

The Influence of National Literatures on Moulding the National Identity

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Abstract

An intense interest in national identity is a paradoxical but an utterly human reaction to globalization.

The paper considers the role of national literature in shaping and preserving national identity with Russian classical literature as a source material. The word classical is pivotal here because it implies that a work of literature has been read and acknowledged by many generations of the nation despite changes in their way of living, culture, ideology, world outlook, etc., inevitable in the course of history.

Consequently it is classical literature (among other factors) that moulds a nation, its identity, character and culture. Therefore it may serve as a key to a magic door behind which the nation's enigmatic soul dwells because all differences of national identities are obscure and mysterious to other nations. The reason for this is ethnocentrism, i.e. perception of one's own culture as the only right, acceptable and standard one. It causes hostility, xenophobia and aggression thus threatening humanity.

The best way to ensure a peaceful life on the Earth is to give the right for self-identity to all nations. We should be grateful to that national literature which stops the word and the hand threatening other peoples.

The main questions discussed in the paper are:

To what extent can national classical literature be regarded as a source and a pivot of national identity?

Why do some greatest Russian national classics (like Pushkin, Lermontov) not become international ones (like Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov)?

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The modern age is known to be characterized by two main features: on the one hand, by unprecedented and unbelievable scientific and technical progress in the sphere of communication and, on the other hand, by speeding up globalization process as an important result of this scientific and technical breakthrough.

Without going into details of this most complicated controversial process, I would like to emphasize only one consequence of globalization that has revealed once again the paradoxical ways of human conscience and behaviour.

The paradox is in the fact that the prospect of global unity of mankind, all people and all countries living peacefully together in one Global Village caused a strange paradoxical reaction, because the idea that the global village needs one global language made all the peoples recall their languages and cultures, their national traditions, tastes and values, which led to the understanding of the importance of national identity preservation.

In other words, the special interest in the problem of national identity is a paradoxical but utterly human reaction to globalization.

That is why the following questions have become topical in the contemporary world: what are national identity and/or national character, how shall we protect them from the global processes levelling everyone and everything, where are their roots and sources?

I will try to investigate the role of national literatures in shaping and preserving national identity.

According to Wikipedia, but with a small correction, national identity is the characteristic trait of the human psyche to express, in a concentrated form, a person's belonging to a certain (in the Wikipedia — different) nation or ethnic group.

The notion of national identity comes close (in some definitions almost coincides) with the notion of national character, which is defined as a set of specific psychological traits attributed to this or that socio-ethnic community (N. Djandil'din¹).

Consequently, national identity is closely connected both with the national character and with a much broader notion of national culture, which includes the results of spiritual and material activity of people representing this nation.

What is the role of classical national literatures in these world processes, cultural conflicts, ethnical confrontations and wars?

The word *classical* should be emphasized here, because literature becomes classical when it withstands the test of time, of a long time at that.

Indeed, a work of art or an author can only be called classical in a particular national

¹ N. Djandil'din. Nature of National Psychology. Alma-Ata, 1971, p. 122.

culture if it remains appealing, widely read and acknowledged by a few generations of people of this nation, despite changes in their way of living, culture, ideology and world outlook, which are inevitable in the course of history.

Thus, it is classical literature, first and foremost, that moulds the nation, its identity, character and culture, especially if we mean a historical dialogue of cultures.

How are national identity, national character and national culture moulded? It is no exaggeration to say that the main tool, instrument and means is **the national language**. It's not the only one, but a major one. The national language not only reflects the national culture, but also preserves it and moulds it. In other words (of commonplace metaphors), it is the national culture's mirror, keeper and tool.

Literature totally rests on the language resources. A writer has only one source at hand, the WORD. By means of the written word the master of literature — the literary artist! — creates the whole world, populates it, i.e. he becomes a Creator of the world determined by his national origin, character and identity.

International jokes, where representatives of different nationalities find themselves in the same situations but react to them differently according to the national characteristics ascribed to them by the nations making these jokes can also be regarded as a source of reflections and moulding national identities or rather stereotypes about them/

Only one example (out of hundreds or thousands, because every nation has its own collection of stereotypes, usually, the most critical and negative ones describe the closest neighbours...) This international joke illustrating stereotypes of European nations is very popular now in the world, especially in Europe. It has become a successful object of commerce and is sold in millions of souvenirs (post cards, plates, towels, etc). Here is its modified variant giving the characteristics of European opposite to the typical ones which produces some comical effect.

“The perfect European should be... controlled as an Italian, humble as a Spaniard, generous as a Dutchman, famous as a Luxembourger, organized as a Greek, driving like the French, cooking like a Brit, sober as the Irish, technical as a Portuguese, patient as an Austrian, flexible as a Swede, humorous as a German, discrete as a Dane, talkative as a Finn”.

However, the stereotypes of international jokes are so far from the objective assessment that the very word “stereotype” has got a negative meaning.

This is one of the opinions from Sankt-Peterburgskiye Vedomosti (a newspaper) published on January 11, 1859: ‘There are general characteristics of nations; the French are called frivolous, the English selfish, the Russians patient and so on, but goodness gracious, how many thoughtful Frenchmen, selfless Englishmen and very impatient Russians each of us has met...’

Indeed, the selfish, stiff and absurdly reserved Englishmen of the jokes have created literature sparkling with humour, irony and sarcasm: the fiction of Swift, Dickens, Thackeray, Shaw, Wilde and even Shakespeare, who created 22 comedies against 5

tragedies. Hardly any culture values humour as high.

And finally, Russians — hooligans and alcoholics of the jokes — have enriched world literature with a precious contribution: the works by Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Chekhov and Dostoyevsky. The characters of these works, with their philosophic quests and delicate emotional experience, are members of the intelligentsia among other characters of the world classical literature (no wonder, the word intelligentsia was borrowed by the European languages from Russian).

So where is the Russian national character? In jokes or in Russian classical literature? Who is the typical Russian – a muzhik with a bucket of vodka or Tolstoy's Pierre Bezukhov?

It is well-known that during World War II, fascist Germany was actively collecting information about Russia and the Russians before invading Russia. And Russian literature was not the least of the sources of information. That is how the German leaders made their judgement of Russian who they were going to attack. Russia was regarded as 'a colossus with feet of clay': push and the country will fall apart, for it is inhabited by the meditating 'feeble' members of the intelligentsia — like Bezukhov, Nekhludov, Myshkin, Raskolnikov, Uncle Vanya, Ivanov and other characters of Russian classical literature.

Ivan Solonevich bitterly remarks: "Russian literature gave the main background for all the foreign information about Russia: here you have Oblomov, Manilov, superfluous men, pathetic fellows, idiots and tramps."²

Fairly critical of Russian Literature as the source of information, Solonevich labelled it 'a crooked mirror of people's soul'. He writes: 'Literature is always a distorted reflection of life. But in the Russian instance, the distortion transgresses into some fourth dimension. Russian literature reflected almost none of the Russian reality... Russian literature revealed Russia's many weaknesses but it did not reflect strong points, and the weaknesses were mostly far-fetched. And when the sorrowful years of wars and revolutions wiped the film of literary verbiage off people's lives, then from under the artistic sham of Manilovs, Oblomovs, Bezukhovs, Shchigrovsky District's Hamlets and Muscovites in Harold's cloaks (A. Pushkin's phrase), of superfluous people and tramps, there emerged people with wills of iron, quite unnoticed by Russian Literature.'³

Without getting engaged in the argument, I only want to try to 'rehabilitate' Russian literature which did deceive the enemies. True, there were no Oblomovs and Bezukhovs in the Brest Fortress. But who knows what Bezukhov and Oblomov would have done, had they been in the Brest Fortress. They may also have shown up 'the iron wills of the Russian national character', which, according to Solonevich, Russian literature failed to reflect. It did not reflect the iron and thus deceived the enemy with its distorting mirror.

² I. Solonevich. *The Nation and the Monarchy*. Moscow, 1991, p. 166.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

Without rejecting indignantly all fiction, as Solonevich does, it must be admitted that it is not a crooked, distorting, but rather an incomplete mirror. It is incomplete, for 'one cannot cover the uncoverable', as Russian writer A.K. Tolstoy said through his fictional character Koz'ma Prutkov. Incomplete and subjective, for each work of classical literature has its individual author with his/her subjective, personal view of the world, determined not only by national self-consciousness and national culture, but also by his personal life, artistic imagination and quite specific personal literary talent.

Thus, fiction – especially in the status of classical! – is undoubtedly a source of information on a national character, which reflects and at the same time shapes it.

However, there is one more aspect concerning the part a national literature playing in moulding the national character that must be mentioned. The matter is that talking about a national literature inevitably leads to the concept of international one which is supposed to reflect, satisfy and mould some international, universal characteristics of the mankind. What are the relations between the international literature and national ones? What features of the national literary works may be a pass to the heights of the international status?

There are two main points of view on the subject.

The most popular one states that the international (or more commonly called) world literature is a collection of the best samples of national literature and "the more national an author is the more international is the sphere of his/her international acknowledgement"⁴.

Another point of view is well illustrated by the following dialogue between the two characters from "Kavanagh, A Tale" a novel by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow published in 1849 in the USA. It was the time when the American nation became concerned about creating its own – American! – national literature. The participants of the dialogue are Mr Churchill, a writer, and Mr Hathaway, a publisher establishing a new magazine in order to raise the American literature to the status of a national one.

Here are some extracts of their dialogue on the subject.

"I think, Mr. Churchill," said he, "that we want a national literature commensurate with our mountains and rivers,--commensurate with Niagara, and the Alleghanies, and the Great Lakes!"

"In a word, we want a national literature altogether shaggy and unshorn, that shall shake the earth, like a herd of buffaloes thundering over the prairies!"

"Precisely," interrupted Mr. Churchill; "but excuse me!--are you not confounding things that have no analogy? Great has a very different meaning when applied to a river, and when applied to a literature."

⁴ S. Dovlatov. С. Довлатов. Блеск и нищета русской литературы. СПб, 2010. p. 69.

“But, Mr. Churchill, you do not certainly mean to deny the influence of scenery on the mind?”

“No, only to deny that it can create genius. At best, it can only develop it. Switzerland has produced no extraordinary poet; nor, as far as I know, have the Andes, or the Himalaya mountains, or the Mountains of the Moon in Africa.”

“But, at all events,” urged Mr. Hathaway, “let us have our literature national. If it is not national, it is nothing.”

“On the contrary, it may be a great deal. Nationality is a good thing to a certain extent, but universality is better. All that is best in the great poets of all countries is not what is national in them, but what is universal. Their roots are in their native soil; but their branches wave in the unpatriotic air, that speaks the same language unto all men, and their leaves shine with the illimitable light that pervades all lands. Let us throw all the windows open; let us admit the light and air on all sides; that we may look towards the four corners of the heavens, and not always in the same direction.”

“But you admit nationality to be a good thing?”

“Yes, if not carried too far; still, I confess, it rather limits one's views of truth. I prefer what is natural. Mere nationality is often ridiculous”⁵.

This dialogue shows quite vividly the contradiction of different opinions on the subject of international versus national literature.

A very talented contemporary Russian writer Sergei Dovlatov (quoted above) who is becoming more and more popular after his recent untimely death refuses to discuss the theory of relations between the world literature and national ones but gives examples that illustrate his “non-theoretical” opinion. His illustrations are Joseph Brodsky and Vladimir Nabokov who represented Russian literature at the international level but there are not so many national features in their literary works⁶. On the other hand, some absolutely Russian authors such as Leskov, Kuprin and many others, have not become internationally acknowledged. It seems that the principle working here is opposed to the one given before: the more national the author is the less he/she is internationally acknowledged.

And one more important moment must not be forgotten while discussing the national/international relations of literatures, on the one hand and the actual influence of national literature on moulding the national character and identity.

Problems related to these functions of national literary works are clearly highlighted when **the translation of these works into foreign languages is undertaken**. This major aspect ultimately reveals both acknowledgement of and participation of national literatures in dialogues of cultures and — specifically! — conflicts of

⁵ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. *Kavanaugh. A Tale*. Boston. Ticknor, Reeds and Fields, 1849, pp. 114-115.

⁶ S. Dovlatov., *ibid*, p. 69.

cultures.

The obvious example of such a conflict is non-recognition or, to be more precise, underestimation of Alexander Pushkin by the outer non-Russian world.

A Russian will never understand why Tolstoy, Chekhov, Dostoevsky and Turgenev are more famous in the world than Pushkin. Paying tribute to these great masters of Russian and world literature, every Russian knows that its patriarch, the father of the Russian literary language and Russian literature, its star number one, its sun is Pushkin. There can only be one father and one sun.

Therefore, Pushkin's well-known unpopularity in the outer world and especially in England, which is well-known and attested in detail, is so offensive and blasphemous for the Russians that I have no wish to give distressing evidence of it.

This sweeping incomprehension of Pushkin, which sometimes may be sincere, sometimes deliberate and politically conditioned, is usually accounted for by Russian experts and Western 'advocates' of the great poet with a single reason — the untranslatability of poetry in general and Pushkin's poetry in particular.

Vladimir Nabokov was quite categorical in this issue: 'My translation theory is very simple, in fact. The only thing that matters is the ideal accuracy of translation... In my book about Pushkin... I argued and demonstrated that the rhymed translation of *Onegin* is **impossible** [emphasis mine — S.T.], for one would have to distort the meaning in order to get the necessary number of syllables and find a rhyme, very trite as a rule. Thus, a word-for-word translation with explanations for the text and extensive notes is for ever and ever the only possible tool for me.'⁷

Famous French philosopher Jacques Derrida considered translation resistance to be a characteristic trait of any good poetic work: 'Can a poem be called a poem if it does not resist translation?'⁸

However, it does not at all mean that we should leave any attempts at translating poetry into other languages. On the contrary, the stronger the resistance, the better the poem and the more reasons for us to try and make it available for foreign readers.

Of course, problems and difficulties of translating Pushkin's works into foreign languages are one of the major obstacles preventing him from getting recognition not just due to the 'trust in the Russians',⁹ but as an internationally acclaimed world master. It is 'one of the obstacles', but not the only or most important, the main being his famous Russianness, his soul, national character, national identity, which seem obscure to the non-Russian world.

Pushkin is the soul of the Russian people, and the Russian soul is known to be a

⁷ Talk between Vladimir Nabokov and Pierre Domergue. 'Zvezda', 1996, No. 11, p. 62.

⁸ Talks with Jacques Derrida. Jacques Derrida in Moscow. Moscow, 1993, p. 162.

⁹ 'As far as I know, no Russian ever questions Pushkin's literary reputation. But can we trust Russians?' *C.A. Johnson*. Pushkin: A Personal View. Contemporary Review. L., 1965, November, vol. 206 (1198).

mystery, an inexplicable secret for the foreigners, actually like all national souls which are mysterious just because they are **different**.

Thus, the main reason for non-recognition and incomprehension of Pushkin as the Russian literary genius number one is the conflict of cultures, mentalities and, ultimately, the conflict of souls. I can foresee the immediate questions: And Dostoevsky? And Tolstoy? And Chekhov? The answer is that they are **more international and less national** than Pushkin. Pushkin is a national writer. I realize that this is a trite phrase and that volumes of scientific surveys of 'folk origins and national spirit' have been published. But Pushkin **is** national. Any Russian grows up with Pushkin and lives all his/her life with him. Fairytales in childhood, then comes the school-reader Pushkin, enriching the vocabulary and suggesting quotations on every occasion ('the encyclopaedia of Russian life'), then anything about him: letters, recollections, relatives, friends, contemporaries, dictionaries, literary criticism...

Together with Pushkin, a great number of people entered the Russian history, his entire personal world, those whom he loved — and we joyously love them too, and those who hated him — and we utterly hate them. Apropos, a belated thought: the notion of the Russian person does not mean an ethnic purity of the nation 'in blood'. A Russian is a person whose native language is Russian and, consequently, whose native culture is also Russian, because language and culture are the main means that mould the personality. And Pushkin, with his African ancestor, proves that best.

Therefore, the point is not in the fact that Pushkin is untranslatable: he was, is being and will be translated. The point is that the non-Russian world does not understand his soul, the point is in the conflict of cultures.

Representatives of different cultures see the world differently: this different vision is imposed on them by their native culture and their native language as the carrier and keeper of culture. Each foreign word is an intersection, a clash of cultures, because between it and the real-world object or phenomenon it denotes there is a notion conditioned by the collective consciousness of the nation united with one culture. That is why each translation and, actually, every lesson of a foreign language is a dialogue of cultures. An alien culture is the most interesting part in this dialogue because the aim of the translation is the acquaintance with it, and the alien is the least translatable.

Let us conclude: Pushkin is untranslatable, but all poets are untranslatable, some more, others less.

Pushkin is obscure to the non-Russian world because of the conflict of cultures. But... Pushkin as part of the culture of his time is getting more and more obscure to the Russians.

Pushkin, for Russians, is the great classic of Russian literature. The test of time is still going on, and everything is changing radically: the way of life, the social structure, the language and — in a broader sense - culture.

Commentaries, which Nabokov ardently stands up for, are necessary, and in growing numbers, not only for Pushkin's foreign language translations, but for the Russian

readers as well.

The study of socio-cultural commentaries on extra-linguistic facts enlightens the conflict of cultures, and it is mostly not only a conflict of one culture with a foreign one, but that of the classical work's past culture with modern one.

Accordingly, the most wide-spread commentary of this kind should be an explanation of the outdated details of everyday life very common to Pushkin's contemporaries, but entirely forgotten by their descendants. These details are vital to show the characters' inner and outer worlds, the author's attitude to them, and the contemporary readers' evaluation. In this case, commentaries serve as a bridge over the gap which divides 'our' and 'their' time, or as a pair of glasses which can help a modern reader discern the details of bygone ages.

In Pushkin's variants of Eugene Onegin there are such lines: 'Get married! — To whom? — To Lidina — What a family! They have nuts served up and they drink beer at the theatre.' The modern reader is puzzled: what negative socio-cultural connotations prevent the marriage to poor Lidina? The meanings of the words nut and beer have nothing to do with the context and do not explain the cultural riddle. The only thing is clear: the social life (social, because nuts are served to the guests and beer is drunk at the theatre) has changed so much that any connection with modern life is lost, and so are the connotations of these words.

What is to be done then? How can Pushkin's riddle be solved? Why does the Russian reader perceive him so enthusiastically, so personally, so unconditionally in spite of the time difference between cultures and unawareness of cultural realities? Why cannot the non-Russian reader, as a rule, appreciate him and, at best, 'trusts Russians'?

There is only one answer: Pushkin is a deeply traditional, national writer, he is a genius and the embodiment of the Russian spirit, of the Russian soul. And these two notions, genius and soul, cannot be described and studied rationally or scientifically, and that is why Pushkin's mystery cannot be solved because neither Russia, nor its people, nor its greatest poet 'cannot be understood with pure intellect alone'. The same can be attributed to all other nations and their national literatures and writers.

To sum up, the role of classical national literatures in a dialogue of cultures, in general, and in a historical dialogue, in particular, cannot be overestimated. Classical national literatures are the essential source of information about the roots of national identity; they are the key to a magic door, or rather to the seven doors behind the seven seals where each nation's secret soul dwells, because all the differences of national identities, characters and cultures are obscure and mysterious to other nations. The reason for it is ethnocentrism i.e. perception of one's own culture as the only right, acceptable and standard one. The only way to save life on the Earth is to give the right for self-identity to all nations, for their own view of the world (world outlook), their own way of life, traditions, customs, to accept this right with the mind if not with the heart, to realize the dangers and threats to humanity and to our planet caused by xenophobia, aggression, intercultural, international conflicts. We should be grateful to those national literatures that stop the hand and the word threatening people. May the writers remember about their great power over the minds and souls

of their readers.

And may they use this power for people's good.