Literary Methodology of Andrei Bitov in the Novels about Armenia and Georgia

Alexander Kovalenko¹ and Elrashid Ali Mohammed Adam²,*

¹Department of Russian and Foreign Literature (of Philological Faculty)
Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), Moscow, Russia
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6747-285X

²Department of Russian and Foreign Literature (of Philological Faculty)
Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), Moscow, Russia
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2058-2901

*Corresponding author

Keywords: Andrei Bitov, Mikhail Bakhtin, Russian Prose, Literary Methodology, Travel Genre, Georgia, Armenia

Abstract. This article explores the contributions of one of the greatest Russian writers in the contemporary literature Andrei Bitov, who has written several novels and short stories that reflect his journey to Armenia, Georgia and Middle Asia. Andrei Bitov was one of the first Russian writers in the Soviet Union after V. Bryusov and O. Mandelstam, who devoted to an entire literary work “Lessons of Armenia” to Armenia in 1969 then “Georgian album”. However, his political opposition to the Soviet Totalitarianism led to the prohibition of publishing some of his works. At the end of the article, an attempt will be made to look in depth at the literary methodology of A. Bitov in his novels’ journey about Armenia and Georgia in particular and the concept of the outstanding literary criticism of M.M. Bakhtin’s “Transgridence” and the well-known concept of V. Shklovsky’s “Defamiliarization” in A. Bitov literary methodology. The semantic complexity of travel in A. Bitov’s work has an ontological and cognitive meaning.

1. Introduction

Andrei Bitov was a well-known Russian novelist, writer, and essayist, who has made a great contribution to modern Russian literature. He began writing poetry firstly in 1956, but then started loving prose. In 1963, he published his first collection of stories “The young Leningrad”. Bitov’s works were not claimed by the Soviet regime, due to his opposition against the government that time, he was writing without any restriction of the neglect from the censorship on publications. And Andrei Bitov followed Pushkin's principles “inspiration is not for sale, but it is possible to sell the manuscript” [5]. He said that nowhere to hurry, so he seldom wrote and wrote quickly, that is why his novels took a long time to be developed. The personality and creativity of A. Bitov occupied a special place in Russian literature of the twentieth century, and this feature becomes more and more obvious in the mind of the reader that the writer irrevocably passed away on December 3rd 2018. One of other ideas which becomes more distinct is that A. Bitov's work needs consistent scientific research in the context of Russian contemporary literature.

Speaking about the scientific research of A. Bitov's prose, we cannot forget about its features. In this regard, we can give one vivid example, N. Ivanova wrote about the features of A. Bitov’s work as follows: “A. Bitov was a novelist, storyteller, geography-historian-essayist, who collected various spheres by breaking the possibility of enrolling writers in a single direction” [4]. And, it can be added that A. Bitov was a “traveler” of himself, a literary critic and philosopher.
2. The novel “Lessons of Armenia” by A. Bitov

2.1. The story of the creation of the novel

Andrei Bitov was one of the first Russian writers in the Soviet Union who devoted to an entire literary work “Lessons of Armenia” in 1969. A. Bitov started publishing some short stories about the journey to Armenia in a journal, informing about the people of Armenia, about nature, sightseeing of the country, history and today, about Yerevan and more, and about architecture in particular. The history of its appearance is associated with various paradoxical coincidences. For instance, it seems interesting to note here that the paradox of "geographical", or even "biographical property" is evident in his work.

In his memoirs, A. Bitov constantly mentioned Japan as his childish dream to visit new countries far away from his homeland. The dream did not come true, due to the “travel restrictions” at that time. The Writers' Union could not allow him traveling to the capitalist country (of Japan). However, A. Bitov was not alone in this situation, when the “Khrushchev Thaw” was over; the young writes in USSR such as V. Aksyonov, A. Voznesensky, V. Voinovich, E. Evtushenko and many other liberals began to feel different kind of restrictions by the authority.

Instead of Japan, A. Bitov went to Armenia. A young Leningrad prose writer, who has graduated from the Higher Scenario Courses in Moscow, was given the task in 1967 to go to one of the central newspapers in Armenia to write an essay about the new architecture of the capital of the Sunshine Republic.

When A. Bitov arrived to Armenia, there were unexpected things happened. The task was not performed as it was. The result was, interestingly, exceeded expectations. The book was unexpected, because it appeared not like a regular newspaper essay: instead of writing about the new socialist architecture of the capital, he wrote about the whole of Armenia that became an emotional story about this long-suffering land, its rich history, people, culture, language. Instead of the story about today, it became a story about the distant past. In addition to that, A. Bitov also wrote a lot about its (of Armenia) unique architecture, covered with centuries of time.

A. Bitov was not the discoverer of Armenia. At the beginning of the twentieth century, V. Bryusov discovered for the Russian reader the wealth of poetry of this wonderful country by translating its great poets into Russian. On January 20th 1916, one of the most accurate and insightful poems “Towards Armenia” was dated. V. Bryusov created a portrait of this beautiful country with a rich and glorious history, with its noble men and beautiful women, with its wisdom and military prowess. About Armenia, V. Bryusov wrote, it united West and East, it became the core of the world, personifying the soul of mankind.

As famous in the history of Russian literature in the beginning of the 1930s, the essay by O. Mandelstam “Traveling to Armenia” (1931-1932), was written. It is characterized that the trip to Armenia coincided, and perhaps became the cause of the poet’s unhappiness, a kind of subsequent exile to other gloomy and cold places.

However, there is another version of the story of the appearance of the novel “Lessons of Armenia” by A. Bitov, excluding romance and completely pragmatic. Tadashi N. wrote: “in search of “daily wage”, for this purpose, A. Bitov signed a contract with a reputable state publishing house for the book in a propaganda and journalistic spirit. It should have been called “Armenia: before and now” [7]. Summing up the author’s individual statements and the contemporaries’ recollections, it can be argued that A. Bitov at that time worked not only for “high art”, but also for the sake of basic income, to feed his family. A classic example of this kind is the historical work of F.M. Dostoevsky on the novel "The Player", “the text of which was written under an enslaving contract with the publisher Stellovsky in a short time, for the sake of a fee, but ended up in the ranking of masterpieces of world literature” [3].

The novel “Lessons of Armenia” was written for more than a year, although Andrei Bitov spent only ten days in Armenia. In this regard, Andrei Bitov wrote: “I have lived in this book much longer than in Armenia, and this is its content,” - each day added so much to me that it took me a month to describe it. Who should I take so much time from? ... ” [1]. The book ultimately turned out to be
unexpectedly large, and therefore A. Bitov remarked with humor: “What was the author’s health to write such book so quickly” [1].

2.2. “Lessons of Armenia” was a lesson for a modern prose

The book did not correspond to the stereotypes of the perception of the Soviet reader, it was too “free”, “smart” and at the same time “relaxed”. Nevertheless, it did not face any special obstacles from censorship, and readers could read the stories from the novel first time in 1969, when the book was published on the pages of the Peoples’ Friendship Magazine. But whole “Lessons of Armenia” was published in the Armenian publishing house “Sovetakan Grokh” (“Soviet Writer”) in 1978.

The writer often noted that already at the beginning of creation, it was important to see the end of the book in its entirety, in its inseparable and “folded” form, and inspiration would help to “unfold” it in all harmony and concreteness. Consequently, the impetus for the deployment of the text in time became the metaphor of the “lesson”. Compositionally, the text consists of individual lessons that are added to the systemic “curriculum”: “Lesson of language”, “Lesson of history”, “Lesson of geography”, “Lessons of faith”, also there are chapters of “Caucasian captive”, “Passion of urban planner”, “The old man”. The cyclical completeness of the “curriculum” is emphasized by the final story “After the lessons”.

The concept of the lesson is interpreted widely - and above all, in the cultural and historical context: what the writer saw in a small country became an example for the whole world. On the other hand, A. Bitov also gave people a lesson to free thinking, the courage of creative expression, which was highly praised by the critic I. Zolotussky, defining A. Bitov’s novel as “a lesson for modern prose” [8].

Thanks to the semantic complex of travel, steady for the creative consciousness of the writer. “Lessons of Armenia” successfully fitted into the emerging ”metacycle”. An intermediate result of this movement was the publication of the book “Traveling from Russia”, which, in addition to the lessons of Armenia, includes other novels: “The Wheel”, “Our Man in Khiva”, as well as the story “One Country (Travel of Boris Murashov)”, written based on impressions from the author’s trip to the Central Asian Soviet republics, these seven journeys became the milestones of the “route”, the “road map” of A. Bitov, which formed important general features of his writing style that determined the vector of his worldview.

3. The “Transgridence” of M. M. Bakhtin in the prose of A. Bitov

What was extremely interesting is that some semantic subtexts of the work, in that, “Lessons of Armenia”, of course, is a story about the past and present of Armenia, its people, the tragic history of the country, remarkable figures, nature and architecture. However, later A. Bitov mentioned that “the book was not written about Armenia, but about Russia the country at that time, however, about magnificent and magical Russia in abstract way” [1]. The statement is extremely curious and raises many questions.

Obviously, this phrase contains a paradox that implies a lot of meanings. To understand Bitov’s expression, we need to remember another statement of the outstanding literary critic M.M. Bakhtin on the ”Transgridence” (Transgridence is a special form of out of position. If transcendence is a transcendent being, another being, then transgridence is being in a different plane of being, belonging to a different layer of being), and "out-of-position" of writer's thinking. The meaning of this concept as Bakhtin explained that the creative and analytical thinking of the author demanded to visualize the world out of certain point of time and place (i.e., from the point of view of eternity). Then, the dynamics and meaning of the passage of time becomes clear. The well-known concept of V. Shklovsky’s “Defamiliarization” (Defamiliarization is the artistic technique of presenting to audiences common things in an unfamiliar or strange way in order to enhance perception of the familiar), which is explained even more broadly - “a view from the outside”, can be comprehended not only in the spatial dimension as in Bakhtin’s concept, but also in any other dimension such as in the intellectual, moral, stylistic, language, genre, etc.
Everything said is directly related to Bitov, the given statement and more broadly to his creative method. Moreover, Bitov was doubly “out of position” and “defamiliarized”. The first step is the out-of-position of another (Armenian) culture. The second step is the “reverse”, the out-of-position of Russian culture in the Armenian context. But there is a third step—the non-position of Russian culture (“due to idealism), in relation to Russian culture (existing, flawed).

The semantic complexity of travel here has its ontological, cognitive meaning: Bitov claimed that cognition of Russia was possible through the prism of space and time in another country, another culture and history, the author wrote that: “Everyone knows that travel broadens one's horizons - it's right. But this expansion consists in the fact that you see the homeland wider. The meaning of the journey is what you see when you get back home…” [2].

The history of the publication of “Lessons of Armenia” ends with a “small triumph”. A. Bitov became well known and recognizable to the Russian reader as the author of an innovative text, the discoverer of a long-known, but "unknown" country. On the other hand, he became an involuntary hero of Armenia, E. Shuvaeva-Petrosyan mentioned: “The feedback of the journey in writer's recognition wasn’t fully realized by him,—the spontaneous outburst led to the fact that Bitov, like his predecessors - Bryusov, Gorodetsky, Mandelstam - is revered in Armenia as a saint. He just like his friend Matevosyan, was strengthened in “solid and infertile soil” [6].

4. The novel “Georgian Album” by A. Bitov

For A. Bitov, the process of writing a book is a process of movement toward understanding. To write means to try to explain something to oneself, and, as a result, to other people. The more A. Bitov wrote about the republics of the USSR, the deeper he understood himself and his homeland. As the plot progresses, its horizons become wider. Awareness of this fact spontaneously spelled out precisely in the “Georgian Album” as a “final” journey. In addition, Georgia was originally close to the Russian heart, the author was baptized in the Georgian Orthodox Church, and this meant that the author essentially never got out of Russia: “... but this coast was conquered yesterday - I was still in Russia” [1]. The narrator and writer merge into one character. While in Georgia, the writer was aware of the long-standing relationship between Russia and Georgia. The narrative takes on the style of a “stream of consciousness” caused by a memory of childhood, about baptism in this land, about predecessors who came to Georgia (A.S. Pushkin). From this episode, we can understand that A. Bitov wrote two texts at the same time: the first is a literary text, and the second is literary criticism. He understood the connections existing between all texts, from the first word to the last. Moreover, the writer believed that he used different genres in travel books, just this was a “synthesis”, which was said to intersect with other genres, while remaining independent.

The story “Georgian Album” is a continuation of A. Bitov’s hypertext. In the comments to the story “Georgian Album”, the writer said that all the individual texts written in different genres began to merge and intertwine, in one way or another to continue each other, growing into something bigger. The author has already delved into the “Empire”, not seeing the general idea, not realizing that the first phrase was already written in 1960: “It would be nice to start a book that can be written all my life...” [1].

A. Bitov believed that each chapter of the “Georgian Album” was written as the last, as a farewell. Since three chapters of them were published “legally” as a background to portraits of his friends in 1976, and the remaining three chapters were illegally published in the notorious uncensored almanac “Metropol” in 1979. We can state that the style of A. Bitov is different in each chapter in his work is a separate work. Therefore, some critics and researchers noticed a feature of Bitov’s work: you can start reading from the end or the beginning of the book, without losing any meaning. This feature is, indeed, pronounced in the novel "Pushkin House".

5. Conclusion

To summarize, based on the discussion highlighted in this paper so far, we can conclude that the creative method of A. Bitov in the novels “Lessons of Armenia” and “Georgian Album” contains
the poetics of M. Bakhtin and V. Shklovsky. On the one hand, A. Bitova saw his country through
the prism of these two countries and culture. On the other hand, he saw them from the point of view
of Russia; eventually he saw his homeland from the non-position of Russian culture.

An important and even innovative parameter in the semantic complex of travel was the rethought
principle of “Defamiliarization”: travel outside, to another country, became an occasion and an
opportunity for a deep understanding of one’s own country and the place of an individual in it. The
author created a “double vector” of defamiliarization—from “his territory” to “alien” and,
conversely, from “alien territory” to “his”. A double, “shuttle” look is a way of “stereoscopic
vision” of space. This technique has been implemented most consistently in “Lessons of Armenia”.

Armenia was reflected in the artistic space of three Russian writers, A. Bitov, O. Mandelstam and
V. Bryusov. Each of the writers discovered Armenia in his own way. Bitov rediscovered Armenia
for Russian readers. In “Lessons of Armenia” and in his work in general, A. Bitov continued the
tradition of his predecessors, especially the tradition of Alexander Pushkin and O. Mandelstam. A.
Bitov’s work plays an important role in strengthening the relationship between Russian and
Armenian cultures. As such, "Lessons of Armenia" teaches a person to live. Instead of “Lessons of
Armenia”, the story of A. Bitov deserves the title “Lessons of Life”.

References
[1] Bits. A.G. Travel from Russia: Empire in four dimensions. Dimension III: Travel Stories, M.:
Publishing House “Astrel”. 2013, pp. 505.
[2] Bitov A.G. Traveler: Double. M.: Fortuna Limited, 2004, pp. 240.
[3] Dostoevsky M. The story of the creation of the noel “The player”. Access: http://www.
adlmostoevsky.ru/2015/02/istorija-sozdanija-roman-igrok-dostoevskij-i-anna-snitkina.html
[4] Ivanova N. Fate and role//People’s Friendship -Issue 3 -1988, pp. 244-255.
[5] Pushkin A.C. The speech of a bookseller with a poet. Access: https://ilibrary.ru/text/
525/p.1/index. html
[6] Shuvaeva-Petrosyan E. Andrey Bitov and Armenia: Birth of a traveler and the genre of travel
genre. https://zen.yandex.ru/media/armmuseum/andrei-bitov-i-armeniia-roidienie-puteshestvennika-i-janra-putesh estvi5c0768aec2500600aa628336
[7] Tadashi N. Literature and borders: The Caucasus in Russian literature. Osip Mandelstam and
Andrei Bitov. pp. 267. http://srch.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/coe21/publish/no17_ses/13nakamura.pdf
[8] Zolotussky I. Cognition of the present/voprosy literatury [literature issues]. No. 10. 1987, pp. 24.