less classical, concerning the dependence of the value hierarchies in art from the intentions of the recipient. This representation implies, firstly, the thought of the inability to control fate of his text, which, of course, disturbed the writer while working on his main work, and secondly, the

anxiety about the author and the reader’s purity, ability to read and write without thinking.

In “True Beauty” anxiety gets another embodiment: the essay begins with a comparison of the two variants of perception of beauty: for some people the pleasure of books is no different from all sensual pleasures (“flowers, wonderful days, women”), while others “suffering from an excess of sincerity” are looking for depth (Proust, 1971, 342). This simple opposition is replaced by the following one, which describes the inner break in consciousness of the “too sincere”: “They endlessly ask themselves whether your own idea really brings pleasure, or it is just a passion for fashion” (Ibid.). Uncertainty about your own authenticity, about whether the depth is not false itself, whether it is borrowed from outside, from the surrounding noise – a theme for Proust that is far more important than the very classic dichotomy of the depth and surface. (The same theme is in some texts of the “Pleasures and Days”, and is distributed as a variety of variations in almost all the episodes of the “Search” related to art.)

Fragments of “Poetic creation” and “The decline of Inspiration” are rare to non-fiction attempts of Proust to describe the creative and not receptive side of creativity. Both texts, however, depict in detail the situations of creative impotence, fatigue, and deadlock. They, unlike the above-mentioned theoretical studies, resemble the fragments of a narrative about a certain “poet” followed by the narrator. In the first text at first it is proved that the real experience of living the life of a poet is not the same as for everyone else, as it serves for the task of art. Proust illustrates this thought as the image of a book, at the end of which there is a date and a name of the city where the writer spent summer and wrote this book, but for the reader who got to the last page, it is clear that the same city in the book was the site of action. There is a paradox anticipating the basis

of poetics of any modernist novel, but it remains undeveloped; author's attention is focused on the creative "state of the spirit". The rarity and uniqueness of inspiration leads to a multiplication of fragments of unfinished texts, for example "Faust", "Don Quixote" that were being written for a long period of time and burned manuscript of the Mallarmé main work. The "Decline of inspiration" explores a kind of the flip side of the same process – periods without inspiration, loss of enthusiasm. Here, in an inversed manner to "Poetic creativity", we see an artist, whose trouble is not the inability to bring the great work to the end, but is the imperfection of the finished work and the inevitable exposure: "We know which pages were written without rapture, we know that rare pleasing ideas do not generate other ideas" (Proust, 1971, 413).

Thus, when starting talking about the "Poetic creativity" in general, Proust inevitably admits both huge ambitions, the desire to write a book, in which there would be no page written without inspiration, and doubts that such a plan can be implemented. Before the novel even becomes a draft, he writes texts about a fear to not be able to finish the book in time, or to lose the creative energy. Nowhere in this case there is no "I" said when talking about the creativity: a reader, a viewer, a critic is marked by him with the first-person plural, the writer, creator – with only the third-person single. At the same time Proust begins, in the form of numerous fragmentary drafts, working on the unfinished novel, which is now published under the code name "Jean Santeuil": the essays on creativity are stylistically almost identical to these drafts, and a "poet" in them is close to an autobiographical main character. The opinion that it is a change in the grammatical third person in "Jean Santeuil" to the first person in the "Search" became a decisive factor, by which Proust at the second attempt managed to create a single, although non-

classical, novel text is shared by all researches of the history of the novel. A.D. Mikhailov sees the meaning of this gesture in the traditional effect of trust that creates an autobiographical letter (Mikhailov, 2012, 279-280). At the same time, as shown by J.-Y. Tadié, the transition to the first person was accompanied by erasing many openly autobiographical details and replacement of real people by fictional characters (Tadié, 1971, 28-29). Against the background of earlier fragments that are not directly connected with the text of the novel, it is clear how deeply variations in the choice of a narrative instance are associated with almost tragic problematization of the creative process: from the beginning he was aware of the riskiness of a step that would turn a reader into an author and a theorist of creativity into a creator.

We have here a reflection of the novice novelist, the considered texts are said repeatedly; although there are different arts and different literary forms, among them there are always novels. This is especially noteworthy in the context of the final version of the "Search of the Lost Time", where a number of significant names for the narrator includes Chateaubriand, Nerval and Baudelaire (Proust 1989, 226), but among the keys to the "literary archetype" (Nicole, 64) there are no novels; it seems to us that a version that it is one of the components of the overall strategy of displacement of the "fathers" and suppression of the sources of Proust is quite right (Bouillaguet, 2000). Not only drafts of the "Search", but also the earlier texts allow us to see the displacement. "The poet" in "Poetic creativity" wrote a novel, in "The true beauty" the restless souls of readers find shelter from Leconte de Lisle and Flaubert, that is a poet and a novelist. Finally, the most vivid proof of that the art for Proust begins to be identified with the art of the novel is in "Against the uncertainty". As was stated above, in article one of the main evaluation criteria becomes flexibility, a universal soul ("l'âme universelle")

that is best expressed not in allegories, but in the more personal. As standards and a reproach to the “young poets” he set, however, not poetry, but novels – “War and Peace” and “The Mill on the Floss”. Leo Tolstoy and George Eliot from that time are Proust’s favorite examples that appear whenever it is necessary to point out the aesthetic ideal. For a critical article about the new poets or an anti-symbolist manifest these are the unmotivated and strange examples, besides, Proust does not try to explain how you can project a novelistic poetics onto the lyrics and what a “young poet” who took Leo Tolstoy as a standard would be like. Without a doubt, he was concerned over his own plans of the novice novelist. If you read “Against the uncertainty” on the background of the Mallarmé programmatic article “Crisis of

Verse” (Mallarmé, 2003), reference to which is in the Proustian article, a contrast between the theoretical thinking of the poet and the prose writer becomes particularly noticeable. Mallarmé bases the whole concept of crisis and renewal on the issues of versification, explains the whole history of French literature through the attitude to the free verse and development of prosody; Proust, when he needs to talk about the verbal art, always refers to the explanation of the novel techniques. In both cases we are dealing with the practice under the guise of theory, the search for his poetics. Claims of Proust to the language of the Symbolists are motivated by the philosophical differences and interests of literary groups, as well as by the fact that in this language it is impossible to write “In Search of the Lost Time”.

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Риторика ранних эстетических манифестов Пруста

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Нехудожественное наследие Марселя Пруста включает ряд текстов, которые обычно рассматривают как попытки будущего романиста сформулировать свои взгляды на природу искусства и прояснить свое место в литературной жизни эпохи. В статье рассматриваются наиболее завершённый антисимволистский манифест Пруста «Против неясности», и три фрагмента, в которых описываются разные аспекты творческого опыта. Задача исследования в том, чтобы изучить риторические аспекты прустовской рефлексии о творческом процессе и определить прагматику такого типа письма в контексте формирования романиста. Прослеживая риторические стратегии, которые Пруст использует, чтобы дистанцироваться от художественных тенденций своего поколения, данная статья предлагает интерпретировать эти ранние наброски не только как теорию искусства, но и как манифестацию авторских сомнений и амбиций, связанных с его литературным проектом. Как доказывается в статье, Пруст в своих дебютных опытах наиболее оригинален и близок к модернизму не тогда, когда пытается имитировать теоретиков и критиков, а когда затрагивает трудности работы начинающего автора (страх утратить вдохновение или не суметь закончить свой главный труд, проблемы поиска литературной идентичности, отношения с читателями).

Ключевые слова: Марсель Пруст, французская литература, эстетический манифест, модернизм, символизм.

Научная специальность: 10.00.00 – филологические науки.
