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FRANÇOIS MAURIAC'S DIALOGUE WITH SOVIET READER WITHIN "CE QUE JE CROIS" ESSAY

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Abstract

The article focuses on the problem of critical reception of the works by and the personality of Francois Mauriac (1885-1970), a French author and Nobel prize winner, in the Soviet Union. The relevance of the research stems from its belonging to the domain of the theory of "active" reception and perception by the reader (a translator, or a literary critic) conducting a dialogue with the author, who, in his turn, steps into the dialogue with the reader through his fiction. Firstly, the article touches upon the problem of translating the French author's oeuvres into Russian by the top translators of their time; it was also noted that some of the translations shortly followed Mauriac's novels publication in France, which points at his popularity among the Soviet readers since the beginning of his career. Secondly, we studied the opinions of Soviet critics who recognized Mauriac as a master of social critique, but at the same time overlooked or wholly ignored the foundation of his art, namely its spiritual dimension. We used the essay "Ce que je crois" as an example, since it is Mauriac's quintessential work which represents his spirituality and the unique autobiographical style. Through study of the making of the essay and its publication in the USSR, it has become possible to track down the gradual discovery of Mauriac's legacy in its entirety and full complexity, which culminated by the end of the XXth century.

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1. Introduction

It was not until 1952, when the French author François Mauriac was awarded Nobel prize for literature, that the Soviet general public finally got the chance to come upon his works. Since then, however, several translations into Russian were made of nearly each of his books. From the 1970s on, at least once in every three years, a new edition of his books (not less than 100.000 copies each) would come out in the USSR. Some of the books written by this Catholic writer were made part of the curriculum for university and specialized schools' French language majors. However, his religious works, including the renowned essay "Ce que je crois", were ignored by the Soviet official sources.

The story of the Soviet translations of François Mauriac's oeuvres into Russian, along with their reception by critics and translators, will shed a light at the difficult dialogue between the pious Catholic author, closely examining the Soviet life, and the reader of that époque, capable of grasping the literary imagery of his works, to whom "Ce que je crois" had given a chance to discover the world of religious literature. It will also help us to divide the timeline of his recognition by readers and critics into different periods.

2. Problem Statement

Our research is done within the framework of the reception theory which emphasizes the "dialogic" nature of the word per se, as stated by Bakhtine (2002, p. 100). According to his theory, it is exactly *dialogue* that lays the foundation for any art (including its textual forms). Dialogue is here understood as a spiritual encounter underlying the mutual understanding between the reader and the author, along with his predecessors and contemporaries, and also inner dialogues of the characters (Ibid.). Thus, any literary text is, in fact, a dialogue that the author is leading with not only his reader, but also with the culture as a whole, both the one of the past, and the one contemporary with the author. The receptive aesthetics principles make sense, as long as the semantic potential of the given text could be unraveled only by a recipient (be it a reader or a scholar, e.g. a critic).

Another theoretical premise for our work is the concept of Jauss (1989) и Iser (2000) who postulated the "dialogic" nature of the text. The "historicity" of the reader, whose inherence the originators of the reception theory stated, is of a particular interest to us, since it helps the reader revise his own expectations and, ultimately, come to terms with them (Jauss, 1989; Ottmar, 2019).

Also, the reader (a critic / translator) is, following Barthes (1984), deemed as "an active participant" of the dialogue within the literature process (pp. 69-77). Thus, perception of any text is, actually, a bilateral process, and it is never devoid of the dualism of "mine" and "yours" (Timasheva, 2018).

Finally, our research rests upon the interdisciplinary concept of "spirituality" understood as an integral part of identity (O'Connor & Wathee-Delmotte, 2016). Spirituality in the USSR was closely associated with the prohibited literature fighting the Soviet dictatorship (Wathee-Delmotte, 2015, p. 216). So, any religious work embodied a struggle for freedom, both political and cultural one, and therefore was branded as ideologically corrupt.

Because the essay “Ce que je crois” serving as the main source of our work, is autobiographical, we have also taken into account the most recent works, discussing the distinctive features of the autobiographical genre (Saveleva, 2017).

3. Research Questions

To achieve this aim, the following objectives were put forward:

1) To study history of the making of the earliest translations of Mauriac’s works into Russian, which marked the onset of the dialogue between the writer and the Russian reader.

2) To gather and analyze the opinions of the leading Soviet critics who recognized Mauriac as a master of social critique, but at the same time overlooked or wholly ignored the foundation of his art, (i.e. its spiritual dimension).

3) To define, based on the essay “Ce que je crois”, Mauriac’s spiritual testament to the posterity, how the discovery of Mauriac as an essayist and an author of autobiographical works by the Russian audience was finalized in its completeness.

4) To study and quote the reviews of Mauriac’s prose by the readers outside the USSR (i.e. the foreign readers of Mauriac’s religious prose).

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of our research was to track down the timeline of Francois Mauriac’s reception within the Soviet period of the Russian history. The bulk of this work was based upon his confessional text “Ce que je crois”, written in the autobiographical genre.

5. Research Methods

Our methodology is based on the multi-facet approach combining the methods of literary criticism and historiography. In our research, we made use of the “subject-to- subject” method, applied by Kasatkina (2016; 2019b) to the analysis of oeuvres by Dostoevsky. This method can be used for decoding of practically any text (Dubnyakova & Stepanov, 2020). It is based on the assumption that the object of cognition (the text) should inevitably give way to its subject, with whom another subject (the reader, in this case) steps into some kind of a relationship. It was important for us to reveal the instances when the ideas of the author could not be fully decoded, but rather remained subject to interpretation. It was exactly what Kasatkina (2019a) defined as “looking through a glass darkly” (p. 24). Indeed, readers of Mauriac’s oeuvres often grasped only the superficial meanings of his works, instead of trying to reach out to the deepest layers of his concepts and images.

Another important methodological premise of our work is the contemporary axiological approach to scientific problems regarding the author as an identity-seeker (Zheltukhina et al., 2016) and taking into account the fact that our values tend to change over time (Vikulova et al., 2020).

6. Findings

6.1. The story of the making of the essay “Ce que je crois”: the “publisher - author”, the “author - his family”, and the “author - translator” interactions

Unlike Mauriac’s another religious work, the novel “The Life of Jesus Christ” that took 54 years to be translated into Russian (first published in the French “Flammarion” in 1936, it was printed in Russian only in 1991 by the “Mir” Publishing house), his essay “Ce que je crois” came out in the USSR much earlier.

This confessional work by the Catholic author was first published in France, 1962. Its first edition in Russian, translated anonymously, was printed in Brussels in 1979. Mauriac was commissioned to write that essay by the head of the renowned Grasset publishing company who had launched a series of famous persons’ religious confessions, and François Mauriac was the second writer soon after Jean Rostand (1953) who joined that project. The series turned out quite fruitful, and through it, a number of very famous authors, including Pierre-Henri Simon (1966), Gilbert Cesbron (1970), Maurice Clavel (1975), Jean Vercors (1975), Hervé Bazin (1977), Jean-Marie Domenach (1978), Jean Delumeau (1985), Albert Memmi (1985), Léopold Sédar Senghor (1988), and Monseigneur Gaillot (1996) received a chance to give voice to their creeds.

From the very outset, the 70 year-old François Mauriac, a member of the French Academy of Science since 1933, who in 1958 received the Legion of Honor, envisioned his contribution to the series not only as an authoritative testimony of his faith to some unknown readers. At the beginning of “Ce que je crois” he declares that he dedicates this essay to his grandsons Pyotr Wiazemsky and Gerard Mauriac, meaning them to read it when they turn 16: “Pour mes petits-fils Pierre Wiazemsky et Gérard Mauriac quand ils auront seize ans” (Mauriac, 2015, p. 11). Thus, the outline of his creed, while already a strong testimony of his faith as a practising Christian, is additionally charged with his personal desire to pass it on to his posterity. Surprisingly enough, Russia had become an integral part of the life of the Mauriacs a few years before that: the writer’s daughter Claire married a descendant of the Russian noble dynasty of Wiazemsky, who had fled from the Russian revolution. By the time “Ce que je crois” came out, his grandson Pierre had already turned 13.

Thus, from the very beginning, by responding to the publisher’s personal request, the author wanted to step into a dialogue with his readers, including his close relatives. Before that essay, Mauriac had been known in the USSR only as an author of prose owing to several Russian translations of his novels available at the time. The first Mauriac’s text published in Russian (the great novel “Thérèse Desqueyroux”, which was very dear to the writer himself (Monférier, 2016; O’Dwyer, 2016) was printed in the Soviet Union in 1927 (translated by Maria Abkina) in 1927 - the same year it came out in France. Other Mauriac’s editions published in the Stalin era included “The Knot of Vipers” (Fr. “Le Nœud de vipères”, Russian translation by Novikova (1934) and “The End of the Night” (Fr. “La Fin de la nuit”, translated by Dovgalevskaya (1936). Also, some fragments of “The Unknown Sea” (Fr. “Les Chemins de la mer”) and “Plongées” were published in the “Foreign literature” journal in 1939 (issues ## 5-6 and # 2 accordingly), those ones translated by Norah Gahl (Dranenko, 2019a; Dranenko, 2019b).

6.2. Reception by Soviet critics: from “a foreigner” to “a neighbor”

Ilya Erenburg (1891-1967), a writer, poet and translator from French and Spanish, was the first who noted the talented aspiring French author. In his “Memoirs” Erenburg wrote about their first encounter in 1913: “Francis Jammes sent me to François Mauriac, who writes good novels about bad life. He is a Catholic, but in his books there is much more harsh truth than Christian compassion” (Erenburg, 2005, p. 485). According to Kirnoze and Fomin, “such a reference given to the author of “Thérèse Desqueyroux” by the Soviet writer and translator, sounded prophetic in the 1960s, when the Soviet critics were ready to forgive him his Christian compassion for the sake of the “truth of life” that his books had” (Kirnoze & Fomin, 2010, p. 40).

In the 1930s, that view was fully supported by Ivan Anisimov in the most comprehensive way. The critic wrote in his prefatory note to the 1936 translated edition of “The End of the Night”: “His novels depict a rigid system of beliefs drenched with the clerical obscurantism [...] He is an arbiter of decay” (Anisimov, 1936).

Even after Mauriac became a Nobel prize winner in 1952, Soviet critics persevered in condemnation of his style from the ideological point of view. Maurice Vaksmaher (1964) criticized Mauriac for graphic naturalism and primitivism in his depiction of life resulting from his Christian convictions: “The truth of life in Mauriac’s works is vivisected and warped by his Christian and didactic ideals: thus, his realism is always smeared by an excessively graphic depiction of “the grime” and his persistent references to the concepts of “sin”, “redemption” and “grace”. However, the critic cannot help pointing out that “the novel “The Knot of Vipers” is arguably the most realistic anti-bourgeois book ever written” (Ibid.).

Two years after Mauriac’s death, new Russian translations of his several works were released by the “Progress” publishing house in its “Masters of Contemporary Prose” series. In the prefatory note called “The Purgatory of Francois Mauriac”, Leonid Andreev reviews the writer’s works from a less ideologically biased viewpoint, and, consequently, even uses some terms of the Christian religion: “The world of Mauriac’s prose is a Purgatory for his contemporaries, people of the XXth century” (Andreev, 1972). However, while praising Mauriac’s relevance to the time, the critic still focuses solely on his criticism of the bourgeois society. Leonid Andreev calls Mauriac “one of the sharpest critics of the church and the established religion”. In his opinion, Mauriac’s novels are “preoccupied with human obsessions”, any bourgeois family portrayed there is “a “prison cell” and bourgeois ideals just make no sense. Thus, his characters turn into “vipers” (Ibid.).

It was only in the period of the Perestroika that Viktor Balahonov in his preface “These People are my People, and their History is my History” to a collection of Mauriac’s essays published on the 100th anniversary of the author, noted the writer’s outstanding *contribution* to literature: “[Mauriac’s prose] is the legacy that gives us a chance to encompass the human nature in the most profound way. They open up new perspectives on the Western European life. The influence of his works has spread far beyond France. Francois Mauriac is a writer whose art belongs to readers from all countries of the world [...]” (Balahonov, 1986). And it was only the Perestroika’s wind of change that made such a positive review possible.

6.3. Discovery of Mauriac as a religious writer

The first translation of the essay “What I Believe” (Fr. “Ce que je crois”) into Russian was made anonymously in Brussels, 1979, and published in the journal *Logos* (## 3-4). In the post-Soviet time its second impression was printed by the Kievan publishing company “Duh i Litera” in 1996, The most recent Russian edition in Russia came out in 2015 in Nizhnij Novgorod’s “Hristianskaya biblioteka” (Mauriac 2015), and it was translated by Zoya Maslennikova.

Zoya Afanasievna Maslennikova (born Vlasova; 1923-2008) was a sculptor, painter, poet, writer and translator. She was also an associate of Fr. Alexander Men’ (1935-1990) a Russian Orthodox priest, theologian, and missionary; author of a number of books on theology and history of Christianity and other religions. His educational role in that period, when the Russian Orthodox Church was not publishing religious books by herself and had to apply to European authors for help, was hugely important. And this is exactly the reason, as Zoya Maslennikova explains in her preface to the translated edition of the novel “The Life of Jesus” (Fr. “La Vie de Jésus”), why Russian readers were so fascinated with Mauriac’s religious works: “The contemporary reader is poorly versed in religious literature. Until recently, they even could hardly get hold of the Bible, because the Patriarchy who distributed it, had only a very limited number of copies available [...]. This kind of literature remains totally obscure to our readers” [Maslennikova, 1991].

It was no accident that Fr. Alexander Men’ considers the word of Mauriac more than authoritative. In the first volume of his “History of Religion” he puts him on a par with such renowned writers “protecting spiritual values” as C. Peguy, P. Claudel, G. Greene and A. Saint-Exupery [Men', 1991]. And due to the publicity given to Mauriac by A. Men’, Russian readers started discussing the true-to-life nature of both characters and Gospel allusions of his books.

Even earlier than that, the literary work of the Catholic writer had been endorsed by the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia. In 1970, Fr. Alexander Shmeman (1921-1983), one of the foremost XXth century Orthodox theologians, gave an interview for Radio Svoboda at the passing of Mauriac. In 2015, that very speech, under the title “In Memory of Francois Mauriac” became the Preface to the Russian edition of “What I Believe” (Shmeman, 2015). In this way, the religious message of Mauriac becomes a story of freedom in the land of slaves, and the sincerity of the French author becomes the most essential quality one needs to have to fight for freedom: “Mauriac never decorates the man, but neither he ever lies about him. The man is called to freedom, but it turns out the most burdensome gift imaginable [...]. Indeed, the characters in the novels by Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn and Mauriac are totally free. They are free, since they were created by those authors’ human totality” (Shmeman, 2015, p. 8). Further on, disagreeing with the Soviet critics, the priest stands up in defence of the writer, calling him a successor of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, the greatest Russian classical authors: “No one would dare to call Mauriac an “exploiter” or an “obscurantist” [...]. He was the one in the succession line started by Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, who not only proved the compatibility of faith and art, but also revealed that faith is the deepest source of inspiration for artists” (Shmeman, 2015, p. 7).

6.4. Mauriac as a journalist

Mauriac as a journalist, daily interacting with his readers through his articles, was virtually unknown in the USSR, because they were where he was creating the most complex literary images, and where his “spiritual totality” (“*une tonalité spirituelle*”) really prevailed. It was exactly the reason why no single work out of that hugely important part of his legacy had ever been translated in the USSR.

But it was exactly through his essays and autobiographical works that Mauriac was able to talk to his reader in a completely straightforward way and crystallize the everyday life, and, in doing so, he always used his word as a weapon to fight for his ideals (Casseville & Touzot 2019; Ruttik, 2019).

For one thing, Mauriac in his journalism keeps paying a special attention to the Soviet Union, sharply criticizing all the things Soviet. In doing so, he makes use of special forms of dialogue, transcending the mundane and the trivial. For instance, he made lots of notes on the personality of Stalin which are second only to those on the great French philosopher Blaise Pascal. Taking into account Mauriac’s philosophical views, Kashlyavik concludes that his attitude to Stalin had much to do with the writer’s hope for the Christian revival that would at some point get started in Russia. He expected such revival to make up for the bloodshed of the Revolution and Stalin’s regime (as cited in Dubnyakova & Mihalova, 2020).

On the other hand, Mauriac keeps on his personal spiritual quest, hoping to find the word of authority in Russia, though he is far from idealizing the history of Russia as did André Gide (Lineva et al. 2017), the “Holy Rus”, or the “Russian drama”. Bearing in mind “The Possessed” by Dostoevsky he remembers the words from “The Brothers Karamazov”: “If God does not exist, one can do as they please” (Mauriac, 1944). Despite that, in Russia, which had seen unthinkable sufferings from the darkened depths of its history and its forests, he is able to recognize the eternal Rus (Ibid.), and a great future laid down for it (Dubnyakova & Mihaylova, 2020). He calls Dostoevsky and Tolstoy his best friends, and deems the former dearer to him than even his favorite author Marseille Proust: “The oeuvres of the Christian writer Dostoevsky go far beyond the best works of Proust, because the former, albeit saw criminals and prostitutes as fallen creatures, but nevertheless able to redeem their sins. I have already written once, that God is totally absent in Proust’s works, and it is truly horrible” (Mauriac, 1944).

It is exactly the spiritual quest that becomes central in Mauriac’s “What I Believe” (like in all his oeuvres). The essay begins with the words: “Chapter 1. “Point of Departure”: What I believe in is, sadly, not equal to what I know” (Mauriac 2015, p. 15). And in the last chapter “Regrets” he says that he does not need to delete any single line of his book [...] (Ibid, p. 135), and formulates the summary of his faith: “To believe means to love” (Ibid., p. 139). The Soviet readers first came upon these words only in the post-Soviet era, and in the 1990s as well as in the 2000s, at the time they start rediscovering Mauriac due to the numerous translated editions that had come out by then.

7. Conclusion

The table below is a breakdown of the stages of critical acclaim Mauriac was gradually receiving in the USSR based on the data gathered and analyzed (Table 1):

Table 01. The stages of the critical reception of F. Mauriac’s works of various genres in the USSR

Years	Genres of Mauriac’s prose			
	Fiction	Autobiographical	Essays	Religious works
1920s-1930 s.	+	-	-	-
1940-60 s.	+	-	-	-
1970 s	+	-	+	-
1980 s	+	+	+	+
1990 s	+	+	+	+

Mauriac steps into a dialogue with Soviet readers for the same purpose as with the whole world: in order to get the spiritual dimension of the man restored. The writer’s path to the hearts and minds of the Soviet readers was rocky: from being merely noted by some critics (of which the quickly-done translations of his oeuvres in the 1920s and 1930s was the proof) to his praise as a critic of bourgeois society concurrently with the total ignorance of the spirituality of his works in the 1920s - 70s; from his oblivion in the 60s to the rediscovery of his works in the 1970s and a fascination with his fiction in 1980s-90s, when his prose was first perceived by the Soviet readers in its entirety and complexity. And this dialogue keeps going on even now.

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