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METAPHYSICAL NATURE OF WORDS THROUGH THE CLASSICAL LITERATURE LENS

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Abstract

The paper is devoted to the writers' "interprofessional" reflection about the nature of words. The art-based approach allows us to interpret poets' and novelists' attitude to words as a professional reaction: words are the only tool for literary art. Thereby the cognitive literary methods are relevant to the material of this paper. Exploring the "metaphysical nature of words" on some examples of Russian classical literature, one can observe two types of role understanding of words: (1) "alienation" of words (when they are taken into account as separate and independent units or entities); (2) "wholisticness" of words (they are only carrying sense when examined in relation with the context). In this article, the works of four Russian classic writers are analysed: Gogol, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Akhmatova. The episodes related to the theme of "metaphysical nature" of words were extracted and examined. This analysis confirmed that writers understand the nature of words as an aesthetic source: the perception and comprehension of sense can be successful as the result of an unexpressed feeling of text rather than an explicit understanding of words' meanings. Thus, "the metaphysical nature of words" opens up the "aestheticization" of the art of writing, and helps to to raise the understanding of the aesthetic side of literary art from the "rhetorical level" to that of the aesthetic perception of written words.

Keywords: Art-based research, aesthetics, Gogol, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Akhmatova.

1. Introduction

The metaphysical understanding of the "nature of words" can be enriched through the art-based research method (which is not yet fully established in humanities (Lycan, 2018). This approach suggests that "art knowledge" and "scientific knowledge" can be compared and considered concomitantly (Barone & Eisner, 2012). McNiff (2008) emphasized that art has always "…served as a primary agent of change in the world" (p. 38) and that is why art knowledge and scientific knowledge "can inform one another" (Ibid., 35). It seems to the author quite productive to apply the art-based research method to classical literature: writers and poets use words as the basic material of their art. Thus, literature and poetry can be examined as a source of philosophic evaluation of the role of the Word in human life. Writers and poets can provide us with an understanding of the "nature of words" deeper than thinkers or researchers because words play a significant and ultimate role in their artistic use; hence one can find in novels and poems the answers to research questions related to the "nature of words". (See, for example, explanations by Nico Carpentier during his "Iconoclastic Controversies exhibition" organized in Brasilia in the autumn of 2018: "The idea behind this exhibition is that photographs can work just as effectively as a written academic text" (http://nicocarpentier.net/icontroversies/). One can extend this statement by applying it to the literature as an art: the idea behind this or that book is that the novel (or poem) can provide us knowledge just as effectively as a written academic research would. In other words, readers can find the answer to a research question directly in novels, dramas, poems, where their creators produce a metafictional work: they investigate and generalize the role of the Word in human life.

2. Problem Statement

There is increasing concern that language (considered as verbal culture) is being reduced in everyday human practices. Literature as a form of "verbal art" has gone through its dominant period in the past, and it is now undergoing a sharp process of marginalization in culture. This is why investigations on the "metaphysical nature" of words are becoming more actual than before digital era.

Debates around the Word in pre-revolution Russia were quite intense. The theory of "imiaslavie", a philosophical and religious approach to the Word itself was frequently put forward (Pavel Florensky, Sergey Bulgakov and others, as cited in Abel, 2016).

Later, when investigating Russian novels, Mikhail Bakhtin came to the idea of "utterance as a whole" ("All three of these aspects – thematic content, style, and compositional structure – are inseparably linked to the whole of the utterance and are equally determined by the specific nature of the particular sphere of communication" – (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 60). Bakhtin considered as an "utterance" any finalized text (oral or written) – from a short "ah!" to a full novel. The dialogue between "Word" and "Utterance" concepts can be considered from a philosophical point of view as a dialectics between "alienation" (or "individuation") of words their "wholistic" (or "collective", "communitive") nature. Thus, the first aspect of the problem statement in this article is the investigation of this dialectic ("alienation" vs. "wholisticness" of words).

Another side of the problem statement is the aesthetic approach to the "metaphysical nature" of words. As Wittgenstein (2020/1921) supposed, there is "a limit to thinking" related to the words' nature

(p.3). Wittgenstein also stated that any field of human mental activity (art, religion etc.) – apart from pure rational or knowledge processes – is important for the development of civilization but it cannot become a "proposition" (or "thought", "utterance"), i.e. it is impossible to verbalize this experience; words are helpless. In parallelly, Bakhtin suggested to consider Words as "neutral tools" ("Thus, emotion, evaluation, and expression are foreign to the word of language and are born only in the process of its rive usage in a concrete utterance" (Bakhtin, 1986, 61). Thereby, the Word "works" as an aesthetic phenomenon which exists only as the act of perception. It is obvious they both (Wittgenstein and Bakhtin) pointed out the difference between the Word as "a logical tool" and the Word as "an artistic tool". Exploring the classical literature texts one can bridge the gap between "alienation" of words (when they are just neutral logical structures) and their "wholisticness" (when words are agnostically dissolved in the Utterance, and Utterance means more than just a word combination).

3. Research Questions

The research question of this article is: How can two types of philosophical thoughts about the "metaphysical nature" of words, extracted from the classical literature, contribute to the aesthetic understanding of verbal culture?

4. Purpose of the Study

In this article, four examples from the Russian classical literature (Gogol, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Akhmatova) are analyzed to illustrate two different conceptional approaches to the word as an object of philosophical observation ("alienation" of words and their "wholisticness").

5. Research Methods

The data for this investigation were collected from several Russian classical literary texts (novels and poems), which contain the theme of "metaphysical nature" of words. We divide our data into two sets: (1) a philosophical investigation of the "alienation" of words; (2) philosophical intuitions about the "wholisticness" of words (what we defined as "nothing": if words are the "whole" they cannot be taken as "units", as something substantial; their meanings do not exist without the whole context of the particular communication act (Halliday, 2018; Webster, 2019). The first set of samples is related to the inclusion of philosophical thinking around the role of words in human life in the plot of the book. The writer (narrator) or hero can provide this explicit philosophical thinking; we can find a sort of mix of philosophical tractate and a story. It means that this type of data can be interpreted directly (as the explication of the writer's thoughts). Analyzing this set of data, we used the art-based approach (the philosophical thinking of Words by the Writer is important as the reflection of artists about their artistic tools (Leavy, 2017; Seregina & Christensson, 2017).The second set of episodes combines implicit forms of philosophical reflection: we have to interpret the literary text as the source of hidden sense, using indirect interpretation approach (comparable with Wittgenstein "indirect method" explaining "social theory of knowledge" (Wittgenstein, 2020/1921). This method was appropriated by one of the branches of cognitive literary studies (Meskin, Robson, Ichino, Goffin, & Monseré, 2018).

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As it was mentioned above, art-based research methods were used in this study: the literary texts are taken in account both as sources of philosophical thinking and as aesthetic events. "Aestheticization" (Matteucci, 2017) as a significant trend of current cultural development of society is transformed in this study into the research approach: to collect, classify, interpret artistic verbal material as stimuli of human perception, as Bakhtin provided in his "the speech genre" definition (Bakhtin, 1986).

6. Findings

Two forms of analyses of the Word as "an object of philosophy" in classical Russian literature texts are explored below. In the first paragraph, Gogol's and Tolstoy's approach to this object are examined. The second paragraph combines Chekhov's and Akhmatova's philosophical intuitions allowing them to penetrate metaphysical nature of Words. Here, we demonstrate the possibilities of the cognitive literary studies (and also the limitations of the cognitive approach applied to literary texts).

6.1. The alienation of the Word

The first form can be found in examples of texts by Gogol and Tolstoy. Nikolay Gogol demonstrates the phenomena of word alienation from the context in a number of different episodes and in various ways (Gogol, 2012). One famous example of this alienation is in "The Nose" (1836). But an even deeper alienation of the word can be found in the tale "Ivan Fedorovich Shpon'ka and his aunt" (1832) (episode about "the omnipresent wife", where the word "wife" is examined as an "individuated entity": a wife with a "goose face", a wife as a handkerchief in the pocket, a wife as "a sort of woolen fabric" etc., 13 variants all in just one page of text). One can see the "non-metaphoric" sense of this episode; "wife", here, demonstrates this word's power of sense: it loses its usual meaning, and marks an "atmosphere of horror" possessed by the main personage of this tale.

Another side of words' individuation was explored by Leo Tolstoy in "War and Peace" (the episode on Platon Karataev): "Every word he spoke and everything that he did was the manifestation of that, to him, incomprehensible activity, his life. But his life, as he himself looked upon it, had no sense as a separate existence… his words… flowed from him… as a fragrance exhales from a flower" (Tolstoy, 2018, 170). According to this episode and others from "War and Peace" (concerning debates about French language, Pierre's marriage proposal, the princess Mariya and her dying Father's conversation – in total, 7 episodes provide us examples of Tolstoy's "metaphysics of words"), and also one episode from "Anna Karenina" with the marriage proposal of Levin to Kitty, one can see a protest against the word's alienation. Tolstoy permanently comes back to the idea of "non-significance" of "pure", "nude" words (comparing these with the deepest and sincerest feelings and willingness), and at the same time he displays philosophical analyses of words taken as entities, as "things".

Figure 01. An explanation of Levin and Kitty. Illustration by Alexander Samokhvalov to Leo Tolstoy's novel "Anna Karenina". 1952–1953.

On the illustration by Alexander Samokhvalov (see Figure 01) one can see that written words mean nothing; the heroes are making their explanations with their eyes and through the total atmosphere of face-to-face communication.

6.2. Word as Nothing

The second form is explored in Chekhov's plays (Chekhov, 2015). One can see that neither words nor replicas of characters ever provide the real sense of the scenes in Chekhov's drama. Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko called this artistic effect "underwater currents" describing the psychological side of Chekhov's plays. "The Cherry Orchard" or "Three Sisters" contain numerous examples of word eliminations (a dialog becomes a crossing of different streams of consciousness), where the sense is constructed beyond words, avoiding "word explanations". Words themselves play in Chekhov's works mostly phatic functions: their sound just fills the air, there is nothing meaningful but the atmosphere of the inner life of characters. For example, in the play "Three sisters" heroes talk about labour, they discuss the effect of alum on hair growth, they collect rumours about the new commander, his wife and children, then they talk about the doctor's binge, or the new hair style of Irina, or that "chekhartma" is roasted lamb with onions, and "cheremsha" is a sort of soup; they can have long discussion about why Moscow has two universities and not only one – all this information is not important, not meaningful, it can never be defined as a "proposition" (Wittgenstein's definition of Thought). But despite these phatic conversations the reader or spectator gets a strong understanding of the sense of these plays – the total solitude and desperation that reign there.

Figure 02. A cadre from the film "An Unfinished Piece for Mechanical Piano" (on Chekhov's play "Platonov"; film director N. Mikhalkov, 1977, USSR).

In Figure 02, representing a scene from the play "Platonov" by Chekhov (1878), one can see a dialogue between characters: each person lives her or his inner life, and verbal exchange is just a sort of noise.

In Akhmatova's poems one can find even more complex reflections of words' nature: the poet wanted to write with "mute words" (Akhmatova, 2017). In her masterpieces, the word can have a dramatically significant "weight" but its meaning will never be related to its usual lexicography.

A Russian literary critic Ozerov (1996) referring to the presentation of Kees Verheul noticed that Akhmatova always demonstrated in her poems that when a person speaks, reality ceases to exist. Akhmatova's early lyrics can be considered as a perfect fulfillment of the Tyutchev's poetic paradox "Silentium!". Silence becomes the source of her understanding of life.

7. Conclusion

This quest in the metaphysics of words by writers and poets is relevant to the "anti-linguistic" turn in Language Studies (Halliday, for example, following Saussure's "semiology", (Webster, 2019). "Contextual" and "situational" understanding of language and words have recently radically evolved toward the ideas of a "wholistic" idea of communication and considering words as medium-like unperfect conventions. The investigation of several Russian classical writers' opinions about the "metaphysical nature" of words helps clarify the understanding of words' functions by poets and novelists who use words as artistic tools. Two types ("alienation" and "wholisticness") can be combined as one thing: writers show the impossibility to express the sense through words; the reader gets the sense through an aesthetic "touching" the text. A meaningful perception can be reached with reading "between the lines", and the rational "proposition" can never explain the result of this perception. The paradox is that writers achieve this effect operating by words as their only tool. It can be interpreted as the way to understand the aesthetic nature of words ("the metaphysical nature" is "the aesthetic nature").

Acknowledgments

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