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IS FRENCH REVOLUTION A CATASTROPHY? CHARLES DICKENS AND HILARY MANTEL IN A DIALOGUE THROUGH AGES [1]

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A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens and *A Place of Greater Safety* by Hilary Mantel are in the centre of the essay's author's reflection. The two novels have the same topic – the French Revolution of 1789–1794; they have the same issue – the fate of humanity under very much complex revolution circumstances. While analyzing psycho- and socio-analytical approaches to depicting the Revolution and the issues it raises, its genesis, its progress, its participants, winners and victims, the essay demonstrates some obvious similarity of artistic reconstruction of a human being's fate, despite this human being's various degree of involvement into revolution process. It is the similarity of tragic coverage of such humanity phenomena as love, friendship, dignity, trust, etc. that the essay stresses. On the other hand, some fundamental peculiarities of both novelists in their depicting of the Revolution are demonstrated4 they are based on the differences of writers' understanding of historical novel message and, what is more, on the writers' different paradigms of reconstruction of the past: predominantly sensitive, romantic, didactic in Dickens's narrative, and realistic, sometimes deliberately impassive and documentary tone in Mantel's work. The writers' share psychological dominant is differently realized: in Dickens's novel the author voice determines the narrative development; in Mantel's – narrative polyphony dominates where the voices of the personages, documents, other cultural artifacts are equal.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, Hilary Mantel, historical novel, the French Revolution, humanity, document and imagination.

Two novels which are in the centre of reflection in the essay, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) by Dickens and *A Place of Greater Safety* (written in 1974–1978, published in 1992) by Mantel, are separated by a time gap of a hundred and thirteen years but are connected by the event they differently appeal to –

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the French Revolution of 1789–1794, which influenced the world development for a century and more ahead. These are rather different novels in terms of dominative generic approaches to picturing France under the Revolution: Dickens's s socio-historical and Mantel's psycho-historical ones. We agree with Barbara Hardy's argumentation that in his later novels 'Dickens's concern with social criticism becomes more passionate' [Hardy 1968: 15], and thus history is reconstructed in A Tale of Two Cities mainly through the spectrum of sharp social contrasts, emphasized by usual Dickens's symbolism and sentimentalism. Nick Rennison argues, that in A Place of Greater Safety Mantel's portrait of the Revolution is mostly made of the 'triangular relationship between her three main figures' (Robespierre, Danton and Desmoulins)' [Rennison 2005: 120]; this relationship seems to be private, but Mantel makes of this psychologically sharpened relationship the main career of history.

In one of the final chapters of *A Place of Greater Safety*, Hilary Mantel, depicting the Jacobin terror in Paris of 1793 at its peak after the 17th of September, when the Law of Suspects was introduced, allowing for the arrest of anyone whose conduct suggested they could be supporters of tyranny and counter-revolution, gives a narrative floor to an Executioner. It should be noted that formally *A Place of Greater Safety* is written in Sie-Erzählung, but due to indirect speech we are very often, but not always as it will be in Mantel's masterpiece – Thomas Cromwell trilogy, 'inside' the character's mind; generally speaking this early Mantel's historical novel is remarkable by its narrative polyphony where among the "narrators" we see not only three main characters, that of Robespierre, Danton and Desmoulins, but their diaries, letters, secret notebooks, their women and the diaries and letters of them, many other real historical persons – Saint-Just, Fabre, Herbert, and also – court records, cuts from newspapers, pamphlets and other documents of the time. Quite often Mantel uses the form of script – with no narrator, just the phrases of personages. Due to these numerous narrators' points of view (i. e. multi-focused narrative paradigm), the novel is famous by its stylistic diversity; this 'chorus of voices' produces Mantel's famous 'flow of history' which gets its highest manifestation in the trilogy about Thomas Cromwell.

So, coming back to the fact of the Executioner's narration in the episode, one can't help being impressed by its 'business-like tone' that helps to feel the writer's tragic irony when the Executioner complains about too much work and expresses his disappointment of guillotine:

'At first they'd thought the guillotine would be a sweet, clean business, but when you have twenty, perhaps thirty heads to take off in a day, there are problems of scale. Do the powers-that-be understand just how much blood comes out of even one decapitated person? The blood ruins everything, rots things away, especially his clothes. People down there do not realize, but he sometimes gets splashed right up to his knees' [Mantel 2010: 724]

He continues:

'The machine itself is quiet, efficient, reliable; but of course he has to pay the man who sharpens the knife. He's trying to make operation as efficient as he can, get the speed up. Fouquier[2] shouldn't complain. Take the Brissotins; twy one, plus the corpse, in thirty minutes flat. He couldn't spare a skilled man to time it, but he'd got a friendly spectator to stand by with his watch: just in case he heard any complaints' [Mantel 2010: 724–725]. He complains that there stopped regular audience to come 'to see skilled work'; instead 'some of these old women knitting (italicized by me. – *B.M.*) for the war effort' came, who 'have been paid to sit there' and who 'can't wait to get away and drink up the proceeds' [Mantel 2010: 725].

Anyone who has read Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* at this point quickly remembers Madame Defarge – symbolic image of social Nemesis, whose passionate wish for righteous retribution under revolutionary circumstances, ruining everybody and everything, very quickly turns into ominous and brutal social vendetta. 'Knitting' in the novel becomes the symbol of remembering social crimes of the rich and the powers against the poor and the humiliated, and in the end – of total terror of the mob whose inhuman instincts were awaken to reality by the Revolution. We read in Book the Second, Chapter XV, titled 'Knitting':

'Jacques', returned Defarge, drawing himself up, 'if madame my wife undertook to keep the register in her memory alone, she would not loose a word of it – not a syllable of it. Knitted, in her own stitches and her own symbols, it will always be as plain to her as the sun. Confide in Madame Defarge [Dickens 1974: 187–188].

Closer to the end, Defarge, her companion called Vengeance and many other Paris women used to sit near guillotine and to greet with a furious pleasure and another knot of their knitting any new beheaded aristocrat and counter-revolutionary. Dickens's tragical irony is obvious in Chapter XIV 'Knitting is Done', Book the Third, when Defarge's social vengeance utterly turns into animal bloodlust and is punished by her death and by rescue of the people whom she with ill enthusiasm persecuted. And it, by Dickens, meant the glory of real humanity which is above any politics, revolution and distorted justice.

This kind of intertextuality is very much notable for the novels which are artistically studying humanity examined in full by French Revolution: in the novel of Dickens it is humanity which triumphs, in the novel of Mantel – humanity which collapses. Having said that we are once more well aware of opposite approaches to the event by the writers: Dickens – with his symbolical hyperbole , melodrama, romanticism, and didactic sensibility; Mantel –

with her cumulative reconstructing of reality, when she pours on a reader the river of facts, details, archive documents, and she does it with the help of the narrative tone which Joan Smith calls ‘trivialising tendency’ and ‘slickness’[Smith 1992]. (Smith uses the terms in a very much critical way, whereas we do not put in it so much negative content, on the contrary, we see this trivializing as the means to reconstruct the historical process in its as full as possible flowness.)

We argue that while writing historical novel and remodeling history any writer volens nolens keeps in mind his or her present day: the work of this parabola is inevitable. It is a well known fact: there were some worrisome anxieties which stimulated Dickens to start writing the novel about French Revolution and which resulted as the scenes of shocking social gap between French aristocracy and common people, the scenes of social injustice and oppression which the ruling class of France in the 1780s imposed on French peasants, workers, artisans, village and townsmen and finally – in the scenes with the flows of blood, lots of victims of the revolutionary violence, more than often innocent ones (like a little seamstress who appears in the scene of the execution of Sydney Carton and 41 more), and shocking routine of guillotine work. Though we agree with George Orwell who notes, that due to the peculiarity of Dickens’s artistic method, ‘even the Reign of Terror was a much smaller thing than he makes it appear’ [A Tale of Two Cities 2006: 70]. In Dickens’s several letters during and after the Crimean War he stressed that he was ill with political pessimism, that he was feeling England on the eve of revolutionary events, some social implosion, that England resembled France before the Revolution of 1789–1794 (see his letters to John Forster, February, 3, 1855; to John Layard, April, 10, 1855; to the Earl of Carlisle, April, 15, 1857 [The Letters of Charles Dickens 1938: 662, 651, 844]). The writer was full of worries that the things which were going on in England would bring the country to catastrophy due to mindless governing country by Tories under Lord Palmerston. Such extra-literary thoughts of the writer help to understand the tone of his sarcastic satire which Dickens pours on the pre-revolutionary French aristocracy in the first part of the novel; it is an obvious parabola: writing furiously critically about French ruling classes before July 1789, Dickens keeps in mind English ruling classes of his time. Strictly speaking, social situation in England of the late 1850s was not so poor and strikingly depressive as in the 1840s, which used to be called ‘hungry forties’; here we see the work of high emotional attitude to life so much peculiar to the writer on the whole. Some critics and biographers (see [Pearson 1949]) stress that it should be considered also some family troubles which happened at that time in the life of Dickens: his separation with wife in 1857 influenced his temper too, especially if we remember how much impulsive, impressible and nervously excitable Dickens was as a personality. To our mind we should both not exaggerate this factor and not utterly ignore it. What, we think, is directly connected in the novel with all these family troubles, is the theme of eternal loneliness and isolation, which J. Cross rightly sees in the novel and stresses [Cross 1968: 234].

This is one of the themes of *A Tale of Two Cities*; one more is that of violence as the form of retribution for all social crimes which French aristocracy committed in the years prior the 1789 Revolution. In the worldwide Dickensiana it is also well investigated fact that many ideas concerning the Revolution, its causes and effects, were inspired in the novel by Dickens's enthusiasm towards Thomas Carlyle's French Revolution (1837; revised edition of 1857). Dickens's treatment of this event as the manifestation of revolutionary violence as social revenge has some essential roots in the book of Carlyle which the writer, by his own words, 're-read 550 times'. Though, *A Tale of Two Cites* is an artistic work and it does not just retell Carlyle's book; what is more, Dickens argues with Carlyle when he shows the fall of Bastille and stresses, by means of the mass scenes, that it was people but not heroes who captured Bastille and started the Revolution. It is worth looking at the symbolical title of the chapter of the Bastille fall – The Sea Still Rises; 'the sea' here is, no doubt, the common people of France and its social rage.

The first part of the novel is well documented, and it is closer to a classical ('walterscottlike') historical novel than the second part which is closer to a romantic thriller where love and self-sacrifice collide with blind rage and vengeance, which, by Dickens, symbolize the French Revolution. As we have already stressed, the writer sees his novel as a warning to the powerful of his time. Just look at the first passage of the novel, a sort of poem in prose of which Dickens was a great master:

'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only' [Dickens 1974: 25].

Dickens obviously links two historical periods – that of pre-revolutionary and revolutionary France and England of the middle of the 19th century, and for making this similarity more visually impressive he uses disturbing symbols and epitomes which aim to awaken awareness of England being on the edge of the political and social abyss: think of the flows of red wine which spread out along the street in Faubourg Saint Antoine or the stones of the Evremonde Castle. The novel, among some other meanings, has such a title because of these ideas of caveat, and at the same time, especially closer to the end, when ‘fire rises’ and ‘storm rages’ (using the words of the titles of the chapters in Dickens’s novel to describe the Revolution of the time of Jacobin terror), London in contrast to Paris seems a land of peace, comfort and rescue.

Barbara Hardy in one of her books on Dickens writes that the novelist was not an exception in such sort of thinking; by her, in England of the time there was ‘the genuine fear of revolution’, and she asserts that in this respect it was no wonder that the image of Madame Defarge stands as ‘another symbol of ominous futurity’ [Hardy 1968: 29]. The critic means here that Dickens understands the main function of this very novel as social warning. We think, it explains the growing symbolism and sensitivity as the story progresses; just in this plane it is necessary to see Carton’s self-sacrifice; and it is not only personal atonement due to love, but a symbol of higher social strata penance.

Hilary Mantel in *A Place of Greater Safety*, goes much further in using documents and documental evidences than Dickens in the first part of his novel: she ‘allows’ documents to have equal narrative rights (voices) with the voices of the people who were leaders of the revolution or just participated in the events on both sides of the historical barricades. Tom Chadwick rightly stresses that documents, historical facts and details researched by Mantel in archives of various kinds, ‘do not simply figure in the novel as the source for Mantel’s fiction’, they ‘not only record but actively produces history’ [Chadwick 2020: 165]. We can definitely say that, despite the fact of writing her novel when the idea of post-modernist historiographical novel, advanced by Linda Hutcheon in 1988 in her A Poetics of Postmodernism : History, Theory, Fiction, had been just in progress of formulating, and the first metafictional historiographical novel in English literature had been already written by John Fowles – The French Lieutenant’s Woman (1969), Mantel avoids many postmodernist tricks of reconstructing history: in her novel there are no narrative as a game with readers; intentional revealing all the narrative ‘seams’; forcing readers to think that there is no history, there are just subjective stories (narratives) about the past, unreliable but sincere and emotionally true; suggesting that readers may construct their own ‘history’. Mantel was (and is) preoccupied with the idea of the life-like narrative as it was in pre-postmodern historical novels: she avoids depicting the past as ‘vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum’, as Frederik Jameson puts it when describing postmodern historical novel (cit. from [Wallace 2005: 204]). As for the ‘choir of narrative voices’ we spoke about in the beginning of the essay, in Mantel’s novel it is not just a puzzle playfully set of numerous subjective interpretations of the historical event, but an organic wholeness of the reconstructed epoch, and this unity is not static but movable and incomplete, it is, as Irina Kabanova asserts in her essay, ‘the unity of documental facts of private and everyday life of the epoch and fictional motivation of the characters – both real and imaginative – actions’ [Кабанова 2021: 330]. Mantel, figuratively speaking, directs her rich imagination into the ‘white space’ which objectively exists between documentary evidence and the real historical person whom this evidence belongs to or who produces this document (see about it in more details [Kabanova 2021: 330, 336–338]). Mantel once said: ‘I like to be free to tack among facts, to combine them as I wish’ [Mantel 2012]. Stephanie Merrit once wrote about Mantel’s method of working with historical facts registered in the records to which the writer addresses: ’Historical fact’ is an ambiguous term. We can point to certain events taking place on certain dates – though the further back you go, the more even the dates are open to doubt – but we often don’t know what was said off the record, or how the principal players behaved when the chroniclers looked away’ [Merritt 2014].

We agree with the critics who argue that in *A Place of Greater Safety* Mantel opens the theme which she remarkably develops later in her trilogy about Thomas Cromwell: the way to the power of the persons whom it was closed because of the social norms of the epoch [Кабанова 2021: 331]. In this novel she develops the theme when reconstructing the lives of Desmoulins, Robespierre and Danton – the leaders of the French Revolution, who are triumphants at the start of the Revolution, whose fates are to prove the main slogan of the Revolution – liberté, égalité, fraternité and who, in four years, become the victims of the Terror which they themselves proclaim as the only instrument to defend the Revolution and bring France to total happiness. On the one hand, it is the story about these three men, but on the other hand, it is a story about catastrophy of humanity at the moment when the events which originally had a very noble goal take the direction opposite it. Mantel, having started her narration about the lives and fates of these three characters in traditional pattern of Bildung, ends it with depicting the tragedy of ruined not exactly the great goal but sincere and very warm friendship, humane closeness (especially between Robespierre and Desmoulins), compassion, care, liking, empathy, affection to name a few ‘shades’ of deep friendship of these three (even the rivalry of Robespierre and Danton blends in this paradigm of the collapse of real humanity under the pressure of those elemental ruthless phenomena caused by Revolution. A Place of Greater Safety is a novel about catastrophy of persons who at some moment becomes fanatics of an idea, and sees nothing but it, who is ready to sacrifice friends and close people for the glory of the idea. In this respect Mantel echoes Dickens.

Mantel devotes much of the narrative to the episodes of almost fatherly feelings which Robespierre had at his teens taking care of small Desmoulins; Mantel also shows passionate feelings which the latter had towards his older friend, and stresses that at many moments of difficulty and doubts Desmoulins addressed Robespierre – both in early years of their friendship and especially during the turbulent times of the Revolution. For example, not long before the arrest of Desmoulins by the order of his closest friend, a talk happens between them; by Mantel fictitious depiction (it is a fictitious moment, based on many solid evidence of some special closeness of Desmoulins and Robespierre obvious in their letters and entries in their diaries) Desmoulins asks in despair:

'What did we have the Revolution for? I thought it was so that we could speak out against oppression. I thought it was to free us from tyranny. But this is tyranny. Show me a worse one in the history of the world. People have killed for power and greed and delight in blood but show me another dictatorship that kills with efficiency and delights in virtue and flourishes its abstractions over open graves. We say that everything we do is to preserve the Revolution, but the Revolution is no more than an animated corpse'

Robespierre would not look at him; but without doing so, he reached out for his arm. 'Everything you say is true', he whispered' [Mantel 2010: 772–773].

The suggestion of Desmoulins, who in the end of the novel painfully beholds their fallacy in choosing the ways of Revolution, to set Committee of Mercy to replace Committee of Public Safety – the organ, which is in charge of all mounting killings, seems possible to find a response in the soul of Robespierre but Maximilien is already so much captured by his idea of bring all to the glory of happiness that any worries if it is right, even if these are worries of the dearest friend, are at least influences of bad people ('Camille is a spoiled child' [Mantel 2020: 792]) and at the most – counter-Revolution. At the meeting in Jacobin Club to discuss Desmoulins's pamphlets against the excesses of the Terror which become the grounds to accuse Desmoulins in counter-revolutionary activities Robespierre practically takes his words back suggesting that Camille could write these pamphlets at the dictation of some people and, thus, betrays the old friendship; ideology wins over humanity, and it is the final mark of his collapse as a human being.

One can't help noticing how much resonate the endings of the novels of Dickens and Mantel: both Sydney Carton and Camille Desmoulins in the end moves into the eternal light which Desmoulins sees over the bent head of some girl opposite the guillotine, Sydney Carton meets his death with enlightened face, 'sublime and prophetic' [Dickens 1974: 383]. The idea of this eternal light will be used by Hilary Mantel in the final scene of the Thomas Cromwell trilogy too. To many extents, it is not only the moment of death acceptance as an inevitability and anticipation of liberation off all earthly hardships and vanity in the face of Eternity. It is the moment of the introduction of the hero into eternal light, aka context, of Great History; it is the recognition of the belonging of the hero's deeds to Eternity, inaccessible to those alive.

Summing up, we have once again to say that despite considerable time gap between both writers and the novels we have been reflexing on; despite the fact that much have been changed in estimation and understanding of the French Revolution during a hundred and thirteen years which lay between the two novels; even taking into consideration how much historical novel as a genre has changed; and the last, but not the least, being very well aware of the peculiarities of the writers' realisms and their ways of reconstructing of the past – very much different and not at all alike, there is one moment strikingly common; the writers' concern about the fate of humanity under hard, cruel and even catastrophic challenges any revolution brings in. It is supra-historical value of humanism that unites so much different approaches to the same grandeur historical event which we see and high artistic levels of which we celebrate in our reflection.

Footnotes

[1] The essay is based on the paper read by the author at the International conference of Historical Fiction Research Network, 18 – 20 February, 2021.

[2] Antoine Quentin Fouquier de Tinville (10 June 1746 – 7 May 1795) was a French prosecutor during the Revolution and Reign of Terror periods.

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ФРАНЦУЗСКАЯ РЕВОЛЮЦИЯ – КАТАСТРОФА? ДИАЛОГ ЧАРЛЬЗА ДИККЕНСА И ХИЛАРИ МАНТЕЛ ЧЕРЕЗ СТОЛЕТИЯ

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В статье рассматриваются два романа – «Повесть о двух городах» Чарльза Диккенса и «Место большей безопасности» Хилари Мантел, которые объединяют одна тема – Французская революция 1789–1794 гг., и одна проблема – судьба человечности в революционной ситуации. В ходе анализа большей частью нравственно-психологического и социо-аналитического подходов писателей к проблемно-тематическому срезу изображении революции, породивших ее обстоятельств, ее протекания, участников и жертв демонстрируется, с одной стороны, совпадение осмысления Диккенсом и Мантел судьбы человека, независимо от степени вовлеченности в события, сходство в трагическом освещении гуманизма и таких его проявлений, как любовь, дружба, честность, благородство, доверие. С другой стороны, подчеркиваются многие особенности воссозданных на страницах романа картин революции, которые связаны с различным пониманием задач исторического романа и с различием художественных доминант реконструкции исторического прошлого – эмоционально-романтического и дидактико-сентиментального мировоспроизведения у Диккенса и жесткого реалистико-документального у Мантел. При этом общая психолого-аналитическая направленность повествования реализована по-разному: в романе Диккенса при помощи доминанты авторского голоса, в романе Мантел – при помощи многоголосия, в котором равноправны голоса действующих лиц, документов разного типа, культурем времени артефактов.

Ключевые слова: Чарльз Диккенс, Хилари Мантел, исторический роман, Французская революция, гуманность, документ, воображение.

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