

INSECT CODE IN THE POETRY OF N. OLEINIKOV**(Based on the Poem “Cockroach”)**

Vakhitov Yulay Salavatovich

Literary Critic, Teacher of Russian Language at the Almalyk

Branch of the Tashkent State Technical University

ABSTRACT

This article makes an attempt to combine disparate and contradictory interpretations of the image of the central character of the program poem by avant-garde poet N.M. Oleinikov, as well as take a fresh look at the history of the creation of the poem, carefully examining its literary genealogy.

Keywords: poetry, avant-garde, absurdity, grotesque, insect.

INTRODUCTION

The work of Nikolai Makarovich Oleinikov, a prominent representative of Russian avant-garde poetry in the first third of the 20th century, attracted and still attracts the attention of researchers, largely due to its versatility and ambiguity of interpretations. This statement fully applies to the poet's programmatic poem, published in 1934, under the, at first glance, inconspicuous title “Cockroach.”

The exceptional grotesqueness of the text, noted by many researchers of the poet's work, and the fantastic collision itself described by him - the suffering of a creature, either turned into an insect, or endowed with human features, bring Oleinikov's “Cockroach” closer to F. Kafka's famous story “The Metamorphosis” (1915). The well-known fact that Kafka's works were translated into Russian no earlier than 1964 would seem to completely deny his influence on Oleinikov's work. However, if we take into account M. Zhuk's statement that “German philologists and Soviet intellectuals knew about Kafka and read his works in the original or in other languages” [5] long before the latter's official publication in Russia, as well as “the possibility the fact that the first Russian translations of Kafka could have appeared back in the twenties and early thirties” [6], then there remains hope that the similarity of the two texts is not a coincidence. Oleinikov's literary and personal circle, which included prominent writers, poets and philosophers representing the literary and aesthetic group of the OBERIUT-Chinari, could well have had those same translations of Kafka or read him in the original, which, taking into account creative contacts within the association, makes it possible to assume that the author of “Cockroach” was familiar with the text of “Metamorphosis.” However, despite the apparent coincidence of individual artistic details and the general tragedy of both works, it has not yet been established for certain whether the poet relied on this text by the Czech writer when creating the poem.

If the connection between Oleinikov and Kafka is completely attributable to the field of literary coincidences, then the following lines from the story by B. Zhitkov “Micro-hands”, published in 1929 in No. 7 of the magazine “Ezh”, of which Oleinikov was the editor-in-chief, leave no doubt about what the text formed the basis of the poem: “I caught a cockroach, I knocked it down with micro-hands, like a pig” [4, p. 11]. The story tells the story of a scientist who, as a

result of a scientific experiment, entered a microworld in which he had to kill and dissect a cockroach. Moreover, even the comparison of an insect with a pig, given in the story and in the poem, coincides: “And having pierced it, it knocks down / the Cockroach on its side, like a pig...” [9, P. 157].

Interest in the text of “Cockroach” is due not only to the external grotesque, but also to its content, which allows for the presence of subtext. Oddly enough, in the first stanza the creation of external grotesque is not served by exaggeration, but by the opposite technique - litotes:

A cockroach sits in a glass.
Sucks a redhead's leg.
He got caught. He's in a trap.
And now he is awaiting execution¹ [Ibid., p. 156].

There is still no ambiguity here: a cockroach means an insect; it sucks a “red leg” (although not a leg, as would be logical). S. Polyakova discovers here the theme of “childhood suffering”, akin to the concept of Dostoevsky’s famous saying about the “tear of a child”: “... he sucks his red leg, repeating the unconscious movement of a frightened or confused child sucking his finger <...> a cockroach, overcome with fear, behaves like human child.” [10, pp. 14-15]. This stanza itself contains an allusion to the poems of Captain Lebyadkin from the novel by F.M. Dostoevsky’s “Demons,” from which the poem’s epigraph (“A cockroach caught in a glass”) was borrowed:

There lived a cockroach in the world,
Cockroach from childhood,
And then I hit the glass,
Full of fly-eating... [3, P. 91].

The first who drew attention to the “complex literary genealogy” of Captain Lebyadkin’s work was I. Serman, who noted that “it goes back to Myatlev’s poem, but in content and morality it parodies the civic poems of the 1860s” [12, p. 600].

This refers to the poem by the Russian satirist I. Myatlev “A Fantastic Saying” (1833), in which a parallel is drawn between insects and humans in a sadly ironic form:

Cockroach
Like in a glass
Will hit -
It will disappear
On glass -
Hard -
It won't crawl up.

¹ Here and below is an interlinear translation of the poetic texts

So do I:
My life
Has faded,
Departed... [8].

By “civic poems” we should understand a whole layer of democratic poetry of the 1850-60s, primarily the poetry of N. Nekrasov, V. Kurochkin and D. Minaev.

I. Serman calls F. Dostoevsky’s novel “Demons” the direct basis, the source of poetic absurdism of the 1920-30s: “The parodic poems in Demons turned out to be a necessary ferment in the literary ferment of the late 1920s. From the “mistakes” and “ineptitude” of Lebyadkin’s poems, from the “absurd” fantasy of Stepan Trofimovich’s poem, much could be learned to create conscious and literary-oriented absurdism in poetry” [12, p. 604]. The artistic world of the novel “Demons” is absurd because, firstly, it gives rise to the absurdity of Lebyadkin’s poems, and secondly, it is expressed and reflected in Lebyadkin’s poems according to the principle of the identity of life and poetry. The absurdity of life and the absurdity of literature are also revealed in Oleinikov’s poem. In the structure of his poetics, formal rules are observed: the saturation with naive images and motifs speaks in favor of the childishness of poems about a cockroach, but their content touches on non-childish topics: suffering, death, a scientific experiment on a living creature. In this discrepancy between content and form, artistic absurdity is born.

The priority of the cockroach over other insects may lie in the fact that it, “as an eternal inhabitant of a person’s home and his companion, is most anthropomorphic, which explains the emergence of motives of pity and sympathy” [1, pp. 220-221]. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the revealed psychologism in the description of the character is expressed by constant emphasizing his external experiences (“He sucks a red leg”; “He glances at the sofa with sad eyes”; “The cockroach pressed against the glass / And looks, barely breathing...”; “Cockroach, squeezing his hands, / Prepared to suffer”) [9, pp. 156-157]. In the context of the realities of the 1930s, the poetic story about the suffering and death of an innocent creature could be taken literally, which became the starting point for such an interpretation of the text already in the 70-80s of the last century. According to L. Ginzburg’s concept, the author, in an allegorical form, referring to the image of an anthropomorphic animal, declares the lack of rights and humiliation of the hero, in whom, apparently, it is not difficult to guess the type of “little man” that is classic for Russian literature.

Ginzburg, behind the poetic masks and buffoonery of Oleinikov’s poems, sees a humanistic beginning, true values expressed through “the word about love and death, about pity and cruelty, cleared of “containers” [2, p. 25]. Such an interpretation of the content of the text forces us to accept Oleinikov’s grotesque for his inability and unwillingness “to use the traditional dialects of poetry, which, in his opinion, have already lost the ability to mean” [Ibid., p. 24]. The conclusion of the analysis of the entire work of the poet and “Cockroach” in particular is the idea of the tragedy of “a mediocre person, thoughtless, weak-willed, who is dragged and crushed by cruel fate” [Ibid., p. 25].

As an argument for this version, let us turn again to the epigraph of Oleinikov’s “Cockroach”. Captain Lebyadkin’s poems, which at first glance represent an example of absurdity and

primitivism, have, as their author explains, a deep philosophical meaning: flies and a cockroach that fall into a glass are “thrown into the tub” by old man Nikifor, who, according to Lebyadkin, “depicts nature.” Accordingly, by the tub in which the captain is “forced to live,” he means Russia. It follows that the author of the “play” “Cockroach” himself, in the world system he created, becomes an insect, forced to obey the whims of fate. (At the same time, Lebyadkin insists: “The cockroach does not complain.” Oleinikov’s hero also shows resignation).

A different point of view, essentially diametrically opposed to the concepts of Ginzburg and Polyakova, is contained in the lengthy article by O. Lekmanov and M. Sverdlov “The Life and Poems of Nikolai Oleinikov,” exploring the biography and work of the poet. Based on the position of the total irony of N. Oleinikov’s work, relying on numerous facts of the poet’s manifestation of a “frivolous” attitude towards others, as well as towards the foundations of life itself, the authors of the article do not find it necessary to support the serious, tragic discourse of the poet’s poems. On the contrary, they defend the idea of deliberate “mockery of the reader and his habits” [7, p. 155].

Such a reading of not only “Cockroach”, but also other key works of the poet (including “Crucian carp” and “Heinrich Levin”) allows us to talk about the author’s ridicule, total irony directed against an inexperienced reader who takes on faith the story about the torment and death of the character. The alogism accompanying this contributes to the ironic play on the theme of death. The motif of dying, repeated again and again like a broken record, depreciates and compromises itself: “...The cockroach dies” (in the 12th stanza), then – “... suddenly gets colder” (in the 13th stanza), then – “... he doesn’t breathe” (in the 16th stanza) and after that it is additionally stated – “... a dead cockroach” (18th stanza) [9]. Nevertheless, in conclusion, after repeatedly declaring death, the dead man will only “... will... / Wait for a sad end” [Ibid.]. The processuality of dying and its detail are characteristic of the poetry of modernism, which, according to some researchers, in its syncretic association with futurism gave rise to the phenomenon of literary absurdism. It is obvious that in his approach to the topic of death Oleinikov is close to V. Vvedensky, one of the founders of the unification of real art, whose name is directly connected with the literature of the absurd.

To understand and share Oleinikov’s laughter, the reader must have, albeit small, a sharp enough literary sense that allows him to see the parodic moments of the text. Thus, following the exaggerated silent horror of the cockroach from the impending death, Oleinikov, describing in the eleventh stanza the scene of the death of the hero, introduces a simple quatrain with a curious numerical hyperbole (“one hundred and four instruments”) and playful rhymes, referring to the children’s poetry of K. Chukovsky (“instruments - patient”). The macabre picture is neutralized by the intonation of a children's rhyme (like “I will cut, I will beat, / You still have to drive...”).

The final stanza is introduced with the expectation of the perception of the reader and listener, who is well acquainted with one of the most popular song genres of the early 20th century - romance. It was the following absurd song lines that Oleinikov took as the basis for the finale of “Cockroach”:

His eyes are blue
 They don't look at the light of God,
 His lips are rosy
 They don't talk about love... [11, P. 111].
 (Romance "No matter how many times I walked through the forest...")

The interpretation of "Cockroach" from the standpoint of modern postmodern literature denies the presence of any social or humanistic features that could serve as grotesque in Oleinikov's programmatic work. The reader can only show sympathy for his hero at the beginning of the text, but in the next moment, according to the author's idea, pity is replaced by laughter, "because it is not he who suffers and dies" [7, P. 157].

Thus, the existence of the hero, as well as his death, are subject to the laws of the absurdist world and cannot have the only correct interpretation. It is obvious that the absurdity in Oleinikov's text is created deliberately and, thanks to semantic layers, can serve various ideological and aesthetic purposes.

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