

## **BONDAREV AND THE ERRORS OF THE SOVIET CRITICISM**

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*Abstract. The paper highlights the special place of Yuri Bondarev's writings during the Soviet era and the critical stereotypes of the Soviet criticism. Bondarev was the exponent of the new wave of war writers ("frontoviki" or "okopniki") and his prose was concerned with presenting the truth of the soldier ("okopnaja pravda") so that his writings were significantly different from the first wave of Soviet prose concerning World War II. Most of the Soviet critics were opposing to the new directions of writing and they were preoccupied with maintaining the appearance of a so-called exceptional and diversified Socialist Realism. Thus, the Soviet criticism of the '50s-'60s was blocked in some stereotypes of literary comprehension and interpretation, presenting erroneously Bondarev's works as part of Socialist Realism. The paper presents the writer's important stories and novels, as well as the most relevant stages of his creative work.*

**Keywords: Socialist Realism, Soviet criticism, Bondarev, World War II, critical stereotypes.**

The theme of World War II was a prolific one for the Soviet literature, generating more waves of writers: the war correspondents inspired by the romantic heroism of war as a continuation of the romantic revolutionary tones of the newly established canon of the Socialist Realism, the soldiers who became writers during the '50s and '60s with psychological and realistic prose and then another detached and rather philosophical wave of war prose.

One of the members of the category called "okopniki", Yuri Bondarev hadn't always had the intention of writing, as he confessed: "During war, the thought of writing had never occurred. And only after front there was a strange and vague necessity of expressing something. Then I wrote my first stories"<sup>1</sup>. This start was carefully guided by K. G. Paustovski and by the Soviet critics who were eager to notice that the master and the apprentice were not similar in their style and manner of expression. And it was, indeed, true that Bondarev was writing a sheer realistic prose, true to life and far from the romantic and lyrical prose of Paustovski, on whose patience Bondarev meditated later: "... being an excellent stylist, he had the compliance toward other directions of style and other ways of expression; he didn't impose his own manner of writing"<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, the master succeeded in imbuing his students the idea that "the most important fact in literature is to state your point of view"<sup>3</sup>.

Yuri Bondarev's prose is considered to be organized in two creative stages: the first realistic and psychological one and the second stage with a philosophical perspective (*The Battalions Require Fire* 1957, *The Silence* 1962, *The Hot Snow* 1969), including the first novel of this type – *The Shore* 1975 and the others (*The Choice* 1980, *The Game*<sup>4</sup> 1985). The

<sup>1</sup> Y. Bondarev, *Chelovek neset v sebe mir [The Man Carries the World in Himself]*. Moskva, Molodaia gvardia, 1980, p. 67 (our translation).

<sup>2</sup> Y. Bondarev, *Poisk istiny [The Search for Truth]*. Moskva, Sovremennik, 1976, p. 118 (our translation).

<sup>3</sup> Y. Bondarev, *Chelovek neset v sebe mir [The Man Carries the World in Himself]*. Moskva, Molodaia gvardia, 1980, p. 67 (our translation).

<sup>4</sup> See K. Clark's discussion of Bondarev's novel erroneous membership in Socialist Realism – K. Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2000, p.

common trait of the two creative stages is represented by the author's seeming challenge of the patterns and norms of Socialist Realism. The novels from the second stage reflect the war consequences and its social-philosophical consequences, while the heroic is rather associated with tragic<sup>5</sup>. These ethical and philosophical preoccupations of Bondarev's prose contributed to the critical perception of a "universalist" and "wide" prose<sup>6</sup>

Unlike the Soviet critics who regarded with reticence the new wave of writers made in the trenches of World War II or who rejected this type of writing and the "truth of the trenches", there were other critics who tried to reconcile this new wave with the old school of the Socialist Realism. The main argument of the first group of Soviet critics was the fact that the "narrow" view of events of the war proposed by the new wave of writers was opposed to the desirable "truth at a larger scale" considered necessary for the Soviet literature and its main purpose of educating the masses toward being the "new men", characterized by patriotism and national pride. On the other hand, the second group of more tolerant critics saw the necessity of enlarging the scope of Socialist Realism and bringing new perspectives on life and war in the context of the cultural "Thaw" after Stalin's death<sup>7</sup>. Thus, the partial flexibility of literary norms was another desirable aspect, as were the standards of the Socialist Realism and of the censorship during Khrushchev era.

Under these circumstances, Yuri Bondarev's prose became the victim of ideologizing interpretations in order to fit this type of prose into the so-called innovative gallery of Soviet literature, whose essence was pointing out the "unfair war and supporting the great deed in the name of the rightful cause"<sup>8</sup>. One of these critics, Idashkin assures the readers that Bondarev's prose follows the footsteps of some well-known works, such as *The Iron Flood* (*Zheleznyi potok* 1924) of A. Serafimovich, *Chapayev* (1923) of D. Furmanov, *Optimistic Tragedy* (*Optimisticheskaja tragedija* 1934) of V. Vishnevsky, *The Rout* (*Razgrom* 1927) of Fadeev, and in the same category as *The Star* (*Zvezda* 1952) of Kazakevich, the trilogy *Guide-on Bearers* (*Znamenostsy* 1946, 1947, 1948) of O. Honchar, *Forever Nineteen* (*Naveki deviatnadsatiletnie* 1979) of G. Baklanov, *The Alive and the Dead* (*Zhivye i mertvye* 1959) of K. Simonov, *The Shepherd and His Wife* (*Pastukh i pastushka* 1971) of V. Astafiev, *The Third Rocket* (*Tretja raketa* 1962) by V. Bykov and *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* (*A zori zdes' tikhie* 1972) of B. Vasiliev. Although many from this list could be situated in the category

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269-276. We believe that Bondarev's entire work may be questioned as being more "Soviet" than classified as Socialist Realism. And Yuri Bondarev is only one example of such systematic and erroneous critical presentations.

<sup>5</sup> See more on this matter in N. Fed', *Khudozhestvennye otkrytia Bondareva* [*Bondarev's Artistic Discoveries*]. Moskva, Sovremennik, 1988.

<sup>6</sup> I. K. Kuz'michev, *Nravstvennye osnovy sovetskoj literatury* [*Moral Foundations of Soviet Literature*]. Moskva, Prosvechenie, 1986, p. 182 (our translation).

<sup>7</sup> The term was took over from the title of I. Ehrenburg's novel *The Thaw* (*Ottepel'*, 1954) and it marked the period after Stalin's death and Khrushchev's era. The journal *Novyi Mir* promoted the representatives of the "thaw", among which we mention: V. Dudintsev, A. Solzhenitsyn, V. Astaf'ev, R. Rozhdestvensky, A. Voznesensky, B. Akhmadulina, E. Evtushenko. The theme of de-Stalinization was approached in cinematography as well: for the first time by director G. Chukhrai in the film *Chistoe nebo* [*The Clear Sky*] (1963) and then by other Soviet directors, as E. Ryazanov, L. Gaidai, M. Romm, M. Khutsiev. During the same period the 6<sup>th</sup> International Youth and Students' Festival took place in Moscow (1957).

<sup>8</sup> Y. Idashkin, *Grani talanta. O tvorchestve Iurija Bondareva* [*Limist of Talent. On Yuri Bondarev's Creation*]. Moskva, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1983, p. 42 (our translation).

“beyond Socialist Realism”<sup>9</sup>, they are nevertheless presented based on their historical and geographical membership as being part of the Socialist Realism, acquiring, according to the Soviet ideologizing perspective, the “immense power of emotional influence and credibility firstly due to the fact that the authors affirm themselves on well-defined party and social positions”<sup>10</sup>.

The first published writings – the story *The Youth of the Commanders* (*Yunost komandirov* 1956) and the novel *The Battalions Request Fire* (*Batal`iony prosiat ognia* 1957) – stirred up diverse and divergent reactions in the criticism of those times, as well as the interest of readers due to the theme already common in Soviet literature – the “theme of mankind ordeal”, “discernment of the sense of truth of the human price under unusual circumstances, as it is used to say extreme circumstances”<sup>11</sup>. The stories surprise due to their “precision and authenticity”, “knowledge of the concrete conditions and details”, “lack of academic features and obliteration in story-telling”, not due to the “originality of the subject or exceptional event”<sup>12</sup>, as Ekaterina Gorbunova<sup>13</sup> tried to argue. The same critic introduced the notion of “ethical-moral collision” in Bondarev’s prose, commenting that his writing is always directed toward expressing the “moral feeling”<sup>14</sup>.

The novel *The Hot Snow* seems to be built on the delicate issue already exposed in the short stories and the mentioned collision is beautifully orchestrated. But the novel develops that atmosphere of crisis until the trigger of collision, motivated by the rhythm of the interior and exterior circumstances of the characters and by their specificity. We could admit that the psychological collision is organically bound to the dynamics of the action, monologue and dialogue, of the interior reflections that form a “unique rhythm of the Bondarevian prose”<sup>15</sup>.

While the story *The Youth of the Commanders* (1956) is focused, in Idashkin’s perspective, on the “conflict between duty, consciousness, human elementary honour, on one hand, and corruption, carrier and love of power, on the other hand”<sup>16</sup>, *The Battalions Require Fire* is the expression of the harsh truth of the soldier or, as the same critic assures us, the “heroic truth of soldiers”, slipping the adjective “heroic” without which a favourable critical review to Bondarev’s prose couldn’t have appeared in the context of the “critics’ dissatisfaction, who asked for large scale scenes and a global sound”<sup>17</sup> of war. The opposition between the bookish knowledge of war<sup>18</sup> and the direct one is the continuation of the opposition between the “global truth” and the “truth of the trenches”. Both types of writing are mediations of war representation for the readers, and that (re)presentation of the war for a reader who hadn’t known the war met, according to Olga Kozhukhova, a war participant, a

<sup>9</sup> The collocation is borrowed from the book *Beyond Socialist Realism: Soviet Fiction Since Ivan Denisovich*, edited by Geoffrey A. Hosking, Holmes & Meier Pub, June 1979.

<sup>10</sup> Y. Idashkin, *op. cit.*, p. 43 (our translation).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, pag. 11 (our translation).

<sup>12</sup> E. Gorbunova, *Iurii Bondarev. Ocherk tvorcestva [Yuri Bondarev. Overview on Creation]*. Moskva, Sovetskii pisatel’, 1981, p. 19 (our translation).

<sup>13</sup> The author of the books *Problemy teorii realisticheskoi dramy [Problems of the Theory of Realistic Drama]* and *Pered litsom novoi deistvitel’nosti [Facing the New Reality]*.

<sup>14</sup> E. Gorbunova, *op. cit.*, p. 19 (our translation).

<sup>15</sup> Y. Idashkin, *op. cit.*, p. 12 (our translation).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> Y. Bondarev, *Chelovek...*, p. 89 (our translation).

<sup>18</sup> An idea expressed by the critic V. Korobov, see Y. Idashkin, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

“high psychological barrier, which you are about to face every time you start writing about war”<sup>19</sup>.

Analyzing the literary changes of the moment, Leonid Sobolev talked at the 2nd Congress of Writers of the Russian Federative Soviet Socialist Republic about the appearance of authors who “expressed the untold truth of war, as every one of them understood it”, highlighting the existence of three characteristics of the new writing: the tendency of describing the piece of land during war, the lack of great exceptional deeds<sup>20</sup> (and with no heroizing aura, we would add) and the focus on complicated and difficult feelings of the simple soldier. Sobolev also emphasized the fact that the writers may fall into another extreme – the “pathetic ostentatious and rather decorative style” and in an excessive naturalism due to the ardent desire to show the war “as it was” so that the result would be what he calls the “minimization of thoughts and high feelings and the daily simplicity of the characters and events”<sup>21</sup>. This may be considered a sample of the similar critical demarches that only remarked and never saluted the appearance of the “new wave” in the war prose, without leaving apart the model of reading-comprehension-interpretation specific to that period, a pre-established one and characterized by the stubbornness (or habit) to judge in the same manner what was clearly not presenting the same features of the Socialist Realism.

We should also mention the neutral position of some Soviet critics who saluted the new wave of writing, a position that hadn’t condemned totally the perspective or the style of the writing, making place, as we have already mentioned, in the so-called gallery of Soviet literature. However, they hadn’t succeeded in detaching from the pattern of reception and interpretation proposed (and imposed by Socialist Realism) and thus remaining partially tributary to ideological norms of literature.

We bring the argumentative example of Idashkin concerning other critics rejecting this type of “literature of the trenches”, limiting thus the global historical vision on the events to a piece of land, to some trenches, also limiting the importance of the victory upon Fascism, and thus diminishing the image of the global heroism of the so-called “Soviet people”<sup>22</sup>. Idashkin’s argumentation is based on the impossibility of opposing the entire to a constitutive part, this being a theoretically meaningless demarche, continuing then by absorption of this part into the “unitary organism”<sup>23</sup> of the image of war, as the disruption of these parts would be impossible, as well as the ideational fragmentation. The so-called finishing touches of this type of argumentations reside in attributing the same triumphalist language to new literary works, based on the same means of interpreting the texts, revealing the great deed, duty,

<sup>19</sup> Olga Kozhukhova, *Chelovek na voine. Literaturnaia Rossia [The Man at War. Literary Russia]*, 1977, the 2nd of December in Y. Idashkin, *op. cit.*, p. 21 (our translation).

<sup>20</sup> Idashkin yet continues to discuss about the „great deed” in the case of Bondarev’s characters, as well as in the case of Bykov’s and Astaf’ev’s and Bogomolov’s characters, applying blindly consecrated collocations for different literary realities, conceptions and dimensions – Y. Idashkin, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

<sup>21</sup> Sobolev’s report at the Congress in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 1965, no. 27 in Y. Idashkin, *op. cit.*, p. 96-98 (our translation).

<sup>22</sup> This was an artificial desirable notion designed to represent the Soviet (inter-)national cohesion. According to the dictionary *Nauchnyj Komunizm*, the “Soviet people” is “a new historical, social and international community that appeared in USSR based on the Socialism victory, overcoming the class and national oppositions, coming near to various classes, social groups, nations and ethnicity, and harmonious relations among them” – article “Sovetskij narod” in *Slovar’*, *Nauchnyj Komunizm*, ed. A. M. Rumjantsev, 4<sup>th</sup> edition. Moskva, Izd. Politicheskoy literatury, 1983, p. 278-280) (our translation).

<sup>23</sup> Y. Idashkin, *op. cit.*, p. 26-28 (our translation).

exceptional heroism in the tradition theorized by G. Lomidze in his book *Nravstvennye istoki podviga*<sup>24</sup>, as well as the ethical and moral purity of the Soviet soldiers, the heroic responsibility and the great pride in defeating the Nazism.

Nevertheless, the rigid Soviet criticism toward these literary changes made a just distinction regarding this new prose, refusing her membership near the consecrated works of the Socialist Realism. The reason for this rejection were not only the different and disturbing style, perspective, tone and approach, but the content itself was focused on rendering the „unimportant and petty” aspects of war, as well as continuing the representation of the so-called class struggle or of its nefarious consequences so that the didactic process of literature would slip away into undesirable directions. Moreover, the ideational and ethical-moral basis was not of communist, revolutionary inspiration, being rather originated in the classical Russian literature, making no reference to the so-called great achievements of Soviet literature.

Concerning Idashkin’s argument about the impossibility of opposing the whole to its constitutive parts and their „merger into a unitary organism, living with the same common purposes and the same will for victory”<sup>25</sup>, we may invoke the already known argument of difference between the exposed truth in these „parts” and what was supposed to be the „unitary organism”. Besides, the authors’ purposes couldn’t be called „common”, while the „will for victory” sounds like a great shelter for the atrocities of war in which the characteristic was „ours against ours”, as it was also the case of V. Bykov’s prose.

What may appear interesting is the fact that Bondarev refused to enter the discussion between the critics and to point out his place in the background of the Soviet literature, as his mere acceptance in the Soviet literature granted him the continuity of publication, ensuring him the integration in the context of Socialist Realism: „Do we have a real basis in discussing about the truth „of the trenches” and at „the large scale”? Nor chemical analysis, nor a critical one could point out the difference between the two. During war this truth was named simpler – duty. Duty – the category that has to do with the sense of human life – is a high level notion, supposing morality at the limit of to be or not to be.”<sup>26</sup> Yuri Bondarev had moved the point of discussion strategically on another concept so dear to Soviet critics – duty, be it the case of civic, Sovietized, human, natural, defending or with no mythical and grand pretences of the typical Soviet demarche that had the purpose of continuing the cliché of the class struggle against Fascism representing the West.

Another rejected aspect of Bondarev’s prose was the massive death of the characters at war. Nevertheless, Idashkin brought up the example of other Soviet literary works, as *The Rout* by Fadeyev and *Optimistic Tragedy* by Vishnevsky, in which there was not an epical opening of the events and the majority of characters died. Besides, there was no opposition between the „personal” truth and the „global” perspective, while the pathos and heroism of the characters was according to the works that presented an epical perspective on the same events. The difference between the two mentioned novels and those of the new wave of war prose consists in the different approach of the events and the dissonant narrative voice in (re)presenting them through atypical characters to Socialist Realism. As for the characters,

<sup>24</sup> G. Lomidze, *Nravstvennye istoki podviga* [*The Moral Origins of Heroic Deed*]. Moskva, 1975.

<sup>25</sup> Y. Idashkin, *op. cit.*, p. 27 (our translation).

<sup>26</sup> Y. Bondarev, *Chelovek...*, p. 82 (our translation).

they are „presented” as „positive”<sup>27</sup> – a theoretical literary mechanism brought to life by a series of cultural and historical events<sup>28</sup> and standardized by the Socialist Realism through the literary works constituted in a canon.

Nevertheless, discussing „globally”, the success and popularity of this type of literature, we may point out the Soviet critics’ „compromise” of accepting it, even marginally with the necessary „cosmetic touches” specific to the reception of writings that belonged to Socialist Realism. In that way, the marginal literary works were „saved” and the differences were silenced. We are to refer to both types of the mentioned critical demarches, adding the perspective with no „ideological lenses”, proposing a reading and an interpretation beyond the Socialist Realism and its critical instruments.

The novel *The Hot Snow* proposes the same micro-universe of the trenches inhabited by the same type of characters (soldiers, commanders, nurses), adding an enlargement of the usual narrow perspective by introducing new characters – Bessonov and Vesnin – the General and the member of the Military Council. Bondarev manages to give the restorative (and yet false) impression of macro-universe, the desirable global perspective on war. The distinction of this „global perspective” consists in the fact that the narrator’s perspective is focussed on the same battle in the same location, near Stalingrad from a position that supposes also a higher military rank and a higher responsibility. This „counterfeit” of the supposed globality required by the Soviet criticism seems to be the ironic answer of a master of narrative techniques and means of character construction, being the mark of the Bondarevian finesse in representing on 500 pages just two nights and three days of the great battle of Stalingrad – a battle of huge historical importance for the Soviet anti-fascist fight.

The importance of Stalingrad battle and the seeming increase of the perspective led to the same critical confusions in the reception of the novel. However, Bondarev wasn’t worried about the errors of the Soviet criticism and sometimes expressed his ideas in the language specific to those times: „The truth of war includes everything – from the movement of the red pencil on the map until the night before the battle in the trenches, from Lenin to the days of the Revolution of October until the first gunshots in June ’41, from ’37 to the 20th Party Congress”<sup>29</sup>.

The character construction of the main characters – Zoya’s secret husband Drozdovsky and her instant passion Kuznetsov – is based on the relationships of this love triangle. Zoya’s death is determinant and decisive in constructing the narrative climax and the psychological collision, as the two of them relate differently and react differently. Kuznetsov’s suicide requires the re-evaluation of the character and it constitutes Bondarev’s declaration of independence as a writer toward the patterns and writing schemes of the

<sup>27</sup> The discussion of the development of the positive character could not take place without including Chernyshevsky’s novel *What Is to Be Done?* and the later political and literary events of the ’20s-’30s. See more on this subject in Olga Gradinaru, *Scurtă incursiune în problematica personajului pozitiv în proza rusă și sovietică* [A Short Incursion into the Problem of the Positive Hero in the Russian and Soviet Prose] in *Studii umaniste și perspective interculturale. Cercetări ale doctoranzilor în filologie*. Conferință internațională. Târgu-Mureș, 14-15 aprilie 2011, Coord. C. Moraru, Al. Cistelean, I. Boldea, Ed. Universității Petru Maior, Târgu-Mureș, 2011, p. 1479-1488 and Olga Gradinaru, *The Child Character and the Positive Hero in the Soviet Prose of the Second World War* in *Caietele Echinox* volume 19 *Communism and Negotiation of Boundaries*, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, 2010, p. 282-291.

<sup>28</sup> See a short presentation of this process in K. Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 3-24.

<sup>29</sup> Y. Bondarev, *Chelovek...*, p. 172 (our translation).

Socialist Realism. Kuznetsov's final act may be classified as the result of an egotistical individuality opposed to the features of the Soviet positive character, while the tragedy of his gesture may be questioned from the crystallized position of the Socialist Realism, where the single permitted death was the one serving the country in building the so called „glorious golden future”. From this perspective, Kuznetsov's tragic suicide slips into derisory, absurdity, lack of humanism and lack of a so called „Sovietism”, being considered a useless and disgraceful act by the Soviet criticism that rejected and/or tolerated the new wave of war prose. Nevertheless, the Soviet criticism seemed to indulge in a severe „myopia”, silencing the final episode and focussing eagerly on the events and scenes of the battle, praising the dedication of Soviet soldiers in the noble defence of Stalingrad.

Unveiling the strategies in the character construction requires the analysis of the key-episodes in their relationship, taking into account the final scene that ensures the balanced comprehension and interpretation. The auctorial intention, as well as the specificity of the narratorial voice has to be taken into account in order to provide an accurate and harmonious interpretation. As for the narrative voice and its relationship with the characters' consciousness, we notice the existence of two reflector-characters – Kuznetsov and Bessonov – with several introspections in Drozdovsky's reflections, motivations and attitudes, most of them presented through Kuznetsov's stream of consciousness.

Some ethical and moral issues at war are also highlighted in Bondarev's novel so that the fear of death becomes an important aspect in war representation. This aspect was neglected during the first wave of war prose, especially in the excessive heroic writings with lyrical fragments and a romantic tone, as A. Fadeyev's *The Young Guard* or V. Kataev's *Son of the Regiment*. The fear of death represented the subject of controversial discussions between the Soviet critics who were inert to the political and cultural context, on one hand, and those less ideological and more tolerant in their literary analyses since the „Thaw” of 1954, on the other hand.

In conclusion, Bondarev's critical reception was a biased one with ideological reminiscences of the established canon of the Socialist Realism, situating author's type of heroism in a depreciative light, especially when comparing him and his characters with K. Simonov's characters. Even in the context of a theoretical aesthetics and stylistic expansion of Socialist Realism, the writings of the second wave of writers inspired by World War II were marginalized and misunderstood. We pointed out two Soviet critical manners in dealing with Bondarev's prose – either rejected according to the patterns of comprehension and interpretation deeply rooted by the Socialist Realism canon or erroneously accepted and presented as part of the existing list of masterpieces. In both cases we have a decrease of Bondarev's talent and writing skills only due to the attempt of regarding his works as relating to Socialist Realism canon and patterns. The Soviet stereotypes of literary comprehension and interpretation limited the true perception of Bondarev's writings, continuing his post-Soviet misconception through the same clichés.

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