

Literary Criticism of the Late XIX- Early XX Century and the Literary Success of M. Gorky

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Abstract

Maxim Gorky is the greatest writer of the XX century, whose life and creative pursuit has been vastly researched. Due to the scientific advancements and the general complexity of the writer's figure, there has been a recent development and expansion of the study around Gorky. And one of the results of such expansion becomes a new look at the phenomenon of the incredible success of the writer. Our research aims to analyse critiques of the phenomenon of Maxim Gorky's writing success. Critics of all types sought to understand the reasons for the writer's rapid success, to share their own versions. A myth of sorts about the writer's success emerged in the very first papers: as if the secret of Gorky's success lay in the glorification of a lowlife (social outcasts). Critics perceived Gorky as a living classic long before the academic history of literature acknowledged him as one. It is important to bear in mind that the horizons of expectations of the writer and his readers were almost aligned; to understand Gorky's success. In the late 1890s and early 1900s, the feuilleton appeared as a counteraction to Gorky's success. The authors of those feuilletons ridiculed the extreme exaggerations of critics and their metonymic transfer of his biography on his works.

Keywords: Maxim Gorky, literary criticism, success, fame, classics, myth, biography

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the XX century, many writers achieved fame rather rapidly, incomparable with the pace of the XIX century. In this regard, it is possible to talk about the phenomenon of so-called "accelerated» reputations. In fact, the special interest of critics in this cultural problem arises in this era particularly.

With this background, the special interest is drawn to the life and success of young Maxim Gorky. Numerous facts illustrate writer's early fame. Gorky's first collection of short

Published/ publié in *Res Militaris* (resmilitaris.net), vol.12, n°3-November issue (2022)

stories and essays was of enormous success, which seemed to be unprecedented to the history of Russian literature.

Therefore, it is important to understand how, on the one hand, Gorky himself perceived such an early recognition, and on the other hand, how critics reflected it back then.

His letters dated back to the 1890s and early 1900s include plenty of reflections on the public, success and related to both phenomena fame. It is curious that in Gorky's correspondence, “plots» related to the readership and “symbolic capital» are combined with purely economic criteria of success, which publishers point out to him. Gorky's success is also associated with the author's consciously built strategy and work on his reputation, which included the choice of “the reader's field that is most suitable for the functioning of his texts”. An indicative example here is his advice, which was undoubtedly based on Gorky's own experience, to L. Andreev: a young author needs to sensitively capture the cultural atmosphere of the era and feel his reader.

There are many materials in criticism about the visible manifestations of this success, almost all critical articles about Gorky contained arguments about the phenomenon of his success. We regard this role as twofold: criticism followed the growth of Gorky's recognition, recorded manifestations of success, and at the same time contributed to its formation and consolidation

2. Methods

The role of criticism in creating the reputation of a writer, in shaping and consolidating his success and his fate in general, both in a positive and a negative sense, is a topic that has not been sufficiently studied yet. Some contemporaries believed that criticism overlooked Gorky's literary talent, decided that his success was created exclusively by the reading public, and not by criticism. However, recognition by criticism is a necessary step to success. In the sociology of reputation, this process is associated with the concept of “circles» (or “stages») of recognition.

This study is based on the basic principles of studying the reputation of a person in sociology and literary criticism (Rodden, 2006; Fine, 1996; Power et al., 2009; Best & Lowney, 2009), researches on the reception of Gorky's personality and works from the standpoint of biographical and receptive methods (Bonamour, 1988; Niqueux, 1996; Rolet, 2007; Niqueux, 2005). In addition, the work uses the historical-functional method with a general description of the critical heritage of the Silver Age (Pashkurov & Razzhivin, 2016), the method of comparative linguistics (Bekmetov, 2015; Bekmetov et al., 2020).

The initial thesis was important for us. Russian critics shared the idea of Emile Gennequin, the French literary historian, that interest in a writer characterizes society. In “The Experience of Constructing Scientific Criticism: Estopsychology» Gennequin defined the problem of scientific criticism as the journey from the book to its author and then to his admirers (Геннекен, 1892; Kocha, Iwedi, & Sarakiri, 2021; Kokandy, 2021).

М. Горький в письме к Д.Н. Овсянко-Куликовскому от декабря

In December 1911, M. Gorky, in a letter to D.N. Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky, regarding his articles on the early work of the writer, admitted that criticism had not taught him anything.

However, it would be hasty to conclude Gorky's attitude to criticism based on this assessment alone. The notion that criticism may not matter to a writer can be classified as a myth. In fact, the facets of a writer's attitude to criticism are manifold.

3. Results and Discussion

Gorky was constantly interested in criticism. It could be easily proved by his correspondence (analysing the articles by N. Mikhailovsky, M. Menshikov, V. Botsyanovsky, E. Soloviev and others), notes on articles and books about him in the writer's personal library. Gorky's marginal notes show how attentively he read V. Rozanov's judgments about Gogol and Dostoevsky. At the same time, firstly, Gorky was not satisfied with the level of criticism of the 1890s, and secondly, Gorky was characterized by a fairly strong self-criticism. He believed that it was too early to write so much and so well about him. "I think, however, that it is too early to write about me seriously and too early to praise me. I seem to be one of those who do not finish their journey, but remain the traveller» (from a letter to V.F. Botsyanovsky on November 5 (18), 1900). (Горький, 1954)

Many articles about Gorky begin with a statement of the writer's success, with reflections on his popularity, with the metamorphoses that could be expected from the young author. N. Mikhailovsky compared the rate of achievement of success by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, and emphasized its incomparably high rate with Gorky. Mikhailovsky substantiates the analysis of a writer's success as one of the most important problems of criticism using the example of Gorky. "Discovering the secret of a writer's success means to find that something besides talent, although through it, that draws public attention to him, to indicate that point in his writings that directs to him the interest and sympathy of contemporary readers" (Михайловский, 1995).

A myth of sorts about the writer's success emerged in the very first papers: as if the secret of Gorky's success lay in the glorification of a lowlife (social outcasts). Various critics wrote about this, as P. Krasnov, N. Mikhailovsky, A. Volynsky, etc. In-depth articles on the topic of interest to us belong to M.O. Menshikov. Menshikov drew attention to the fact that the outcasts, shown by Gorky, awakened in the memory of society "something romantic and passionate», perhaps, "children's legends about bandits and heroes», "the memory of youth, memories about the heroes of civil wars and uprisings". In the article "Beautiful Cynicism», first published in the newspaper "Novoye Vremya» (1900), the critic pays a lot of attention to the writer's fame, how it was created and how a person who had tasted it could suffer. Menshikov was one of the first to associate Gorky's success with fashion (the problem of "literature and fashion»). According to the critic, "Mr. Gorky came just in time, and this was also one of the secrets of his marvelous glory. He came along with a new wave of thought in Russian society, in the midst of fierce battles between the populists and Marxists, in the midst of heightened attention to the proletariat". Menshikov secured the mechanism of the influence of literary heroes on the social behaviour of the public and noted the connection between the popularity of Marxism and the early success of the writer: "The fashionable school of thought of Marxism emphasized immediately the outcasts and introduced them to the public. The outcasts became as popular as once were Circassians and Zaporozhian Cossacks, elevated as some "crown jewels of creation». Some even began to imitate them. And new authors appeared in the genre..." (Меньшиков, 1900). Gorky became extremely valuable and needful.

Menshikov suggested that for Gorky himself "the fame was unexpected and, probably, awkward», that "the main reason of his fame lay in him being fashionable then and he could

easily fall into an equally rapid oblivion”.

Vasily Kedrov noted in his book “What is the true meaning of the work of Maxim Gorky?” (1904) that the main cohort of Gorky's admirers was presented by “young people with their selfless enthusiasm for all sorts of new ideas, and this youth sees in Gorky a herald of progressive ideas, a defender of individual freedom, an ardent supporter of social democratic ideals” (Василий Кедров). The critic fits the success of Gorky into the general context of cultural life at the beginning of the XX century, which is defined as a time of an unprecedented escalation of spectacles by modern researchers of the genesis of mass culture.

Following the terminology of reader-response criticism, we may say that the horizons of expectations of the writer and his readers were almost aligned. The critic N. Korobka caught up in Gorky's work some tune that corresponded with the psychological mood of his readers, gave them an answer to their requests. These ideas could be found in his article with the indicative title “M. Gorky and His Social Significance”, which was included in his book “Essays on Literary Moods”.

Even though critics agreed that the main reason of Gorky's success was his own talent, they kept searching and exploring more social based reasons: book sales, readers' opinions, an unusual biography inseparable from his plots, etc.

4. Summary

An analysis of early articles about Gorky allows us to conclude that criticism, relayed on social reasoning, but eventually had to take into account the success of the young writer among his readers, although the trendsetting critics themselves did not have an unequivocal attitude toward Gorky.

B. Eichenbaum wrote that “Gorky became a celebrity before he had time to look back at Russian literature and how he looks in it». (Эйхенбаум, 2001) But it was the critics who first sought to trace this connection between Gorky's works and the traditions of the XIX century. Thanks to constant and persistent analogies with the peaks of Russian literature of the XIX century Gorky was immediately included in the list of Russian classics once it was established among critics and publishers, in literary history and gymnasium programs at the end of the century. When the phenomenon of “transfer of reputation» from Tolstoy to Gorky took place the important role was played by cartoons, caricatures, feuilletons on the theme “Gorky and L. Tolstoy».

The first reviewers of his stories have already made comparisons with the classics of the XIX century. The first reviewers of his stories have already made comparisons with the classics of the 19th century. V. Botsyanovsky took up the technique known in Russian democratic criticism, and considered the heroes of Gorky as a kind of the Rudins, “superfluous people”, only from a different milieu. (Максим Горький, 1999) N. Korobka supplemented V. Botsyanovsky, expanded this comparison and brought Gorky's heroes closer to the vast gallery of superfluous people who occupied such a prominent place in Russian literature of the 19th century. Therefore, Gorky's favorite heroes are “Pechorins from outcasts and merchants» (p.78). The outcast replaced the dying elite.

Therefore, it is rather one-sided, believes the critic, to observe Gorky as a writer who only makes outcasts superfluous people. Gorky's stories, where the heroes beat each other, evoke Mikhailovsky's memories of Dostoevsky's hero from “Notes from the Underground»

and his sayings.

A. M. Skabichevsky even mentions that Gorky “displays an ideal gipsy in the character of Makar Chudra and competes in this respect with Pushkin» (p. 91). According to V. Rusakov, a columnist for the journal “Izvestiya po Literature, Naukam i Bibliografii” («Известия по литературе, наукам и библиографии»), Gorky is “undoubtedly a great, outstanding writer of everyday life, whose characters can be easily compared with the classic characters like Pechersky”. (Русаков, 1900)]

At the very beginning of the XX century, the names of Gorky and Chekov began to appear side by side in reviews devoted to Russian translated literature more and more often. Thus, the observer of the novelties of the German book market in the article “Chekhov and Gorky amongst the Germans” noted that both Gorky and Chekhov had gained heaps of admirers in Germany, and even became the rulers of the souls of Germany's elite. According to the observer's research, German publishers succeeded in ensuring that the public, rather stingy in spending on books, began to buy cheap editions of the stories of Gorky and Chekhov.

Critics perceived Gorky as a living classic long before the academic history of literature acknowledged him as one. The actress N.I. Komarovskaya remembers an interesting fact of the discrepancy in the attitude toward Gorky between readers and scientists. She was a student at the Historical and Philological Faculty of the Women's Higher Courses of V.I. Gerye. At the end of one of the lectures on the history of Russian literature came one of the students asked why Gorky had not been included in the course. Everybody waited impatiently for an answer. Aleksey Nikolaevich Veselovsky, the lecturer was taken aback by the absurdity of the question» (Комаровская, 1965). But the young thought otherwise.

5. Conclusion

Comparison of Gorky with the classics of the 19th century and eminent contemporary writers generated in the criticism of the 1900s a whole stream of articles-parallels and books-parallels: “A book about Maxim Gorky and A.P. Chekhov” by E.A. Andreevich-Solovyov (1900), “Maxim Gorky and the reasons for his success (Correlations with A. Chekhov and Gleb Uspensky)” by L.E. Obolensky (1903), “Gorky and L. Andreev” by P.M. Alexandrova (1903), “About the novelettes and stories of the years. Gorky and Chekhov” by N.K. Mikhailovsky (1902), “Chekhov and Gorky” (1906), “Chekhov and Gorky amongst the Germans” by S. Yurievsky, “Gorky and Dostoevsky” (1913) by D.S. Merezhkovsky, etc. In 1901, the first collection of critical articles about Gorky appeared, “Critical Articles on the Works of Maxim Gorky” (S. Grinberg's edition). The very construction of the book is rather startling. It includes a biographical sketch and articles for the 1898-the 1900s. Some of the articles are given their titles by the publisher, which allows emphasizing the dynamics of the writer's talent: “New features in the talent of M. Gorky”, “Growing talent”, etc.

To these series of parallels, we can add the comparisons between Gorky and Nietzsche. They could be found in works of N. Mikhailovsky, M. Gelroth, L. Lvovsky, P. Krasnov, etc. But this problem can become the topic of a separate long article, despite the existing researches on this topic.

Acknowledgements

This paper is performed as part of the implementation of the Kazan Federal University Strategic Academic Leadership Program.

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