

THOUGHTS ON THE RUSSIAN DEMON

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ABSTRACT

The representation of the Demon is not exclusively connected to the Russian literature, art or way of thinking. Moreover, it is not just the specificity of the European Christian culture and religion. In my presentation my aim is to introduce how demon is represented in some examples of the Russian literature.

We can find plenteous adaptations of this subject within the religious-theological literature or in the history of the philosophical thinking. This topic can also be found in the holy books of other religions and cultures. Therefore, it takes an outstanding place in the teachings and contemplations of other different cultures. Such folkloric demonology, which was relying on biblical-religious sources, was not typical of the medieval art and literature but its origins were found in pre-Christian eras as well.

In the 19th century Russian poetry the representation of the tragic experience of the encounter with the Demon first appeared in Pushkin's poems. In the Russian literature after Pushkin, we can find numerous instances for the representation of Demon (Devil, Satan etc.): "Devils" by Dostoevsky, the devil hallucination of Ivan Karamazov in his work of "Karamazov brothers"; Fyodor Sologub's short story "The Petty Demon" "The Little Demon"; Vasily Shukshin's narrative "Until the Cock Crows Thrice"; Woland, the representation of the Satan in "Master and Margaret" by Bulgakov.

Keywords: Russian literature, Goethe, Faust, Demon, Bulgakov

INTRODUCTION

First of all, I would like to note, that the representation of the Demon and treating with the Demon and its' "synonyms", -such as the Satan, the Devil, the Antichrist- is not exclusively connected to the Russian literature, art or way of thinking. Moreover, it is not just the specificity of the European Christian culture and religion. In my presentation my aim is to introduce how demon is represented in some examples of the Russian literature. Dealing with this subject does not exclude but rather presupposes the connections with the universal European thinking and art.

It is obvious, that owing to the biblical origin of the Demon, Satan, Devil, we can find plenteous adaptations of this subject within the religious-theological literature or in the history of the philosophical thinking. I would like to emphasize that this topic can also be found in the holy books of other religions and cultures. Therefore, it takes an outstanding place in the teachings and contemplations of other different cultures.

It is also noted, that such folkloric demonology, which was relying on biblical-religious sources, was not typical of the medieval art and literature but its origins were found in pre-Christian eras as well.

THE RUSSIAN DEMON

In the 19th centurial Russian poetry the representation of the tragic experience of the encounter with the Demon, was first appeared in Pushkin's poems like "Demon" written in 1823. Pushkin himself connected this poem, in one of his short comments written in 1823,

to the figure of Mephisto of Goethe's *Faust*. As it is known, the hero of Goethe's dramatic poem, in his debate with the Lord in the Prologue in Heaven, is not willing to acknowledge the creation of the Lord referring to men's suffers.

The hero of Pushkin's lyrical poem experiences the romantic disillusionment, the Byronic world-pain, by meeting with the spirit of doubt and denial. But typically this negative experience will never become dominant or irresolvable in Pushkin's biography. Pushkin represents the phenomenon of disillusionment in his other works written in different genres. These are the following poems entitled "Angel" (1827) and "At the beginning of my life I remember a school" (1830).

Pushkin's contemporary Gogol in his novels gives a sometimes comic representation of the caricature of the world that becomes demonic.

Another contemporary and follower of Pushkin is Lermontov whose life-work is determined by the Demon-experience. It is well-characterizing that during his 27 years of his life he wrote eight variants of his poem "Demon". But most of his poems, dramas and prose are profound, diverse and powerful compositions of this experience. Plenty of Lermontov's lyrical poems were set to music by his contemporary-, and other later composers. Based on Lermontov's narrative poem entitled "Demon" Vruble painted a series of pictures, and it also had a significant effect on Rubinstein's music as well.



Figure 1. Tamara and Demon by Mikhail Vruble

While in the narratives of Gogol the lack of spirit is dominated, that is the overmastered world of the Devil is the comical source of the tragic laughter. In contrast, the lyrical poems, and perhaps the entire oeuvre of Lermontov are based on Goethe's Mephisto's denial and the rejection of the world comparable to skepticism and denial.

However, as it can be read in his poem written at the age of 15 "My Demon" (1829), Lermontov's Demon is always different. Though, it essentially differs from Mephisto or from Pushkin's hero in the sense that not just the immanent, empirical world is unacceptable, but he collects all of its disappointingly disgusting facts. His lyrical hero experiences that he will never be released from his Demon and from himself, he will never find relief and therefore he will be condemned to an irresolvable solitude to such an extreme level, that he connects the realia of the empirical, immanent world with the demonic transcendent world; with the completeness of its spiritual experience, a beautiful, brilliant and seductive world; a world that can never be achieved.

Lermontov's Demon does not make any compromise: it does not replace the unachievable

but clearly sparkling ideals with the livable world. Life means completeness, the truth; therefore, his heroes are not capable and not willing to live in the real world. Their souls are disrupted by the extreme metaphysical ambiguity of the desire for life (Demon, Pecorin) and of the unachievable, perfect idealistic world.

In the Russian literature after Pushkin, we can find numerous instances for the representation of Demon (Devil, Satan etc.). Such works are as follows: a novel entitled “Devils” by Dostoevsky, the devil hallucination of Ivan Karamazov in his work of “Karamazov brothers”; Fyodor Sologub’s short story “The Petty Demon” “The Little Demon”; Vasily Shukshin’s narrative “Until the Cock Crows Thrice”; Woland, the representation of the Satan in “Master and Margareta” by Bulgakov.



Figure 2. The Master and Margareta (Illustration)

The 20th centurial Hungarian philosopher Bela Hamvas writes in his study entitled “Henoah” about the previously mentioned unachievable ideal and the metaphysical ambiguity of the transcendent and immanent being. He writes about the “irreversibly lost Paradise”, “high existence”, “the salvation”, “the Paradise and the kingdom of God”, “the beginning and the end”, “the Fall”, “the expulsion”, “rebellious angels” and of the Antichrist. He contrasts the personal existence with the impersonal, where personal means the real “godlike existence”, and impersonal equals with sin, the unreal, the inexistent, the “destruction”. Previously he writes about the Antichrist – which I consider as the equivalent to the Demon-, as the “impersonal”, the “non-existent, not human, the nothing, the in vain, ...the empty, the nothing that can be experienced when you face with the damned and silly pressure, the impersonal violence, or with the fact where there is no man behind just the impersonal itself.” Sin is impersonal, but the personalization of the impersonal, that is the not-being of the existent, the commanded human action: the commanded murder of another person.

Before turning to Tolstoy’s representation of the hegemony of the Antichrist, and its impersonality, I find it necessary to discuss another philosopher of the 20th century. The French Simone Weil (1909-1943) who immigrated to London from the Nazi occupation and because of her compassion for his compatriots she died of voluntary starvation. Her main works were written during her exile in London, of which I refer to the following work: “The Personal and the Sacred” (its French title is *Le Personne et le Sacré*). Simone Weil unlike Bela Hamvas neither deals with the contrast of the personal and impersonal, nor with the opposition of the person and the individual (as Nikolay Berdyaev a Russian philosopher of religion, lived in exile in Paris). But like the previously mentioned philosophers, she discusses the fundamental questions of human existence, the renewal of

the human spirit and the possibility of spiritual rebirth and sanctification. As a Jewish female writer she has had a remarkable impact on the universal Christian thinking. The main idea of her study on the personal and the sacred is about the opposition of the natural and supernatural, in other words of the immanence and the transcendence. “Something that is essential for goodness is impossible in a natural way, but it is always possible in a supernatural way (...). The supernaturally good is not just some completion of the naturally good (...). Each important question of human existence is solely a choice between the supernatural and the bad.” She classifies democracy, law and person to the immanent fair valued world, “from which nothing good can come from, but it can inevitably causes a lot of trouble” for the people, as Simone Weil notes “for the unfortunates”. “Solely the light, that constantly falls down from the sky can give rain to the trees (...). Only those things that come from Heaven can leave a real mark on the ground.”



Figure 3. Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy

In the novel of Tolstoy’s “War and Peace” in volume four, part one, chapter eleven, we can read about executions carried out by French soldiers because of some presupposed fire-raising. In the narration – according to Tolstoy’s well-known psychological representation – the internal, mental processes are illustrated by the description of external visible features of the characters. Pierre Bezukov, the hero who observes the happenings as a spectator while he is waiting for his own execution, refers to the impersonal, the Antichrist, the nonsense state in the same way as the above mentioned Bela Hamvas. On the soldiers’ faces, who carry out the commanded executions, inconceivability and the horror of impersonality are reflected: “He swayed like a young soldier, his face deadly pale, his shako pushed back, and his musket resting on the ground, still stood near the pit at the spot from which he had fired. He swayed like a drunken man, taking some steps forward and back to save himself from falling.”

Pierre’s shaken sense of ontological certainty is restored again later, still in captivity, after a strange dream, when he identifies the love of live with God’s love: “From the moment Pierre had witnessed those terrible murders committed by men who did not wish to commit them, it was as if the mainspring of his life, on which everything depended and which made everything appear alive, had suddenly been wrenched out and everything had collapsed into a heap of meaningless rubbish. (...) his faith in the right ordering of the universe, in humanity, in his own soul, and in God, had been destroyed.”

It is possible that Pierre’s dream with his experience of God and of human sense can serve as an answer for the agonizing search for God by Bela Hamvas and by Simone Weil. Pierre

continues his dream and sees a moving, continually transforming ball that consists of drops. "This is life."- said his humble Swiss teacher in his dream. This thought continues in his dream: "Life is everything. Life is God. (...) To love life is to love God. Harder and more blessed than all else is to love this life in one's sufferings, in innocent sufferings." (...) "That is life," said the old teacher. (...) "God is in the midst, and each drop tries to expand so as to reflect Him to the greatest extent. And it grows, merges, disappears from the surface, sinks to the depths, and again emerges".

In Pierre's restored experience of human sense life (the immanence, the projection of the natural) gets its meaning as it is a changing eternity pervaded by the transcendence, the experience of God.

CONCLUSIONS

In this analysis, I have examined how demonism, which can be found in many cultures and mythology all around the world, is represented in some works of the German and Russian literature. Besides the above mentioned connections, we can also demonstrate further relationships between the two cultures and their literature. Namely, the well-known German philosopher of the early 20th century, Oswald Spengler in his work "The Decline of the West" mentions four Russian philosophers including Berdyaev and Frank, which is why the Bolshevik dictatorship sent them along with other 12 persons to exile in 1922. Spengler wrote his work "The Decline of the West" because of his disappointment and shock caused by World War I. The work has a rather pessimistic tone in which he focuses on the decline of the Christian culture. He finds that the only possible way of saving humanity is by the Russian culture, and by Russia itself. Furthermore, the "dialogue" between two other authors, Thomas Mann and Merezhkovsky, a Russian philosopher of the early 20th century, should also be studied. In Thomas Mann's study of Tolstoy's novel "Anna Karenina" he writes about the justification of Levin, the Russian author experiences faith as something that transcends and overwrites the civilization. Analyzing the final part of Goethe's Faust Merezhkovsky contrasts the Levin-like human sense experience with its rejection of civilization and rationalism with Faust's western idea of "Whosoever unceasingly strives upward... him can we save". Taking into consideration today's constant challenges, I believe that not only Europe, but also our accelerated world needs all the well-thought and suffered verities of the great European ancestors regarding the perspectives of the creative human activity.

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