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Learning International Literary Connections as a Means of Promoting Tolerance: Specificity of the Early Stage of F.M. Dostoevsky's Work Reception in Great Britain

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Abstract

The paper describes a new approach to learning and teaching foreign language communication stressing the significance of promoting tolerance in the learners. It suggests including history of the writer's work reception in the course programme of EFL students. To illustrate the approach, the article analyses the key tendencies of Dostoevsky's early reception in the United Kingdom, explains the significance of "The Russian Novel" by French diplomat and critic E.M. de Vogue as one of the important factors determining the Russian writer's work interpretation, considers H. Vizetelly and F. Whishaw's contribution to introduction of the first English translations to the British readers. The paper summarises the reviews of Dostoevsky's works placed in the British literary periodicals. It also describes the impact of Anglo-French rapprochement on the literary and cultural interchanges and Dostoevsky's reception in particular.

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1. Introduction

One of the most powerful forces driving the development of today's world is globalisation. Leading to increase in number of intercultural and interconfessional contacts in various spheres of life, it makes national communities

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more open towards each other and forms the united world community. This factor brings to the forefront the idea of tolerance – willingness to learn and accept traditions and views of people representing other nationalities. Culture, encompassing music, visual arts and literature, is an unfailing spring of knowledge of traditions, habits and mentality, which allows learners to get a comprehensive idea of the nation, enables them to overcome eventual bias, and paves the way for the full-fledged dialogue with another culture. Due to its specificity, literature always played the leading role in this process. Every nation has its own outstanding men of letters who create the image of the country, its traditions and people. In Great Britain, they are W. Shakespeare, W. Scott, Ch. Dickens, W. Thackeray, O. Wilde, and B. Shaw, in France – Molière, H. de Balzac, V. Hugo, and M. Proust, in Germany – J. Goethe, E.T.A. Hoffmann, and T. Mann. Among the key figures of the Russian literature, there are A.S. Pushkin, M.Yu. Lermontov, N.V. Gogol, I.S. Turgenev and L.N. Tolstoy. Referring to their works, the reader learns about the culture and the people they represent as much as from a special book.

Experience of the history of cross-cultural communication confirms the role of foreign literature in promoting tolerance and, what is more important, the significance of learning history of the outstanding writers' work apprehension by the receiving culture (by translators, critics and writers). Retrospective study of this phenomenon discovers the factors causing culture clash, which helps to predict possible misunderstanding in the global dialogue and find the ways to prevent it, for example, in a foreign language classroom.

In order to illustrate how important it is to follow the destiny of the writer's creative heritage abroad for deeper awareness of the foreign culture, we consider the early stage of F.M. Dostoevsky's personality and work reception in Great Britain.

2. Methodology

The principal method is a historical analysis of the critical works, determining the tendencies of Dostoevsky's heritage reception in Great Britain in 1881-1889; the translations released in 1887-1888; numerous reviews published in British periodicals; and cultural and historic environment of the time. The suggested approach allows tracing the main reasons why the British misread and misinterpreted Dostoevsky and his novels.

3. Discussion of Results

Formally, Dostoevsky entered Britain in 1875, the year when his name appeared in several articles of the popular British literary journal "The Athenaeum": in the review of Russian literature by Eugene Schylar (Schylar, 1875) and in the obituary wrongly published several years before Dostoevsky's death (Ralston, 1875). However, ordinary readers could not get acquainted with his works since none of them had been translated into English yet. For this reason, the book lovers had to read Dostoevsky in French. The first translation – "Notes from the House of the Dead" – appeared in 1881, but it did not receive recognition from the public: specialists considered the translation a loose one, and the novel – a piece documentary fiction, describing the author's life in a forced labour camp.

Great Britain learnt about Dostoevsky several decades later than continental Europe, therefore French scholars and French culture had to become mediators between the writer and his British readers. The most significant role here belonged to E.M. de Vogue and his book "The Russian Novel" published in 1886 and immediately translated into English. Modern scholar P.R. Zaborov describes this text as "... one of the most significant literary manifests of the late 19th century, having played an important role in the history of European (and not only European) aesthetic thought, and at the same time – a kind of laud to the Russian literature of the period" (Zaborov, 2010). For years, the book was the guide leading Europe to understanding or, as we will later show, misunderstanding Russian literature and culture.

E.M. de Vogue (1848–1910) was a strong adherent of Russian-French rapprochement and tried to promote it working for the French Embassy in Saint Petersburg. After resignation, he continued walking this path as a writer and scholar. He considered inchoation of the cultural dialogue between the two states to be the shortest way to their rapprochement (Vogue, 1913). For this reason, former diplomat told about Russia and Russian history in his works of fiction, and about its literature – in his critical essays, published in the liberal newspaper "Revue des Deux Mondes". Later these essays came out as "The Russian Novel", which became the peak of the Russian theme in Vogue's career and brought him fame and recognition worldwide. The book includes chapters devoted to the

preromantic period of Russian literature, romanticism, and the outstanding representatives of realism – N.V. Gogol, I.S. Turgenev, F.M. Dostoevsky and L.N. Tolstoy.

The chapter about Dostoevsky tells the story of his life, gives general description of his works, and analyses the most significant ones. Vogue specially distinguishes three works of the author's literary legacy: the debut novel "Poor People", "Notes from the House of the Dead" and the first novel of his mature work "Crime and Punishment". The critic speaks admiringly of psychological depth of the books, power of the Russian novelist's talent, the farseeing and shrewdness, displayed in Dostoevsky's early work, postexile period and in 1860-s. The critic calls "Crime and Punishment" the "zenith" of the writer's talent. Being generally positive, the review is rather ambiguous. On the one hand, it is "the deepest psychological sketch" since "Macbeth", on the other, it is "the book for scientists who dedicated themselves to studying human soul" able to frighten off an ordinary reader with its complexity (Vogue, 1913). The diplomat considers Dostoevsky's mature work (except "Crime and Punishment") weak in comparison with his early period, thus getting into an argument with the opinion shared by modern specialists in Dostoevsky studies.

Vogue wrote his book to introduce Russian literature to the French. On the one hand, he achieved good results: France and entire Europe knew the names of the outstanding Russian writers; on the other hand, his work did not meet the requirement of impartiality. This drawback found response in the reviews: "One did not know whether to be grateful to Vogue for his introduction of Dostoevsky to a large reading public or to be irritated by the narrowness of his appreciation" (Gide, 1925). H. Muchnic shares this opinion. T.L. Motyleva calls the book "a combination of admiration and bias" (Motyleva, 1988). Thus, the British were initially misinformed about the Russian writer's work and the consequences of this misguiding were impressive.

In 1886 British publisher and journalist Henry Vizetelly started releasing a series of Dostoevsky's works, including "Crime and Punishment", "Idiot", "Injury and Insult", "The Permanent Husband", "The Friend of the Family" ("The Village of Stepanchikovo"), "The Gambler" and "Uncle's Dream" translated by F.J. Whishaw (1854–1934). We do not know whether the publisher and the translator read Vogue's work, or whether they considered his opinion while choosing the works for publication, but all the books they released except "Idiot" had favourable reports of the affluent critic.

Anticipated by "The Russian Novel", the translations drew the attention of the British literary community: many periodicals ("The Athenaeum", "The Academy", "Pall Mall Gazette", "The Spectator", "Scotsman", "Public Opinion", and "Morning Post") published extensive reviews. All commentators unanimously recognized the Russian master's bright personality and extraordinary talent but, after Vogue, they interpreted his works (especially the late ones) as reading for experts in psychology and psychiatry. The «Idiot» strongly disapproved by the French critic received the most scathing criticism. The reviewer from "The Spectator" called this novel "ultimately unattractive" and a "demonstration of abnormalities" (Spectator, 1887). The most radical opinion belonged to John Lomas who called the Russian author "the leader of a sect", and his works – "the mere vehicle of a set of narrow opinions" (Lomas, 1886). Some of the reviewers explained their criticism by the poor quality of translations. However, this opinion seems groundless as even among the educated elite very few could read Russian. These inaccurate judgments definitely had their influence on the reader giving him a distorted understanding of Dostoevsky's novels and the writer himself.

Vogue and the adherents of his approach had a negative impact on the image of Dostoevsky and his legacy in Great Britain. They introduced him to the reading public, but deprived the readers of the ability to form their own judgments: the British knew the name of the Russian author, but their idea of him and his work did not correspond to the reality. The commentators of the time were unable to understand and appreciate Dostoevsky, as his work was in stark contrast to the traditional English literature. In other words, Dostoevsky's realism was interpreted too literally, his novels turned out to be too indigenous for the British aesthetic and critical thought. Ordinary readers and the majority of professionals were not ready to accept the works due to their difference from the Victorian canon.

Nevertheless, some British men of letters did not follow the author of "The Russian novel": Robert L. Stevenson and Oscar Wilde became Dostoevsky's devoted readers. In 1887 the latter one wrote a review of the "Injury and Insult" for "Pall Mall Gazette". He was the first to speak of the incongruity of comparing Dostoevsky with other writers due to his uniqueness that allowed him to take his own place in the world of literature. According to Wilde, Russian novelist has "a power of dealing with the deepest mysteries of psychology and the most hidden springs of

life” and his realism is “terrible because it is true” (Wilde, 1887). Wilde recognizes Dostoevsky as a master of portrait who knows how to depict the hero’s character and emotional state through small gestures, clothing, actions, avoiding lengthy explanations and descriptions. Wilde’s shrewdness is impressive, as this statement is almost an axiom of modern Dostoevsky Studies.

R.L. Stevenson also became Dostoevsky’s considerate and loyal reader. Before the English translations of “Injury and Insult” and “Crime and Punishment” came out, he had read both works in French. In his letter to J. Symonds he called “Crime and Punishment” “the greatest book” he had read in ten years (Stevenson, 1886). However, even some of his friends did not share his opinion. According to the Scottish writer, the reason why the British reading public rejected the novel was the “impotence in many minds of today which prevents them from living in a book or a character, and keeps them standing afar off” (Stevenson, 1886). The example of Wilde and Stephenson is only the exception that proves the rule.

To obtain a complete view of the factors, determining Dostoevsky’s heritage reception in Great Britain, we also have to consider cultural environment of the time. Gradual rapprochement with France, taking place throughout the century, reached its peak in 1880-s. French influence was particularly noticeable in the fields of art and literature. The popular French phrase “fin de siècle” (“end of the century”) inextricably tied with another phrase “fin de globe” (“Judgment Day”) came into circulation among the British artistic and literary elite. However, we should emphasize that the meaning of this concept for the French and British had significant differences. In France, this phrase meant the “impudent exoticism” and “novelty”, while in Great Britain it had pejorative connotations, and meant something distorted, reprehensible and grotesque (Cevasco, 1990). Anything that did not match the settings of Victorian morality could easily be ranked as “fin de siècle”. In other words, the new trend, welcomed in France, was treated as something inappropriate, indecent, contrary to the unshakable foundations of the traditional society in Great Britain. For this reason, in the late XIX century England could witness two opposing tendencies: the desire of young Francophiles to follow the direction of French art and desire of the conservatives to protect the society from the harmful influence of the alien culture. The most radical Francophobes suggested prohibiting publications of the novels by E. Zola and G. Maupassant in Great Britain and contumacious publishers were to be imprisoned. For this reason Henry Vizetelly, the only publisher of Dostoevsky in Great Britain, had to close down his enterprise and in 1890-s the name of the Russian novelist was buried in oblivion.

4. Conclusion

Summing up the results of the research, we have to admit that Dostoevsky’s early reception in Great Britain was determined by a number of factors: the influence of Vogue’s book, failure of the British literary community to shape their own independent judgments and attitude of political conservatives to British-French cultural interchanges. Looking at the author’s creative heritage through the eyes of the French, the British received a distorted image of him and his work. This interpretation illustrated difficulties the British faced in creating the concept of the Russian culture. Their interest to Russia and Dostoevsky’s work is apparent, however, many critical articles and books demonstrate misreading of the key features of the novelist’s works, reflecting national specificity.

Thus, the suggested analysis helps to formulate the principles of British-Russian cultural interaction and define the communication are as demanding particular attention and cognitive tuning in order to apprehend the specificity of the foreign culture. Study of the British reception of other Russian writers and cultural luminaries’ personalities and their work gives the opportunity to elicit and classify the tendencies of intercultural dialogue between the British and Russians and give guidelines to its participants that will definitely prepare the ground for developing special academic courses and methodological tools. To obtain a complete view of this bilateral process, it is also important to explore the tendencies of Russian understanding of the British art and literature. This approach improves awareness of the roots of cross-cultural misunderstandings, which is vital for promoting tolerance towards other ethnicities.

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