

## "A Feast in Time of Plague" by A.S. Pushkin in the Context of Russian and European Literary Traditions

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### Abstract

*In the center of attention of the authors of this article is semantic discrepancies in the text of the tragedy of A. S. Pushkin "A Feast in Time of Plague" and dramatic poem of John Wilson's "The city of the Plague", which, admittedly, is a literary source of Pushkin's works. This topic long ago has attracted the attention of literary critics. The article raises the question of the conceptual differences of the two authors (Russian and English) in their submissions about the "death" and "eternal life". For the characters of John Wilson's death is presented as a means of overcoming human suffering, inevitable within the boundaries of earthly life. Understanding of immortality is associated by them with the sense of freedom from the burden of earthly suffering. For A. S. Pushkin "eternal life" (immortality) is associated with the expectation of a personal meeting of loving people outside of death in the circumstances, free from the limitations and problems of their earthly life. An appeal to the texts of the literary predecessors of John Wilson and A. S. Pushkin – J. W. Goethe and N. M. Karamzin – in description of their ideas of "eternal life" allows us to speak about the non-randomness of Pushkin deviations from the text of the English original. According to the authors of the article in the texts of A. S. Pushkin and John Wilson are identified discrepancies, caused by the profound reasons of mental character.*

**Keywords:** Russian literature, literature comparative studies, A.S. Pushkin, mentality, literary hero.

### 1. Introduction

"A Feast in Time of Plague" by A. S. Pushkin was almost immediately identified as a "mysterious work" (V. G. Belinsky). And all its subsequent interpretations are obviously hopeless attempt to offer a comprehensive "solution" (Nepomnyashiy, 1999 & Pyatkin, 2014).

One of the areas of research searches which attracted attention almost immediately was associating Pushkin's text with the poem of John Wilson as one of obvious literary sources. Thus, in the spotlight were the songs of Mary and Walsingham, in which were most of original Pushkin's art solutions.

### 2. Literature Review

A later interpretation of Pushkin's text of D. Blagoy (Blagoy, 1972), S. Ovchinnikova (Ovchinnikova, 1971), V. Solovyov (Solovyov, 1972), S. Rassadin (Rassadin, 1977), R. Poddubnaya (Poddubnaya, 1977), as already was noticed in the article by I. L. Pankratov, and V. E. Halisev (Pankratova & Halisev, 1982), in base on the semantic structures put episode of dialogue of the President and the Priest.

However, it appears that the deep motives that made once A. S. Pushkin to depart from the text of John Wilson and to offer its literary version remain largely unclear. And this, we think, again actualizes the interest in the songs of Mary and Walsingham in version of Pushkin and in English original.

### 3. Results and Discussions

Song of Mary Gray from a poem by John Wilson creates an atmosphere of painful loneliness of the girl in the middle of the deserted (extinct) from plague homeland. Only, in it is its emotional content. The desert, once populated by beloved souls, in which turns out to be Mary, creates a feeling of hopelessness.

Emptiness surrounds her from the evening, when she visited her village, at night and in the morning when she woke up. Apparently, always will be so, and motionless clock hands on the bell tower seems to confirm this conjecture.

The tragedy of irresistible loneliness is heard in the song of Mary Gray and is its main content.

Pushkin's song of Mary, coinciding partly in the texture with the song of the heroine of John Wilson (description of the devastation that brought the Plague), however differs with it conceptually. There is no painful and hopeless emptiness in which was English heroine. In Pushkin's world there is Jenny and Edmund, the separation of which is impossible inherently:

Jenny does not leave Edmund Jenny even in heaven (Pushkin, 1960, p. 374).

And this radically changes the whole picture of the world. The opportunity of a personal meeting outside of death, to which imply the characters of Pushkin, fundamentally destroys the atmosphere of hopeless loneliness, so painfully experienced by the heroine of John Wilson.

Of course, Pushkin's song of the President and similar song of the hero of John Wilson are semantically closely connected with preceding it in the text of the tragedy by songs of Mary. But this relationship varies greatly in two texts. They have different answer to those fears and expectations that carry songs of Mary in Russian and English versions. For the character of John Wilson "praise the Plague" is due to the fact that it leaves no chance and is the "Queen of Church graveyards and graves." Namely by the inevitability of death that it carries the Plague differs from death in battle, where there are also those who are killed, and those who won. It differs from Fever and Tuberculosis, lethal outcome of which can be avoided. And from "stupid Paralysis", when "cold" is only one part of the body, and the other laughs at him.

The Plague is absolute in its rights to destroy everything that connects us with the world: addictions, vices, obligations. Mary Gray from a poem by John Wilson in her song expresses the suffering of the man who kept the entire palette of personal experiences, all the threads connecting her with the world of people dear to her, a world which no longer exists.

This is the tragedy of a lone human consciousness, found himself with all his attachments and earthly meanings in an absolute emptiness.

"Praise the Plague" sounds like a comprehensive answer to the root cause of this suffering. A plague wipes out everyone and everything, leaving no hope, no expectations, no of the human consciousness, open to feelings of loneliness.

Differently is A. S. Pushkin. Its Chairman performs his "Anthem to the Plague" in the semantic context created by very different in content song of Mary. His heroine, as noted, has been hoping to keep in contact with her lover and outside of death. And this creates a optimistic background of her experiences.

In contrast, "Anthem of Plague" builds a completely different value orientations. His delight is not linked with the triumph of the values of earthly existence, nor with the expectation of harmony of Eternal life.

He praises "The Kingdom of Plague" - "the state of the world, when the usual values of earthly life was lost and the new, undated is not yet clarified. This situation of "dark abyss at the edge," in which Pushkin's Chairman finds the "inexpressible pleasure" (Pushkin, 1960, p. 377).

Two songs of John Wilson is not detected between themselves any semantic tension. The song of Mary Gray tells about the endless suffering of a person on earth; "Praise the Plague" indicates the way out from this state. John Wilson demonstrates a simple, linear principle of construction of the episode of his poem that conforms to the formula: problem statement – a comprehensive answer to it.

A. S. Pushkin offers a tense dialogue of two incompatible positions in the world. His "Song of Mary" speaks about the immortality of true values of terrestrial life, their unconditional continuation outside earthly existence.

Continuing infinite here becomes synonymous with immortality. About completely different concept of immortality speaks his Chairman in his song. It is not attained by a man in a simple, mortal state. It is given only to the elite and it is possible to get in touch with it at the moment of extreme tension:

All that death threatens to For mortal heart hides is Inexplicable pleasure - Immortality, maybe pledge!

And happy is who among unrest it can find and manage (Pushkin, 1960, p. 377).

"The Kingdom of Plague" is praised by him because it gives that moment of "inexpressible pleasure", the contact with "the immortal".

In the Pushkin story the concept of Walsingham is opposed (and this juxtaposition is subjected to a fundamental question!) not only to the song of Mary, but also to the judgments of another extremely important character, the Priest. For him, as for Mary, immortality is a possibility of personal contact with family outside of death. About this he speaks as his main argument when he urges revelers to go home:

*Break off the monstrous feast, when  
Wish you meet in heaven  
Lost beloved souls (Pushkin, 1960, p. 378).*

*And when trying to stop Walsingham memories about deceased mother:  
Or think you she's now not crying,  
Not crying bitterly in the heavens,  
Looking at his son... (Pushkin, 1960, p. 379).  
Or about the lost wife:  
Matilda's pure spirit is calling you! (Pushkin, 1960, p. 379).*

Nothing of the kind we wouldn't find in the poem of John Wilson, whose heroes consistently argue the idea of death, as the dear deliverer from the endless worldly suffering. None of them, unlike Pushkin's characters, don't say a word about the expected beloved personal contacts outside of death. And there is a deep reasons developing in Russian and European literary traditions.

#### 4. Confirmations

For half a century before the above-mentioned works of John Wilson and A. S. Pushkin in the literary life of Germany (and across Europe) has been a huge in depth stock event – publication of "The sufferings of young Werther" by Goethe, sentimental hero of which who commits suicide. The direct motive for voluntary withdrawal of Werther in the other side becomes unrequited love. After almost two decades (in 1792) already Russian author N. M. Karamzin published his famous story "Poor Liza", the heroine the fate of which would be perceived by reading Russia as the highest revelation..

Of no surprise is some similarity of the two motives of suicides of literary heroes. Unrequited love is a natural object of literary attention of the authors of the epoch of sentimentalism, regardless of their national affiliation. But in this background especially significant are some important discrepancies in the interpretation of the motives of heroes of the Russian and German sentimentalism.

It is interesting to note that the work of Goethe contains as if minimized story that underlies the novel N. M. Karamzin. We are talking about the episode of the epistolary notes of Werther, dated August 12, containing a dialogue with Albert. The hero recalls the story of a girl "recently pulled dead from the water" and retells it.

Here are excerpts from this story: "a pretty young creature, who grew up in a close circle of domestic duties, daily papers <...> but in passionate her soul are awaken other, concealed desires, and the flattery of men only encourages them <...> finally, she meets the man who irresistibly attracted her with unknown sense; <...> she forgets the world around, hears nothing, sees nothing, feels nothing, but him and yearn for him only. <...> she finally opens her arms towards him. <...> She sees neither God around the world, nor anyone who can replace her loss, she feels lonely, abandoned by the whole world and, choking with a horrible heart flour, rushes headlong down, to drown pyk misery in around her on all sides death" (Goethe 1985, pp. 51-52).

It's practically the story of Lisa, a Russian girl, deceived in her expectations. The only difference is that Albert (the interlocutor of) immediately assesses his German predecessor as "stupid girl" with a "limited horizon". It seems that such a reaction expected from him Werther, telling her story.

As Karamzin Lisa, a "stupid girl" dare to call her except perhaps a complete cynic, and a girl with a "limited horizon", perhaps, none. She "is made" (represented) in a fundamentally different way than the girl from the story of Werther. The immediate motive that pushed her to suicide is fundamentally different. In the phase of rapid development of her relations with Erast she also like the heroine of the story of Werther, is entirely devoted to his beloved, detached from the world. "Ah! I will rather forget my soul than my beloved friend!" (Russian literature, 1970, p. 692) – she admits to herself at this time. But at the time of suicide she is not driven by despair, not blinding loss. More precisely, she passes through a phase of despair, when she says: "I can't live <...> Oh, if the sky fell on me! Poor me!" (Russian literature, 1970, p. 698). But not this state becomes a direct cause of her death. All this will be followed by a pause ("...after a few minutes she plunged into some reverie...") (Russian literature, 1970, p. 695)), then would appear quite sober diligence in conversation with Annie ("Take this money to the mother – they are not stolen..."). All this suggests that suicide of Lisa is not a step of a moment of desperation, but it's gratuitous, internally rational action. This is a deeply creative, transforming the world act, and therefore not calling the author's condemnation. She doesn't run from the world, but rather flows into the harmony of the cultural-historical landscape, with descriptions, of which N. M. Karamzin began his story, and, in fact, concludes: "...sitting in meditation, leaning on the reservoir of Lyza's remains; in my eyes is flowing a pond; over me rustle the leaves" (Russian literature 1970, p 695). Changed Erast, who himself told this story to the author, the year before his death, is another result that has occurred as a result of Liza's voluntary death. Finally, the ending phrase of the story – "Now, maybe they already reconciled!" (Russian literature 1970, p. 695) – hints at a happy ending outside of death, where will happen a personal meeting of lovers, already free from the prejudices and misconceptions of their

earthly life. The possibility of such posthumous meeting is experienced as a reward for earthly suffering, it brings to the story fundamentally optimistic beginning.

Heroes of Goethe (Werther and Lotte) are also sometimes talking about meeting in another existence, but it is said a little differently, with a greater degree of doubt. Lotte in the notes dated 10 September: "We will not disappear. <...> But whether we meet again, Werther? Will we recognize each other? What do you anticipate, that will you say?" (Goethe, 1985, p. 59). And then (in September) and later, before the death (in December) Werther would give an affirmative answer: "We won't disappear! We will meet again! Going to see your mother! I will see her, will recognize her, and before it, in before your mother, your copy, will open my soul" (Goethe 1985, p. 115). It should be noted, it is about the mother of Lotte, whom Werther has never seen. That is, he had to recognize a person whom in a literal sense he couldn't recognize.

Both the Goethe's heroes did not doubt the correctness of the postulate of eternal life ("We won't disappear!"). The doubts relate only to the meeting in another world (will meet /will not meet: get to know each other / don't get to know). Such doubts are not even mentioned by Karamzin. For him, apparently, are unconditional the meeting and recognition. Not quite clearly sounds the question about reconciliation in a different world, but it also in Karamzin version is rather solved positively. The transition to a different life is not concerned, in his understanding, the fundamental causes, linking the characters of the story. After death they are exempt from all accidental, caused by their existence in the social world.

Posthumous transformation of heroes of Goethe has taken a greater, significant character. The very nature of the person, and, consequently, interpersonal relationships are changing. Therefore, there is a risk not to meet and recognize each other.

Werther's anticipations of otherness are accompanied by his personal dissolution in the divine substance, "the communion <...> to bliss of, who creates in and out himself" (Goethe 1985, p. 54). But if "all is in and out himself", then meeting with others (with Lotte) on the other side of being is impossible. What dreams Werther, it is not a personal meeting, but something else, for example, the merger "in the face of the eternal" (Goethe, 1985, p. 115) when the spatial and temporal boundaries are erased, and girlfriend and her mother brought the doubles, that is, one and the same.

Namely because of it significant portion of Werther's text turns not in the expectation of meeting, but in a sentimental farewell of hero with Lotte, forever. This is something that almost do not exist in the text of the story of Karamzin, emotionally focused on waiting for the inevitable, preinstalled meeting there, below death.

Very interesting observations allow to make so-called "Russian Werther". This is quite a large layer of Russian poetic texts of the late XVIII – early XIX century, opened by V. M. Zhirmunskiy (Zhirmunskiy 1982, p. 41-49) and allows to make some assumptions about the perception of Goethe's novel, the image of Werther in the Russian literary community. There is repeated the same elegiac situation: Lott at the tomb of Werther. It is suggested with a suicide letter of Werther from Goethe's novel: "When at clear summer night, you will ascend the mountain, then remember about me, about how I often went up the valley, and then look at the cemetery on my grave, where the wind in the sunset rustles the tall grass..." (Goethe, 1985, p. 104).

In Russian poetic texts Werther's cry for the memories consistently is interpreted in a physically tangible presence of the shadow of a hero in familiar places and the desire to unite with him in his tomb.

One such poem, which the author signed the letter S., appeared in the "Moscow magazine" of Karamzin in 1792.

*Oh, you around these places deplorable  
Hovering shadow, wait!  
Behold the darkness of endless suffering –  
Touch my longing!  
Look, Oh, Werther! How ends  
Charlotte her life;  
How dies to you,  
Descending into your tomb!..*

Luckily these verses were placed in one together with the "Poor Lisa" part VI of "Moscow journal" for the year 1792. But unite them not only the cover of the magazine, but, above all, the mood and the ideological and semantic dominant. Easily is drawn a parallel with the "groan" of Lisa, audible in the deserted hut, and with her grave, to which comes repentant and miserable Erast, apparently, wanting to connect with his lover. Nothing like this in principle could be in the text of the novel by Goethe. Conceivable here by Werther climbing of Charlotte the mountain, memoirs, glance (from the mountains), abandoned in the cemetery, at the tomb of Werther, does not coincide with the spatial descriptions of Russian texts, and, most importantly, with their semantic units.

Russian posthumous interpretations of "communication", intertendency of Werther and Charlotte are created in the

images of their audible, tangible, almost physical contact. Lotte finds her beloved in a special way peculiar, dissolved in a subject, the natural world, longs for a connection with him in the tomb. It is more unites poetic texts with ideological attitudes of the "Poor Liza" by Karamzin than "Werther" by Goethe.

The letter of Werther is a form of his sentimental farewell to beloved. Russian poetic texts seek to portray (to depict) a meeting of heroes after death. And this is a very significant discrepancy.

## 5. Conclusion

Pushkin's concept of "eternal life", of course, is based on the views of his predecessors in the Russian literary tradition, to which seems mandatory the meeting loving people outside of death. Expectation of this meeting, the desire to approach it is one of the underlying motives of the Russian literary hero of the XVIII-XIX centuries (Nikolaev, 2012).

For the characters of John Wilson, as for heroes of Goethe, principled in their life act becomes the overcoming of suffering, the inevitable in limits of the earth, human life. The notion of immortality is associated here with the feeling of freedom from the burden of earthly suffering.

In the system of Russian literary representations the "eternal life" is associated with the assertion of continuity, infinity personal close relationships, loving each other people, relationships that outside life is not already complicated by circumstances of earthly existence.

The nature of these discrepancies in the literary treatment of the problem of immortality is, apparently, in deep religious and ethical views, formed in Russian and European cultural traditions.

In any case, the sustainability of such a kind views of Russian literature of the XIX century finds clear confirmation in the analysis of the works of M. Y. Lermontov (Nikolaev & Shvetsova, 2014) and I. S. Turgenev (Nikolaev & Shvetsova, 2015), which we have presented in our earlier publications.

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