

Image of Geopolitical and Cultural Catastrophe in the Poetry of Oleg Chukhontsev

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Abstract: Oleg Chukhontsev is one of the most outstanding modern Russian poets. In his creativity, there was only one period when he almost did not create from late 1980 to the second half of the 1990s. This is the time of post-Soviet disintegration, and for the majority of the Russian population, it was a difficult experience. In the rare works created by Chukhontsev at that time, the country's geopolitical and cultural catastrophe is somehow interpreted. As it usually happens with a poet, it naturally combines various semantic plans like external realistic and several symbolic. At *Southern Night*, Chukhontsev has embodied the feeling of a complete end and this work perfectly combines deeply personal motives and motives that convey the image of a geopolitical and cultural catastrophe. As the author states, everything has died, both his former poetics (personal meaning) and his former country (general meaning). The poet has lost the gift of speech because he ceased to feel an organic connection with his native land since it was "seriously ill and was almost at death". By the time of the creation of *Closing the Season* Chukhontsev, as a poet, had managed to renew himself.

Keywords: Oleg chukhontsev, Contemporary poetry, Russian literature, Cultural catastrophe, Geopolitical catastrophe.

INTRODUCTION

The remarkable praised era of Russian literature was the 19th century, which generated, in a significantly short time, some of the predominant masterpieces of world literature (Ermakova and Skvortsov 2019). Without any doubt, the most prosperous period in the history of Russian literature is the literature of the 19th and 20th centuries. Twentieth-century Russian literature is complicated phenomena with a broad range of characteristics. The entire ups and downs of Russia's fate in this century are reflected in the sphere of literature, and the procedure of natural evolution of this literature has been changed many times through an abrupt changing of historical events. The works of twentieth-century Russian literature differ in form and style of literature and individual and collective style that they can rarely be included into a coherent and integrated format; But all these variations have a common origin, which is the era of the rapid growth and flourishing of art at the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Redko 2019).

I. A. Ermakova. In her interview with the critic and scholar A. Skvortsov, the poet I. Ermakova discusses modern poetry, its authors and processes. Starting as a discussion about the creative evolution of the poet and mentioning her work as a translator, author of frequent

publications in various think journals, and her numerous poetic awards, the interview progressively goes on to explore the contemporary poetic reality that Ermakova defines as 'the age of Oleg Chukhontsev. She argues that the importance of the poetry of Chukhontsev lies in its absolute precision of choice of words and its accurate and honest depiction of familiar facts. In such an attempt to show the undistorted universe, modern poets turn to similar types of art, up to the cinematic stage, but few achieve this stage (Ermakova and Skvortsov, 2019; Hansen 2019). Oleg Chukhontsev graduated from the Philological Faculty of the Moscow Regional Pedagogical Institute. Over the years, he worked in the poetry departments of the magazines' *Youth* and *New World*.

The first poetic publication took place in 1958. The first book of poems was compiled in 1960, but was not published; the same was with the book *Name*. In 1968 after the poem *Narration about Kurbsky* open persecution of the poet in print began, an unwritten ban was imposed on the publication of his works, which lasted eight years. During these years, Chukhontsev did a lot of poetic translation of classical and modern poetry from Europe, the USA and the USSR, although his poems were highly appreciated in the early 1970s.

The first collection of poems *Of the Three Notebooks* censorship missed only in 1976, the second *Dormer Window* another seven years later. Only the third *Wind and Ashes* (1989) became free from

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ensorship distortions. Then the collections *The Running Landscape* (1997), *Fifia* (2003), the book of selected works *From These Limits* (2005), the poem *The Namesake* (2008) was published. In 2014 the two-volume edition *Speech of Silence and Languageless Tolmach* appeared. They include the original poems of the poet and his selected translations of European and American poets (Skvortsov, 2016; Mukharyamova 2019).

“In a sense, the poetry of Chukhontsev is necessary for Russian culture as one of the options for a creative path focused on traditional values. This is not about ready-made values. The tradition of Chukhontsev is in reversing his gaze, in the very need to draw from the past. At the same time, Chukhontsev himself is always at the beginning of this path and does not dare to summarize. He is constantly in search of a language that, as a result, is always unrecognizable. Chukhontsev does not “close up” his language, perfecting his own intonation — he does not “infect” the reader with himself. In this way, it is extremely fruitful for readers and writers. Chukhontsev gives away for his reader’s immersion in his poems an image of that perspective of the path to which there are no first and last” (Chukhontsev & Chukhontsev, 1991; Skvortsov, 2016).

In a nutshell, the primary purpose of the study is to analyze the Russian ancient and decadent literature, predominantly analyze the Image of geopolitical and cultural catastrophe in the poetry of Oleg Chukhontsev to get acquainted with his work, style, life, personal motives etc.

RESEARCH METHOD

The foundation of our study is the historical-functional, typological, comparative-typological, hermeneutic and structural-semantic approaches to identifying the means of artistic embodiment of the image of a geopolitical and cultural catastrophe in Oleg Chukhontsev’s poem. In the poetry of Oleg Chukhontsev, there are responses to the works of many authors, the work with dozens of poetic forms is obvious, there is a constant field of tension between the poet and the poetic tradition (Skvortsov 2016; Bassel 2019). Based on the previous studies, we attempted to thoroughly illuminate the Image of geopolitical and cultural catastrophe in the poetry of Oleg Chukhontsev.

The manifestations of genetic and typological ties with the Russian tradition were studied under the

influence of literary studies (Stokes, 1997; Kulakov, 1999; Afanasev and Breeva 2016; Afanasev, Breeva and Domansky 2017; Krylov 2017; Afanasev and Breeva 2016; Zubova 2010; Leiderman and Lipovetsky 2003; Orliitsky 1991).

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The immediate context of O. Chukhontsev’s work allows us to conclude that at the turn of the 1980s and 90s, the poet was primarily interested in geopolitical and sociocultural motives. They are expressed in an apocalyptic and eschatological aspect (*I do not Reach for This Freedom* (1989), *In This Wild, Farcical Novelty of the Outback* (1989-1992), *It is Coarsely Stamped on a Rubber Rug: Welcome!* (1991), *Words Spoken, Disputes Resolved* (1994). *At Southern Night* is the most radical text of all created during this period. It captured the state when the old died, and the new is not there. The country, people, culture and former poetics of Chukhontsev himself have died.

According to the text, there is no anybody in the gloomy train, except for the hero. The image is clearly symbolic. Here there is a reference to V.F. Khodasevich’s poem *Automobile* (1921) (Hansen, 2019), where the hero sees with his inner gaze a mystical car. Black rays which destroy everything they reach fly out of her headlights. Khodasevich’s car is infernal, Chukhontsev’s train transfers a person to another being, and it has features of otherworldly transport. The hero seems to be moving from hell to some other space. Where he goes is unknown, but obviously not to paradise. This motive subsequently is more clearly developed by Chukhontsev in the poem *One and the Same Dream* (2007), where the image of a wagon standing tightly looks like purgatory.

The time and place of action in the poem can be guessed quite accurately: the very beginning of the 1990s after the collapse of the USSR, the Black Sea coast of the Caucasus. The real story is this: At a southern summer night, a man is standing on the platform and waiting for the train that will take him home. The train is arriving very late, but the light in the wagons is off, the windows are broken. The hero is leaving and sees the radiance in the night sky. These are fireflies. The hero is fallen into gloomy thoughts about the meaning of what is happening with the world, the country and with him personally:

“At Southern night, alone on an empty platform.

I'm waiting for the last train, but it's late
 and fireflies over the paths of the wedding
 swarm
 flare up and go out. Clouds of fireflies.
 Flare-up and go out. Smells of roses and
 bleach,
 swarms of some kind of chronic nearby,
 but the darkness phosphoresces,
 splatters, and dust
 volatile,
 it seems that the very air is ready to set
 fire”.

The symbolic meaning of *At Southern Night* can be clarified if we take into account the literary subtext and the immediate context of the poet's work in the 1980s and 90s.

The poem implicitly implies a number of classical primary sources. The most obvious reference is *On a Haystack at Night on the South* (1857) by A.A. Fet. Usually, O. Chukhontsev's explicit allusions are not the most significant for understanding the meaning of the whole. The modern poet starts from the first line of Fet and develops the meaning of his work in a different direction. Fet depicts an almost conflict-free merger of the individual and the abyss of space. Chukhontsev portrays the loss of an individual personality on devastated land. The Universe does not notice the internal and external drama of the individual; the harmony of the cosmos lives its own life parallel to man.

The connection with the poem by O. Mandelstam's *Concert at the Station* (1921) is more veiled. It is confirmed by general semantics, railway motives and figurative roll calls: “smells of roses and bleach” by Chukhontsev, “smell of roses in rotting greenhouses” by Mandelstam (Redko 2019; Pakhareva 2020; Kriksunov 2019; Kornienko 2019; Korchinskii 2019; Bassel 2019).

In both texts, the moment of a geopolitical and cultural change is recorded. But there is an important difference between them. O.E. Mandelstam in full accordance with his principle of poetic subtext (Orlitsky 1991; Taranovsky, 1974) writes about a premonition of

a catastrophe approaching the country (war and revolution), while O. Chukhontsev expressed hope for a revival. However, the renaissance, in accordance with Christian tradition, is possible only after suffering and death. Therefore, the symbolic time in the poem of Chukhontsev corresponds to the sacred time from Good Friday to the Resurrection.

Extensive and implicit poetic ties both with contemporaries and with classics artists. It is a stable feature of the artistic world of Chukhontsev. The general principle of the poet's work with tradition can be represented as follows. The primary sources are perceived by the author critically and are substantially transformed at the formal or semantic level. As a result, either dialogue with tradition is created on equal terms, but not from the standpoint of respectful apprenticeship, or even a polemic with predecessors, in some cases reaching the rejection of their cultural forms, meanings or their beliefs. But every time such a strategy is not noticed, it can be felt only with slow reading. Revealing a stubbornly independent attitude to tradition allows rejecting the idea of Chukhontsev as a conservative poet, albeit of a wide profile. He is a consistent converter, or his innovation is not revolutionary avant-garde, but a hidden evolutionary warehouse.

In the poem, the general poetic principle of Chukhontsev is presented quite distinctly. Here, classic sources point to important motives for the author. A reference to Fet reveals a connection with space, but “damaged”, barely noticeable. A reference to Mandelstam reinforces the motive of a boundary, transition, separation from the past and a huge social and cultural layer:

“At Southern night, alone on an empty
 platform

I'm waiting for the last train, but it's late
 and fireflies over the paths of the wedding
 swarm
 flare up and go out. Clouds of fireflies.
 Flare-up and go out. Smells of roses and
 bleach,
 swarms of some kind of chronic nearby,
 but the darkness phosphoresces,
 splatters, and dust
 volatile,

it seems that the very air is ready to set
fire

And when the spotlight, emerging from the
darkness,

ran along the tracks and grated the
composition

with extinguished lights, with beaten
windows

these Caucasian accounts, the devil will
understand them;

and when leaving the suitcases, I
miraculously

jumped up

into the jerked carriage and looked back,

all that was at the top: palm trees, a train
station and

the sea –

everything burned, pulsating nuptial fire.

What is all this: the mother-stepmother - a
house on

stilts –

Hominy with Cheese – Falling Ziggurat

with the statue of an idol – further rattling

chaos –

farther! farther! – powder lightning in

window?

Whoever leaves will remain - knows

each,

who healed with nostalgia the mental
stain?

wounds.

I'm not from this country but from this
century,

as the old convict told me in Paris

Cezeman.

Now neither fireflies nor

stars,

nothing shines on me, vanity in the pillow
knocking.

And in the morning, I see the sparkling
desire

air –

They are not still shooting, and my muse is not
silent (Kulakov, 1999).

The third classical source, implied by the poet, is *I will Go out Alone on the Road* (1841) by M.Yu. Lermontov (Sivtceva–Maksimova, Arkhipova, Egorova and Rufova 2019) (this poem is also one of Mandelstam's main subtexts). The motive of absolute loneliness migrated to O. Chukhontsev, and certainly about the person endowed with the gift of words, who is the poet.

The reference to Lermontov makes the statement extremely individual, intimate. The poem is about the post-Soviet man in general and in particular about the poet's fate in a situation of national disaster.

In reality, the hero moves from south to north, from the Caucasus, from the periphery of the collapsing Soviet empire, apparently to Moscow. This is not only about fleeing from a socio-political fire but also the motive of hope for salvation - Maybe at home, in the centre of Russia, it will be possible to sit out the terrible time.

There is no catharsis inside the space described by the poet. But a skilful composition with non-linear time allows you to finish the poem on the description of harmony when the hero was happy and created. Thus, in the end, a wonderful illusion of breaking the deadlock suddenly arises.

The feeling of overcoming the crisis, not least, is created by the grammar. The poem is primarily written in the present tense. The final life-affirming line "they are not still shooting, and my muse is not silent" in isolation from the context is perceived as a description of the state in which the hero is now. Different interpretations of meaning are possible here. Maybe the hero didn't sleep on the train. In this case, he drives up to the centre of Russia, where violent conflicts are not still flaring up and where he can still experience poetic inspiration. But, perhaps, the hero has a dream about the past, but in reality, everything is tragic, and his muse is just silent.

The style of the work and the poetic form also correspond to the idea of gaining a beautiful illusion. Vocabulary, phraseology, and especially syntax create the impression of prose. The work is written in quatrains of five-stroke tonic, and the first five stanzas are not rhymed. It also works on the effect of external prosaization. The rhyme gradually begins to appear in the penultimate sixth stanza, where the ends of the second- and fourth-lines echo in harmony. Only the final stanza is fully rhymed. At the form level, the transition from the “prosaic” of the white lines to the “poetry” of the finale is completed. But this is an unsteady harmony. The reality, as the hero admits in a state of wakefulness (“nothing shines on me, vanity knocks on the pillow”), promises to go through great trials and sufferings with an unwarranted way out of the crisis. The instability of harmony is emphasized by the graphics. In the last line, there is no punctuation.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the Russian ancient and rich literature, in particular, the Image of geopolitical and cultural catastrophe in the poetry of Oleg Chukhontsev was investigated, based on the previous related studies in this particular field.

In *at Southern Night* Chukhontsev embodied the feeling of a complete end, and this work perfectly combines deeply personal motives, transmitting the image of a geopolitical and cultural disaster. Everything is dead, as the author states. It concerns his former poetics (personal meaning) and the former country (general meaning). The poet has lost the gift because he stopped feeling an organic connection with the native country because it is seriously ill and almost at death. In the general context of Chukhontsev’s poetry *At Southern Night* became a bridge to the later famous conceptual poem *Closing of the season. Descriptio*, (1996). After its publication, criticism began to say that the author began a new period of creativity (Stokes, 1997). This opinion is not unfounded, but the “new” Chukhontsev arose a little earlier, with *At Southern night* It is no accident that the poet opened his public readings with this particular poem, emphasizing its phasing.

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