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Pekashino and Peyton Place

Anglo-American popular fiction already for some decades now has had a considerable impact on the literature of other cultures, especially those of the countries of Western Europe. For instance in the Norwegian National Bibliography (Norsk Nasjonalbibliografi) we find that each year the number of translations from Anglo-American fiction is somewhere between 1,500 and 2,000 titles a year, chiefly of popular literature or so called pulp fiction. This number is on the whole higher than the yearly output of Norwegian belletrical works. The titles of translations from other languages than English make up just five to ten percent of the total yearly number of translations. It is likely that this enormous influx of foreign literature must have left its mark on the indigenous literature in the countries where it was translated. At least this is most certainly the case in the field of dramatic literature. For instance, the Norwegian State Television Company some years ago dissolved its theatrical ensemble "Fjernsynsteatret" and discontinued its production of serious drama productions in favour of serial productions of the kind which are usually dubbed "soap operas". The most prominent of the authors thus excluded is Ibsen, formerly regularly performed by the State Television Theatre but nowadays completely ousted in favour of "soap operas" in the American style which are written by lesser hands.

The attraction of Anglo-American literature for the broader public is undoubtable and, one would surmise, is not only the case in Norway but in other European countries as well. One is tempted to conclude that the Americans have arrived at some universal formula especially fit to attract the public, and thus especially viable commercially as well. An additional question emerges: if American popular literature contains such universal structures, are they to be found in other kinds of literature as well, and even in other literature originating in rather different cultural contexts? Abramov's fictional Pekashino is a small village in the Pomor zone along the shores of the Northern Ocean. Peyton, which gave its name to one of the biggest commercial successes of American popular writing, is con-

ceived as a small urban society in the United States of America. Language, culture and mentality separate them, as well as many thousands of miles. But might there still be something that connects those two different worlds?

Some features commonly met with in the kind of popular literature I have mentioned above is to be found in Fjodor Abramov as well. In the following I will attempt a brief comparison using the novel “Two Winters and three Summers” (“Dve zimy i tri leta”). I use here for reference the American edition of that novel translated by D. B. Powers and Doris C. Powers (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1984). As we know, this novel is part of a larger series “Pryasliny”, the tale of the family by that name.

Already here we arrive at a fundamental feature of the popular fiction mentioned above, viz. Seriality. I would like to remind the reader that most of Abramov’s fiction is written within the framework of seriality. Naturally, it is very unlikely, if not outright impossible, that there could have been any direct influence on Abramov’s fiction from Anglo-American sources. Nevertheless, the parallel is undoubtable.

The same goes for another feature of popular fiction, contained in the formula infinite drama.¹ “Pryasliny” has got a definite beginning, but the ending may be prolonged infinitely as one generation of Pryaslins is followed the next. The only possibility is that the family will be extinguished, which is very unlikely in reality as well as in fiction.

Needless to say, these elements are nothing new in literature. The notion of the omniscient author carrying on, as it were, a continual conversation with his readers, is an old and much used convention in fiction. Abramov does not outright use the convention of the omniscient author as a formal device in his works, but this notion still seems to be directing his vision of the relationship writer-reader: Abramov keeps close contact with his readers.

This conclusion is intimated by his epilogue to “Two Winters and three Summers”²:

¹ Gelinde Frey-Ver, *Coronation Street: Infinite drama & British reality, an analysis of soap opera as narrative and dramatic*, Trier 1994.

² I have only been able to find this epilogue in the Ann Arbor edition. I have not been able to find it in any Russian edition, neither in earlier editions, nor in the newest collected edition of his works (Fedor Abramov, *Sobranie sočinenij v šesti*

Dear friend,

It is you — who have at some time read my “Brothers and Sisters” — that gave me the idea of telling about the life of the Pryaslins after the war.

And here it is. True, it covers only two winters and three summers of their post war existence, and I already think I hear your impatient questions: But what happened next? What is the rest of the story? How did it end? How did Mikhail’s life turn out. And Lizka’s — and their younger brother’s and little sister’s in the years that followed? And what happened to Pekashino itself?

Be patient my friend. I would like to write more than one book about the village of the north, about my Pekashino — and in them, in those books, the story of the Pryaslin family — its maturing, and its moral development — will not take last place.³

Here we simultaneously see the similarities and differences between Abramov and the popular fiction mentioned above. The questions he refers to are just the same which are put in the summaries of the consecutive installments of popular prose and drama fiction. On the other hand, it is hardly thinkable that the authors of such texts would go into details about maturing and moral development. In these matters popular realism and social realism decidedly go into different directions.

Abramov does not go too much into details about the appearance of his persons; the stress is on their doings. In this way he avoids the somewhat strained typology which quite often annoys the spectator in ever so many examples of popular drama. Still, his stress on action gives him the same advantage as the writers of popular fiction when it comes to the question of creating suspense and excitement — those well known commercial baits in the troubled sea of bestseller fiction. The lack of stress on outward appearance also gives him a decided advantage in relation to the exemplary social realist pattern, although it sometimes makes it difficult for western readers to distinguish between the different personages of his novels. On the other hand, it makes them very much

tomach, ed. D. S. Lichačev, V. G. Rasputin & L. V. Krutikova-Abramova, Leningrad 1990-95.)

³ Fjodor Abramov, *Two Winters and three Summers*, Ann Arbor 1984, p. 55.

collective figures, rather typical representatives of the Soviet people (warring, toiling and suffering), rather than separate, individually conceived human beings.

As so many of Abramov's works falls within the framework of "Pryasliny", seriality is certainly fundamental in his work. Popular fiction, as we know, not only is very dependent on seriality, but as well on multi-plane narration. The different milieus which are described are as a rule only superficially connected to each other, thus the action is presented simultaneously on several planes. Some of the characters of the drama are known to each other and function as links between the different planes of action. This technique, which is cultivated for instance in the TV soap operas, is rather seldom exploited by Abramov in his serial fiction. The technique may be found in writers outside the Anglo-American tradition of popular literature as well, but then chiefly as a device to make prose fiction more acceptable for making screen versions. As such, it can be found in modern Russian literature as well. But Abramov does not seem to have been thinking much in cinematographical categories, nor to have been especially concerned that his works should be transferred to the screen. This in spite of the fact that he employs a chapter technique which very easily would allow him to conduct a differentiated multi-plane narration. "Two Winters and three Summers" is divided into two parts. Part one consists of 12 chapters (95 pages), part two of 21 chapters (179 pages). The chapters are divided into subdivisions, the number of which varies between 2 and 5 in each chapter; as a rule, however, the number of subdivisions of each chapter is 3. This technique would very effectively enable the author to select different persons or groups of persons and proceed with the action on several more or less synchronous planes. But most often Abramov does not avail himself of this possibility. In chapter 1, for instance, Abramov starts with the riverboat arriving at Pekashino, thus taking us into medias res, then he proceeds to show us the home-coming of Mikhail Pryaslin. Having done this, Abramov concentrates his attention on the members of the Pryaslin household and keeps his attention there during the four following subdivisions, until the end of the chapter. During this span no other villagers than the Pryaslins are described, and insofar as they are introduced, it is only through the comments of the Pryaslin family.

There is somewhat more variation, however, between the chapters as a whole. For instance, we see that Chapter 7 of the first part is about Mikhail Pryanlin and his love affairs, as well as about how some of the elderly women of the village react to this phenomenon and gossip about it. Then in chapter 8, the writer shifts his attention on to some of those women in their dealings with the village bureaucracy, and in chapter 9 he is back again to Mikhail Pryanlin, this time without any connection to the gossipy women just mentioned. The following chapter (number 10) consists of two letters, one from Mikhail Pryanlin's sister Liza to her younger brother, and another to Mikhail Pryanlin from one of his pals, G. Sukhanov-Stavrov (who addresses Mikhail Pryanlin as "dear old cockroach!"). The chapter ends by a clipping, allegedly from the oblast' newspaper, the caption of which reads: "Not the time to rest on your laurels".

Thus one may conclude that Abramov shows some tendencies towards multi-plane narration, but at no time does this possibility seem to be consistently exploited.

When it comes to contents, it is self evident that several factors go to stress the disparity between our two fields of examination since between Soviet society of the postwar years and contemporary western reality there is surely a big gap. Still, also here parallels may be found. On both sides we may find a certain preference for milieus on the periphery. Though by no means universal, such a tendency is surely to be found in modern Anglo-American popular prose and drama fiction; the scene in the beforementioned Peyton Place novels is set in provincial, small-town America. In Abramov's fiction the remoteness and backwardness of his native Peka-shino, so far from the centres of power and culture, is repeatedly stressed:

Somewhere — through the cities and far beyond the blue slopes of the forests, strode valiant Victory. The papers announced it every day all over again. Already the first trains were fanning out through Russia with demobilized soldiers. But the Pekashinos — the devil with the back-woods! — All they could do, was to wait. And they waited. They waited — painfully, wearily, counting the days. When will those they love and want come home? [...]

Another year had gone by. The country took account of its position... On the evenings when Mikhail dropped into the kolkhoz office, and his eyes fell on the newspaper published in the capitol, his heart swelled with envy.

Somewhere there was the good life, somewhere there lived winged people, heroes who every day and every hour accomplished deeds to the glory of the mother country, and colorfully told of them in their letters and reports. But what is there in Pekashino. What kind of life?⁴

Although Anglo-American popular fiction rarely is explicitly critical of the persons and societies it depicts, the ultimate effect is quite often a rather depressing one — lack of culture, torpor, sluggishness, stupidity. Even if this effect is not intended by the authors, it is all the more striking because it as a rule is accentuated by the purely commercial intent on the part of its authors. On this point Abramov's fiction certainly differs fundamentally from western commercial popular fiction. Abramov may implicitly criticize his personages, the picture which emerges from his books may sometimes appear dark indeed, but still one always feels that Abramov has a big heart for his Pekashino. He is through and through a realist, but his realism is a loving one.⁵

Generally these similarities do not emerge too well at first sight, because they are immersed in the substructures of fiction. The features which at once catch the reader's attention, are just the dissimilar ones: different themes, different people, different cultures, different vocabulary. Still, the structural similarities remain, and may serve as a vantage point for further penetration into modern popular fiction, into its relationship to literature of a less commercial type and generally into the strategies of the writer in relation to his prospective readers.

The above conclusions should be considered as just a preliminary, rough sketch on an intriguing theme which is worth further investigation, not only in relation to Abramov but in relation to other Russian and

⁴ Ibid., p. 55 and 138.

⁵ Cf. Georgij Cvetov, "Fedor Abramov and Russian village prose", David Gillespie (ed.): *The Life and Work of Fedor Abramov*, Evanston, Illinois 1997, p. 23: "The occasional idealization of the Russian village that we find in Belov, Viktor Likhonosov, and even Rasputin was alien to Abramov as it was in the later writings of Vasilij Shukshin."

European writers as well. This is especially true in considering the enormous popularity enjoyed by some kinds of western popular fiction in

Russia and other East European countries already during the last period of communist rule (not to speak of the years after the fall of communism).⁶

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⁶ Cf. Kate Baldwin: “Montezuma’s revenge. Reading ‘Los ricos también lloran’ in Russia”, Robert C. Allen (ed.): *To be continued: soap operas around the world*, p. 285-300. Kate Baldwin’s article generally refers to the post communist period, but for in-stance Brazilian soap operas were enourmously popular in Poland many years before the fall of communism.