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## CENSORED PASSAGES IN THE NOVEL

### ‘SOVEREIGN’S ROAD’ BY MIKHAIL M. PRISHVIN

Elena Anatolyevna Khudenko\*

*Altai State Pedagogical University, 55 Molodezhnaya St., Barnaul, 656031, Altai Krai, Russia*

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#### Abstract

The author of the article investigates the fragments of the novel ‘Sovereign’s Road’ by Mikhail M. Prishvin written in Stalin years. In the novel, the writer conceptualized the idea of re-forging a human being, the balance between pagan and Christian principles, and Tsar Peter’s way in Russian history. It becomes possible to project Prishvin’s strategies as a writer – that were not claimed for during Soviet era and its censorship – by studying the censored parts of the text, such as: 1) the epigraph, 2) the chapter, 3) the main story line together with understanding by their means in the artistic world of the novel as a whole. Failure to publish the novel ‘Sovereign’s Road’ during the life of the writer poses the resolve of the issue of Prishvin’s becoming or not part of Soviet literature, and allows to interpret the novel in its conception as biblical and neo-mythological. However, this plan is only visible through the text fragments ‘saved’ from censorship.

*Keywords:* epigraph, biblical meanings, idea, re-forging, individual

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#### 1. Introduction

To analyse Mikhail Prishvin’s novel *Sovereign’s Road* (1948), a number of literary research publications were written by Russian scholars. G. Pimenova [1] discusses stylistic features of the text; V. Agenosov [2], N. Borisova [3], S. Logvinenko [4], Y. Grishina [5] give the analysis of the novel in the aspect of its genre characteristics. The problems raised in the novel in general, in the context of ideological and philosophical speculation of the writer’s times, are discussed in the research by O. Mashkina [6].

Soviet reality of the 1930s was fully embodied the idea of building a new life and a new man. Research publications of such scholars as M. Berg [7], A. Kuliapin and O. Skubach [8], I. Smirnov [9] show that the new Soviet reality was rooted not only in the neo-mythological basis, allowing to create the world anew from scratch, but was also founded on some scientific and sociological principles. ‘Re-forging’ Soviet man implemented the “new anthropological project” [7, p. 7], launched by the events of October 1917, and at the same time allowed create labour forces in mass order that were required for grand-scale

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\*E-mail: helenahudenko@mail.ru

construction work. It was the idea of re-forging an individual – this leading mythologeme of “shuttle anthropogenesis” [9] of Stalin era – that became the foundation plan for *Sovereign's Road*.

The area of debatable issues on the novel comprises such ideas as: 1) to what extent can the novel be considered complete, as Prishvin's numerous amendments of the text never satisfied Soviet censors and the book was not published until he died; it was this aspect of the issue that we discussed earlier in the collective monograph *Phenomenon of the Incomplete* [10]; 2) in what way Prishvin's creative line was changing in the fight with censors, his writer's and human identity [11-13]; 3) what fragments of the novel remained in the author's wording and what new meanings they enrich the main text with?

The aim of this research is to explore both explicit and implicit indications of a writer's creative behaviour under the conditions of Soviet censorship and total ideological control over literature. Phenomenological approach to the discussed problem is carried out as monitoring the fragments of the unpublished novel by M. Prishvin, which are understood as a person's open thought in the times when such open statements are banned. The article is focused on analysing the fragments presented in the writer's formulation and saved from alterations. They are the epigraph, one of the chapters and the main storyline. Such approach will allow identifying the marrowbone of what Y. Lotman outlined quoting F. Dostoevsky as an “act of intending” [14], to penetrate into the essence of the writer's unaffected behavioural strategy within the domain of Soviet times.

However, the analysis would be incomplete without reference to the texts written at the same time and denoted by Prishvin as scaffolding to the novel [15] – his diary entries of late 1930-1940s (time of writing the novel) and his essay *Fathers and Sons* [16].

## 2. Results

To see the ‘reformation’ with his own eyes and to assess the scale of that historic phenomenon from the inside – that was Prishvin's task, for which he travels to Northern territories – places where his work began (*In the Land of Unfrightened Birds*, 1907), and visits the White-Sea-Baltic Canal.

Of course, Prishvin was aware about the planned excursion to the canal for a group of Soviet writers headed by M. Gorky. The trip lasted six days from August 17, 1933; about 120 writers and artists from different republics of the Soviet Union participated in it. The trip resulted in a collected 1934 edition of essays with the profile of Stalin on the cover which A. Solzhenitsyn later called “the first book in Russian literature glorifying slave labour” [17].

On the one hand, the writer's intentional separation from fellow writers revealed his clear understanding of the general vector of the development of Soviet literature under ideological pressure. On the other hand, it signified his desire to emphasize his own independence (as much as was possible) from the Soviet creators of art.

The 'scaffolding' to the novel shows that the canal construction did not particularly impress the writer: he had seen such a dam in the West a few decades earlier, when he studied at the University of Leipzig. Moreover, Prishvin was struck by the ostentatious outer side of the construction work – he calls the immense scale and monumental transformation “nifty” [18]. But most of all shocks to the writer was people's live: the breaking of the human being in BelBaltlag is interpreted by Prishvin as mass violence that does not bear any perceptible moral effect. The concept of 'false re-forging' (intellectually misunderstood) comes to dominate in the essay *Fathers and Sons*.

In the collected 'reporting' book of essays, Prishvin's was not included, and his question to M. Gorky about the reasons for the rejection was left unanswered. It was only in 1937 that the essay was published – in that short period of time when the White-Sea-Baltic Canal seemed to have been forgotten, but mentioning it had not been yet banned (a few months later S. Firin, the canal construction director, was arrested and executed, which led to a censorship ban on publication of the book thereafter).

The writer's diary for those years reveals his philosophical vision of the historical path the new Russia was taking, the path through suffering to everyone's delight. The diary entries are based on a profoundly ambivalent idea: forced labour is conceptualized as labour that should liberate *internally*.

The writer seeks to understand what is it that happens to people in “times of ruler Creon”, during the “fury of forced virtue”, “blind Golgotha” (as the Stalin era is defined [15]) where they have no salvation. Prishvin attempts to resolve a philosophical dilemma: in what way and when can the abuse of a human being and the loss of personal freedom turn into a person's liberation in the heart and internal world of an individual (if they ever can)?

Besides, the idea to write a novel about the 're-forging' of the individual and most importantly – to have it published, is closely linked to the cherished dream of the writer's whole life: to realize in practice the original idea of art as a creative behaviour.

To publish a novel based on the idea of a state crime – diary entries indicate that Prishvin was well aware of the fact – meant to do a brave deed. The violent force of the book material itself that was associated with 're-forging' the individual was seen by Prishvin as the work on the canal, the writer himself being a convict sentenced by the time: “With the canal, I as a writer, in fact got myself on the canal”; not only the excursion to Belbaltlag, but also the circumstances of writing the novel become “a journey through hell without Virgil” [15, p. 67].

The first chapters of the novel (originally titled *Padun* – Russian dialect name for rapids and waterfalls on the Northern Russian rivers) began to be published in 1939 in the journal *Young Guard*. The first version was completed in 1947, its proofreading was finished in 1948, and then it was edited for four months in the journal *October*. Finally, when the manuscript was completely set, it required alterations. The second version of the novel was completed in the winter of 1949, the third – in the summer of 1949, the fourth – in 1951 and the

fifth – in 1952. All these versions were rejected by the censors, and Prishvin leaves hope to see the idea implemented for over a year before he dies.

### 3. Discussion

In 2006 the complete first edition of *Sovereign's Road* was published in a three-volume collected works of the writer [19], which Prishvin considered to be the only one demonstrating his art. Three elements of the text were preserved in different ways from alterations: a biblical epigraph, a small chapter 'Right and Left' and the storyline. The epigraph was removed by Prishvin himself as a priori censorable (self-censoring); the small chapter was removed entirely without being altered after the first censorship; the storyline was deliberately maintained, which served the main cause for the novel not to be published.

#### 3.1. The epigraph

The text of the novel is preceded by the epigraph preserved in Prishvin's manuscript: "If I make my bed in hell, Thou art there" (Psalms, 138.8).

For the fourteen years of rough work on the novel (1933-1947) it was a third epigraph. The first two came from a poem by Alexander Pushkin *The Bronze Horseman*: "Up there, Great wonder-worker you, beware!.." and "Till floods and storms from chafing duty May turn to peace with thee at last" [20]. The substitution of epigraphs reflected how the author's mind travelled from the idea of rejecting violence towards the search for exculpatory principles for what was happening.

The epigraph "If I make my bed in hell, Thou art there" is an inaccurate quote of the Psalm of David 138 (line 8) considered to be one of the most spiritually intense in appealing to God.

At first glance, the epigraph sets a strange storyline – God's presence in hell. In fact, mythologically speaking, reading the novel through the expanses of hell explains many things, including Prishvin's understanding of the structure of life in the recent years. To Prishvin, hell is the state of the modern world, when human soul is abandoned by God. This concept, seemingly Nietzschean at first reading, develops itself in the direction opposite to the German philosopher: according to Prishvin, *there cannot be* such state as 'being abandoned by God' because God is omnipresent. And if a modern (Soviet) man is in hell, God is near him. It is this Psalm of David that praises God's omniscience and omnipresence to the greatest extent among all the rest of Psalms.

Reading the whole text of the Psalm allows us to understand how important it was for Prishvin to choose this epigraph and to spread biblical meanings over the artistic conception of the novel as a whole.

The Psalm tells us of God's knowing in advance not only the result of human destiny, but all details of human existence: physiological features of an individual's body structure, his prenatal and post-mortal life path. Man is

absolutely transparent to God, but obscure to himself – this idea is important to the writer.

But the Psalm sets not only the subject of hell, but that of resurrection, too. The idea of the universal organic cycle of human nature is emphasized in the Psalm: man is conceived from bones, not from flesh (which would be natural), i.e. from the material into which he turns after his death – from dust. This idea of the Universal is also close to the writer; it binds together all his later work.

Thus, the Psalm **does not** introduce oppositions of hell/Heaven, body/soul, thereby the intensity of axiological meanings is decreased. The meaning of the biblical epigraph can be interpreted broadly: God is not just present in hell, a future (new) man is created from the hell's hash, its bits and pieces of matter.

Based on the concept of seeing-all and omnipresent God, set with the epigraph, the main idea of the text is conceptualized in a very different way: violence committed not only to human nature, but to Nature (blowing centuries-old rocks lying in the way of the canal under construction) is divine in its fact. This idea, blasphemous for the humanist Prishvin is not the same for philosopher Prishvin.

The category of omnipresence neutralizes another opposition: the one between freedom and violence. These do not appear as two forms of dialectical development but as two coexisting states of the Universe. Comparing the present time with Peter the Great's epoch and Alexander Pushkin's comprehension of Peter's theme, the writer concludes that the main moral *purpose of Peter's punishment baton is the protection of a person's integrity*. A man forced in desperately hopeless situation of being violated should not distinguish between personal 'wants' and public 'musts', and that in this way he becomes already released.

In the Psalm of David, it is the divine will, divine knowledge ("thou hast tried me, and know") that prejudices not only birth of man but also the construction of the whole Universe. Divine will in this context is exactly that necessary violence, which alone can give birth to life. God knows the actions, thoughts, words, and the way of man, his deadline. The omnipresence of God in the text of the Psalm is explained by the fact that He created everything around by giving thought down to the smallest detail in all the ways of man – from embryonic form in the womb of a mother to falling into the womb of the Earth (the grave). But this predestination is simultaneously the freedom which is inherently given to a person together with life: a man is ontologically free in his own choice – for example, of the *place* where he is to meet God (no matter whether it is in hell, purgatory or Heaven, – God is omnipresent); of *death* – it is sealed with the first impulse of the divine life; of committing *mistakes* as deviation from predetermined. While the Psalm begins with reference to a prior trial ("you know me"), its ending requests for God's new test – namely, a trial in the fight against the enemies of God – the wicked – which becomes the test of *hatred*, a feeling, not subjected to God (he can punish, but cannot hate).

The Psalm ends with a request to instruct on “the eternal right way” and let escape the “dangerous” road. What is meant by “dangerous” road? Firstly, the Psalm says that man is free in two things – in the love for God and hatred of enemies. They are not simultaneous: to love God doesn’t mean to hate his enemies, and vice versa. But God’s love is omnipresent and involves its dissemination among enemies as well; man in this case is smaller than God, he is aware of his own smallness, but he cannot cope with it – he comes beyond divine will.

This “dangerous” path of hatred is the path without God – Prishvin knew it too well. Hatred is more terrifying than violence, the latter can grow to freedom, but hatred gives grow to nothing else but total destruction, self-destruction including. Hatred destroys the individual, self-destruction engenders nothing but void. There came a time, in the writer’s opinion, when ‘God must be invented’, because the purpose of it is the same as Peter the Great’s baton. Prishvin does not justify violence and the need of re-forging an individual’s identity in the Stalin era, he questions something different here: how to prevent violence from getting into one’s soul, preserve it for another content, and return it to its primordial state.

The second ‘danger’, as Prishvin sees it, is the way of self-betrayal due to external circumstances, because of social and national violence. The failure to publish the biblical epigraph enhances the process of self-reflection in the pages of a ‘parallel’ text. In 1948 in his diary Prishvin remarks: “My work [on the novel] is communist in content and my own in form, and at the same time totally my own that even the smartest person on the right wing will not suspect me of sycophancy” [15, p. 77].

### 3.2. *Small chapter ‘Right and Left’*

In Prishvin’s version the novel contains a small chapter entitled *Right and Left* that was excluded from all other novel editions. The chapter takes only one page, its volume being nonessential for the whole novel. However, it makes the hidden meanings of the main text transparent.

This chapter tells a story of a small Soviet man who overcomes his insignificance (‘raindrop’) and enters the common flow of time that is presented through the image of rapids. The rapids are a huge single water stream, *padun* (waterfall) made of billions small drops of water. This image metaphorically conveys the author’s conception on modern world: communist construction is the ‘rapids’ themselves, composed of individual human lives. But such an approach was initially contrary to the leading ideology of the time: *a small Soviet man* was simply non-existent a priori.

On renewal of the spiritual principle of a human being Prishvin writes: “And the man himself ... had been gradually betraying himself, as if some other person of another breed with a heavy hammer had been knocking out of himself a familiar ordinary small man, with his constant bustle beside him” [19, p. 349]. Further in the text, the expression “the familiar small man” is expanded with

words *lazy, stupid, slow-witted, careless*, transmitting general lack of culture of an 'old' human nature. At the end of the chapter comes the image of a "cloudy veil" over an ordinary soul, when a man, "changing the external nature, lifted up the fog over his own soul and faced it in surprise as unfamiliar" [19, p. 349].

Covert philosophical meaning miniatures were sure to make it more difficult for the Soviet reader to understand the text. Besides, the lexical characteristics of a modern man were unacceptable for censors.

The small chapter excluded by Prishvin himself revealed a socio-political variation of the same Christian idea that was given in the epigraph. This "Christian socialism", as S. Logvinenko [21] defines this phenomenon, becomes in the novel not only one of the ideas, but also a compromise along the difficult path taken by the writer to ensure the publication of the novel in the long run.

### **3.3. The plot**

While creating the main character of the novel Zuyok, Prishvin, takes the boy from the Bolsheviks (KGB) – to thugs and former convicts, and then to 'reigning' in the world of nature (led by the forest tramp Kyprianych). Such storyline twist was perceived by censors as 'wrong' or 'suspicious': how could "angelic" soul of a child exchange ideology for "criminal element" [15, p. 79]? Prishvin understood his own 'mistake', but didn't radically alter the plot.

Zuyok's path can conditionally fit into the following scheme: the movement from common collective ideology (images of KGB officers) – to individualistic anarchism, perceived in a romantic way (former prisoners) – to human identification in the world of nature.

While building such kind of character's movement, Prishvin remembered his own life experience: fascination for Marxism – disappointment in it – turning to nature as self-knowledge. It was not incidental that the writer marked the similarity of Zuyok with a character of his autobiographic novel *Kashcheev's Chain* – the boy Kurymuska, who was moved from Central Russia to the Northern forests of the old believers.

The writer's depiction of the former prisoners' destinies (Volkov, Rudolf, Kuprianych) conceals the thought that destroys the leading idea of the Stalin times. 'Re-forging', in the opinion of the writer, cannot be understood intellectually, i.e., 'in a deeply moral sense': "...we understand it in the sense of 'molding swords to ploughs', i.e. creating a new form but keeping the same material; thugs must have understood the reformation in the sense of changing the horseshoes: the horse was lame in the old horseshoe, now with a new shoe it runs well; but it happens so that the new horseshoe may be put backwards and its track on the road looks counter-directionally to the true motion. In short, re-forging in a criminal language ... has a different meaning than in common speech." [15, p. 64]

Prishvin speculates on the underlying principles of Russian character capable of extreme manifestations in utmost conditions. It is in the images of the thieves that Russian national power could be seen, which the writer calls in his

diaries “the boldness of obedience, the daring of service or anarchy in the face of death: death prowess” [18, p. 823]. Especially clearly can this idea be traced in the image of Vasya Veselkin, who is going to ‘pacify’ the great rock to be able to start his life from scratch (‘all will be forgiven for the feat’), but who never started it, dying from an explosion.

Zuyok’s return to the criminals, offended, is not coincidental for Prishvin in the storyline development. Let even the boy return to the Bolsheviks, his body already bears patterns of other life: the tattoo ‘Mary’ is the same word that the former convict Rudolf carries on his shoulder.

The end of the novel is symbolic: the boy Zuyok comprehends his ‘ego’ neither with the help of the KGB, or Bolsheviks, nor with the anarchists-criminals, but on a large detached island among wild animals. This model of Noah’s ark reconstructed by the writer to some extent depicts history gone backwards – both social and biological history. A primal animalistic nature turns out to be the shortest way for the boy to attain his inner freedom and to comprehend the essence of existence.

The end in the novel was ultimately confronting the epigraph, like the pagan is opposed to the Christian. However, Prishvin was clearly unable to speak openly about his ideological disagreement, and he turns to the wisdom of the natural world.

The novel has gradually become to him a confession of a sick soul, burdened with the search for truth in the country of atheists. In his diary entry of August 25, 1952, a few months before his death, Prishvin tries to explain to himself that he finally leaves the hope for the novel to be published: “My task was in all Soviet times to adapt myself to the new environment and to remain my real self. This task required a feat; the feat was performed, but there seems to be still little done: it took much effort **to learn** (emphasis by M. Prishvin) the new.” [15, p. 82]

#### 4. Conclusions

The idea of the German researcher I. Klein [22] that after 1933 Prishvin became part and parcel of Soviet literature does not seem to us true enough. Unpublished during the writer’s life, the novel *Sovereign’s Road* is a strong counterevidence; Prishvin did not fit in Soviet literature completely.

His anxious desire to be heard and understood by his peers (in the name of whom endless redactions were undertaken) encountered equally strong desire to preserve the existential core of his own identity – that of a human being and a writer.

To Prishvin the novel turned into an attempt to show how, through crime and punishment committed on the national scale, one can access historical catharsis. This attempt failed – each one of subsequent editions not only lost in artistic flavouring, but also became alienated from the conceived idea.



In the fight with the Soviet censorship, it is the publication ban for the novel that becomes a sign of the confrontation of time, and the 'intact' fragments remaining in the text reveal the writer's large-scale comprehension of the tragic events in Russian national history and in human destiny.

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