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У истоков «исповедальной прозы»

Статья посвящена описанию процесса формирования так называемой «исповедальной прозы» – течения, которое возникло в отечественной литературе в середине 1950-х гг., быстро обрело невероятную популярность, но затем, в силу ряда причин, выпало из поля зрения читателей и критиков. Главное внимание в статье уделено раннему творчеству Анатолия Гладилина (с него и началась история «исповедальной прозы»), которое ныне оказалось незаслуженно полузабытым. По мнению автора статьи, дебютная гладилинская повесть «Хроника времён Виктора Подгурского» явилась по-настоящему новаторским произведением, сыгравшим важную роль в литературном процессе 1950–1960-х гг.

Ключевые слова: Гладилин, исповедальная проза, новаторство, идеология, приватная жизнь, компромисс.

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At the Origins of Confessional Prose

The article studies the process of development of the so-called confessional prose, a movement that occurred in Soviet literature in the mid-1950s, quickly gained incredible popularity, but then, for a number of reasons, dropped out of sight of both readers and critics. The article's main focus is the early works by Anatoly Gladilin (who marked the beginning of confessional prose), which nowadays turned out to be undeservedly half-forgotten. According to the author of the article, Gladilin's debut novel, *The Chronicles of the Times of Victor Podgursky*, was a truly innovative work that played an important part in the literary process of the 1950s – 1960s.

Key words: Gladilin, confessional prose, innovation, ideology, privacy, compromise.

In the late 1950s, a new phenomenon appeared in Soviet literature – confessional prose (contemporary critics also called it ‘youth prose’ or ‘youth confessional prose.’) Its authors belonged to the so-called fourth generation, later named ‘the children of the year fifty-six’, for whom their entry into independent life coincided with the beginning of the Khrushchev Thaw. Critics referred to the works of L. Zhukhovitsky, V. Krakovsky, V. Moskovkin, G. Sadovnikov, Yu. Semenov, and

several others as confessional prose, but three authors – Anatoly Gladilin, Anatoly Kuznetsov, and Vasily Aksyonov – were recognized as leaders of that kind of prose. Novels and short stories written by ‘confessors’ were mainly published in Yunost, a literary magazine. The common ground that allowed speaking of a uniform literary movement was hinted behind a variety of plots, characters, and artistic devices. The protagonist in confessional prose is a young dreamer starting his life; the plot is based on a conflict between that character and the life’s monotony, and his search for his own path. The distance between the author and the character was minimal. Most commonly, such a story was shaped as a character’s confession, hence the term ‘confessional prose.’ Another distinctive feature of these books was the intense use of specific youth slang.

This kind of prose was a huge success at the time, and practically every work by its main authors was in the limelight of readers and critics, becoming a topic of loud discussions. However, after A. Kuznetsov, A. Gladilin and V. Aksyonov had left for the West, their books and names were banned, and, for a while, confessional prose became yet another ‘blank space’ in the history of Soviet literature. At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, emigrant writers of the third wave got attention once again, but that had little effect on the process of studying confessional prose: the later texts were usually the ones published and discussed. As for the early works of ‘confessors’, the interest in them completely waned. In this regard, a judgement-like critic’s review, dating back to 1983, seems very revealing: «Despite the high-profile resonance, Russian literature does not owe to ‘youth prose’ any important artistic discoveries» [1, p. 71].

However, what seemed so obvious in the early 1980s is highly questionable now. Today, youth confessional prose seems to have played a very significant role, enriching the national literature with important discoveries and, therefore, needs conceptualizing. This article will discuss the first stage of its development, primarily related to the creative life of Anatoly Gladilin. It was his novel, *The Chronicles of the Times of Victor Podgursky*, published in the September issue of Yunost in 1956, that became the beginning of confessional prose.

The novel’s main character, Victor Podgursky, graduated from high school in 1953 and failed to get into college. Failure at exams took away his self-confidence for quite a long time. On top of that, Victor is one-sidedly in love with his former classmate Nina. However, everything in his life eventually gets better, he finds peace of mind and starts a job. In fact, the young author reproduced a plot scheme of the occupational bildungsroman about a youthful character, which was very

common in the socialist realism literature of the time: first failures and disappointments, unrequited love, and then the start of professional life and spiritual growth under the influence of a healthy collective. However, formal resemblance to the common trope only reveals the innovative nature of Gladilin's novel more sharply. The author focuses on the character's private life, rather than his socially useful activities, hence the system of values that is completely different from that of the contemporary Soviet literature. Everything considered an insignificant 'addition' to the main storyline became principal for Gladilin.

Failing at exams unexpectedly, to some extent, turns out a benefit for Victor Podgursky: he suddenly falls out of the smoothly running social mechanism and ends up being outside the system, alone and on his own. He has free time now. Victor 'has nothing to do' – so Nina, now a university student, reproachfully remarks. But 'having nothing to do' proves useful, brings him a sense of freedom and the ability to think independently. Gladilin reminded the Soviet readers of the charm of aimless walks through an evening city, of the need to be alone.

The novel timeline is indicated very precisely: late 1953 to early 1954. It was a turning point in the country's history, full of important events, but there is no mention of them in the novel. Its title itself (full title: *The Chronicles of the Times of Victor Podgursky. Composed of Diaries, Timelines, Historical Events, and Memories of His Contemporaries*), seemingly promises an immersion in historical realities, but the author confines himself to mentioning the disproportion between the number of higher school applicants and the number of available student places in the fall of 1953. Gladilin consistently depicts the de-ideologized life of the character, whose experiences and actions are completely private and have no sociopolitical significance. Victor does not read any newspapers, and says about a radio set that its most useful detail is the off switch. Closer to the end, Podgursky becomes a member of the Komsomol committee, but mainly for the beautiful girl who heads that committee.

The innovative nature of the novel is also manifested in the fact that not only does Gladilin not hide the shortcomings of his apparently autopsychological character from the very beginning, but he also emphasizes them. Victor Podgursky, among other things, is chatty, weak-willed, and capricious in an unmanly way. Soviet literature commonly interpreted such qualities as unworthy human weaknesses that need to be overcome. For Gladilin, those are unique features of an individual's inner world, deserving of attention and exploration. The undoubted merit of the debutant author was creating a character in whom young readers could recognize

themselves. It was immediately noted by contemporary reviewers. «After all, Victor is not that good of a person, and if we forgive him a lot, we should consider why, – wrote, for example, critic I. Bobrova. – The author doesn't sugarcoat his character! No, he shows him the way he is. Victor insults his mother, and many people think: “Well, who hasn't? It happens!” Victor unexpectedly gets drunk – “Well, it happens too!”» [2, p. 73]. Many years later, Sergei Dovlatov who called Gladilin an idol of his youth, will say, «I myself was Victor Podgursky a little» [5, p. 244].

Thus, the fundamental novelty of the work was primarily due to the unusual situation of the protagonist leaving the ideology-driven society for the world of private life. It can be said that it was Gladilin who paved the road for Andrei Bitov, Sergei Dovlatov, Vasily Aksyonov, Valery Popov, and other wonderful Russian authors. The problem was that the author of *The Chronicles of the Times of Victor Podgursky* refused to follow the route he himself discovered. His next novel, *Brigantine Raises Sails* (1957), has a lot in common with *The Chronicles...* at first glance: its main character, Vovka Andrianov, like Podgursky, graduates from high school and starts an independent life after he fails to enter college; and the foundation is again the standard plot structure of an occupational bildungsroman «about a young man who struggled at first, but has overcome the difficulties under public influence» [4, p. 145]. However, comparing the first two Gladilin's novels, we find a significant difference. In *The Chronicles...*, the controversy with official bureaucratic mythology is hidden in the subtext, whereas in *Brigantine...* it becomes the most important style-formative and meaning-formative factor. Here is a very characteristic excerpt from the novel: «Every morning, as she was going to work, Zina thought not about how to exceed the plan by twenty percent or set some kind of production record for fence coloring (although she did not mind dreaming about good prices for easy jobs), but about how she would get a glimpse of, say, Slavka Shirokov, or chat with her friends from the sawing shop about the latest party, and so on» [4, p. 131]. *The Chronicles...* had practically no similar passages. The words 'plan' and 'record' were not mentioned at all; Soviet ideologemes were simply put outside the narrative, as though the author did not notice them, describing the real life only. In *Brigantine...*, Gladilin is openly fighting the propaganda clichés, the whole novel is built around the contrast between the bureaucratic mythology and the actual reality. At the same time, his criticism is aimed not at the contents of Soviet ideology, but at its form, which the author considers inappropriate. Gladilin seeks to restore original purity to the devalued ideological values. That is why in *Brigantine...*, he matches the genuine engagement in work of Vovka Andrianov

and his crew against fictitious poster enthusiasm, and sincere love to Soviet power against bureaucratic patriotism.

In his subsequent works, Gladilin tried to follow the same attitude: fight against the lies that engulfed Soviet life, but still keep from infringing the major ideological postulates and even solemnly proclaim their inviolability. In fact, it turned out that the author who ironically used the worldview and aesthetic clichés as a starting point, had to keep going back to them. This contradiction was especially noticeable in his novel *Eternal Business Trip* (1960): a story of a KGB Major Aleksey Kraminov, constituting the main storyline, acquired a funny ambiguity that was hardly part of the author's idea – whether it really is an ode to a courageous KGB serviceman or a parody of a Soviet-era political detective story. Gladilin also made counterproductive attempts to simultaneously debunk and praise Soviet ideologemes in his novel, *The First Day of the New Year* (1963), which refers to the spiritual and moral searchings of the main character, a young modernist artist Felix Alyokhin. In it, the author raises the problem of father-son relationships only to solemnly proclaim its absence in the Soviet reality; he insists on reconciling the elder and the young, Chuikov and Chagall, budenovka hats and slim fit trousers. As a result, the burden of this moral and didactic assignment lies heavy on the characters, deforming their personalities.

To conclude, today we can confidently state that Anatoly Gladilin created a truly innovative work at the beginning of his creative path. His novel *The Chronicles of the Times of Victor Podgursky* undoubtedly had a serious impact on the process of development of the national literature. Although Gladilin's further creative biography was replete with all sorts of unjustified compromises (both ideological and aesthetic), which often led him to an impasse, *The Chronicles...*, like certain other works of confessional prose, stood the test of time. It is necessary to generally recognize as objective the assessment E. Vertlib gave to youth confessional prose: «... The 'youth' prose played a positive role. <...> It said to hell with the system of dogmatic coordinates; its 'familiar contact' destroyed the rusty cumber-someness of the long-prevailing monologic style and programmed behavior. It fulfilled the minimum program and gave way to the maximum program» [3, p. 271].

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