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THE ROMANTIC TRADITION AND THE (RE)INTERPRETATION OF THE ROMANTIC SELF IN BORIS PASTERNAK'S AND VIRGINIA WOOLF'S PROSE WRITING

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Abstract

The article makes an attempt to sound the novelty of Virginia Woolf's and Boris Pasternak's literary theory in the context of literary tradition. I argue that at least in two crucial fields, in the definition of the self and the treatment of the relationship of art and reality, it is the paradigm established by the Romantics that seems to be the most important point of reference. In order to prove this, I discuss both the authors' statements about romanticism and the romantic traits in their philosophies of art. Some of their concepts relevant to the topic (for example, Woolf's moments of being, or Pasternak's idea of creative subjectivity), expounded mainly in 'A Sketch of the Past' and in *A Safe Conduct*, and the Romantic influences on their work are in the focus of the paper.

Keywords: *B.L. Pasternak; Virginia Woolf; Romantic Self; Romantic Tradition*

Romanticism has been defined almost as many times as it has been written about. Different critical schools give different definitions, and individual writers and thinkers shape the term for their own purposes.¹ Most literary periods undergo this definition-seeking "ordeal", but Romanticism seems to suffer the most often. The main dispute is about its homogeneity – whether it is a single literary movement or we should speak of a plurality of Romanticisms.²

Virginia Woolf anticipated the recent critical attitude that emphasises continuities between literary ages, when in 'A Letter to a Young Poet' (1932) she mockingly wrote: "A pistol shot rings out. 'The age of romance was over. The age of realism had begun' – you know the sort of thing" (1942: 132-143). Of course, "writers know very well" that this is nonsense:

[...] – there are no battles, and no murders and no defeats and no victories. But as it is of the utmost importance that readers should be amused, writers acquiesce. They dress themselves up. They act their parts. One leads; the other follows. One is romantic, the other realist. One is advanced, the other is out of date. There is no harm in it, so long as you take it as a joke, but once you believe in it, once you begin to take yourself seriously as a leader or as a follower, as a modern or as a conservative, then you become a self-conscious, biting and scratching little animal whose work is not of the slightest value or importance to anybody. (134)

Despite the fact that he belonged to various literary groups until 1927, Boris Pasternak gives voice to his discontent with categorisation of art in his essay 'Neskol'ko položénij' ('Some Propositions', 1919):

Портретист, пейзажист, жанрист, натюрмортист? Символист, акмеист, футурист? Что за убийственный жаргон!

Ясно, что это – наука, которая классифицирует воздушные шары по тому признаку, где и как располагаются в них дыры, мешающие им летать. (Pasternak 1989-1992, 4: 369)

Portraitist, landscapist, genre-painter, still-life painter? Symbolist, Acmeist, Futurist? What murderous jargon!

Clearly, aesthetics is a science which classifies air balloons according to where and how the holes are placed in them that prevent them from flying. (Pasternak 1985: 30)

Woolf's remarks and assessment of the Romantics are often contradictory, but it was never her intention to draw up a coherent literary theory or a history of literature, casting herself "merely" as a "common reader" with a sophisticated literary taste.³ Nevertheless, both Woolf and Pasternak used the word "Romantic" in contexts which inform their readers of their own interpretations of the term. Woolf, as a modernist, emphasises the self-reflective nature of Romantic poetry: "We mean a great many things when we say that a poem is romantic. We refer to an atmosphere of vagueness, mystery, distance; but perhaps we most constantly feel that the writer is thinking more of the effect of the thing upon his mind than of the thing itself" (1987, 2: 75). Pasternak, on the other hand, firmly expresses his contempt for Romanticism in *Ochranajaja gramota* praising antiquity because "[...] античность не знала

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