

XV International Conference "Linguistic and Cultural Studies: Traditions and Innovations", LKTI  
2015, 9-11 November 2015, Tomsk, Russia

## Reception of N.S. Leskov's Religious and Philosophical Worldview in English-speaking Critic

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### Abstract

The monograph of American researcher Irmhild Christina Sperrle 'The organic worldview of Nikolai Leskov' focuses on the philosophical foundations of the writer's worldview. The aim of this article is to clarify religious and philosophical aspects of literary works of the writer, which allows obtaining a complete picture of the Leskov's work as an integral literary system. Journalistic and artistic creativity of the writer contains a wealth of material to prove the thesis of organicity in Leskov's worldview. In our article we focus on the concept of organic integrity and its realization on the stylistic level of Leskov's journalistic texts.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Scientific Committee of LKTI 2015.

**Keywords:** N.S. Leskov; organicism; religious worldview; journalism.

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### 1. Introduction

Leskov's personality and literary works have attracted researchers' attention at the end of the XIX century. Over such a long period of time (XIX until the present time) a variety of aspects referring to Leskov's creativity have been considered: genre and stylistic features of his works, artistic language, reflection of the socio-political and ideological debate in his works, a system of moral ideals, values, and the imagery of his works. Today Leskov studies deal with such issues of Leskov's creativity as collection, comment and attribution of writer's texts, as

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researchers face the problem of incompleteness of his work. Philosophical and religious dimension of Leskov's creativity and worldview are at the centre of international researchers. The article introduces the analysis of Leskov's views as a writer as well as a journalist presented by Sperrle (2002).

## 2. Religious aspect in Leskov's works

A number of international scholars have repeatedly appealed to religious issues in Leskov's art. Such researchers as McLean (1977), Edgerton (1951), Lantz (1981), Heier (1970), Muckle (1978), Pritchett (1962) and others have emphasized Leskov's commitment to Protestantism. For example, Muckle (1978) expresses the idea that Leskov's creativity should be studied through the prism of Protestantism. Researchers are also interested in investigating ideas of quakerism and radstockism in Leskov's works. Edgerton (1951) and Pritchett (1962) have proved connection between Leskov's novel 'Vale' and quaker's plot. Heier (1970) compares Leskov's book 'Society split' about Lord Radstock and 'Lord-Apostle in St. Petersburg big light' written by Prince Mishcherskij. The English scientist Malcolm (1951) focuses on Leskov's letter to V.A. Pashkov, who followed Radstock's ideas in Russia, published by Edgerton.

The writer found in these exercises ideas that were close to him. From quakerism he borrowed 'Quaker mysticism that assumed constant acquisition of Revelation in this spiritual and mystical experience', according to Sazhin (2007). Subsequently, it was reflected in the writer's cycle called 'pravednichesky' (or 'truth-seeking'), where the center is based on the idea of daily Christian labor. *Stundist's* sermons made the artist turn to pietism that is approval of religious feeling priority over dogma. 'Impoverishment' preached the imminent end of the world, which gave the writer material for the study of marginal types of consciousness that will be embodied in art, in the images of his characters of tramps, wanderers, representing an alternative for everyday consciousness 'fright'. Leskov is known to be extremely interested in certain national character types whose images are reflected in such works as 'Lefthander', 'Iron Will', 'Robbery', and 'Warrior'.

And besides, Leskov was actively involved in the debate on spiritualism. Being attracted by its philosophical side, he writes a book and several articles about Lord Radstock, gives a critical assessment of his sermon. Thus, by the end of 1860s - beginning of 1870s due to the fact that the writer refers to different doctrines and sects, he develops a specific artistic world. According to Sazhin (2007, p. 48), 'the reason of Leskov's interest in sectarians is the interest of a psychologist, researcher of aesthetics and writer, and not the interest of the historian, ethnographer, or religious researcher'. In such preachers and prophets as Radstock and Valdenshtrem Leskov is interested in the literary type of hero-preacher. Leskov's characters are always people who are inspired, enchanted, mysterious, drunk and crazy. These typical Leskov's heroes are cranks, a kind of marginal people, who sincerely believe in their preaching. According to Leskov's judgement, the Lord Radstock himself is an 'eccentric', a 'naive Lord'. The type of an eccentric hero is embodied in such works as 'The Enchanted Wanderer' (1873), 'The Sealed Angel' (1873), 'Inspirational vagrants' (1881) and many others.

In our opinion, the religious aspect is one of the most interesting and controversial issues of the writer's art. Many literary critics, psychologists, philosophers, who have studied his work, did not come to a conclusion about the writer's commitment to a particular faith, as Leskov was interested in different manifestations of faith. Throughout his life the writer expressed different attitudes to the official church. In the 1860s it is in line with church doctrine, but by the 1870s the writer begins to rethink his attitude towards the church. In the middle 1870s Leskov, disillusioned with the official church, reads the Gospel anew. The writer does not like the formality and negligence of contemporary church. In the 1880s he refers to the Tolstoy's ideas.

## 3. Leskov's religious views in Sperrle's monograph

The monograph of Sperrle (2002) is representative in that it seeks to identify the main vector of the writer's worldview. This becomes the basis, according to the researcher, of the so-called 'organicism'. In addition, the author of the work is constantly drawn to the religious aspect of creativity in Leskov's worldview, referring to his letters and articles. Before delving into the religious component of writer's world, let us consider the philosophy of organicism, which, according to Sperrle, is central to the Leskov's worldview.

### 3.1. *The essence of organicism*

Organicism is a philosophical direction that appeared in the second half of the XIX century. The society in terms of this trend is seen as an integral organism. It draws parallels between the society and the living organism. For example, the biosocial theories of Albert Schäffle and René Worms were conducted in a direct analogy with the organism and society: trade was likened to circulation, government activity – to the functioning of the brain.

Leskov's literary activity develops in the mainstream of this trend. It seems that the writer has studied the writings of economists and sociologists of that time. Detailed consideration of this trend concerning Leskov's creativity and worldview occurs in chapter one 'Leskov's Organic Worldview'. At the beginning of the chapter Sperrle gives a historical background clarifying the philosophy of organicism. This trend goes back to the Greek philosophy, Platon and Aristotle, who argued that 'a work of art should be like a living being'. The problem of form and content becomes relevant in the philosophy of organicism. At the beginning of the XX century this trend was reflected in the concept of internal relations, theory of systems and Gestalt psychology (assuming a holistic way, the structure of vision). Sperrle believes that organicism is based on the idea that 'the whole is more than the sum of its parts'. The author suggests that, in general, everything is interconnected and changing one part causes a change in the entire whole. As a result, the whole is likened to any living organism that goes through various stages (the existence, development and degradation) and seeks to develop.

The metaphor of a growing tree in organicism as the model of organism is replaced by the human body. Gender becomes important, because the process of creation is revealed in the union of male and female principles, and as a result, the creation of something new. Consequently, sexual desire in organicism equates to a desire to know what entails a certain creative promise. According to Sperrle, a more appropriate metaphor for the creative process is another organ of the human body and namely the stomach. The researcher enters the lexical and semantic levels for the interpretation of this metaphor: 'We 'crave' information, give 'food' for thought, and sometimes cannot 'stomach' (digest) certain facts or people'.

As a result, Sperrle is drawn to the lexical level of Leskov's work. The researcher shows that Leskov often used in his style organic metaphors, especially when describing the relationship between man and life. The source of his metaphors is often folk art or the Bible. For example, Leskov compares timid people with crows and bold ones with eagles. Etymologically, the lexical unit 'wing' goes to the root of the Russian verb 'inspire', which Leskov often used. In addition to these metaphors the writer repeatedly uses the adjective 'organic' to describe relationships between events and people.

Leskov's characters are organic, that is spontaneous, natural and simple. Heroes are deeply religious, but they are not aware of their religion as it is organically present in their lives, so we can say that they are tolerant to other faiths. The writer uses his characters and styles to convey to the reader his own point of view and opinion. Leskov stood on the position of religious tolerance, believing that sincere faith cannot do any harm to the person. Leskov's characters are attractive because they are sincere and faddish, as well as passionate following their faith. Sperrle cites the example of Princess Protazanov in the story 'Seedy generation'. Princess is characterized as a bold and resolute woman in matters of faith and religion, she actively supported the debate on religious themes, was not afraid of being criticised. The writer himself was impressed by his character, as he was interested in religious matters and expressed his personal views about them, and kept his worldview and did not hesitate to criticise.

### 3.2. *Leskov's journalism*

Let us refer to Leskov's journalistic activity. It is worth noting that in many of his articles, particularly during the 1860s, he openly criticizes the current state of society and raises all sorts of topics and issues. For example, exploring the social life, the publicist actively expressed his views on folk themes and related issues of education, in particular religious education of ordinary people. At that time, he recognized the importance of educating people, who, in his opinion, were cornered, lived in absolute darkness and ignorance. The publicist appealed to the society and claimed to cope with the 'enslavement' of Russian people that hinders the development of people's life.

In series of articles about the working class Leskov raises the problem of social hygiene, drinking, which can be solved through education that can heal from this illness: 'We need to shed light to the masses of understanding, need to clean up their tastes, we need to provide them other pleasures of life apart from low bar atmosphere', 'all this is achieved only through education of the masses and the assumption of their participation in the aesthetic pleasures' (article 'The issue of the elimination of drunkenness in the working class'). The publicist was sure that the task of

the journalist is to highlight various problems of life, regardless of the significance of the phenomenon, talks about the burning issues of the time, so he focuses on 'many hygienic ulcers of social life' (article 'About the working class'). Already in his earlier articles the publicist used organic vocabulary and metaphors. Using this style Leskov affects the reader and gets the society to take action and initiate changes.

Sperrle (2002) notes that Leskov has always stressed the need for education, especially for women. Indeed, he speaks about it in many of his articles beginning in the 1860s: 'Russian women and emancipation' (1861), 'Internal Review: Saratov peasant women as public figures. ...' (1862), 'The opinion of Russian Jews 'About possibilities'. - Possibility of women's emancipation in practice. ...' (1862), 'About the women's section of our printing house' (1863), 'A Few Words in response to domestic chronicler of 'The Russian Word' concerning printing typists' (1863). In these articles, Leskov takes the sociologist position and explains the essence and meaning of the term 'emancipation', compares the European, American and Russian society from the point of view relating to this issue, outlines the boundaries of the concept and eventually proves all the advantages of this process. Education, according to Leskov, can ennoble a person, give him food for thought, and cure the society from many illnesses.

The issue of the public evil in Leskov's worldview remains of great importance. The writer believed that evil must be eliminated by joint efforts of everyone. Each subject should be held accountable for their actions. All people make their own choice which should not be contrary to public development. In connection with reflections on the revolutionaries and nihilists, the writer unequivocally insists that these people are undermining the health of Russia, as they blindly support the truth of their beliefs. He expressed his views in an article in 1870, 'Russian Public Notes', published in the 'Commercial Gazette'. In this article he is talking about the state of public life. The style of the article is rich in organic metaphors. For example, reforms, according to the publicist, lead nowhere causing only harm: 'All of this is just a cause of closer and more inevitable destruction of the organism, because the stomach cannot digest all the facts that it has received' (article 'Russian public notes'). The state of Leskov time represents itself two camps that argue with each other and offer their own way outs ('cure', 'cure-all') of the crisis, as they consider Russian society being unhealthy. The publicist rejects this view, believes that the socio-economic situation in the Russian society has improved since the 1860s.

#### 4. Leskov's vision of the world

From the perspective of the writer, the world needs to be taken as it is, we should make every effort to achieve success and quietly wait for what the life has prepared. Lacking the feeling of self-satisfaction, inability to understand and explain mysterious or inexplicable things should, on the contrary, according to the writer's opinion, be pleasant to humans. In an effort to solve the mystery, riddle, find an answer to the question a man rises above trivial things and makes a lot of useful things, and, above all, for himself. One should accept everything that he meets on his way and keep moving on. Using metaphors of stomach and mind Sperrle sees analogies in a way the stomach needs food we respectively need new knowledge for the mind and work of brain. Mind as Leskov believes constantly needs to function, or work. A person needs improving himself. In Leskov's opinion, mind as well as the stomach (meaning the digestive process, as a result of which the body keeps healthy substances and gets rid of harmful ones) saves only useful knowledge for a person thus distinguishing what is good and what is bad. Someone who does not understand the essence of the process, is a silly person, as he only gets himself full, and for the sake of the full belly he turns a 'God's fool'. Sperrle suggests that these character types can be attributed to Akhilla in 'Cathedral Folk' and Onoprii in 'Rabbit Carriage'. According to Sperrle brain work should be based on the model of the abdomen: absorb all useful and release all unnecessary things. Such a statement is close to Leskov's views.

National mental feature of a person is his faith, which is the basis of human life. Christianity as Leskov believes, must be 'living faith', that is open to individual interpretation. In other words, each person discovers the foundations of faith and religion anew, brings his own understanding. In our opinion, Sperrle rightly observes, that Leskov likes to check his characters by the firmness of their religious beliefs, placing them in conflict situations that contradict their beliefs. For example, Savely Tuberosov in the novel 'Soboryane' criticizes the church, although he is a deeply religious man. There is a dichotomy of words and actions, which manifests itself in crisis situations.

Leskov believes, that the Christian faith is rooted in love, which cannot be taught, it must come from the soul. The writer believed that Christianity is the learning of life, not an abstract idea. Each person understands the Christian faith differently, as God himself created different people with different beliefs. This idea was expressed by Abram in Leskov's legend 'The Tale about Fyodor - Christian and his friend Abram Zhidovinov' (1886). Sperrle

(2002) makes an important point, that the love for one's neighbor plays an important role not only in Leskov's worldview, but is also a distinctive feature of the Orthodox faith, rather than of the Western interpretation of Christianity. It is important for Leskov that a person finds his own path that would lead him to the 'light source', that is to the right direction in life. This thesis is correlated with Leskov's idea concerning good and evil. Sperrle concludes that in contrast to the church fathers, who argue that evil does not exist, there is only the absence of good, Leskov has completely realized, that these two categories (good and evil) exist in a person's life. In this regard, the researcher in the monograph gives an example from the story 'Toupee Artist' (1883), in which the protagonist, after an unfair trial and imprisonment, comes to freedom and becomes a victim of a tavern owner.

Thus, Leskov introduces his understanding of faith. He believes that a person should strive for spiritual development, comprehend Christian truths, and possibly add his understanding, as God created people with different thinking. Therefore, the writer tends to accept the position of faith tolerance. For him it is not important what kind of faith people pursue, but their striving for faith. Leskov continues his religious search and further appeals to the ideas of Lev Tolstoy.

## 5. Conclusion

Alongside with literary works the journalistic activity has taken a very important part in Leskov's creative system. For him both spheres have been presented as equally valuable and interconnected areas within the writer's artistic world. On the one hand, publicist texts somehow preceded his literary works; publicist articles gave rise to the themes and subjects of his literary pieces, as well as clarified the author's position in the short stories, novels and chronicles. On the other hand, the writer's literary activity provided necessary 'food for thought' concerning aesthetics and poetics of his publicist articles, as such reflecting a universal type of the author's thinking. Since his first steps in literature Leskov has always written in two parallel dimensions: literary and publicist ones. Publicist activity has referred to some kind of life laboratory where he has been self-identifying himself and has been developing as a writer and public citizen; as a result his texts can be regarded as milestones relative to the stages in this development process. Logically, the stages of Leskov's development as a publicist are organically linked with his evolution as a writer.

Leskov's publicist articles are characterized by the principle of openness for the dialogue with the social environment, different national cultures, varieties of human spiritual activity (philosophy, ethics, politics, religion), diverse schools of learning and concepts (from ideas of Old Believers to genuine interest in spiritualism, radstockism and Tolstoyism) aimed at searching for 'perfect truth' and ways for self-improvement and self-education. The above mentioned thesis is connected with internal freedom of his publicist activity, which is independent from given ideas or strictly prescribed rules. Reflecting the writer's aspiration towards the integral and dynamic vision of the world, Leskov's publicist practice constituted a valuable and logical way in the development of the writer's creativity concept, its characteristic features being writer's active participation in the life of the contemporary society and his deep personal reflection. Among different trends and processes organicism in Leskov's view appears as a means for analyzing and evaluating the reality. This direction allows him presenting the reality in integrity and interrelation with different problems, helps to critically view a number of burning issues of his time. And what is also of vital importance for Leskov, that organicism has a direct influence on the genre and stylistic system of the writer.

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