

To the I. S. Turgenev's essay Hamlet and Don Quixote

Dita Müllerová, Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Hradec Králové,
ditamullerova@hotmail.com

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The essay *Hamlet and Don Quixote* was written in 1860, which was the time when Turgenev was already an experienced author who had published the whole range of successful works (not only prosaic but also dramatic, lyrical, and epical); he was in his prime as for his artistic work and was concerned with not only literature itself but also with philosophy and he often dealt with theoretical questions and problems.

He was considering the thought of writing a comparative study on the topic of hamletism and quixotism for quite some time – one of the first impulses dates back, according to E. M. Feoktistov, to spring 1850¹, L. M. Lotman even states the year 1848² - the year when the author wrote a short story named *Гамлет Щигровского уезда*³ which was included in the collection of short stories called *Записки охотника* (*A Sportsman's Sketches*). The author's original objective was to present and explain his understanding of important topical contemporary issues of literary analysis. The study was to be published in the *Современник* magazine (*The Contemporary*) which the author had been co-operating with and which he had been contributing to on a regular basis for some time already. The final version of the essay was written a decade later and was first presented in Saint Petersburg at a "public evening of poetry reading on 10th January 1860 organised on behalf of the Association helping artists and scholars suffering hardship", as the sub-title of the text itself states⁴.

Was the reason for the essay's postponement the author's health condition or did the writer need some time to thoroughly consider this sensitive topic or did he just wait for the public to be ready and mature enough to be delivered this text? We can only guess. However, the fact is that the essay was being written in the period when Russian social reforms were being prepared and it was completed in the years of the revolution. Naturally, one of the most topical questions was the problem of a social hero capable of accomplishing necessary changes in the country, which was even emphasised by the revolutionary democrats themselves. Turgenev also felt the need for "new people" who would contrast inactive sceptics. These opposites, thus, created the basis of the essay. It is important to emphasize that the essay cannot be understood as a historical literary analysis of Shakespeare's tragedy and Cervantes' novel at all.

As far as Russian literary criticism is concerned, the interest in the character of the Danish prince rises in the period after the 1825 December uprising and the first ever translation of the tragedy into the Russian language is published in 1828⁵. Literary criticism of the first half of the 19th century prefers Hamlet to Don Quixote.

Turgenev himself saw Hamlets of his time in the type of "superfluous people" who are "eaten away" by reflection, suffer from the lack of will and are not able to complete the tasks of life. For Turgenev, the character of Hamlet is an egoistic man whose reason and will are separated from each other and that is why Hamlets are completely needless, redundant for other people, they do not lead the people anywhere as they themselves do not head anywhere. As said above this kind of personality is useless, superfluous for society does not profit from these people, they would not be able to become a national leader if needed. On the other hand, Turgenev tries to find a piece of rationality in Hamlet's ambivalence; the author also

compares the character of Hamlet to the character of Goethe's Mephisto. The objective of Turgenev's interpretation of Hamlet's type was to show social vanity and the disadvantages of scepticism and egoism.

The question of the two distinctive types of world literature was very topical in the then Russia – Turgenev was not the only one interested in this sort of problem; some of his contemporaries did not share Turgenev's views (e.g. Nikolay Chernyshevsky or N. Dobrolyubov). The Hamlet and Don Quixote concepts development in Russia may have led Turgenev to postpone the publication of the essay as he was aware of the sensitivity of the topic in Russia in general.

The author was probably aware of the fact that the type of Hamlet was heading into a blind alley. That may be the reason for the writer devoting more space to the character of Don Quixote in the essay. This character embodied other social and ethical categories and moral qualities.

In Turgenev's essay, Don Quixote, as well as Hamlet, integrates retrospective and perspective, the past and the future, trying to "interconnect the times".

To justify the all-humane type of Quixote, Turgenev had to overcome the tradition which had persisted until those times - in Russian readers of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries the picture of Don Quixote did not enjoy much confidence and authority as a clearly positive character. His slow rehabilitation began only in the 19th century. Vissarion Belinsky admired Hamlet and that is why his attitude towards Quixote could be considered as not very warm – he wrote that Quixote was separated from reality and that his author „... нанес решительный удар идеальному направлению романа и обратил его к действительности“⁶.

For Turgenev Don Quixote was the personalization of new social power and this is also how the character is shown in the essay: the writer sees mainly belief, belief in something eternal, irreversible, belief in the truth that calls for sacrifices but that can be reached; Quixote is devoted to his ideal and for this ideal he is able to suffer agony and even sacrifice his own life as life is dear to him only in the case when he can be a means of reaching the ideal and establishing justice in the whole world.

The author of this critical essay emphasises Don Quixote's freedom of deeds, the moral power of his spirit, integrity of his personality and nature, clear objective, perseverance, persistence and his will.

On the other hand, Turgenev tries to be fair when evaluating Quixote and that is why he does not forget to mention Quixote's negative features of character. He mainly speaks about Quixote's superhumanity and the fact that the character outlines tasks that he is not able to complete (i.e. to fight against evil, oppose all the hostile forces and defend oppressed people); this characteristic of Quixote is then put into contrast with his appearance (a skinny, lumpish figure with a hooked nose wearing ridiculous armour sitting on a skinny mare).

In his essay Turgenev examines two immortal types of world literature. He states that Hamlet and Don Quixote provide us with two contrasting characteristics of human personality or nature and that all people more or less belong to one of these types, or perhaps these two types can blend or overlap with each other as there are no complete and clean Hamlets and Don Quixotes around (however, the author says that there are more Hamlets). All people live according to certain principles, ideals which they do not doubt, they believe in them. These ideals and principles are, as Turgenev maintains, what individual people perceive as the truth, beauty and good. Human ideals exist either inside people themselves or outside of them. The individuals of Hamlet type hide their ideals inside of them, the other people, i.e. the people of Quixote type, have their ideals outside of them, which means that Hamlet people can be described as egoistic whereas Quixote people do not hesitate to self-sacrifice.

What are characteristic features of Hamlet and Don Quixote then? Turgenev sees Quixote as a person devoted to his ideals, heading for one goal, which makes his thinking and spirit monotonic but not bad or evil; he is not well-educated but his wisdom is based on the fact that he knows what his life mission is and why he was born to this world. Quixote lives for others, he sacrifices himself, he desires truth and justice, he wishes to fight evil, he fights oppressors to defend the oppressed, he is ridiculous and funny, he is keen to reach his goal, he does not know fear (thanks to his firm belief), he is brave, he is free, he does not think about the possible consequences of his deeds, he does not know reality, he has no doubts about his physical strength or talent, he can only see one thing which is idealised and which cannot even exist. Quixote is a creator, social factor, fighter; his psychological feature is a desire for practical deeds, a need to change the situation, this desire for deeds, however, collides with an unfamiliarity of reality; the sad knight is great and funny at the same time and for his unlimited generosity he often finds himself in dangerous situations.

Hamlet is a different type. He looks very good, he is well-educated and has good taste, but inside he is egoistic, arrogant, vulgar, he lives for himself, he exists for himself – he does not look for anything, he does not create anything, he is a sceptic, he does not believe, he doubts all the time; he is aware of both his good sides and bad sides, he is conceited, but he suffers inside because good and evil, the truth and the lie fight each other inside. Hamlet's character structure is based on hypertrophy of moral conscience omnipotence which strives for creating real values; this value-oriented conscience activity controls him so much that it completely paralyses the will for practical deeds and subordinates everything to reflection.

Turgenev also speaks about dualism in his essay – the principle of self-sacrifice and devotion (the principle of Don Quixote – everything that exists exists for something else) stands on one side and the principle of egoism (the principle of Hamlet – a human being is in the centre of everything and everything exists only for the human being) stands on the other. On one hand, Hamlets are thoughtful, versatile, firm in their opinions but they are also not useful, they are condemned to passivity, on the other hand, semi-insane Quixotes who are useful and make things and people move just because of the fact that they see the only goal (which often does not exist) and become attached to it.

Turgenev sees the basic principle of human nature in this contradiction; i.e. life is nothing but never-ending conciliation and battle between these two continuously contending principles, which means that egoism and devotion cannot exist separately, they can only coexist. Speaking of all mankind these two principles create harmony. The whole essay is infiltrated with a tendency towards harmonisation and searching for the good in both characters (ambivalence – neither type is good or bad).

The importance of the essay Hamlet and Don Quixote lies not only in a successful attempt to show likes and dislikes in the two heroes but also in an attempt of literary phenomena typological analysis as well as the author's presentation of comparative dialectics. We also interpret Turgenev's essay as his commentary on the characters in his own works in which the concept of "superfluous people" and creating "new people" were dealt with. His typology can be considered as mapping the given era through characters. Individual characters express certain philosophical and social approaches of this time context (in the Russian context – the principle of social determinism as an immediate influence of social environment on human personality and behaviour) and they also express the author's opinion of social processes. Turgenev expresses his thoughts and ideas under the influence of his opinions of the then situation in the society, his opinions are closely linked to the contemporary period. The development and changes of the author's opinions are visible in the development of character types and form (artistic and compositional approaches) of his novels which create an original and distinctive place of Turgenev's prose and of his artistic and human legacy.

In my opinion, the contemporary glances at anterior world literature works can sometimes surprise us not only by their close links to the then context but also by their timeless connotations and relevance, especially in connection with the relation to current “postmodernist” thought chaos and searching for feelings of safety and the way of the world. It appears that even contemporary views of some classics of Russian literature can become really topical.

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Citations and notes

¹Феоктистов (1929)

²Лотман (1974)

³The short story was first published independently in the Современник magazine in 1849.

⁴Turgeněv (1985)

⁵Левин (1987)

⁶Белинский (1953, 254)

Abstract

Text je věnován teoretické stati významného představitele ruského kritického realismu Ivana Sergejeviče Turgeněva nazvanou *Hamlet a don Quijote*, která se zabývá problematikou lidského charakteru, lidské povahy. Princip „donquijotství“ stojí proti principu Hamleta a jeho duše. Referát připomíná typické vlastnosti těchto dvou charakterů, zmiňuje dualismus sebeobětování a egoismu. Tuto stat' je možné chápat jako komentář autora k postavám jeho románů, ve kterých rozpracoval koncepci tzv. „zbytečného člověka“ a které vytvořily člověka „nového“.