



**Leo tolstoy in the foreign literary mirror**

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***Abstract***

The article is devoted to the problem of perception of Russian literature in German culture, namely, the writer Thomas Mann. The purpose of this article is to identify the most important for European culture results of the Russian literature of the 19th century. Despite the situation of modernism and postmodernism in European culture of the 20th century, the achievements of Russian realism retain their value and significance, which becomes clear due to the reaction of the reader belonging to a different culture. Research methods are hermeneutic analysis, sociology of literature, history of criticism. Material were the critical works of German writer Thomas Mann. The results of this paper show that, along with modernism in the 20th century in European culture, there is a powerful need for realism, which relies on achievements of Russian literature, where analytical realism was introduced in its pure forms. Despite the achievements of postmodernism, this tendency exists in a modern culture.

**Key words:** culture, history, reception, Leo Tolstoy, Thomas Mann.



## **Introduction**

Let's touch upon the role of «foreign mirrors» represented by the person of Thomas Mann. This is an outstanding figure in the spiritual and cultural life of the twentieth century, winner of the Nobel prize for the first novel «Buddenbrooks», a great authority in the world of literary scholars. More than 30 years he scrutinized Russia, Russian literature and its classics. In his activity as a literary critic, he applies to the names and works of Pushkin, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Lermontov, Gogol, Goncharov, Merezhkovsky and Gorky. He devoted a special study to Dostoevsky «Dostoevsky – in Moderation» (1946), Chekhov «Essay on Chekhov» (1954). Life and creative experience of Leo Tolstoy were a subject of a particular interest for the author of great novels such as «Buddenbrooks», «The Magic Mountain», «Joseph and His Brothers» and «Doctor Faustus». It was reflected in different essays and articles like «Reflections of an Unpolitical Man» (1918), «Goethe and Tolstoy» (1922), «Tolstoy» (1928), «Anna Karenina» (1929) and others. All Russian writers who lived in different times, he calls «amazing family of great minds, which is called Russian literature»: «All its great masters and giants came into the world almost simultaneously, as if going hand in hand; their life paths coincide for many years» [1].

## **1 METHODS**

This study deals with the problems of sociology of literature, existing of literature in the consciousness of foreign readers. The author's text often unconsciously reflects the fundamental features of collective representations and collective fantasies; great writers, who «symbolically embody the ideologies of their contemporaries» are closer to their own time [2]. Literature reflects the values of its time, and it is necessary to identify the nature of these values, notions about a man and the meaning of life in that era, its hopes and dreams and «the way of feeling». This is the basis («speaking about values») for the relationships between the writer and his audience, not only in his native language, but in foreign ones: at each particular historical moment, the attitude of the audience towards the writer is determined by the coincidence or the conflict of values [3, 4, 5, 6, 7].

In the sphere of cultural life the role of foreign exchange and intercultural dialogue are very strong and it is particularly relevant for the culture of postmodernism. Someone else's opinion even though he suffers from a certain narrowness, however, is free, not bound by a restrictive patriotism and national prejudice. «The foreign literary mirror» has more evaluative insight, and has the opportunity to see what we do not see ourselves. A foreign view to Russia and Russian classics is determined by many factors.



## 2 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Deep reasonableness, consistency, keenness in dealing with other cultures is evident in the literature methodology of research, applied by a German author to the analysis of foreign material.

Thomas Mann immerses the studied authors and their works into various Russian context; through the Russian circumstances he tries to penetrate deeper into the artistic world of his «Eastern brothers». First of all it is the context of the period (19th century), when Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov and others lived and worked. In this respect a special attention should be paid to the literary journalism of early Thomas Mann, first of all to his «Reflections of an Unpolitical Man» (1918) (especially because the book was created during the First World War, when Germany and Russia at the state level were enemies). In that essay he highly evaluates Russia, Russian people and Russian culture in the national-historical aspect: «Aren't the Russian people most humane of all the people?» [1] - rhetorically asks Thomas Mann. As the distinctive traits of all Russian people a German author he mentioned «heightened sense of justice», «the height and strength of an ethical principles». He admires Goncharov's Oblomov as «the bearer (or personification) of a truly Russian spirit»: «Poor Russia, your son!...». And then interrupts himself, correcting the unilateralism of his words: «Poor? No, happy, happy Russia!». Happy calls Thomas Mann the Russian country. The epitome of latter is «great moral inner self», artlessness, clarity of the Russian soul. His highest respect and admiration for the «Golden age» of Russia culture he expresses in his other works: «What greatness emanates from this era... How many of greatness in a generation, that put forward Tolstoy and defined by its activity the shape of five decades of the 19th century» [All in: 1].

Thomas Mann especially appreciated the political and social situations national in Russia in 1850-1860's (the abolition of serfdom, the liberation of the peasants, political and economic reforms and so on). And Russian literature of that period, in his opinion, was not only a reflection and consequence of social upheaval, but also had caused all these changes.

The great Russian writers, says Thomas Mann, who worked in different literary epochs, built the internal unity and integrity of Russian literature, which stems from the continuity of its traditions. The Western writer describes it as «enduring realism», «eternal truth» (this, according to Thomas Mann, is the essence of Russian realism). Russian authors «covered the vast Russia in all its pristine» and tried to tell the Russian people «how to live» and «what to do», preparing the world for the better life, beautiful and wisely organized. The most «humane of all» - and in this sense «holy» called the German author Russian literature due to its «fondness of man». Russian writers, in his opinion, have in common the ability to spot and brilliantly reveal the fullness and harmony of Russian life and Russian people. The «profound truth» about a person expressed by Russian literature, according to



Thomas Mann, is that Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Chekhov depicted a man not only in his great deeds and accomplishments, not only in creative activities, but in «criminal impulses of his thoughts and heart», in his «guilt». These writers «revealed the dark, satanic depths of the human soul»; they placed a man as an organic part of worldwide «ever-moving, endless ocean of good and evil» [All in: 1].

The highest peaks, the greatest achievements of Russian literature, according to a German artist and critic, are the works of «the prophet of Yasnaya Polyana» and the author of «War and peace» - Leo Tolstoy, who “for his country and his people has about the same value as for Germany, the author of “Faust”» [1]. First of all Thomas Mann admitted that Tolstoy’s realism was «bear-like», epic power of his creations was «bear power» that allowed to express the organic life of Russian people deeply and powerfully. «A great writer of the Russian land, - writes Thomas Mann, - with mighty creative power he reproduced a typical Russian soul in all it’s complexity and noble integrity. Like Antaeus he dropped to his native land for the miraculous multiplying of his strengths. Tolstoy poured into the souls of the Russian people the flow of energy, of freshness, a primeval creative joy and health. «Magic power» of Tolstoy’s impact on the minds and souls of the people the author of «Buddenbrooks» sees in the persistent pursuit of his «Brother from the East» for the meaning of life according to the Russian people and Russian national idea, in Tolstoy’s attempt to provide answers to the major questions of his time [All in: 1].

These «paths that leading to the altar of truth», Thomas Mann discovers in the «joyous, clear and poetic world of Pushkin»; in the works of «artist-critic» by Nikolai Gogol; in the novels, «the deepest psychologist in world’s literature» by Fyodor Dostoevsky, where he «created poetic world of unprecedented novelty and courage» and launched «the terrible might of his science of the soul»; in the prose of Chekhov, which is described as «the strongest and the best in European literature» [All in: 1].

The same methodology of «linking» with Russian social and political circumstances is used by Thomas Mann in his analysis of literary life in the late 19th century. «Russian life of that time, – writes Thomas Mann – allowed no one to breathe freely. It was oppressive, hopeless, downtrodden era... the whole country was under the yoke of autocratic and reactionary regime» [8]. «Mighty force» of the Russian literature of that period (Chekhov, Uspensky, Garshin, and others), according to Mann, was not only in ability to reflect realistically «an intolerant order of 1890, in which people gasping without refreshing playful freedom», but in it’s persistent search for answers to the main questions: «What path is to be chosen?», «How to live?» and «What Is To Be Done?» [All in: 1].

In his late period Thomas Mann strengthens his methodology with a new researcher’s tool, which he describes as a «double chronology». What means that in his analysis of the works of Russian classics



he studies not only contemporary context, but also the modern one, in which Mann created his «Russian notes». Thus, these works are evaluated from the point of view of two centuries – 19th and 20th. Certainly, he is clearly aware of the particularities of the Russian (and Soviet!) circumstances of the 20th century, «measured Bolshevnik-Marxist policy of the construction of socialism»; he does not hide his doubts about the revolution in «the land of Tolstoy». And yet he tries to see in the new Russian events «the first glimpse of light and spirituality» when «already break yet timid shoots of hope for the possibility of a new more joyful, more worthy of the human senses». And the same belief in the presentiment of a new life, Thomas Mann discovers in the work of the great Russian masters. «The greatness of Tolstoy's generation», in his opinion, consists in «the struggle to fulfill the moral obligation of remaining faithful to the people and in serving them». That was essential part of the work of those «Russian titans», whom he referred to «the Tolstoy era» [All in: 1].

Thomas Mann also applied his method of «double chronology» to the works of Chekhov. This double vision, like the magic mirror, allows the Western author to appreciate the outstanding contribution of Chekhov to world and Russian literature. «Through the eyes of the twentieth century» he perceives Chekhov first of all as a realist, who showed critically all that was «funny and sad, savage and alive» in Russian life at the turn of the century. From the same twentieth century perspective Mann finds that Chekhov «belongs to the most powerful and the best» in European literature. He admits «Chekhov's heroic work for the sake of the world». Thomas Mann points out that the artistic ideas of Chekhov «had a timeless quality» and in that sense they belong not only to 19th, but to the 20th century, because they reach «to the best existence. To a more pure, true, noble life, to the wise dispensation of a human society». The author of an «Essay on Chekhov» (1954) dares to assume that in «Chekhov's dreams about huge, sumptuous homes, beautiful gardens and extraordinary fountains, there is something of a pathos akin to a pathos of construction of socialism, which made such a great impression (that was written in 1954, 50 years after Chekhov's death) on the West» [All in: 8].

This consistent reasonableness and subtlety defined the methodology of Thomas Mann's literary analysis – the principle of comparative juxtaposition (Thomas Mann formulated it with a quote from Goethe: «Compare yourself with others! Know thyself!»). Comparative method, which has been used in literary studies for a long time, undergoes a strict inspection in the Mann's critical discourse. In his book «Goethe and Tolstoy» he discusses the possibility of a comparison «of these different names», «antagonistic brothers and friends of nature», «neither similar nor different and at the same time deeply related» [All in: 1]. Mann builds a complex and elaborate system of Parallels, which includes all aspects of comparative literature: synchronic and diachronic, convergence of authors belonged to different Nations, cultures and languages, a juxtaposition of names within the same cultural



environment, «the combination of writers» from different literary period, systems and directions, etc. Most notably he pays attention to the German-Russian parallels. The Significant point is: when comparing «brilliant masters of Russian literature» Thomas Mann takes the «geniuses of German land» - Goethe, Schiller, Nietzsche, and others. Pluralistic Parallels between the Russian classics and the great Germans acquire «a complex weave», cross and intersect [All in: 1].

Tolstoy and Goethe, according to the author, hold a naïve, objective and healthy quality. Schiller and Dostoevsky – subjective, pathological and romantic. The first two are «Children of nature», «geniuses of health», the second are «children of spirit», «geniuses of disease». In that literary space which was created by multiple movable parallels one could perceive not only what connects that «great family» of the Russian classics, but also what divides and alienates them. Their group portrait is not a still icon, but a lively and moving image [All in: 1].

The Russian literary essays of Thomas Mann is not just literary criticism, but criticism of an Western author. In his «Western view» on his «brothers from the East» early Mann emphasizes the uniqueness of the Russian soul, the separateness of the Russian people from the West (proud and unique people, who never wanted to unite with the «European world», as he quotes Dostoevsky) [9].

«German parallels» help to highlight what is hard to perceive in «Russian parallels». For example, evil and sometimes cruel inconsistency of Tolstoy (especially in comparison with the Olympian Goethe) - «the deepest and the worst of his nihilism, which renders «unhuman and icy indifferent» quality to some of his books. Or Dostoevsky's gazing (like Nietzsche) «beyond good and evil», into «the dark side of life on which the rays of the sun do not fall» [All in: 8].

### **3 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

The results of this paper show that, along with modernism in the 20th century in European culture, there is a powerful need for realism, which relies on achievements of Russian literature, where analytical realism was introduced in its pure forms. Despite the achievements of postmodernism, this tendency exists in a modern culture. Analyzing deeply the nature of Russian genius, Mann puts in the first place «the magic power of their influence on the minds and souls», not only Russian, but also European. In his thorough literary criticism Thomas Mann actualizes ideas of Pushkin, Tolstoy, Gogol and Dostoevsky for people of the 20th century.

### **4 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

*The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.*



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