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Understanding the Christian Symbolism of Death in Silver Age Poetry

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Abstract

Introduction. The article is devoted to the analysis of poetic works containing philosophical ideas about dying and death of several representatives of domestic symbolism in fiction of the first quarter of the 20th century in order to search for Christian symbols, contained in them, that take the meaning of death in a certain context. The main tasks of the study include the search for poetic works about dying and death of the most famous poets and religious thinkers of the Silver Age: A.A. Blok, Vyach. I. Ivanov, D.S. Merezhkovsky and A.N. Bely, as well as a religious and philosophical comparison of the ideas contained in their works about death and Christian symbols of death with the idea of death of V.S. Solovyov as the first representative of philosophy and literature of this period. One of the most important research tasks is to identify the features of poetry of symbolism's representatives of the Silver Age that are not characteristic of Christianity.

Materials and Methods. As methods of scientific research, descriptive, historical and hermeneutical methods were used allowing the author to compile as complete a picture of factors that influenced the subject of poetic works of the Silver Age as possible. The appeal to deductive and inductive methods, as well as methods of analysis and comparison, made it possible to highlight the general and special in the poetic works under study.

Results. The formation of the interest of Russian poets and religious thinkers of the Silver Age was influenced by several factors of both historical and spiritual nature, the most significant of which was the work of Vyach. S. Solovyov. In the studied works of A.A. Blok, D.S. Merezhkovsky, Vyach. I. Ivanov and A.N. Bely, Christian symbols are established. These symbols take on the meaning of life and death. The philosophical ideas contained in them are distinguished, which diverge from the ideas generally accepted in Christian doctrine.

Discussion and Conclusion. The discussion of the significance of religious and philosophical ideas about death, as well as Christian symbolism of death in fiction, is of scientific interest not only for the philosophy of religion, but also for other humanitarian disciplines, as evidenced by the work of sociologist B. Marie and philologist L.V. Garmash.

Keywords: Christianity, faith, symbolism of death, value, symbol, Silver Age, poetry

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Оригинальное теоретическое исследование

Осмысление христианской символики смерти в поэзии Серебряного века

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Аннотация

Введение. Статья посвящена анализу поэтических произведений, содержащих философские идеи об умирании и смерти нескольких представителей отечественного символизма в художественной литературе первой четверти

XX в. с целью поиска содержащихся в них христианских символов, принимающих в определённом контексте значение смерти. К основным задачам исследования относится поиск поэтических произведений об умирании и смерти наиболее известных поэтов и религиозных мыслителей Серебряного века: А.А. Блок, Вяч. И. Иванов, Д.С. Мережковский и А.Н. Белый, а также проведение религиозно-философского сравнения содержащихся в их произведениях представлений о смерти и христианских символах смерти с представлением о смерти В.С. Соловьёва как первого представителя философии и литературы данного периода. Ещё одной из важнейших исследовательских задач является выявление нехарактерных для христианского вероучения особенностей поэзии представителей символизма Серебряного века.

Материалы и методы. В качестве методов научного исследования получили применение описательный, исторический и герменевтический методы, позволяющие составить как можно более полную картину факторов, оказавших влияние на тематику поэтических произведений Серебряного века. Обращение к дедуктивному и индуктивному методам, а также методам анализа и сравнения, позволили выделить общее и особенное в исследуемых поэтических произведениях.

Результаты исследования. На формирование интереса русских поэтов и религиозных мыслителей Серебряного века оказали влияние несколько факторов как исторического, так и духовного характера, наиболее значимым среди которых стало творчество В.С. Соловьёва. В исследуемых произведениях А.А. Блока, Д.С. Мережковского, Вяч. И. Иванова и А.Н. Белого устанавливаются христианские символы, принимающие значение жизни и смерти, выделяются содержащиеся в них философские идеи, вступающие в расхождения с идеями общепринятыми в христианском вероучении.

Обсуждение и заключение. Обсуждение значения религиозно-философских идей о смерти, а также христианской символики смерти в художественной литературе представляет научный интерес не только для философии религии, но и для других гуманитарных дисциплин, о чем свидетельствуют работы социолога Б. Мари и филолога Л.В. Гармаш.

Ключевые слова: христианство, вера, символика смерти, ценность, символ, Серебряный век, поэзия

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Introduction. The appeal to Christian symbolism was one of the characteristic features of the poetry of the Silver Age, since it was during this historical period that the intelligentsia, represented by religious philosophers and poets, was actively engaged in understanding the cultural and socio-economic consequences of the revolution in Russia. Hopes for positive transformations in society were quickly replaced by concern for the future of the native country and the whole world as a whole, which could not but affect the scientific works and works of art of that time. Thus, the domestic thinker S.N. Bulgakov, who welcomed the development of revolutionary ideas in Russia, a few years after the onset of the revolution did not hide deep regret about their positive assessment in the past: “Gradually, as the spiritual essence of the Russian revolution in the history of 1905–1907 was revealed, any connection with it became impossible for me” [1, p. 88], but if the works of S.N. Bulgakov were distinguished by straightforwardness, then the works of A.A. Blok, on the contrary, were replete with symbols and metaphors through which the poet preferred to express his attitude to various events, including the revolution in Russia:

“What fiery distances
The river opened to us!
But it was not these days we called for,
But the centuries to come” [2, p. 376].

The poets of the Silver Age of the Russian culture attached great importance to intellectually developed creative personalities, artists, who, in their opinion, should have played a decisive role in bringing the country out of the post-revolutionary spiritual crisis, such statements made them look like thinkers of the Renaissance. Thus, the representative of acmeism N. Gumilyov, according to the memoirs of the English writer and journalist G.K. Chesterton, in a personal conversation with him... “suggested that poets ruled the world” [3]. However, the first poets of the Silver Age, who believed that a way out of the spiritual crisis was possible through freedom and creativity, were representatives of symbolism: A.A. Blok, D.S. Merezhkovsky, Vyach. I. Ivanov and A.N. Bely. The cultural figures of the Silver Age believed that the symbol is... “the bridge into eternity, and death is... the necessary link marking the boundary of the transition between earthly and heavenly” [4, p. 43].

These poets tried through Christian symbols to remind readers of the existence of God and the afterlife, drawing their inspiration from various sources, such as the Holy Scriptures, which they knew from childhood, as well as the work of

the philosopher and poet V.S. Solovyov, with whom they were also well acquainted. Since the topics of life and death were one of the main topics of the work of this poet, the symbolists considered it especially important for themselves to address them in their poetic works. The main topics of philosophical and artistic creativity of V.S. Solovyov belonged to the criticism of the atheistic views of the modern intelligentsia and the problem of the departure of the most important Christian values into the past, the usefulness of the existence of a moderate fear of death as a regulator of human behavior, as well as recognition of the mysterious nature of death.

In the poem “Poor friend, worn out by the long road...” V.S. Solovyov talked about the limitations of the earthly being of man, the inevitability of death and eternity, which can be found only in God, as well as in the love of the Creator for all his creations. The poet himself, as well as representatives of symbolism who followed him, noted that Christianity is the religion of the victory of life over death, therefore, the symbols of death in their poetic works simultaneously took on the meaning of life depending on the context. For example, such well-known Christian symbols as a cross or a flower could take one of these meanings depending on the context of their application. In the poems of V.S. Solovyov “The Homeland of Russian Poetry”, “Rural Cemetery” and “The Answer to Yaroslavna’s Lament” the death of the heroes of the works symbolized the cross, and in the poem “Metempsychosis” the flower was a symbol of death:

“...The yellow sunflower
Has died in the garden.
From dust and decay
A flower grows anew,
To a forgotten grave
A bee comes flying...” [5, p. 158].

Recognizing the importance of the work of V.S. Solovyov for the development of symbolism in Russia, A.N. Bely wrote:

“For you, the mountain thunder of Sinai did resound;
For you, God did appear...
You awakened us: your translucent hand
Did lift the horn” [6].

Finally, another important factor that had a significant impact on the appeal of domestic poets to Christian symbolism was the desire to remind compatriots of the existence of God and the afterlife, which was associated with the growth of atheistic views in Russian society, changing ideas about life and death. Representatives of symbolism believed that the loss of religious faith by people threatened young people with the loss of the meaning of life and was able to increase the feeling of fear of natural death:

“We drag our days without a faith,
Our fate is tired of punishing...
And our life is beyond measure heavy,
And heavy will it be to die...” [7].

Materials and Methods. The use of descriptive, historical and hermeneutical methods of scientific research made it possible to determine the historical and cultural factors that contributed to the formation of the religious and philosophical problems of Symbolist poetry at the beginning of the 20th century, as well as to highlight, among other factors, the influence of the ideas of V.S. Solovyov. In turn, the appeal to deductive and inductive methods of scientific research, analysis and comparison of poetic works by A.A. Blok, Vyach. I. Ivanov, D.S. Merezhkovsky and A.N. Bely made it possible to establish common and special features in the poetic works of symbolist poets.

Results. For the poet A.A. Blok, as well as for the philosopher V.S. Solovyov, death seemed like a secret inaccessible to living people, which was reflected in his poem “Behind the Coffin”. Describing in this poetic work the funeral procession, the poet philosophically argued about the predictability of everything alive in the world and at the same time emphasized the unpredictable nature of death. In the works of A.A. Blok and V.S. Solovyov there were various Christian symbols that took on the meanings of both life and death. Thus, in the poem by A.A. Blok “Monk Walked and Carried Holy Signs...” the life and death of the monk symbolized a flower, and in another poem of the poet “I am Waiting for Death Near the Morning Star...” a star acted as a symbol of death, the light from which accompanied the process of dying of a person. In the poetic work of A.A. Blok “On the Life Burnt out in the Choir”, the meaning of death was taken by such a Christian symbol as a door:

“Of languid maidens by the door,
Where there is eternal dusk and praise...” [8].

In addition to A.A. Blok, a fan and follower of poetic creativity V.S. Solovyov was a symbolist poet and thinker Vyach. I. Ivanov. In the poem "The Veil of Mercy Hides God's Mystery..." the poet, like V.S. Solovyov, addressed the topic of the need for the presence in a person's life of a moderate sense of fear of natural death, which would allow them to build their life in accordance with the Christian doctrine:

"And may the fear of Death with its salutary shudder
Teach us that in the heavenly furnaces there is cold,
So that your spirit, guest of the Earth, be not cloven,
And the wayfarer doesn't wander by the roadside" [9, p. 401].

In the poetic work of Vyach. I. Ivanov "Blok Died", published in 1921 on the death of A.A. Blok, there was such a Christian symbol of life and death as a door, and in another poetic work of the poet "Funeral Feast of Dionysus" the meanings of life and death were taken by flowers:

"The wind blew; the roses scattered;
The sorrowful cypress bowed down...
Bared, the vines lamented:
The great Dionysus has died!" [10, p. 74].

However, significant scientific interest in this poetic work of Vyach. I. Ivanov is represented not only by flowers as symbols of life and death, in addition to flowers, "Funeral Feast of Dionysus" also contains another religious symbol that takes on the meaning of death in Christianity, namely cypress. Information that the image of cypress from ancient times symbolized death was given in their works by the Russian religious philosopher A.F. Losev and the modern French sociologist B. Marie: "Cypress has long been associated with funeral culture, since it was used in embalming bodies, making coffins, decorating graves and houses during mourning. Cypress is mentioned in the Bible among the trees growing in the garden of paradise (Ezek 31:8)" [11, p. 39].

The appeal to the topics of life and death was also characteristic of the work of another representative of the symbolism of the Silver Age of Russian culture, D.S. Merezhkovsky. In the poem "The Double Abyss", the poet demonstrated a Christian understanding of death, presenting it as a riddle that the living people are not given to fully solve. However, no less a mystery to D.S. Merezhkovsky was human life itself:

"And life, like death, is extraordinary...
In this world here, there is another world.
There is the same horror, the same mystery
Both in the light of day, as in the darkness of night.
Both death and life are kindred abysses:
They are alike and equal,
Alien and dear to one another,
Reflected one in the other" [12, p. 54].

Just like V.S. Solovyov, this poet and religious thinker was worried about the growth of atheistic views in Russian society, as well as the directly related passing into the past of the most important Christian values, the main place among which he assigned the values of a person's love for the neighbor. D.S. Merezhkovsky outlined his reflections on this problem in the poem "Death", in which he compared people who have lost their religious faith with "flowers devoid of their roots". In an effort to remind compatriots of the Christian faith, the thinker turned to Christian symbolism in his works, conveying its meaning to believers in an excellent poetic language. In the poem by D.S. Merezhkovsky "Dandelions" flowers were a symbol of life and death:

"Poor people are humble,
What this means, they do not know...
Who He is, the heart does not ask.
The wind from the hills of Galilee
Carries the fluff of dandelions.
"Blessed are the poor in spirit..."
Who He is, people do not know.
But with dandelion fluff
They strew His feet" [13, p. 21].

In the poet's poem "If Roses Quietly Crumble", not only flowers, but also extinguished stars appeared as a Christian symbol of death:

“If roses quietly shed their petals,
If stars grow dim in the heavens,
Waves break upon the cliffs,
The ray of dawn fades on the clouds...” [14].

For another symbolist poet and major thinker of the Silver Age A.N. Bely, the philosophical understanding of life and death was one of the main topics of poetic creativity, which was reflected in the poems “Uprising” and “Masquerade”, in which A.N. Bely described a mystical image of death similar to the image of death in the fine arts of the Renaissance:

“The dry pole of a scythe
Will clang with iron malice on the floor:
Enters a female guest, will click with a bone,
Will wave a shroud: the guest is death” [15, p. 245].

Christian symbol of life and death in the poem of A.N. Bely “Before Thunderstorm”, was a door, and in the poetic works “Christ is Risen”, “My Friend”, “Friends” a cross and flowers:

“Do not laugh at the dead poet:
Bring him a flower.
On the cross, both in winter and summer,
My porcelain wreath is shattered” [16, p. 202].

Discussion and Conclusion. Despite the fact that symbolist poets tried to demonstrate their own religious preferences by using Christian symbols in their works, as well as remind people of the importance of religious faith, their poetic works had certain features not characteristic of Christian doctrine, which included, for example, a pessimistic attitude to life. Examples of such a view are the poems of A.A. Blok “We will All Go Beyond the Grave” and D.S. Merezhkovsky “Christ is Risen”, “They Sing in the Temple....” Another feature of the poetic works of domestic symbolists was the craving for the romanticization of death, borrowed by them from the works of European romantic poets of the 18th century. Images of the living dead and their vain wanderings on the ground were present in the poems of Vyach. I. Ivanov “Insomnia” and of A.N. Bely “Uprising”.

Thus, several factors influenced the appeal to the topic of Christian symbolism of death in the work of symbolist poets: the growth of atheistic views in Russian society in the first quarter of the 20th century, the October Revolution in Russia, as well as the philosophical problems of poetic creativity of V.S. Solovyov, who chose the problem of the finiteness of the earthly being of a person as the main problem of his own poetic and philosophical creativity. Among the Christian symbols that take on the meanings of life and death in the studied works of symbolist poets A.A. Blok, D.S. Merezhkovsky, Vyach. I. Ivanov and A.N. Bely there is a cross, a flower, a star, a cypress and a door.

The uniqueness of understanding the topic of death in the poetic work of domestic symbolist poets was that they managed to combine the Christian idea of death with pessimistic ideas about life and European romanticism.

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