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The History of the Russian State by Boris Akunin is Grigori Chkhartishvili's game of conspiracy?

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Abstract. The author deals with the question of Chkhartishvili's pen names and their role in his work. The characteristics of literary masks, history of their appearance are presented. A general analysis of Chkhartishvili's literary activity and the evolution of his style is also given. The features of the use of various images "tried on" by the writer when creating the main works are analyzed, the necessity of referring to pseudonyms is justified. The main part of the work is devoted to the problem of authorship in the project History of the Russian State, as well as an explanation of the motives that guide G. Chkhartishvili, publishing a historical work under the pseudonym of Boris Akunin. An assessment of Akunin's writing style, his ability to transform familiar genres to the needs of the audience, time, author's tasks, etc., is presented, and the project's fiction texts are overall analyzed. Conclusions are made about the literary image of Chkhartishvili-Akunin as an alternative hero involved in the creation of a historical project. This fact suggests that the writer once again demonstrates his ability to reincarnate, change plot and style and, of course, transform the manner of writing, when working on a particular work of fiction.

Keywords: nickname, literary mask, image of the author, Ancient Russia, The History of the Russian State

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«История Российского государства» Бориса Акунина – конспирологическая игра Г.Ш. Чхартишвили с читателями?

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Аннотация. Рассматривается вопрос о псевдонимах Г.Ш. Чхартишвили и их роли в его творчестве. Изложена история появления литературных масок писателя, представлена их краткая характеристика, дан общий анализ литературной деятельности Чхартишвили и эволюции его стиля. Проанализированы особенности использования различных образов, «примеряемых» писателем при создании основных произведений, обоснована необходимость обращения к псевдонимам. Основная часть исследования посвящена проблеме авторства в проекте «История Российского государства», а также объяснению мотивов, которыми руководствуется Г. Чхартишвили, публикуя историческое сочинение под псевдонимом Бориса Акунина. Приведена оценка писательского стиля Акунина, его умения трансформировать привычные жанры под запросы аудитории, времени, авторских задач и пр., проанализированы беллетристические тексты проекта. Представлены выводы о литературном образе Чхартишвили-Акунина как альтернативном герое, задействованном в создании исторического проекта. Данный факт позволяет говорить о том, что писатель в очередной раз демонстрирует свое умение перевоплощаться, трансформировать манеру письма, сюжетику и стилистику при работе над тем или иным художественным произведением.

Ключевые слова: псевдоним, литературная маска, образ автора, Древняя Русь, История Российского государства

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Introduction

G.S. Chkhartishvili's personality attracts attention with its originality and multifacetedness: on the one hand, he is a qualified orientalist scholar, and on the other hand, a writer. This division is also reflected in the pages of his research and literary works: under his real name, the writer publishes “serious” texts (translations, research papers), while his literary works are published under aliases. G. Chkhartishvili's first fiction texts were published under the alias “B. Akunin”. In his interviews, he noted that he started writing in the first place to please his wife and to demonstrate that literature can be both captivating and intellectual.

To avoid "foolish situations", it was easier to present such an experiment on behalf of an unknown author.¹

The first project of Chkhartishvili, dedicated to the detective adventures of Erast Fandorin, belongs to the pen of Boris Akunin. *The New Detective* (НОВЫЙ детектив) fully corresponds to the canonical representations of such texts (works by Agatha Christie, Arthur Conan Doyle, Edgar Allan Poe, James Chase, etc.), but as you read it, it becomes clear that the work goes beyond the usual understanding of the detective genre and represents a multidimensional postmodernist text filled with numerous reminiscences and allusions to works of Russian literature, style and tone of which, on the one hand, are close to the described era, and on the other, correspond to modernity. Using inversion, nonlinear structure, clever wordplay, double coding, Akunin creates a work that claims the title of "serious" literature, while also appealing to both average readers and intellectuals.

According to Bradley A. Gorsky, Akunin using the techniques of irony, parody and travesty, restructures the literary field, creates new literature from the "rags" of classical traditions and genres, focused on an elite, sophisticated readers (Gorski, 2018).

Indeed, the attention of researchers is drawn to the political and textual space of Akunin's texts, as well as the numerous intertextual elements (Desyatov, Karpukhina, 2019), the evolution of the author's style, and his non-trivial approach to history (Ranchin, 2004).

"Akunin was the first to try to defrost Russian classics" (Bykov, 2007, p. 89). This results in a tribute of sorts to the centuries "when literature was great, belief in progress was boundless, and crimes were committed and solved with elegance and taste" (Akunin, 2021, p. 3).

In his interview with Grigory Dashkevich, Chkhartishvili noted that a new name implies a new personality, which subsequently helps establish new "game rules" with the reader. Driven by a desire to create something not in the style of Akunin, to publish a "non-detective" work, or to try completely new prose, Chkhartishvili-Akunin implements starts a new literary project, *Authors*, in which he takes on the personas of Anatoly Brusnikin and Anna Borisova. A. Brusnikin, a Slavophile and a Pochvennik, offers readers historical works without any detective elements, while A. Borisova, whose persona helps radically change the author's image and worldview, offers an invariant of modern female prose, non-trivial and fascinating, realistic and mystical. This project allowed the writer to work on both historical and fictional works, the latter including elements of fantasy, without losing the respect of admirers of Boris Akunin work.

¹ Dashevskii, G. (2007, December 21). Grigori Chkhartishvili: A new name is identical upgrade the essence. *Kommersant*. (In Russ.) Retrieved December 20, 2022, from <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/837630>

There are projects in which the author writes under different surnames. For instance, the experimental book *Graveyard stories* includes essays written by G. Chkhartishvili and stories created by Boris Akunin, while the cover of the novels in *the Family Album* saga reads “Akunin-Chkhartishvili”.

It should be noted that despite these literary experiments, Boris Akunin has gained the greatest fame and recognition among the reading audience. His phenomenon can be explained by several facts.

Firstly, it was the first alias that Chkhartishvili took on when he began his literary career. During his work on the Fandorin cycle, this image not only merged with the creator, but also, in a sense, replaced him. At the same time, the name Boris Akunin has become a brand, equivalent to modern classic literature – captivating, interesting, and stylish. The stereotype that any new publication with “B. Akunin” on the cover will offer experienced readers a dose of literary and historical play, and trend-seekers – an exciting adventure text, is unshakable to this day: his texts are “entertaining literary studies that also answer truly serious questions” (Bykov, 2007, p. 83).

Chkhartishvili, both as a historian and a philologist, has an accurate understanding of the demands of the times and the audience, which allows him to transform his oeuvre quite promptly and to correspond to current trends, thereby maintaining interest in the persona of Boris Akunin.

It is possible that, in addition to attempting to somewhat reboot Akunin's creativity, the idea behind creating new aliases is – in the age of media and social networks – a desire to correspond to the popular trend of maintaining numerous “pages” and “accounts” with various names, revealing to the audience various sides of the multidimensional personality of their creator.

Discussion

The main research material are Boris Akunin's texts in his large literary project *History of the Russian State*, which covers the period from the formation of Rus as a state to the 17th century.

The synthesis of documentary essays and works of fiction, united by a common theme and plot, but at the same time breaking down into various sub-themes, attracted the attention of many researchers. The literary critics have considered issues of representation of history, reminiscences (Osmukhina, Karpov, 2020), intertextual connections and genre transformations (Arkhangelskaia, 2021; Pleshkova, 2016), playing with time and space, as well as the names of characters (Snigireva et al., 2016; Snigireva, Snigirev, 2016).

Phenomenon of Boris Akunin, questions about postmodernism, a translation problem his works on foreign languages also in the spotlight international researches. So, time and space in historical detectives, their transformations reflec-

ted in the D. Kilfoy's paper. Elena V. Baraban pays a special attention to Akunin's plays with history, canon and genres of Russian literature, and, of course, authorship (Baraban, 2004). Researcher notes that all of Chkhartishvili's works we must consider as total work as a “project”, wherein well-planned marketing, advertising, and economic strategies as well as the use of contemporary PR technologies are considered on par with the writer's style and literary aesthetics (Baraban, 2021).

Through parallel analysis of journalistic texts presented in the historical part of the work and the fictional applications accompanying them, it is intended to determine the writer's game played by G. Chkhartishvili and establish the main motives for publishing the historical work under an alias.

G.Sh. Chkhartishvili publishes the extensive project *History of the Russian State* under the name Boris Akunin. The pages of two textual layers (journalistic and artistic) present attempts to comprehend the historical and sociological processes that occurred in the Russian state from its first centuries up until 1917 (the last volume, released in 2021, concludes with this year). Attention should be paid not only to the “authorship” itself but also to the opening remarks of the first volume, which state the absence of any historical approach: “I don't develop any approach. I don't have one. Any historian who creates his own theory can't resist the temptation to highlight facts that are convenient for him and to remain silent or cast doubt on everything that doesn't fit into his logic. I'm not tempted by that” (Akunin, 2013, pp. 1–5). Such a statement raises doubts. History is researched to find answers to numerous questions that arise during the analysis and evaluation of the results of the state's development. The answer to this puzzle is revealed – fittingly for a writer – in the conclusion of the last volume: “Starting to work on the writer's (that is, deliberately amateurish) history of the state, I wrote in the foreword that I had no (historical) approach that I was going to justify and prove. I really didn't have one. It arose in the process of reading and analyzing what I had read” (Akunin, 2021, p. 374). Thus, it can be concluded that the author involves his readers in another textual game that allows them, on the one hand, to delve into the history of the state and, on the other hand, to enjoy a captivating work of art.

The series of books *The History of the Russian State* is not just another professional postmodernist project by Chkhartishvili-Akunin, but also, as literary scholar M.A. Chernyak believes, a “complete reboot” in his work. The readers are presented with the collective creativity of the real writer and his alter ego, hidden behind numerous literary masks, “representing branches of one artistic whole, which constantly intersect, correlate, argue, cross-reflect each other, forming a mosaic whole” (Chernyak, 2015, p. 191).

The very title of the series refers to *The History of the Russian State* by N.M. Karamzin, which was created in the early 19th century. As researchers have

repeatedly noted, after Karamzin, no writer-historian thought of creating a similar work, so the release of Boris Akunin's *The History of the Russian State* attracted the attention of both readers and researchers – historians and literary scholars alike – and sparked lively discussions in scientific circles.

Creating such a historical work involves not only working with sources and materials but also demonstrating the author's direct vision and understanding of history and its processes. As the “plot” develops, an original work based on well-known facts is revealed, the reinterpretation of which allows the author to gradually reveal a unified historical concept. In this case, the writer's sensitivity to contemporary literary trends, the socio-political preferences of the audience, and, in particular, the creative capabilities embedded by Chkhartishvili in the literary mask of “Boris Akunin”, allow him to present a completely new point of view on past events in another captivating epic text.

Undoubtedly, during the creation of *The History of the Russian State*, Akunin faced several practical and scientific problems related both to the content plan (primary sources, defining key events and personalities) and to the choice of genre and other formal criteria for the literary application presented by unrestricted authorial reflections about famous historical plots.

Akunin acknowledges this fact and notes that the intention behind the book series is to examine and characterize the key historical events and then to provide answers to a series of questions that allow us to trace the nature and key features of state formation in Rus, as well as compare past and present states.

Based on these reflections, a unique author's vision of the genesis of the current state and its connection with Ancient Rus is constructed. In addition, at the beginning of the first volume of the historical series, Akunin formulates the main questions about the emergence of statehood and the state, the answers to which appear gradually as his thoughts develop on the pages of both historical and artistic texts. The idea of showing the formation of the state, starting from its emergence and ending with the very recent past, is permeated with questions – reappearing in different volumes – about the origins of statehood, the relationships with other countries and cultures, and the interconnections between different periods of development.

Subsequent parts of the series clearly reveal a particular “authorial” vision of Russian history: readers are presented with a process of the formation and development of the Russian state, and an examination of history through the lense of the Western and Eastern influences (or more accurately reflecting Akunin's model, European and Asian) allows for the description of its “state-forming” features. In addition, B. Akunin tries to debunk some common myths (the democracy of Novgorod, the idea of the Mongol Empire being a barbaric tribe without culture and customs, etc.).

At the same time, the simultaneous reproduction of certain historical events in the fictional parts of the work allows Akunin to depict an alternative reality, to imagine history in the subjunctive mood, to transform and distort time and space (as in the only drama in the series, *To Kill a Serpent in the Shell*, where the idea of choice and crossroads, on which the country found itself at the end of the 17th century, is realized in two different outcomes, allowing the reader to reflect on missed opportunities and the cost of choice). Such a dialogue between the historical and fictional volumes, in which both facts and their subjective interpretation interact with each other, also allows us to talk about the author's presence in the text.

The writer's alias can be seen as “a synthesis of the author's self-expression and his transformation from, so to speak, a ‘real’ figure into an artistic image that operates within the textual space” (Osmukhina, 2009, p. 5).

Boris Akunin is currently a bright new personality who almost completely replaces the name and surname of his creator. By using an alias and a new image, the writer becomes a part of his work, confirming the idea that “there are no nameless characters in a work of art. There are no unfamiliar names in a work of art. Every name mentioned in a work of art already has a designation, which plays with all the shades it is capable of” (Tynianov, 1977, p. 269). Thus, Chkhartishvili's authorial image of Akunin becomes an independent structural and semantic unit of the work, which simultaneously represents both a mask, hiding the writer, and a part of the macrotext, where it acts as another subject of investigation.

One can assume that in this way Chkhartishvili engages in a dialogue with the audience: by using various aliases that allow him to show his literary talents from different angles, he also considers the audience's opinions and preferences, as well as commercial and political motives. In his works, he effortlessly immerses readers in a postmodernist game, opening a new direction in contemporary Russian literature.

Conclusion

When tackling the question of Grigory Chkhartishvili's transfer of authorship of a historical work to Boris Akunin, it is important to consider both the creative and the pragmatic sides. The Akunin-Chkhartishvili game has been going on for quite some time, the “Boris Akunin” brand has gained popularity among readers, which means that, when publishing such a large-scale project that touches on current topics and problems, Grigory Chkhartishvili needed a popular writer rather than a professional historian, journalist, or publisher. In creating a multi-volume history, the author did not abandon the possibility of attempting to structure and present accumulated knowledge more concisely, conducting comparative

analysis of the past and present, allowing to provide answers to questions posed today. However, this work can hardly claim scientific or academic status. Grigory Chkhartishvili manages to offer the public an easily readable and engaging work with multiple plot lines and personalities, where the creator himself appears simultaneously as a character, hiding behind the mask of the author Boris Akunin, a dilettante writer (this self-definition should also be interpreted in the context of the postmodernist irony), traveling through history and inviting readers to tag along.

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