

THE CATEGORY OF EMPTINESS IN DMITRY PRIGOV'S SOVIET TEXTS

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Abstract: The purpose of the work is to identify the main creative principle of the conceptual poet Dmitry Alexandrovich Prigov, who was a member of the Moscow Romantic conceptualism group in the late 1970s — mid-1980s. The article shows that the main object of Prigov's poetic searches was Soviet reality and the literature of socialist realism. Using the material of pseudo-Soviet texts, the poet demonstrated that the Soviet man was surrounded by a universal emptiness, that all the ideas and ideals of Soviet life were empty and aimless. It is shown that Prigov totally devastated all the components of the literature of socialist realism — from the idea, composition, plot, imaginative system to the style and language that had lost their individual origin. Prigov typified the Soviet in order to reveal its substantial and aesthetic primitivism.

Keywords: D. A. Prigov; Moscow conceptualism; strategy of emptiness; "zero writing"; templates and stencils.

1 Introduction

When talking about the poetic work of Dmitry Alexandrovich Prigov (1940–2007), the first and most important circumstance should be recognized that he is one of the leading figures of "Moscow romantic conceptualism" (Lipovetsky 1997; Epstein 2000; Leiderman 2003; Bogdanova 2004). Together with Ilya Kabakov, Prigov stood at the origins of a broad and powerful avant-garde movement of the 1960s — 1980s, called conceptualism. Prigov is recognized as a deep theorist and an active practitioner of conceptualism — visual and verbal, pictorial and literary. It is necessary to agree with the definition of the critic A. Zhukov, that Prigov is "the foremost master of conceptualism <...> his poetry is a kind of face of the current" (Zhukov 1994, 330).

The peculiarity of the poet's actual and complete involvement in the conceptualist literary (broader — cultural) process was the creation of the image of Dmitry Alexandrovich Prigov — one of the conceptual creations of the poet, who, like Koz'ma Prutkov, had his own view of the world, his own image-personality, a special creative gift and recognizable poetic style. According to the correct observation of modern criticism, Prigov "embodies conceptualism in person" (Kasyanov 1994, 82).

2 Literature Review

The absolute coincidence of the name, surname, patronymic of the real personality of the poet and the fictional image character makes it difficult to analyze the perception of poetry of the real Prigov, the separation of his (their) judgments in creativity and in the essays. But if you try to observe the parameters of the phantom image, not to go beyond its boundaries, then understanding the originality of the poet's creative heritage will be more accessible. The point is that Dmitry Alexandrovich Prigov wrote more than 24,000 poems (this was his creative plan by 2000), but it is very difficult to form a set of features of his artistic manner. It almost defies formalization (Those who overcame socialist realism 2023).

Meanwhile, the volume of Prigov's poetic heritage is enormous and provides a huge material for scientific reflection. According to the observations of the famous German researcher and narratologist V. Schmid, the abundance of Prigov's writing elevates him to the rank of "Stakhanovite of the poetic workshop" (Schmid 1994, 78). According to the conclusion of the postmodern critic V. Kuritsyn, in Prigov's legacy, "pure volume becomes an aesthetic event" (Kuritsyn 2001, 105).

The leading (dominant) subject-thematic orientation of Dmitry Alexandrovich Prigov's (DAP) poetry is the Soviet system, Soviet statehood, Soviet politics, the Soviet way of life, the Soviet man. According to O. Bogdanova, it is not even the image of a "communist dormitory", but the "Soviet mentality" itself (Bogdanova 2004, 455). It is no coincidence that one of Prigov's most representative collections was named "Soviet Texts" (Prigov 1997), and the poet defined his creative method as Sovvitalism (Prigov 1997).

If we agree that Prigov "parasitized the forms of an obsolete culture" (Yerofeyev 1993, 137), then its name is undoubtedly Soviet culture, based entirely on the principles of the basic method of Soviet art — the Socialist realism. And this, perhaps, is the most important, in our opinion, and fundamentally significant representative feature of Prigov's work — a focus primarily on the sociologized Soviet discourse, earlier than on the aesthetic itself. Following the critic A. Zorin, we can agree that everything Soviet acquires a "poetic legitimization" in the poetry of the DAP (Zorin 1997, 16). The Soviet (in any of its forms) is put above all by Prigov, the conceptualist.

Such a Soviet attitude entails the leading creative principle of Prigov sovitalism — poetic work based on thematic priorities and principles (or imitation of principles) of the art of Socialist realism. According to the observations of Y. Dobrenko, a major Western specialist in the field of Socialist realism, on a superficial receptive level, the poet Prigov intentionally "seeks to realize the requirements of the aesthetics of socialist realism" (Dobrenko 1990, 176), even if this realization is based on mythologems, more precisely mythoideologems of the theory and practice of socialist realism.

3 Emptiness as a principle

So, Prigov creates texts ("objects", "opuses", "things", "miniatures", "pseudo-poems") thematically predominantly Soviet, methodologically (from "method") — socialist realism. The concentrated model of his work is Soviet and socialist realism. However, his "Soviet" texts, formally clothed in the socialist realist canon, are devoid of only one thing — a meaningful, semantic and ideological-political core. They are empty. It is in this, in our opinion, that the constitutive features of Prigov poetry manifest themselves — its emptiness, intentionally chosen emptiness, meaningful emasculation. Emptiness as a principle.

Whatever genre Prigov chooses, he never has the same genre, it does not coincide with any of the canonical genres — everything is *wrong* with him, everything is *like*, everything is *different*. That is, in terms of genre, DAP poetry is also empty — it does not correspond to any of the possible genres, therefore Prigov often has definitions of "pseudo-verse", "quasi-verse", "imitation of verse", "strange ... combinations of words". Prigov's semantic constants of the genre are being emptied: the sonnet will no longer become an expression of a love theme, the poem will lose its plot organization, the verse may even acquire the appearance of prose (or "not-prose"). Not only is there "genre purity" (Bogdanova 2004), as a rule, Prigov does not have any genre components at all, they are not observed in principle. According to B. Borukhov, the texts composed by Prigov only "pretend to be some kind of genre, in fact they are not" (Borukhov 1993, 114).

4 Images of a pseudo-author and a pseudo-hero

As is known, in classical literary studies, the most important poetical constant of a literary work is the images of the author and the hero (often the author's *alter ego*). Researcher O. Bogdanova says about this: "The question of the presence of the image of the author and the subject of the poetic text, the question of their relationship or <...> the question of constructing a conceptual personality is fundamental for Prigov's poetry" (Bogdanova 2004, 458). The question of authorship (the image of a pseudo-author) in Prigov's poetry has already been partially touched upon above. But it is important to recall that long before the appearance of the association "Moscow romantic conceptualism", the French poststructuralist theorist Roland Barthes in an essay in 1967 announced the "death of the author" in postmodern art (Barth 1994, 384–391). One of the options for the practical actualization of the "death of the author" in postmodern (and, accordingly, in conceptualist) texts is the maximum convergence of the image of the author and the image of the hero, the erasure of boundaries, their intentional equalization and assimilation. It is clear that it is on this path that the image of the hero, the image of Dmitry Alexandrovich Prigov, arises, explicating the unacceptable fusion of images of the author and the hero in traditional literature. Prigov, the *author*, acts as a Prigov *character*. Moreover, Prigov's images of the author and the hero do not just converge, they, as already mentioned, merge into a *single entity* — DAP.

Taken as the basis for the manifestational declarations of the conceptualists, the R. Bart's idea of the author's death, which was not fundamentally questioned or critically reflected by theorists and practitioners of Moscow conceptualism, was firmly supported by the principle of Soviet socialist realist art in Prigov. The point is that back in 1920, Lenin proclaimed the fundamental principle of the art of socialist realism: "Art belongs to the people". In the strategy of *literalization*, widely exploited by conceptualism, Prigov renounces authorship and, as mentioned earlier, counts all his creations as Dmitry Alexandrovich Prigov, the phantom author. That is, even at the level of authorship — phantom in nature — DAP's poetry turns out to be hollow.

As for the image of the lyrical hero in Prigov's poetic text, it can be assumed that here, too, the recipient reader will find emptiness. That's the way it is. Prigov declares: "I don't write poetry either confessional or personal, and I don't have a personal language" (Gandlevsky 1993, 5). Indeed, any lyrical self in DAP poetry is not a step towards personalizing a poetic character, but on the contrary, a path to targeted depersonalization. As the analysis of poetic texts shows, the image of a lyrical voice in any of Prigov's poems is an illusion of personality and subjectivity. Each of his characters is as compilative and syncretic as possible, he absorbs the most typical — or rather the most common — signs of the self that the poet models in verse. His characters, as a rule, do not have names (if they flash, then they are obviously precedent, in fact being mental facts and / or intertexts).

Most often, Prigov's character names are explications such as Militanser ("Apotheosis of a militanser"), Ballerina ("I'm a little ballerina..."), Locksmith ("A locksmith goes out into the winter courtyard..."), etc. Note that the sign of the lyrical self is not the quality of the personality, not its individual character, but its professional / social affiliation, a priori erasing the signs of the individual. This is exactly what the poet himself admits: "I work, of course, mainly with Russian culture. It has fixed images and roles, and behavioral models" (Zorin 1993, 123), while, according to the conceptualist poet, "image, behavior, gesture in the marked area of art means, if not more, then at least not less than an artistic object" (Zorin 1993, 123). Prigov exploits a generalized-typed, averagely-universalized image (*type*) of a Soviet man-citizen, the author does not provide for the measure of individualization of the character in principle, the maximum of the hero's isolation is his involvement in any Soviet production (in the typology of Soviet literature — to the factory, shop, school). Moreover, in the epicenter of the image — the

image of a policeman, a ballerina, a schoolboy, a locksmith, a husband, a conscious citizen (in the end) — the phantom personality of Dmitry Alexandrovich Prigov is invariably located.

5 The central role of the ego-character DAP

As the postmodern critic V. Kuritsyn notes, "There is a lot of Prigov..." (Kuritsyn 1993, 142). But it would be more correct to say "There is a lot of DAP...", because, of course, it is DAP, not Prigov, who is subject to character dressing. According to critic and writer fellow Vic. Yerofeyeva, the author in the Prigov text disguises himself "not only out of love for dressing up", but also because "from this, trouble of the most diverse properties is born at the level of tension of two cultures — folk and intellectual, at the level of tension of the state and the poet, at the level of tension of the poet and the crowd" (Yerofeyev 2001, 27). It is not Prigov who is the author, but DAP-image reshapes itself in accordance with those specific situational coordinates to which the poet author moves DAP, whether it is an apartment, a store, a subway, a street bench, a theater, etc.

Often, when discussing the author's role in Prigov's poetry, researchers speak of him as a director (Gandlevsky 1993, 5). It seems that Prigov himself is ready to agree with such an interpretation. However, in our view, in relation to Prigov texts, the definition of *director* does not work — Prigov the poet does not control the stage, not the theater, not the collective, but only DAP, the modern Prigov's Kozma Prutkov, a kitchen philosopher and an observant philistine. Prigov does not direct a dramatic conflict or a plot stage collision, he intentionally *mechanically* reproduces the psychology and mentality of an artificial DAP, on himself demonstrating behaviors of various types, faceless Soviet citizens of dummies. If you try to look inside the image — the image of a locksmith, a ballerina, a student, a subway passenger, etc. — then only DAP will invariably be at the epicenter, with its monotonously empty language, empty psychological warehouse.

In this sense, the narratologist V. Schmid is right, who does not agree with giving DAP significant functions as a director or conductor. The researcher asks: "How justified are all these concepts: role, mask, image, game. After all, such designations imply a kind of duality of the subject, which, as it were, splits into two forms, into a serious person and a grimacing character, into real and false subjects" (Schmid 1994, 78). As V. Schmid correctly recalls, postmodernists "do not believe in the existence of an authentic, authentic subject, which exists independently of all masks, games and roles. <...> There is only an image or a simulacra" (Schmid 1994, 78). And although Schmid's reflections go beyond the confluence of the author and the hero (for the German researcher, this is rather a question of postmodern worldviews about reality and illusion), even then it is not entirely true to talk about Prigov's directorial function.

The impersonality of Prigov's characters does not lie in the fact that each of them is devoid of individuality, but in the fact that the conceptualist poet has a *single* image represented — an image that, for one reason or another, takes on different guises and perceives reality from a certain and always *uniform* angle of view. This uniqueness and singleness are a manifestation of the same unchanging conceptual and conceptualized emptiness.

In empty poetry, in the intentionally devastated poetry of Prigov (or its likeness), the very need for any specialness, originality, specificity is lost and annihilated. Such a necessity is not inherent in the poetics of DAP, it is annulled initially and fundamentally, demonstratively and declaratively. The absence of signs of individualization at any level of a poetic (or prose) text is a constitutive feature of Prigov's poetics. The absence of a sign is a sign.

6 The verbal and stylistic emptiness of DAP poetry

The poetry of DAP, empty in its meaningful content, as a result, profanes literally everything — both the form and the content,

both the level of stylistic and verbal expression. The phantom DAP is not burdened with the selection of words, characteristic features of the voice of one or another self-character, it does not need punctuation marks or the distinction of grammatical forms of the nominative or predicate.

The generic feature of the subject/object within one mini-text can change two or even three times — according to the presence of three genera in the paradigm of the Russian language. The same subject in the text can be in the masculine, feminine and neuter gender at the same time (e.g., “Like a heavenly service of everyday life...”). A traditional character object may lose its gender altogether, or, conversely, an inanimate object may receive a generic attribute, a grammatical gender, which it has never had before.

Saturating the text with a multiplicity of uniform empty images-types, shapes and the plan of their expression, the utterances (their speech, style, language) translates into a desolate, meaningless and colorless sphere. It is no coincidence that the critic V. Kuritsyn notes that “Prigov’s poems, written under different images, very rarely differ greatly in intonation, rather resemble each other, personality, if declared, is declared only thematically, but not stylistically” (Kuritsyn 2001, 106). Friend and poet S. Gandlevsky states “Prigov’s purely dispassionate attitude towards different styles” (Gandlevsky 1993, 5). And this is understandable, since all images, styles, languages are just DAP.

In Prigov’s poetry, literally all the signs of a poetic text, that is, the size of the verse, the length of the line, the law of internal organization, the nature of rhyming, the proportionality of the lines, the volume of stanzas, etc., lose any obligation or necessity. And if this is so, then the end result of the empty poetry of DAP is also only emptiness. It is conceptually and constitutively for Prigov to create initially and fundamentally empty poetry, empty images, empty plots, empty meanings. Emptiness is chosen as a key conceptual feature of his poetry, which is why it is so difficult to identify some familiar originality that marks the poetic world, the artistic manner, the individual mentality of the poet.

Prigov has no formal features of verse *conceptually*, his emptiness is his basic fundamental concept. It is on this path — through the concept of emptiness — that DAP profanes Soviet literature, more broadly, Soviet culture, the Soviet world, Soviet life, and Soviet mentality, which he has chosen as a creative pseudo-orientation. The emptiness allows Prigov to carry out *deideologization*, *demythologization*, *discrediting* of the entire Soviet world at all its levels — “discrediting entities that have lost the right to our trust, values that have come under suspicion and require expertise to confirm their usefulness” (Borukhov 1993, 112).

To expect uniqueness and artistic originality from Prigov’s verse, to look for the peculiarities of his poetic world, means to miss the constitutive character of his emptiness, his empty poetry. Emptiness is the only significant and fundamental thing for Prigov. It is a condition for the form and meaning formation of his poetic works. Moreover, it should be understood that the *meaning* lexeme in relation to DAP is filled with emptiness — its meaning (content, semantics) is conceptually empty and meaningless.

These are the obituaries written and signed by “the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Soviet Government” (Prigov 1997, 112), for example, on the death of A. Pushkin (or others). Undoubtedly, at first glance, when reading such obituaries, the absurdity catches the eye.

But such a perception corresponds to the reflection of the traditionalist recipient. In fact, this is once again an explication of emptiness (including the official emptiness of all party obituaries), which DAP actualizes in every line. Prigov does not destroy the “genre” from the point of view of formal and

meaningful, as some researchers believe, this is not his task. His task is different — through the emptiness (meaninglessness) of the content he generated (for example, an obituary), he demonstrates the total, universal emptiness of the Soviet world.

7 The author’s axiology in DAP poetry

In the perception of a literary work, the reader and the critic traditionally strive to grasp the author’s position and, as a result, to explicate the author’s axiology. In the empty poetry of DAP, there can initially be no writer’s assessments — firstly, because axiology was manifestly withdrawn from the sphere of artistic creativity by Western postmodern theorists, and secondly, the evaluative mode was also zeroed out in the context of voids exposed and demonstrated by Prigov himself. The axiological emptiness of Prigov’s poems becomes a reflection of the voids of Soviet ideology and its ideologized evaluativeness, a demonstration of their empty conventionality and falsity. The author and the hero of Prigov are “bearers of the Soviet official folklore consciousness” (Zorin 1993, 130), and therefore, according to DAP, they “by definition” cannot rise above the emptiness of Sovietism.

Modern researchers have long noted that, since there is no position of the author in Prigov’s poetry, one of the dominant conceptualist strategies his poetry should be considered the category *as if* (как бы). B. Borukhov qualifies it as “one of the most important categories of the poet’s artistic world, capable of claiming the role of the vertical norm of his style” (Borukhov 1993, 114). The empty world of the *as if* author of DAP seems to exist, *as if* the heroes act in it, *as if* endowed with a kind of Soviet consciousness. The category *as if* is a formal-speech marker of the conceptual emptiness of DAP poetry, a verbal signal of its total emasculation and zeroing.

Banality is another variant of the emptiness revealed by Prigov and served to create a whole cycle of platitudes (“Banal reasoning on the topic of freedom”, “Banal reasoning on the topic of solid foundations of life”, “Banal reasoning on an environmental topic”, “Banal reasoning on the topic: if you go camping tomorrow”, “Banal reasoning on the topic: man does not live by bread alone”, “Banal reasoning on the topic: take care of honor from a young age”, etc.). It seems, according to the titularly conceptualized title, therefore, stable folk phraseological units are being actualized, imbued with the moral potential of folk wisdom and requiring simultaneous interpretation. However, the result is banality and emptiness.

8 Results and prospects

It would be possible to further emphasize the signs of the emptiness of DAP poetry, but this has actually already been done by domestic and foreign critics, although they did not directly connect the “features” of Prigov poetry with intentional conceptualist and conceptual *emptiness*. In the tradition of classical literary studies, researchers inevitably try to highlight and actualize the features of the originality of the work of DAP, missing the poet’s own position. If the recipients had been more attentive to the statements of Prigov himself, the poet and the theorist of conceptualism, then they would not have needed to look for a complicated explanation for the mixing of images in his poetry, the mode of axiological indifference, the facelessness of his character types, the equalization of style and speech expression, etc.

In one of his long-standing interviews, Prigov openly stated: “To write no poem is the most personal thing” (Zorin 1993, 122), to embody the “vacuum of meaning” in the text (Dobrenko 1990, 176). This, in our opinion, should be the main research trend, which in each case will make it possible to explicate not the specifics, not the originality, but the emptiness, the fundamental conceptualist emptiness of DAP poetry.

The void contains the most unique and at the same time comprehensive expression of the originality of the creative manner of the conceptual poet Prigov, more precisely, his image-

deputy Dmitry Alexandrovich Prigov. Closer attention to the image of the DAP will allow us to better understand Prigov's conceptual poetry and his place in the Russian conceptual art of the 1980s.

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