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MOSCOW TEXT IN E. MILLER'S SNOWDROPS: LITERARY CANON AND REMEMBRANCE OF MYTH

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Abstract

The article raises the question of relationship between the literary canon and the imagological myth in the literary text based on the E. Miller's novel *Snowdrops* (2011). A comprehensive analysis of the novel at the level of storyline, plot, system of literary images and motifs allows us to observe how various layers of the British myth about Russia interact with each other in the work of contemporary British literature. In a special multi-layered image of Russia created in it, as well as in the role played by the Russian space in the development of the features of the character of the main character, the Miller's *Snowdrops* go beyond the image of the Russian world established in the crime novel. Indeed, the image of Russia correlates not only with the layers of myth relevant to the canon, that is, with those that were formed in the 16th – 17th centuries, in the 18th – 19th centuries, at the turn of the 19th – 20th centuries, in the middle of the 20th century and at its end. Besides, it is aligned with the most ancient layer of the myth. The “Moscow text” of Miller's novel *Snowdrops*, unfolding in the interaction of different layers of the British myth about Russia, places particular accents in the system of literary motifs and, being the natural basis for building the plot, i.e. awareness by the main character of his involvement into the evil, works as much as possible to uncover the ideological plan of the work.

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Keywords: Literary canon, imagological myth, British crime novel, motif, plot, literary image.



1. Introduction

The novel by Miller published in 2011 received generally positive review (Johnstone, 2011; O'Connell, 2011) and was shortlisted for books nominated for the Booker Prize. The work has a mixed genre nature: it is a criminal and, at the same time, a psychological novel with an emphasis on the hero's inner path, i.e. the path of knowledge and self-cognition. The genre nature of the novel (as well as the biographical context itself, i.e. the author's lengthy stay in Moscow (2004-2007) as a correspondent for The Economist) is associated with the localization of his actions in Russia, his plot and storyline basis, i.e. testing the hero's life position with general development of his images and motifs. In other words, Russian images, Russian chronotope and motifs associated with the myth of Russia that has been forming for a long time in British culture are directly correlated with the canon of the British crime novel, which suggests and regulates the way the British hero dives into the Russian world. This, in fact, is spoken by Miller (2010) himself in an article Why Western authors published in The Guardian newspaper in December 19, 2010: "Novelists from Le Carré to Amis Small wonder: it's fertile territory for fiction". Miller also cites a list of names that line up the canon of the active inclusion of the Russian element in the orbit of British crime novel; among them are Martin Amis, John le Carré, and Tom Rob Smith. This list could certainly be continued starting with such names as Henry Seton Merriman and Ian Fleming and ending with the names of Dick Francis and Alex Dryden.

2. Problem Statement

The novel by Miller (2011) from the point of view of the development of the "Russian theme" continues the long tradition of immersion of a hero in the Russian space so typical for the British crime novel. The problem reveals the fact that this long-term tradition does not belong to the literary genre itself and does not enclose itself in the framework of fiction as such, but is closely connected with the history of the British myth about Russia, that is with the history of the development of a "sustainable mental formation of collective consciousness of a nation, emanating from the "national/cultural" constant generated by consciousness in the process of convergence with another culture <...>, expressed in the form of images, stereotypes, and other ways of reception and representation of another cultures, <...> and capable, without "forgetting" their past, of acquiring new interpretative layers" (Koroleva, 2014a, p. 311). Thus, the problem of this study is directly related to imagological issues and comes down to defining the specifics of the imagistic myth (in our case, the myth of Russia) entering the canon of a certain literary genre (here, the genre of the criminal novel) and highlighting individual features of this occurrence in a specific piece of fiction (E. Miller's novel "Snowdrops").

3. Research Questions

This study seeks to solve the following specific problems:

- to analyze the novel by A. Miller Snowdrops in the aspects of the imaginative system and the system of motifs, storyline and the plot from the point of view of reception of the Russian world;
- to correlate the results of analysis with known data regarding the content and structure of various layers of the British myth regarding Russia;

- to compare the results of analysis of Miller's novel with the available data on the canon of immersion of the hero into the Russian world in the British spy novel (based on the novel of Ian Fleming's)
- to compare the results of analysis of Miller's novel with the results of analysis of individual works of other subgenres of the British crime novel (based on the novels of R. Harris and A. Dryden);
- to reveal the framework according to which the "Moscow text" in A. Miller's novel continues the canon of the hero's immersion into the Russian world in the British cape-and-dagger and crime fiction novel;
- to determine the specifics of the hero's immersion in the Russian world in the novel "Snowdrops": to identify possible individual features of the use of the literary canon and the reception of the Russian world in it.

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study is to determine the specific image of the Russian world in A. Miller's novel *Snowdrops* in the context of the canon of developing the Russian theme in the British crime novel and the peculiarities of re-creation of the British myth about Russia in it.

5. Research Methods

In the domestic literary studies, the research in the field of imagological problems is carried out in line with one of two main methods: the discourse analysis techniques based on the principles of "non-referential", "subjective plurality" and "discourse" of European imagology (Trykov, 2015) and imago poetic techniques based on the principles of historicism, objective truth and focus on the artistry of the form of the comparative historical method in Russian literary criticism (Trykov, 2015). In this paper, the analysis of art work of and the comparison of results of this analysis with the available data of comparative historical and poetic nature are based on the methods of imago poetics, in accordance with the principles of historical poetics and comparative historical method in literary criticism. With respect to the genre canon the article relies on the theory of the imagological myth proposed in the monograph of Koroleva (2014a).

6. Findings

A.D. Miller's *Snowdrops* narrates how an Englishman, a representative of one of the English banks in Russia, during his fourth and last year of his stay in Moscow in the early 2000s, accidentally meets two Russian girls in the subway, falls in love with one of them and, being deceived by them, becomes one of the key figures in their fraudulent sale of a high-end apartment in the center of Moscow, which does not belong to them. Nick begins to suspect that he is a victim of cynical deception before the sale is completed and the girls suddenly cut off all ties with him; the final epiphany comes precisely at this moment. The storyline of the art work fits into the canon of the British crime novel in the form in which it is reproduced in Ian Fleming's cape-and-dagger novel *From Russia with Love*, 1957 and John Le Carré's *The Russian House*, 1989 as well as in such mass action thrillers as B. Starling's *Boris Starling Vodka*, 2004 and R. Harris *Archangel*, 2009 (Koroleva, 2014b; Krasavchenko, 2008; Khabibullina, 2010). Fabulously, Miller's novel immerses an intellectual British hero into a modern Russian chronotope so that the hero not only

becomes embroiled in a cultural, historical, and mental space alien to himself and to the Western reader, but also has to engage himself into criminal and risky relations or suspicious surrounding.

No less canonical for the genre of the British crime novel is the test of a hero by his love for Russian heroine (compar.: the plot of *The Russian House, Le Carré*) (Khabibullina, 2010): in Miller's novel *Snowdrops* Nick falls in love with beauty Masha and, entering into an affair with her, suggests that his feelings are mutual. Masha maintains this illusion in him, while it is beneficial for her, and then disappears from his life. For Nick, however, it does not become a feature beyond which he stops thinking about her. Having left Russia forever, he continues to recall the happy moments spent with the Russian girl, and to dream about her and about Moscow. The unexpectedness of this final line of his confession (the book is written in the form of confession addressed to an English girl who might become his wife) becomes the key to understanding how the appeal to the Russian world, typical of the genre of the British crime novel, develops into an individual author's beyond the canon.

The boundaries separating the genre canon of the development of the "Russian theme", which Miller follows in the novel, from the individual author's implementation, goes along the line of "one's own — someone else's". Indeed, in the framework of the genre canon the "Russian", in general, is assessed as unequivocally "someone else's". It is alien to the hero, the British, and the European consciousness anti-world, lying "at the other end of the ethical spectrum" (Miller, 2010). That is how the understanding of the Russian world is formed in general in the system of Russian images and motifs in the classic cape-and-dagger novel of Ian Fleming.

The Russian world by Fleming (1957) is predominantly the world of the KGB and Smersh. The motifs of death, fear, danger, and cruelty of the system, cunning features of the people involved there, harsh propaganda and aggressive expansionist intentions of the state are tightly linked with these images: repetitive words are the characteristics of "murder", "brutality", guile; gross obscenity; mechanical, cold and infernally dull people (Fleming, 1957). The description of Russian people, as a whole, as semi-wild people with a slavish mentality, incapable of creativity and stupidly executing orders is woven into this fabric. Thus, the smell of roses and perfumes, penetrating the Russian air, hides the 'concealing animal odours' coming from people (Ibid.); the subordinates of the General who were reprimanded are called 'the moujiks who had received the knout' (Ibid.); according to one of protagonists, the Russians are '<...> masochists. They love the knout. That's why they were so happy under Stalin <...>' (Ibid.).

In this system of motifs several layers of the British myth about Russia are reflected at once. First of all, it is a layer formed in the notes of the English travelers in the period between the middle and the end of the 16th century associated with the perception of Russia-Muscovy (allocated space along with other 'native', exotic countries 'opened' by the English Protestant world) as a barbaric, wild, pseudo-Christian and even immoral world; rich in natural resources and at the same time snow-covered and terribly cold (Koroleva, 2014a). These associations with the Russian world turn out to be in demand in various genres of English literature at different times. In one of Sidney's (1888) sonnets from the series *Astrophile and Stella* (full version first published in 1598) the poet, describing the state of passionate love, compares him to the slavery of Muscovite ('like slave-born Muscovite'). In the Shakespeare (2009) comedy *The Vain Efforts of Love* (first published in 1598) Ferdinand of Navarre and his courtiers dress 'like Muscovites or Russians', which creates an association with 'savages' and cold in French princess ('my frozen

Muscovites'). After more than a century the memory of the myth resurrects the image of 'Moscow-Muscovy', practically, unchanged in Defoe's (2009) novel *The Further Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Describing the Russian empire from the time of Peter the Great, the novel speaks of 'Moscow possessions' and fortresses 'belonging to the Moscow Tsar', about 'devout' 'Muscovites' who 'hardly deserve to be called Christians, about a long (eight-month!) and severe winter, as well as vast desert spaces. We also find references to the imagological canon in the literature of the 19th century, in particular, in Byron's (2009) poem *The Bronze Age* (first published in 1823), the most important components of the image of Russia are deadening cold and snow ('Thou other Element! / <...> Who is the winged flapped o'er the faltering foe, / Till fell a hero with each flake of snow') and a Tsar as a barbarian tyrant ('barbarian' 'Autocrat' – 'the king of serfs'). In Fleming (1957), the motifs of wildness, rudeness, deceit and atrocities of the Russian people are related to this layer of the British myth.

No less significant are the connections of the motifs that describe the Russian world in Fleming's (1957) novel, with another layer of the British myth about Russia, i.e. the layer formed during the second half of the 18th early 19th centuries. In a situation of conflict between the military and political interests of Britain and the interests of the Russian empire, a new series of associations with the image of Russia is formed in the structure of the myth: it begins to be perceived as a powerful political enemy and rival seeking to seize territories and characterized by despotic (eastern) internal order, slavery of people, perversity of his nature. Such image of Russia is found in one of Tennyson's (1884) sonnets (*Poland, 1872*; the first name is *Sonnet on the Result of the Late Russian Invasion of Poland*). Here the entire Russian state is called the oppressor and the overgrown Barbarian in the East endowed with 'icehearted Muscovite; brute Power'. The Russians in the poem are both the youngest and most unworthy nation ('the last and least of men'); and Russia is a country that threatens to swallow up the whole world ('transgress his ample bound to some new crown'). In Fleming's (1957) novel, this layer of myth is clearly embodied in the motifs of both internal and external slavery of Russian people, their perverse tendency to fall victim to brutal violence. The echoes of this layer can be found in the motifs of death and fear, aggressive expansionist intentions of the state.

Finally, in this system of motifs, the layer of the British myth about Russia that is relevant for Fleming was also reflected, i.e. the layer formed during the second half of the 1930s - 1940s, reflecting the perception of the USSR in Britain as a terrible totalitarian state and the Soviet people as a gray mass, a mechanical aggregate of 'cogs' in its mechanism. Such perception of Soviet Russia is ridiculed in Anthony Burgess's novel *Cranberries for Bears* (Anthony Burgess, *Honey for the Bears*, 1963) and his memoirs. In the latter, he notes that as he expected to see the 'police state welded together by iron discipline' and 'impersonal masses', he was greatly surprised by the unexpected excessive freedom, 'poverty, dirt, good-natured drunken sloppiness' and 'the idiocy of Soviet ideology' (Melnikov, 2003). The motifs of people coldness, the cruelty of power, the rigidity of propaganda relate to the 'Soviet' layer of the British myth about Russia in Fleming's novel.

At the same time, in the image of the main heroine of the novel *From Russia with Love*, i.e. Tatyana Romanova, a fundamentally positive layer of the British myth about Russia, formed during the turn of the 19th – 20th centuries is embodied when Britain discovered intuitive religious commitment, sensitivity, natural naivety and sophistication, including art in the Russian novel, Russian culture and Russian mystical consciousness (Cross, 2013). It is interesting that Fleming describes these features of Tatiana in a definitely

reduced, profane tone: a craving for culture is manifested in the fact that the girl's favorite word is 'cultural' ('kulturny'). Her intuitive religiosity is expressed through the words of prayer from her childhood which she remembers when a difficult moment comes. Such features as sensitivity and naturalness are shown by her immediate and irrevocable love with Bond.

At the same time, any 'Russian' attribute in the British crime novel is not always regarded as completely alien, as an 'opposite pole of the ethical spectrum' that Miller speaks about in his article. This line in the assessment of 'Russian' is approved by the crime novel mainstream embodied in the novels of Fleming, Forsyth, Harris, Dryden. Having dived into the Russian anti-world, the heroes of these novels return to Britain with a fuller understanding of the abyss where Russia lies and with a sense of accomplishment, i.e. either by confronting Russian evil (Fleming, Dryden), or by saving Russia from the final fall (Forsyth Harris). The assessments of the "Russian" against the background of plot-ambiguity in the novels, which to a lesser extent fit into the canon of the criminal genre, are not so unequivocal.

In the context of the genre canon, the moments of a typical and individual interpretation of the "Russian theme" in Miller's novel *Snowdrops* become obvious. Just as in many modern British crime novels, in Miller's work, the image of Russia is based on different layers of the British myth about Russia, many of them are aimed to create an atmosphere of violence and evil. However, the Russian world in Miller's novel is not unequivocal at all. The layer that is historically closest to both the author and the time of the novel's action is most vividly represented in the system of motives: Russia (mostly Moscow, also Petersburg, Odessa, Murmansk) is portrayed as a criminal, dangerous and dissolutely vicious space ('wild', 'the monstrous city' is about Moscow) where everything is accessible for oligarchs, big bankers and their 'heifers'; almost everything is accessible for prostitutes, scammers, bank employees; and nothing is accessible for intellectuals and workers. This is a world in which people constantly drink vodka, hang out in nightclubs, make large deals related to non-existent production projects, and try to kill or rob those who are weak and defenseless.

A number of motifs in the novel correlate with the layer formed in the 16th century. The motif of winter cold, intolerable frost and snow is clearly highlighted in the structure of the novel. In particular, the hero notes with great surprise 'I knew this was the real thing: the big chill', (Miller, 2011), - and summarizes '<... > the snow is part of what makes them and nobody else' (Ibid.). The snow and cold are basic images in the Moscow chronotope of the novel. Moscow, and the whole Russia is the space of neon and chanson, high-speed traffic and nightclubs, vice, crime, cash flow, oil and 'long-legged girls' in its modern existence. In a timeless existence, this space is unbearable, terrifying in its duration and severity of winter; space of snow and frost, as if dominating a person. Needless to say this accent (but, naturally, not the motive itself) is individual for Miller.

Many other motifs essential for the internal advancement of the novel's action in the direction of understanding of 'other', i.e. the Russian world and oneself, flow naturally from this dominance. Primitive wildness, irrationality, and ability to do the impossible (for a civilized Western man) are connected with the force of nature. The main character Masha, unlike the Englishmen, has something that could be compared with the 'primary earth energy' (She had a kind of earthy energy' (Ibid.)). About the Russians, in particular, that 'They could wallow in mud and vodka for a decade, then conjure up a skyscraper or execute a royal family in an afternoon' (Ibid.) and that despite all their craving for 'violence',

‘preoccupation with earthly worries and suffering’, they are ‘just children’ (‘They’re just babies, I thought, these Russians <...> All these adolescent hints of violence <...> For all their worldliness and pain, I thought then, the Russians are just babies’ (Ibid.).

The combination of modern and timeless, the image of the modern in the light of the timeless in the chronotope of the novel, as well as the essential anomaly, the abnormality of the whole Russian world is declared in its title and its epigraph. The first part of the word ‘snowdrops’ is the root ‘snow’ (snow), the internal form of the word, without taking into account its metaphorical transference, i.e. the ‘snow drops’ or ‘snowflakes’. The epigraph gives two interpretations of the meaning of the word, i.e. standard, recorded in dictionaries - ‘an early-flowering bulbous plant’ and a slang one - ‘a corpse that lies in the winter snows, emerging only in the thaw’. Moreover, the slang meaning literally belongs to the ‘Moscow slang’. Thus, the epigraph not only decodes the ‘double bottom’ of the title and prepares the reader for the perception of the text, but also sharply designates the contrast ‘norm (universal) - deviation from the norm (Moscow)’. At the same time, ‘Moscow’ should be understood broadly as ‘Russian’, however, this narrowing is significant not only from the point of view of the reader’s prior input into the chronotope of the novel, i.e. Moscow of the early 2000s, but also from the point of view of the correlation of the basic motive of chronotope (with the idea of timelessness of the Russian mismatch with the norm).

This idea is clearly carried out in the motifs of common depravity, perverted sinfulness of Russian people (at the end of the novel, this motif becomes aphoristic ‘these flamboyantly sinful Slavs’ (Ibid.)) and once and for all predetermined despotism of power. The latter motif, in particular, lurks in the references to Ivan the Terrible and in the strangely sharp generalization of the hero that all ‘Russian leaders’ are ‘mass murderers’: a mass murderer, like all Russian leaders’).

The idea of timeless inversion of Russian space is expressed in the form of a ‘prehistoric hand’ (Miller, 2011). It appears to the hero in the episode, which is described in the thirteenth chapter. This is an occasional image: It no longer appears in the novel; however, the liveliness with which the hero represents how this hairy prehistoric arm protrudes from under the March snow and nasty ooze – sliakot and tries to reach out and drag you under is indicative: from under the numerous motifs associated with different layers of the British myth about Russia, the original archaic image, the image of zoomorphic and monstrous Russia is peeping out (Koroleva, 2014a).

The motifs associated with the layer of British myth formed in the 1930s – 1940s of the 20th century are less pronounced, however, still voiced in the novel. These are the motives of unjustified total tyranny (traces of which the hero finds in the awesome magnificence of the Soviet stations of Moscow metro and Stalin’s skyscrapers) and soulless state control (the ‘memory’ of which the hero sees in the ‘inhuman’ heated air with central heating batteries). The fact that this layer is embodied in the system of motifs of the novel is very meager; the work sharply diverges from the canon of modern British crime novel.

The motifs associated with the myth layer of the 18th – 19th centuries are also dimly embodied in the novel, the pseudonym ‘Cossack’ that belongs to one of Russian characters associated with cruelty, expedience and untruthfulness, i.e. references to the fire of Moscow during the Napoleonic War (Miller, 2011); the association of the Russian character with the east (there is quotation about Kate, one of the Russian heroines of the novel: ‘She smiled the other smile that they have, the Asiatic smile that means nothing’ (Ibid.)). The thin line marked in the novel motifs associated with a layer of myth, formed at the

turn of the 19th – 20th centuries. Thus, in the image of the Russian people, the leitmotif of depravity and sin is combined with the motif of holiness and religiosity. This is what we see, in particular, in the episode, where the hero gazes in surprise at the ‘string of elderly women’ at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, ‘singing hymns’ and waiting for their turn to attach themselves to some shrine. The hero concludes his observations with pronounced bewilderment: ‘They looked unreal <...> there in that city of neon lust and frenetic sin’ (Ibid.). An significant generalization of the hero regarding the essence of ‘Russianness’ is expressed with the following words ‘It’s a strange country, Russia, with its talented sinners and occasional saints, bona fide saints that only a place of such accomplished cruelty could produce, a crazy mix of filth and glory’ (Ibid.).

In the image of the main character (Masha) there is a significant role of characteristics also associated with this layer of myth: She ultimately turns out to be an absolute mystery, a ‘noble villain’ in a skirt organizing a fraudulent scheme in order (though it remains not entirely clear) to get money on the education of her young son; her image is formed not only from the negative features of lies and fraud, not only from the features of ‘earthly energy’ (which was mentioned above), but also from the beauty, skill, talent and even broad erudition. She dances beautifully and skis perfectly, she knows how to control herself and skillfully depicts what she wants to portray. Moreover, when Masha leads Nicholas to the Tretyakov Gallery, he discovers that she knows the names of all the saints and can comment on all the episodes of Russian history (Ibid.).

As we see, in the Miller’s novel the ‘Russian’ acquires a polyphonic sound both in terms of evaluation and in terms of interpreting Russianness. The structure of the image of Moscow-Russia is a series of various motifs from the base in the chronotope of the novel, the motif of winter cold and snow to the motif of terrestrial energy; from the motif of vice and crime leading to the plot to the motif of beauty, skill and holiness. Despite the rootedness of both the storyline and the images and motifs of the novel in the canon of genre (as mentioned above), the novel does not fit into this canon neither from the point of view of polyphonicity of the system of Russian motifs nor from the point of view of special accents in it (in particular, on the motif of snow and cold). The same can be said about the introduction of the image associated with the archaic medieval image of Russia. At the same time, for the most part of the novel, “Russian” is felt by the British hero as something fundamentally alien, as an ethical, aesthetic, and climatic-spatial anti-world. However, gradually replacing the external view of Moscow, Russia, the Russians with the inside look generated by love for the Russian girl. The hero begins to see positive features in the Russian world and, moreover, completely beyond the scope of the genre and imagological canon, interpret his negative features as internally close, partially belonging to him and partially belonging to humans.

The hero talks in his finale confession about understanding and evaluation of the ‘Russian’ expressed in all the madness of its snow, neon lights and global contradictions ‘I miss Masha. I miss Moscow’ (Ibid.). Even more surprising going beyond the genre canon is the understanding of the Russian world as a special mythological space that reveals everything that is bad in a person, which lives in the depths of his soul and is unaware of it for some time. At the end of the novel, the word “snowdrop” in its slang meaning becomes a metaphor for the evil buried in the depths of human psyche ‘That’s what I learned. The lesson wasn’t about Russia. <...> You learn about yourself. <...> My snowdrop was me.’ (Ibid.).

7. Conclusion

Thus, the development of the “Russian theme” in E. Miller’s novel *Snowdrops* is firmly based on the genre canon of the British crime novel. The storyline of the novel is built in accordance with this canon, immersing the hero in a modern Russian criminal chronotope and guiding him through a test of love for Russian heroine. In general, the system of motifs and images of the novel, mixed with an idea of anti-world, ethical minus-space and associated with the reproduction of basic semantic elements of different layers of the British myth about Russia corresponds to the genre canon. The plot of the novel, however, as well as specific accents in the system of motifs and the overall assessment of the “Russian” go beyond the genre canon. The basis of the plot is a gradual self-reassessment of the hero, awareness of his deepest involvement into the evil so easily found in Russia, and, at the same time, overestimation of the very principle of dividing the world into something what “belongs to me” and something what “belongs to others”. The “Russian” in that dizzy lightness with which the vice combines with virtue and holiness in it, at the end of the novel are conceived by the hero as something belonging to him. The immoralism of modern Russian world exposes the latent evil that the hero finds in himself and, in general, in humanity. In other words, the alien “Russian” is gradually realized by the hero as something individual or universal.

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