



BOOK REVIEWS


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Boris Akunin, literary critic and teacher.
Book review:
Akunin, B. (2022). *A Russian in England: A self-instruction guide to fiction.*
Moscow: Alpina Publishers. (In Russ.)

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Борис Акунин, литературовед и педагог.
Рецензия на книгу:
Акунин Б. Русский в Англии: самоучитель по беллетристике.
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Boris Akunin, the author of Erast Fandorin saga, creator of impressive *The History of the Russian State*, an experimentalist with genre, put together several of his talents – that of a historian, fiction author, pedagogue and literary critic – to write the book we are about to review. It is hardly possible to prioritize any of the mentioned above. All of these sides, the “incarnations” of the famous writer, blend together in the book where he positions himself in a new genre of “self-instruction book”. It looks like the artist, who generously shares the secrets of his creative laboratory with anyone who tries his or her hand in a difficult workmanship of a writer, is saying: “Watch, think and do as I do”

A Russian in England as a polysemantic and refined metaphor, explains the quality of the material, peculiarities of the space, specifics of characters and points to the meaning and peculiarities of Writer’s Craft. This metaphor holds the very “estrangement” which allows to see Englishmen through the Russian eye and to see a Russian as an object of observation for a Britain native, and meanwhile, is a reminder of rivalry and long-standing controversy of two empires. This estranged “eye”, enriched by impressions and observations, turned backwards, allows a new way of perceiving Russian reality, historical and modern. An expert in history, Akunin immerses the principle of “double (direct and reverse) estrangement” into different epochs. We plunge into the epoch of Ivan the Terrible, Paul I, Nicholas II and the 20th century. Thus, the book about England, its fiction and history, makes a full circle and is comprehended as the book about Russians and Russia. Akunin takes on the role of a tutor and strictly adheres to the pedagogical “vector” of a teach-yourself book. First and foremost, this is true about the well-defined architecture of the genre. In the manual there are 10 units, with 5 sections in each, every section has its own task: Subject, Material, Task, Example, Commentary. Historical episodes follow each other chronologically, even though they are not drawn entirely but remain dotted. Each episode involves material for the plot, B. Akunin, as a smart and generous teacher, tells how to construct a story, how to develop a theme, how to write about love, rivalry, how to reveal the inner world of a character or two characters simultaneously, which style to choose, how to use a detective narrative, and, finally, how to fill the plot with “magic” and “mysticism”. And here everything is put into action, from benevolent advice to subtle comparisons. Characters of a story are compared with two “submarines” with periscopes; a tanka written by a Japanese poetess to the death of her young son is suggested as an inspiration to explore the theme of death. Like a musical virtuoso who is good at playing many instruments, Akunin teaches to write according to any pre-planned assignment, there is a wide variety of “assortment” – political thriller, psychological drama, buff comedy, single-act play, psy-

chological sketch, epistolary novella, romantic novella, picaresque prose, hermetic detective story, some “horror” story of the “maniac-story” segment, and finally a narrative of a mystical-metaphysical nature. The breadth of coverage is amazing, the set of tools causes good envy, the generosity of the master causes respect and gratitude.

One and the same topic – the story of the relationship between Herzen and Ogarev – can serve as a pretext for an artistic experiment: how to create a “positive”, sympathetic character for the author, and, consequently, for the reader, and an unsympathetic, “negative” character. And here it does not matter what is the true attitude of B. Akunin, the “engineer of the human soul” to his characters, it is important to show the “technique”. For a fiction writer the authentic, the real, simply does not exist, because the people he or she created are the fruit of a writer’s technology aimed at capturing the reader’s attention. Of course, Akunin the teacher here does not in the least change his fictional role of a “gamer”, deftly and masterfully manipulating the reader’s expectation and consciousness. But after all, he does not hide the fact that in the “self-instruction book” it is suggested to have in mind the horizons of literary (fictional) creativity as an intellectual game. Not in the least pretending to be the Creator, this is not his vocation, he knows the value of his talent as a fiction writer and makes it the very subject of the “educational process”.

In the book there are moments that are extremely useful for literary criticism and for understanding Akunin’s deep narrative “mechanism”. He teaches to look for episodes in history that are in the “shadow”, little-known, imperceptible, and for this reason can become a source of artistic intrigue, and then to “shed light” on the “genuine” driving forces of the big story. This is the “game” aimed at arousing the interest of the reader. Akunin teaches to “look behind the document” (or, as Yu. Tynyanov wrote, “to make a hole” in the ceremonial document), he shows how to revive little-known facts and turn them into the starting point of the plot, which is “embedded” in a well-known historical context. And then, instead of a well-known historical figure, someone minor becomes significant as the character who drives the collision and influences the course of events. Take for example, the interpreter Epifan Neudacha (the Loser), who prevented the marriage of the Russian tsar to a subject of Queen Elizabeth, or a certain Bartenev, who became the prototype of Rakhmetov, or the fosterling of Tsar Boris Godunov, the “defector” Nikifor Alferyev, who turned into the Anglican priest Mikifer Elferi.

Akunin, the pedagogue, teaches to understand and use the original law of antinomy of any literary text. The writer is aware of and knows how to skillfully “play” on those contradictions and contrasts that are inevitable in human communication – personal, social and political. Thus, the plot of the story “Prodigy and Boomer” is built on a chain of contradictions, which begins with the theme of the fate of the Crimea (the reader gets the hint that this issue has an everlasting relevance!) and ends with the idea of British colonization of Australia.

Firstly, this is the “traditional” rivalry between Russian and British Empires (which is always interesting and relevant to this day), and secondly, the dispute between two politicians, the brilliant diplomat Semyon Romanovich Vorontsov and a young energetic prime minister of Great Britain William Pitt, who decides

on relocation of “tens of thousands of idlers”, thirdly, the rivalry between “old” and “young” (“boomers” and “prodigies”) politicians in the government, and finally, an interesting and in its own way contradictory figure of Vorontsov himself, who spent forty seven years in Foggy Albion, but until the end he remained a true Russian, devoted to the interests of his motherland. The “final touché” (this favorite Akunin's trick is discussed in the last lesson of the tutorial) becomes a spectacular “antinomic” paradox ending:

“– *What if you sell it to the Russians? They don't have enough territories, so let them buy it.*

– *Nonsense, Pitt muttered. – The Russians don't even know what to do with the Crimea. The eyes in the mirror suddenly sparkled.*

– *Eureka! the Prime Minister repeated his favorite word. – I know what to do with Australia! This will be our Siberia!*” (Akunin, 2022, p. 117).

It is very improbable that a phrase like this could have been pronounced by an Englishman, but it sounds really efficacious and present-day! This is the gist of Akunin's fiction narration! And this sounds notably attractive – two powers are able to find a peaceful compromise.

Unit 10 is the crown of the tutorial “Collecting material. Final touché”, the apotheosis of Akunin master class, where the master shares his personal motives for creativity. Akunin loves “numerology”, and it is here in the final, “sacred” chapter 10, as maestro intended, that all thematic, professional pedagogic “lines” come together and converge on the main idea, that fills Akunin's book with the final message, which may be called intimate and privy, it is the message of love for his motherland: the role of the “cherry on top of the cake” (“final touché”) is played by the image of a rowan. Akunin paid attention to the botanical inaccuracy in the poem by Marina Tsvetaeva: “Two final lines on their own are an ideal example of a breathtaking ‘final touché’. A botanical inaccuracy is especially striking: a person suddenly seized by acute nostalgia does not care whether it is a bush or a tree” (Akunin, 2022, p. 365).

Akunin brilliantly continues the trend, started by Russian formalists and makes us recall Boris Eikhenbaum's classical “How Gogol's *Overcoat* Was Made”. The lessons from the novelist evoke in memory “How to Make Verses” by V. Mayakovsky. It is impossible not to remember the controversy between A. Blok and N. Gumilev on the nature of poetry whether it is a child of “divine inspiration” or a product of “poetic technique”.

Be that as it may, Akunin put together a great self-instruction manual, where a “mystery” of creative writing is cancelled and instead a “technology” of product manufacturing on consumers' demand is offered. In fairness, we note, that the author of the manual still gives freedom and leaves room for inspiration and “mystery”: “You are totally free in genre. The course of study is completed, you have the full right to vote. Vote with your heart. Same with style. This time do not mimic anyone and do not imitate anyone. Sing with your own heart – like a nightingale, like a canary, even like an owl, but not like a parrot. This tenth lesson should turn out uniquely yours. Consider it your graduation thesis” (Akunin, 2022, p. 352). “Vote with your heart” – this is about the field that cannot be “checked with algebra”.

You catch yourself thinking that Akunin’s “techniques” are too obvious, that this technique is nothing but “white threads” with which a “suit” or “dress” is sewn. But you forgive the author, how can you not forgive? He does not pretend and take on the messianic role of the Writer, just the role of a skillful craftsman-fiction writer. Learn to sew with white thread as well, it is acceptable and is even quite popular and in demand. The manufacturability of the writing process is justified by the author and another comparison from which the tutorial actually begins. The author’s wit is inexhaustible here: “Here is something like a cook-book. A chief in a white cap will reveal to you the secrets of drushlag and ladle, accumulated over a long life at the stove. This cooking course is combined with tasting. I will not only explain the theory, but also cook, fry, marinate, in front of your eyes, and then feed you with whatever is prepared, that is, you will not be in the restaurant hall where ready-made dishes are served, but – in the kitchen” (Akunin, 2022, p. 3). After all, the task is quite worthy, the master does not teach the technology of “fast food”, but trains in creative “haute” cuisine.

The purpose and task are clear, beautifully and temptingly worded, skillfully laid out in the manual. It remains to wait for the result, that is the “products” that will come out from the pen (computer keyboard) of the trainees. However, one should think that this task, perhaps, is already insoluble. For the question of approbation of labor passes into the sphere of an individual, personal experience which is poorly visible. Who is going to share his or her personal experience of writing according to the recipes of an experienced novelist? We will wait for comments.

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