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Mythopoeics of the Apocalyptic Story by A. Adamovich *The Last Pastoral*

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Abstract. The article is devoted to the analysis of the mythopoetic structure and the philosophical-anthropological issues in Ales Adamovich's novella *The Last Pastoral*. The relevance of the study is determined by the growing scholarly interest in late Soviet works permeated with a profoundly tragic, apocalyptic pathos. The aim of the study is to examine the specificity of an artistic method atypical of the author and to analyze the ways in which the author's apocalyptic worldview, as a response to the crisis of utopian discourse, is refracted in the compositional structure of the novella and its system of imagery. The novelty of the study lies in emphasizing the writer's recourse to the arsenal of modernist poetics in order to construct a universal model of the apocalypse. Within the given tasks of the research the paper analyzes the mechanisms of deconstruction and inversion of key archetypal patterns, including the pastoral genre, the Robinson myth, and the cult of the Eternal Feminine. Particular attention is paid to the author's engagement with Biblical imagery and narratives, which reveals his apocalyptic pathos (Cain and Abel, the Tower of Babel, the Judgment of Solomon). The study concludes that, through a system of inverted myths and archetypal images, Adamovich articulates his concept of the impending destruction of humanity: according to the author, the cause of global catastrophe is rooted in human nature itself, in its ineradicable "Cain-like" inclination toward violence and division, which renders any social or technological progress ultimately fatal and potentially capable of leading to universal annihilation.

Keywords: Apocalypse, Biblical allusions, Eternal Feminine, pastoral genre, myth, inversion

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Мифопоэтика апокалиптической повести А. Адамовича «Последняя пастораль»

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Аннотация. Исследованы мифопоэтическая структура и философско-антропологическая проблематика повести Алеся Адамовича «Последняя пастораль». Актуальность исследования обусловлена общим ростом внимания научного сообщества к позднесоветским произведениям, пронизанным глубоко трагическим апокалиптическим пафосом. Цель – изучить специфику нетипичного для автора художественного метода, рассмотреть пути преломления в композиционном устройстве повести и ее художественных образах апокалиптического мироощущения как отклика на кризис утопического дискурса. Научная новизна состоит в анализе обращения писателя к арсеналу модернистской поэтики для создания универсальной модели апокалипсиса, позволяющей раскрыть авторскую концепцию кризиса современного мира. В рамках поставленных задач проанализированы механизмы деконструкции и инверсии ключевых архетипических схем (пасторального жанра, мифа о Робинзоне, культа Вечной Женственности), а также уделено внимание библейским образам и сюжетам повести, раскрывающим специфику апокалиптического пафоса (Каин и Авель, Вавилонская башня, Суд Соломона). Сделан вывод о том, что через систему инверсированных мифов и архетипических образов Адамович раскрывает свою концепцию грозящей человечеству гибели: причина глобальной катастрофы, по мнению автора, коренится в природе человека, в его неизбывной «каиновой» склонности к насилию и расколу, что делает любой социальный или технологический прогресс фатальным и в перспективе способным привести к всеобщему уничтожению.

Ключевые слова: Апокалипсис, библейские аллюзии, Вечная Женственность, жанр пасторали, миф, инверсия

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Introduction

The 1970s–1980s were marked by the widespread proliferation of an apocalyptic worldview, which emerged as a reaction to a profound crisis in the dominant utopian discourse. While the early years of the Soviet state were characterized by a pathos of utopian construction, a belief in linear progress, and the possibility of radically restructuring the world according to a rational blueprint, by the late Soviet era, the fundamental unrealizability of all previously

proclaimed utopian models had become evident. The realization of the dead-end nature of the communist project, the growing systemic socio-economic contradictions, environmental concerns, as well as the moral decline of society contributed to a total disillusionment with the utopian discourse. The vacuum left by the loss of previous meanings became a breeding ground for an anxious foreboding of an inevitable end, which found its concentrated expression in literary texts of an apocalyptic orientation.

In this context, we find N.L. Leiderman's concept productive, as he viewed 20th-century culture as a whole as a "culture of the transitional type", torn between two poles – "apocalypticism and revolutionism" (2010, p. 614). The late Soviet period is marked by the crisis and exhaustion of the "revolutionism" paradigm in particular: the project of "heaven on Earth", based on faith in the possibility of radically restructuring the world and creating a new human being, revealed its failure and led not to harmony, but to new forms of alienation and violence. This ideological collapse led to the dominance of apocalyptic consciousness in the intellectual and artistic environment. This consciousness, disillusioned with the concept of linear progress and acutely experiencing the loss of absolute existential landmarks, turned to ideas of final retribution, judgment, and a civilizational dead end. The most vivid examples of the literature of this period – from the socio-philosophical novels of the late works of the Strugatsky brothers *The Doomed City, Overburdened with Evil*) to later "village prose" (V. Astafyev, V. Lichutin, V. Belov) – are not merely artistic testimonies of decline, but first and foremost thoughtful explorations and interpretations of the fundamental causes of the unfolding crisis.

The artistic apocalypse, as a reaction to the vacuum of meaning that has formed with the loss of faith in the positivist transformation of reality, has increasingly attracted the attention of researchers in recent years. Contemporary scholars classify a wide variety of leading representatives of late Soviet prose, often disparate in their ideological and aesthetic principles, as "apocalyptic" authors. Thus, P.A. Goncharov asserts that "one of the dominant motifs in V. Astafyev's prose is the motif of the Last Judgment, which harks back to the apocalypse", and "...apocalyptic motifs permeate the writer's entire work" (2024, p. 52). "The catastrophic nature and vulnerability of existence in the 20th–21st centuries, the proximity to the atmosphere of the 'end times'", is read by Ya.V. Soldatkina as one of the most important themes in literature at the end of the last century, especially for those writers who explored out "various versions of an alternative world order" in their works (2021, p. 290). The complex of apocalyptic and eschatological motifs in the works of the the Strugatsky brothers and Chingiz Aitmatov is examined in the latest works by T.L. Rybalchenko (2020), O.G. Abramova and I.V. Sukhotskaya (2024). There is a noticeable interest among researchers in studying apocalyptic motifs in the

literatures of the peoples of Russia (Karmanova, 2020). As for contemporary Russian literature, researchers are also inclined to note the presence of apocalyptic motifs. Thus, according to D.L. Kulikova, the “end-of-the-world motif” of the global decline and destruction of man as a spiritual being permeates much of A. Ivanov’s historical fiction (2020, p. 159). This article aims to develop this line of research and examine the specifics of the representation of the apocalyptic worldview in A. Adamovich’s story *The Last Pastoral* from the perspective of its mythopoetic structure.

Results and Discussion

The Last Pastoral (1987) by Ales Adamovich holds a special place among late-Soviet “apocalyptic literature.” This text synthesizes within itself the key features of the era. The work is not merely one of the texts that express a catastrophic worldview but its reflective quintessence. Adamovich, known as the author and co-author of stark chronicles of war (*Khatyn*, 1971; *I Am from the Fiery Village*, 1975; *The Blockade Book*, 1977–1981; *Chasteners*, 1980), makes a transition from historical specificity to metaphysical generalization, from the tragedy of a single event to the comprehension of a total anthropological catastrophe leading to the demise of all humanity. His apocalypse lacks religious pathos – it is a cold, technogenic end, which has become the logical outcome not so much of specific political systems as of the entire path of human civilization.

A. Adamovich admitted that the idea for the story was born during his visit to the UN building, where “two light boards with the names of, I think, 158 countries” reflected “the most complex combination, the play of international, interethnic, class passions”. It was then, he said, that the idea for the new story emerged: “the fate of humanity through the final passions of a few individuals”¹, the realization of which required appropriate means of artistic expression. In *The Last Pastoral*, A. Adamovich, previously known to the wide Soviet reader as a master of realistic artistic-documentary prose based on extensive factual material and confessional testimony, now consciously turns to the arsenal of modernist poetics from the early 20th century. Rejecting the traditions of socially-determined realism, he employs the language of convention and complex symbolic generalization.

A key feature of the story is not merely the use of mythological and archetypal literary schemes, but their radical transformation. Traditional myth, historically intended to perform a cosmogonic function – ordering chaos, solidifying cultural codes and moral landmarks – here loses its creative power. It still provides codes for reading the text, yet the functions of key mythologemes are inverted,

¹ Adamovich, A.M. (2006). Is this the last pastoral? (from an interview). In *The Star Called Chernobyl* (p. 420). Minsk: Kovcheg Publ. (In Russ.)

reflecting the spirit of an era of universal crisis. Much like authors of Russian modernist literature of the early 20th century, A. Adamovich forces “the mythopoetic organism to work in reverse – to artistically formalize the disintegration, fragmentation and destruction of the worldview” (Polonsky, 2008, p. 19).

The story’s title evokes the memory of one of the world’s oldest literary genres – the pastoral or idyll, the aim of which is to depict “the serene life of people against a backdrop of pristine nature” (Stepanov, 2008, p. 77). In Adamovich’s work, the serenity and harmony of the pastoral landscape is disrupted from the very first pages – the flowers that the narrator-hero mows every morning frighten his companion (“She is afraid to approach the flowers, insisting they reek of carrion. It makes Her nauseous, turns Her completely inside out”²), and he himself understands perfectly well that he is mowing down some other, hostile, unnatural substance: “I know it too: these are not flowers! Enormous damp dragon heads twitch angrily under my blows, and if you step on them – they whistle, squeak. Enormous slippery mushrooms, saturated with dampness, masquerading as flowers. And what masquerades as mushrooms – that remains to be understood”³. Following the annihilation of humanity in a nuclear catastrophe, nature itself mutates: “in its death throes, it strained, hurried to give birth, produce something else at the last moment, for the finale, but the disrupted genetic mechanism threw out the most absurd combinations from its depths, meaningless and delirious, like those three-headed rats that fatally wound, gnaw at themselves to death”⁴.

From the very outset of the story, through sketches of a mutating and even somewhat hostile nature, A. Adamovich subjects the traditional pastoral code to systematic deconstruction. The idyllic topos of “serene life in the bosom of nature” is totally inverted: nature appears not as a source of harmony and purification, but as a mutagenic, hostile-to-human substance, where the beautiful (flowers) is indistinguishable from the horrific (carrion), and familiar taxonomies collapse, generating ontological uncertainty (“And what masquerades as mushrooms – that remains to be understood”). This “pastoral in reverse” becomes a metaphor for the entire post-apocalyptic world, where the very foundations of world order and perception are perverted. As A.E. Nyamtsu notes, “A. Adamovich creates an original version of the pastoral myth, which has a conceptual influence on the evolution of the complex socio-cultural context of *The Last Pastoral*” (1991, p. 192). The poetics of the “inverted” pastoral serves as a key tool for the artistic embodiment of the total catastrophe to which

² Adamovich, A.M. (1989). *Khatyn. Chasteners. Last Pastoral. Tales* (p. 499). Moscow: Sovetskij Pisatel Publ. (In Russ.)

³ Adamovich, A.M. (1989). *Khatyn. Chasteners. Last Pastoral. Tales* (p. 499).

⁴ Adamovich, A.M. (1989). *Khatyn. Chasteners. Last Pastoral. Tales* (p. 515).

humanity has come: the last support collapses – the myth of nature as a refuge and guarantor of eternal rebirth. The traditional myth, which once worked for creation and ordering, here serves to fragment and disintegrate, recording the final rupture between man and a world that can no longer be his home.

The narrator-hero's struggle with the yellow flowers can be interpreted as an archaic, almost ritual act of cosmicizing hostile, chaotic space, an attempt to recreate on the island a semblance of a habitable and safe locus – a micro-model of the lost civilization. His actions ("I keep glancing back at the birches and hurry, hurry to deal with the yellow scourge before She wakes up"⁵) are dictated not only by pragmatic concern for a loved one but also by a profound existential impulse: through imposing order in the microcosm, to affirm his own "I" and his role as protector in an utterly destructured world. This daily labor becomes the hero's act of resistance against total disintegration, a gesture intended to fence off the last bastion of the human (the narrator-hero's relationship with the Woman, their fragile domesticity) from the aggression of the other, the alien principle manifesting itself in mutating natural forms, thereby actualizing the archetypal plot of "Robinsonade". The hero seems to strive to repeat, at a new stage of civilizational collapse, the myth of Robinson, whose reason and persistent labour conquer the chaos of wild nature, creating an island of order and meaning.

However, the subsequent development of the plot exposes the futility and tragicomic nature of this struggle. The arrival of the Third, who sees no threat in the flowers and looks at the hero as if he were "high on some gas-drug", as well as the growing indifference of the Woman to the mysterious yellow plants ("Sometimes now she doesn't notice her enemies"⁶) mark the collapse of the very attempt at cosmicization. The hero turns out not to be a conqueror of chaos, but rather the last priest of a fallen religion, senselessly performing a ritual that has lost both its meaning and its audience. Thus, this hopeless struggle transforms into a metaphor for the crisis of the anthropological project itself: finite, mortal man proves unable to oppose the total disintegration of the world, which he once aspired to cosmicize, with anything but a private, individual gesture, doomed to misunderstanding and oblivion.

It appears that the Image of the Woman in Adamovich's story is conceptually rooted in the mythologeme of Eternal Feminine, Sophia – Divine Wisdom, which received powerful development in the philosophy and culture of the Silver Age. Briefly outlining the essence of this teaching, A.F. Losev wrote: "...that the highest thing to which man aspires is the object of human love and that the highest is personified in the form of an all-beautiful woman, is deeply

⁵ Adamovich, A.M. (1989). *Khatyn. Chasteners. Last Pastoral. Tales* (p. 501).

⁶ Adamovich, A.M. (1989). *Khatyn. Chasteners. Last Pastoral. Tales* (p. 560).

understandable to those people whom no lower, earthly forms satisfy and who would wish to partake of higher being” (1990, p. 223). It is no coincidence that later the hero’s previously unnamed companion receives the name Maria, directly correlating her with the Gospel myth of unconditional moral purity, the Immaculate Conception, and the birth of Christ. However, A. Adamovich, following the general logic of inverting mythological schemes, strips this archetype of its transcendental, heavenly dimension, placing it at the very epicentre of an earthly apocalypse. His Woman is not a mystical symbol, but the last embodiment of fading life, a weak voice of moral intuition and the very possibility of procreation in a world doomed to sterility and degeneration.

During the politicized arguments between the narrator-hero and the Third, who scholastically and fruitlessly strive to uncover the causes of the occurred nuclear conflict (mostly just shifting blame onto each other), the Woman intervenes in their dialogue with brief remarks, acting as a bearer of extra-ideological, existential truth. Her short, piercing questions (“Did any of you give way?! Just so the children could live? – our Woman inquires judiciously [...] What, was the world made up only of politicians? Were there no fathers, mothers?”⁷), thrust into an inherently useless argument, expose the moral poverty of any abstract doctrine that sacrifices a concrete, living human being. The Woman embodies not intellectual-rational knowledge, but “heartfelt”, maternal knowledge (appealing to children, to parental feeling in the people who led the world to destruction), reflecting an instinctive yearning for peace and the continuation of life. She seeks to appeal to the conscience of the debaters, to their common human nature, rejecting the already meaningless geopolitical intricacies of the bygone conflict. Her conclusion (“Now it’s clear why they could never get along. If there’s no peace within yourself, what peace can there be with others?”⁸) becomes the principal verdict on the entire vanished civilization.

However, the unfolding of the plot shows that even now, in humanity’s last refuge, man is incapable of comprehending the truths she conveys. The Woman not only fails to lead the hero to an awareness of the falseness of all former historical paths, but also inadvertently serves as an apple of discord between the last people – her departure to the Third is perceived by the narrator-hero as an assault on the future of all humanity, since the Third is infertile. The feeling of belonging to a great purpose, the task of reviving and saving Humanity (a transparent allusion to a whole complex of socio-political doctrines claiming to definitively arrange human life, creating “heaven on Earth”) gives the hero licence and provides a reliable pseudo-moral justification for any subsequent actions, including a duel and the murder of his rival: “Now I knew for sure: I would go to any lengths to get Her back, return motherhood to Earth [...] Even

⁷ Adamovich, A.M. (1989). *Khatyn. Chasteners. Last Pastoral. Tales* (p. 558).

⁸ Adamovich, A.M. (1989). *Khatyn. Chasteners. Last Pastoral. Tales* (p. 550).

if blood is shed, so be it; yesterday the arithmetic in such matters led to everything's destruction, but here, try arguing with it: five liters of infertile or oceans of living? To be or not to be on Earth – at the cost of these five?”⁹ The hero compares himself to mythical titanic figures (“Important, how might I appear from the future, perhaps as Prometheus, who preserved the fire, almost a god?”¹⁰), thereby donning the mask of a superman, a future founder and arranger of universal happiness at the cost of a single life. A. Adamovich actualizes the archetypal ethical dispute about the “tear of a child”, demonstrating its monstrous relevance even in the conditions of a total anthropological catastrophe that has already occurred. Guided by utilitarian arithmetic, the hero not only commits another crime – he thereby reproduces in miniature the fatal logic that led humanity to destruction before his very eyes. His messianic pathos, his willingness to sacrifice human life for the sake of an abstract “universal happiness”, turns out to be a mirror reflection of the principles of “high politics”, based on the belief that “the end justifies the means”. The final duel thereby becomes not a resolution of the conflict, but its eternal reproduction, tragic proof that the virus of violence is ineradicable and continues to live even in the last man, always ready to proclaim himself the saviour of humankind.

The hero's messianic pathos, justifying violence for a lofty goal, directly leads to the death of the Woman – the bearer of that very life-giving principle for which, it seemed, the struggle was waged. The Woman's death as a result of this confrontation is profoundly symbolic and constitutes the culmination of the author's concept. Her death signifies not merely a physical loss but the final victory of chaos and disintegration over the last bastion of the human – over the life-giving, Sophianic principle, over the very possibility of love and procreation. With her departure, the world definitively loses not only its future but also its highest moral landmark, that “higher being” to which one should aspire. Thus, the apocalypse reaches its concluding stage: it is not merely the biological species that perishes, but also its spiritual, ethical essence, embodied in the archetype of Eternal Feminine, and it perishes not without the participation of the one who fancied himself its saviour. The story's finale affirms the hopelessness: the ethic that “the end justifies the means” is untenable under any circumstances, for murder cannot in any way serve life – it only destroys it.

Biblical plots and images play an important role in the artistic space of the text. It is noteworthy that initially the story had a different title. A. Adamovich's notebooks record two initial variants – *The Children of Abel* and *The Children of Abel, or The Happiness of Living*¹¹. From the very first creative intention of

⁹ Adamovich, A.M. (1989). *Khatyn. Chasteners. Last Pastoral. Tales* (p. 572).

¹⁰ Adamovich, A.M. (1989). *Khatyn. Chasteners. Last Pastoral. Tales* (p. 572).

¹¹ Adamovich, A.M. (2006). To the *Last Pastoral*. In *The Star Called Chernobyl* (p. 427). Minsk: Kovcheg Publ. (In Russ.)

the author, a desire to actualize the ancient biblical myth of fraternal conflict is evident, which in the story is projected onto the modernity of the Cold War era and nuclear confrontation. From the outset, the author is interested not in concrete historical, but in existential-anthropological roots of the global catastrophe that befell humanity. The cause of the impending apocalypse is seen not in the errors of this or that political system, but in the tragic division inherently present in human nature, in the ineradicable propensity for violence and the inability to overcome the fatal legacy of “Cain’s” enmity, which transient socio-political conditions only expose and intensify.

The Woman’s assessment of the causes of the global catastrophe is also given through the prism of biblical imagery. Her bitter conclusion (“So divided then? The child – in half!”¹²) is a direct allusion to the famous judgment of Solomon, but within the space of the story, this image is radically inverted. While the wise king used the threat of cutting the infant in half as a way to identify the true mother, in the world of *The Last Pastoral*, humanity, obsessed with ideological confrontation, has indeed “divided” its child – civilization itself – in half, preferring universal destruction to conceding to the opponent.

The biblical myth is most directly actualized in the definition given by the Woman to the men on the island: “all-Cains”. This is not merely a reference to a specific biblical character, but a capacious anthropological diagnosis. Both men – the narrator and the Third – appear as heirs of Cain, doomed to fraternal enmity. The actualization of the archetypal biblical plot strips the conflict unfolding in the text of concrete historical and transient political explanations, elevating it to the original, metaphysical sin of violence, for which all humanity is guilty. The mark of Cain turns out to be not a curse for the chosen few, but the generic brand of all humanity, which has failed to overcome its destructive nature.

The hero’s final monologue summarizes the biblical allusions, formulating the idea of the catastrophe’s fatal predetermination: “What geniuses nature and fate sent to meet you, what guides, what Words, Books, Voices, what Lamps you held in your hands – and all to no avail. Nothing helped; it ended in this. So why, why, what curse hung over us? Or indeed – the mark of Cain?”¹³. The rhetorical essence of the question points to the doom of all attempts at redemption: every means of salvation given to people was inevitably perverted and turned into “an instrument of one’s own righteousness, torture, executions, murders”¹⁴. Thus, according to the story’s logic, the apocalypse that befell humanity is not an external punishment but an immanent consequence of the inherent corruption of human nature, its inability to contain and properly use the chance for salvation

¹² Adamovich, A.M. (1989). *Khatyn. Chasteners. Last Pastoral. Tales* (p. 558).

¹³ Adamovich, A.M. (1989). *Khatyn. Chasteners. Last Pastoral. Tales* (p. 592).

¹⁴ Adamovich, A.M. (1989). *Khatyn. Chasteners. Last Pastoral. Tales* (p. 592).

granted from above. The biblical subtext allows the author to elevate the particular history of nuclear war to the eternal tragedy of the human race, doomed to self-destruction by its own hands.

Conclusion

This research positions *The Last Pastoral* as a unique work of late-Soviet apocalyptic prose. Turning to the arsenal of modernist poetics, the author conducts a profound analysis of the causes of a possible anthropological catastrophe. Through the inversion of key archetypal genre models (the pastoral), popular cultural myths – the myth of Robinson, the myth of Eternal Feminine – as well as by incorporating biblical subtext into the artistic space of the text (the motif of humanity’s “mark of Cain”, “Solomon’s judgment”), the story reflects the tragic authorial concept: the source of the apocalypse threatening humanity lies not in specific ideologies, but in human nature itself, in its original, ineradicable tendency toward division and violence, justified by some abstract higher purpose, which transforms any lofty teaching or technological progress into an instrument of self-destruction, fatally threatening the very existence of humanity.

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Bio note:

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