The Reception of China’s Image in the Poem “The Great Nothing” by K. Balmont

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Abstract. The article considers the receptive aesthetics of the image of China in K. Balmont’s poem “The Great Nothing”. Considerable attention is paid to the poem’s interpretation. The analysis of K. Balmont reception, identifying the source that prompted the poet to create the poem, is new in this work. Author’s reasoning and conclusions are based on critical studies and comparison of two cultures: Slavonic-Russian culture and Chinese culture. The analysis of K. Balmont’s poetic works is carried out in the semantic aspect using the search of textual parallels, which consists in juxtaposing the poem K. Balmont’s “The Great Nothing” with other poems by the poet, as well as with poems by other authors. The reception study of the image of China in the K. Balmont’s poetry allows approaching another aspect of the cultural world view of the Silver Age in Russian Poetry.

1. Introduction

K. Balmont’s poetry attracted the attention of many scientists. These are works of V. Orlov, P.V. Kupriyanovskii, N.A. Molchanova, L.N. Taganov, T.S. Petrova and other researchers. D.E. Maximov noted the improvisational characteristics of Balmont's poetry, “innovative poetic texture”, “poetics of the way” [1]. V. Orlov, describing the poet's personality, claimed that decadence for K. Balmont “served not only as of the form of aesthetic attitude to life but the life itself, the personal life of the poet” [2].

Starting with decadent poems until the 1930s, the images of non-existence, nothingness, darkness, and emptiness became important for the poet [3]. V.F. Markov in the comments to the poems of K. Balmont suggested that the poet's interest in the East and especially the theme of “nothing” could be found from the French poet Lagor: “Lagor could not only give rise to a common interest of Balmont to the East but partly his pantheism, his theme of “nothing” [4].

2. K. Balmont and his poem “The Great Nothing”

Researchers of creative works by K. Balmont note his deep lyricism, a word of poetry that comes not from the outside world, but from the soul itself: “having crossed all the seas and passed all the roads, he noticed nothing in the world, but his soul” [5]. However, the thirst for knowledge of existence drew him to the unthinkable for a man of his time corners of the Universe. It seemed that he tried to embrace in his mind all the fields of science, to learn the customs of all nations and states. “True lyricist” and “aesthete” (in the words of V.N. Orlov) K. Balmont drew his poetic strength not from the problems of public order and politics, but the highest aesthetic delight of the heart [2]. Balmont’s fascination with any country was not limited to the study of only one language, he turned to folklore, myths and legends, was interested in history and philosophy. The poet deeply appreciated another culture, it is known that “the names of languages and nationalities (Slavic,
French, Chinese, etc.) Balmont invariably wrote with a capital letter and considered this writing important” [6].

K. Balmont’s poem “The Great Nothing”, written on February 1900, can be called the summit of his “Chinese” poems. The poem title came from the philosophical concept taixu (太虚, tài xū)—“Great emptiness”, “The Void”, “Heaven”, which goes back to the doctrine of the Dao. (emptiness) is also translated as “empty”, “unoccupied”, “false” and is the antinomy of the concept shi (实)—“true”, “honest”, “real”, “solid”. If we consider “The Great Nothing” as the microcycle consisting of two texts, we can say that the first of them was the result of the poet's appeal to Chinese mythology, while the source for the creation of the second was the Daoist book of stories and anecdotes “Zhuangzi”.

3. The main features of the image of China in K. Balmont's poem “The Great Nothing”

3.1 “Piety” as the world views of the lyrical hero

Piety, which K. Balmont wrote in his poem, is not a sense of unity with the world, but the “indiscriminate unscrupulousness” that is the characteristic of decadent aesthetics and art [2]. Let us turn to the text of K. Balmont’s poem "The Great Nothing":

My soul is a deaf theopathic temple,
Shadows breathe there, growing dimly.
The most gratifying of all my dreams
Beautiful monsters of China.

However, the expression “deaf theopathic temple” for the poetry of melodious Balmont is a negative response, which is quite clear after reading another poem by K. Balmont “Sparks”, where the poet called himself a “spark”, departing from his God (“Sun”). It is known that Jesus Christ himself is called the “Sun” in the Slavic-Russian tradition. The lyrical hero state of mind can be explained by his spiritual quest, so there are representatives’ names from very different religions in Balmont’s poem. In “The Great Nothing” all religions are fully equal for the lyrical hero, as in many other poetic texts by K. Balmont. His poem “The Great Nothing” reflects a unique Chinese world view that has no religion, no faith in any particular image, but has its own “world” God, a kind of “higher power”.

3.2 Reflection of Chinese mythology

Chinese tradition has four characteristic mythical animals, “four divinities” (四灵, sìlíng)—Chinese unicorn, phoenix, turtle (only this one poet does not mention) and dragon. "Beautiful monsters of China" are endowed in Balmont’s poetic text with power:

Dragon, Lord of the sun and spring,
The unicorn, the emblem of perfection,
And the phoenix, the image of the royal wife,
A fusion of power, brilliance, and bliss.

The Dragon image (龙, lóng) is the main image in Chinese culture. It is often depicted as a winged creature, the Lord of clouds, thunderclouds, rain, soaring in the clouds or floating in waves, wreathed in a fiery flame. In China it symbolizes force (阳, yáng) and dignity; it is the symbol of Emperor: all Chinese emperors regarded themselves as dragons. We can assume that K. Balmont was familiar with the dictionary “Shuowen Jiezi” (“Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters”), known since ancient times, that “the dragon is the chief of scaly creatures, capable of being mysterious, dark and clear-bright, tiny and gigantic, short and long; in spring it floats in the sky, in autumn dives into the abyss”, so the dragon image in the poet's view is associated with spring—“the Lord of the sun and spring”. In the poem “High destinies” the poet calls China “Crowned with a Dragon” [7]. Unicorn (麒麟, qílín) symbolizes fortune and wealth. According to the legends, it is kind to all living beings and portends a happy event. The Phoenix image (凤, fèng) often
symbolizes a human in the Chinese mythological tradition. Phoenix is the best of all birds in the world, the most beautiful and noble bird, “the Queen of birds”.

3.3 Aesthetic and philosophical features

The images of “frozen beauty” and “monotonous dreams” found in the poem are quite understandable: Chinese civilization, one of the most ancient, keeps its culture from everything “external”:

I love a monotonous dream
In the creations of Chinese artists,
Frozen, like frost, beauty,
Like the frost of dreams that sparkles without melting.

The mythopoetic nature of the atmosphere, the language, the reality, covered with legends (for what reason it can hardly be felt like a reality) create the impression of “frozen beauty”, the feeling of sleep, from which it is impossible to wake up.

One component of Balmont’s receptive aesthetics in the poem “The Great Nothing” was the poet's appeal to the categories of Chinese philosophical concepts. The poet mentions symmetry that is the main law of the Chinese mindset:

Symmetry is their basic law,
They paint the distance as an ascent,
And sweet to me, that their horrible dragon
Is not an infernal spirit, but a symbol of pleasure.

From ancient times to the present, Chinese strive to follow symmetry. The concept of symmetry can be found in many canonical Chinese books, used in various forms of art. Symmetry is the aesthetic desire of the ancients, the national aesthetic psychology of the Chinese people [8].

3.4 The idea of a confrontation between two cultures

One of the main ideas of K. Balmont’s poem “The Great Nothing” is the idea of a confrontation between two cultures: Slavonic-Russian culture and Chinese culture. In the Slavonic-Russian tradition “dragon” is the symbol of evil, a demon, a snake, “hell spirit”. The image of Saint George defeating the serpent (dragon) is well-known in Christian iconography. K. Balmont has a poem “Saint George” [9], retelling the famous legend. In China dragon (龙, lóng) “heads” all holidays and it is an integral attribute of Chinese people life. If in the Slavonic-Russian tradition the image of Saint George, piercing a dragon with a spear, is a symbol of counteraction of good and evil, victory over the evil, then in the Chinese tradition it is a game with evil, “pleasure” from its presence. In the poem “The Curse to men” the poet, referring to the dragon image, exclaimed: “Who is he? The Devil or the Constellation—Chinese symbol—vague smoke” [9]. The raised question can be explained by the knowledge of the ancient mythological tradition of China, where “good and evil spirits were not distinguished” (Yuan Ke's expression).

3.5 Echoes of Chinese painting

In the poem “The Great Nothing” by K. Balmont, some principles of traditional Chinese painting are put forward with the expression “tones, fragmented in the difference of the consonants”, strives for a monochrome image, in which it is customary to think that the abundance of external beauty can distract from the true beauty—inner beauty (note that the word “basis”, used by the poet as “relating to painting”, can be observed in the poem by Osip Mandelstam “Washed at night in the yard...”) [10].

3.6 Synthesis of Daoist and Buddhist Traits

Balmont’s poem “The Great Nothing” whimsically combines Daoist and Buddhist elements: in the second part of the poem, the poet “quotes” the famous Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi (or by the words of the poet “Chwang-sang”), one of the founders of Daoism. The “narrative” of “Chwang-sang” (Zhuangzi) is primarily a narrative of the unfeeling (a word functioning in the poetic text “The Great Nothing” twice) state of the “ideal man”: “The real people of antiquity did not know
what it was to rejoice in life and turn away from death, they were not proud of the birth and did not resist leaving the world. Absently they came, absently left, not looking for the beginning, not rushing the thought to the end <...> the mind of these people immersed in reverie”. [11] According to Hansen-Löve, these ideas of the poet date back to Buddhist ideas: “Balmont also has the examples of such a synthesis of Asian (Buddhist) ideas of divine “nothing” (“The Great Nothing”, Chinese mythology echoes here distinctly) with typically decadent detachment from the existence” [12].

3.7 Hidden reminiscence of a famous Chinese proverb

The interpretation of the line “Go West, dreams died” is interesting. In the Chinese tradition the expression “Go West” (上西天, shàng xī tiān) means “to enter heaven”. The “Great Nothing” doesn’t build the eternity, doesn’t give life, it is equal to the emptiness, its space knows no bounds: “This logic (Buddhist) denied God, denied the soul, denied the eternity. It accepted nothing but the changing flow of transient phenomena and their final eternal rest in nirvana” [13]. In the perception of K. Balmont, “nothing” is something terrible, ugly (poem “Deadly Death”) [14].

Conclusion

Thus, it can be confirmed that the basis for the creation of the poem “The Great Nothing” is the Chinese philosophical idea of non-existence. The perception of the poet is based on a deep knowledge of Chinese culture and philosophy.

The semantic content of “The Great Nothing” consists of the following categories:
- The poet's appeal to Chinese traditions and philosophy (“Great emptiness”, the concept of symmetry, treatise “Zhuangzi”, the concept of Chinese painting);
- The use of mythopoetic images (Dragon, Unicorn, Phoenix);
- The interpretation of the dragon image and its difference in the cultural tradition of Russia and China;
- The author’s use of Chinese cultural-linguistic realities (the expression “Go West”).

Poem by K. Balmont “The Great Nothing” is one of the most complex in terms of its semantics. For a true understanding of the author’s intention, for penetration into the way of lyrical hero thoughts and feelings, it is necessary to turn to the hidden reminiscences and images of Chinese culture.

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