

150th Anniversary of Dickens's Death

The



Dickensian

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'Someone who was very close, and very dearly loved': Russian Obituaries of Dickens

RENATA GOROSHKOVA

'We may even love him no less than his own countrymen' (F. M. Dostoevsky)¹

CHARLES DICKENS HAD A HUGE IMPACT on Russian literary life of the middle and later nineteenth century. Nearly all the famous Russian writers, knowingly or unintentionally, were under his influence. Dickens conquered the hearts of ordinary people as well. He was read not only in Moscow or Saint Petersburg: his works, published in literary magazines, were delivered to the furthest corners of the country. For example, Alexandr Herzen writes that through a large-scale expansion of magazines – 'the best form of spreading education' – people in the Omsk and Tobolsk regions in Siberia had the opportunity to read Dickens's novels two months after their publication in London². Dickens knew about his popularity and, according to John Forster, '...for a long time, on anything going "contrary" in the public or private direction, he would tell me he had ordered his portmanteau to be packed for the more sympathising and congenial climate of "the remotest parts of Siberia"' (Forster, 448-449).

Interestingly, Dickens engaged people so strongly that he became a subject for disputes and arguments. A polemic lasting several years developed between the magazines *Otechestvennyye zapiski* (*Fatherland Notes*) and *Sovremennik* (*Contemporary*). The debate was heated, with accusations and reproaches. The editors argued about who first started translating this or that Dickens novel, or who should translate these novels at all³. This passionate love for Dickens had different explanations, ranging from the search for moral guidance to the attempt, by reading Dickens's novels, to compensate for a sense of humour missing in Russians.

Leo Tolstoy in 1904, on being requested by J.W.T. Ley (on behalf of the Dickens Fellowship) to express an opinion on Dickens, responded as follows: 'I think that Charles Dickens is the greatest novel writer of the 19th century, and that his works, impressed with the true christian spirit, have done and will continue to do a great deal of good to mankind'.⁴

In 1915 John William Mackail, Oxford Professor of Poetry and later President of the British Academy, claimed that Dickens was closer to Russians than to any other nation in Europe. His explanation was as follows:

Russians seem to understand the English way of looking at things more easily and more completely than any other Continental nation does. Dickens is a special favorite with them...They find in him what they want, and also he gives what, on the whole, they themselves lack in two matters. They find in him the abounding sense of fun which is rare in the more dreamy and resigned Russian temperament, and they find in him also the force of will, the driving power, which made him not only fight against injustice but bring about actual reforms⁵.

In Russian magazines and newspapers of various orientations in the summer of 1870 at least thirty obituaries were published. Dickens's death became a real tragedy for all his Russian readers. Dickens was also appreciated and not forgotten in the Soviet Union; in 1945 the major newspapers published articles in honour of the 75th anniversary of his death. In this article I offer translated excerpts from some of the obituaries released in 1870 and from one published in 1945. They illustrate the extent to which Russian love for Dickens united a wide variety of readers – people from different professions and backgrounds and with opposing political views.

The obituary in the liberal magazine *Syn Otechestva* (*The Son of the Fatherland*) gave a short Dickens biography and translated part of the sermon by the Dean of Westminster, Arthur Stanley. It then remarked, 'Few writers reached this level of moral probity. In all of his literary and social activity [Dickens] elevated human hearts and souls. That is why in all England we will hardly find any family that is not mourning his death.'⁶

The literary-political journal *Russkiy vestnik* (*The Russian Messenger*) published many distinguished writers and poets, such as Turgenev, Fet, Leskov, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, and it produced a long article in honour of Dickens. This article was signed with the name 'Nelubov', the pen name of the famous music critic G. A. Larosh.

[G.A.Larosh] 'Nelubov', 'Ch. Dickens (An Obituary)', *Russkiy vestnik*, vol.8, no. 6 (June 1870), pp. 809 – 821.

[Dickens's will] strictly forbade all pomp and burial solemnity. However, his great reputation and his service to his country pointed to the place where his remains should lie: according to the custom of England, reverently honouring the memory of its great writers, Dickens was to be buried in that cramped, but proud crypt in Westminster Abbey, Poets' Corner. When the news of the death of the creator of *Copperfield* spread, voices of the people and the press demanded that his ashes be placed in the crypt of the Abbey along with the ashes of those glorious people who made English literature one of the foremost in the world....

He brought to life the rich, diverse fictional world of the people, places and incidents. But with all his merits Dickens maintained the greatest simplicity of feeling, preference for a life simple in its goals and needs, and

finally a modesty in personal habits and requirements from life. His talent was great enough to have stimulated pride or ambition, but he was a stranger to both, and preferred the humble life of a literary man. This simplicity of his personality and behaviour is one of the main reasons for Dickens's unusual popularity – the quality in which he had no rival among contemporary writers.

No one experienced the love and sympathy of the people as Dickens did. In addition to his works, which are so popular in all segments of society in all countries of the world, he, as an amateur actor, as a public reader of his works, as a public philanthropic figure, so often came into contact with the public that he became, as it were, a personal acquaintance of a large number of London residents.... That is why the general feeling of grief with which the news of his death was received on both sides of the Atlantic ocean is doubly understandable. The sad news not only struck the reading public as it might have been struck by the news of the death of any other writer with such rare and brilliant talent; but also, at the same time, it occasioned a great and sincere grief, as for someone who was very close, and very dearly loved.

Should we add a word about the rare personal qualities of the creator of *Pickwick*? Should we speak of his extraordinary loyalty in friendship, his permanent readiness to invest his own precious time to help those in need, despite the strict régime of self-imposed discipline and order without which Dickens would never have mastered his many diverse activities?

Dickens the person is the same as Dickens the writer: the same spirit animated the actions of the man and prompted the poet's creations. This was especially important in the deceased writer.

... Depicting true life in his books, Dickens does not grate on his readers' nerves or arouse their bitterness; he does not intentionally exploit the feelings of anger or revenge, does not introduce into his works anything that could provoke the reader's spleen or misanthropy. Dickens does not use all those provocatively emotive forces, which are so popular among other writers. His realism is true realism. He portrayed life in all its breadth. He addressed the whole rich and diverse field of phenomena, and if in his paintings he mainly dwelt on the everyday, on the sympathies and destinies of small, worn-out and downtrodden people, on the abuse of power and superiority, he always supplemented the picture with images of the best side of life, using warm tones, accompanied with divine music infused with feelings of deep love and ardent belief. He was filled with a warm and generous impulse that drew his feelings with irresistible force to the oppressed and suffering, to the forgotten workers of mankind. At the same time, he possessed that inexhaustible gaiety that combines playful laughter with good nature, and which perfectly freshened the expressions of his serious feelings and the gloomy sides of his paintings. All of his works have a bright and beneficial reflection of his loving, philanthropic spirit, and this soft warm light so enchantingly illuminates the colourful life of his unconventional characters, so charmingly captures the reader's mood and so comfortingly strengthens his faith in the best side of human nature, that the action of his novels, in addition to their artistry, still carries a high

moral value. Thus we experience the gentle, warm and profoundly truthful speech of the preacher who preached the gospel. Indeed, brotherly love permeates Dickens's stories: he may denounce and persecute with punishing acrimony the evils that weigh on human affairs, but in all that excoriating satire we still hear only the noble protest of the same all-embracing love.

In the socio-political and literary magazine *Delo (Business)*, Dickens's obituary was written by Élie Reclus, a French scientist and anarchist who created several fundamental works on ethnography (which are still being reprinted). In the magazine he had a special section, 'news of foreign life' (according to Federico Ferretti, 'it was his principal source of revenue').

É. Reclus, Dickens's Death, *Delo*, June 1870, no.6, pp. 55 – 65.

Charles Dickens is dead. The death of this person is not only a national English event, but a universal one.

...Dickens made a mirror, inserted it into a luxurious, sculpted frame, with gold and silver decorations, and invited England to admire itself. England was curious enough to accept the invitation; the mirror turned out to be clean and true, and mercilessly reflected in itself all the warts, all the wrinkles, all the ridiculous imperfections of dress and clothing. England was surprised to see itself in a mirror as so ugly, old and ill-dressed.

...Dickens is a moralist who wields a scalpel with a firm and skilful hand. He successfully opens the wound. However, his objective is not accuracy but the need to finish the job as soon as possible. Is this because he doesn't like the smell of the corpse, or because he cannot continue without having found a more pleasant theme? In his haste to set aside his surgeon's knife, he plugs with rags the empty spaces of the open chest and entrails of the examined corpse, sutures the skin with a living thread and hastily douses the body with eau de Cologne to destroy its unpleasant odour.

...Dickens, who succeeded only in depicting secondary characters, cannot be considered as a moralist of the highest order. Therefore, his fame and influence will not survive our generation. However, future researchers of the life of our generation will not turn to official historians and statisticians for help, but will choose Dickens and Thackeray, where they will find the true description of English life in the first half of the 19th century, since they furnish so many facts of the time to enable one to draw conclusions about the period. Most of Dickens's novels are characterised by very weak composition and do not improve on *The Pickwick Papers*, which suffers from a complete absence of composition. The plot is too naive, written in a very elementary way; various surprises impress the reader and arise suddenly, as if the author implemented them accidentally, contrary to his will. It also seems that it is not the writer who manages the characters, but the characters who lead the author....

...In the works of Dickens there is something youthful, unfinished, it is almost impossible to look at his characters seriously: his judges, his presidents,

even his executioners, are like puppets. They are painted with a broad brush; his central lovers, male and female, are just cute dolls. How, in fact, is the love between these characters different from a brother's affection for his sister? A series of heated exchanges that can be found in Dickens's works are somewhat naive: one might think that they all relate a hummingbird's love for a fly. This can be also said about some scenes of revelry, which are written unemotionally. After Sterne, Fielding, Smollett and Swift English literature became family-friendly, and authors took special care with their works so that they did not accidentally contain vulgarity, dirty talk, or ambivalent hints. Dickens is a novelist primarily for family reading: while reading his works you see how he composes every work as if he is afraid that a female reader, with the hypocrisy typical of an English lady who does nothing, would drop a meaningless 'Shocking!'.

...His favourite artistic device is to intensify the moral awkwardness and physical ugliness of his characters, and to highlight these qualities with a bright electric light. He never cast his heroes in bronze, never in marble; he put wigs on them, dressed them in the same style, and studied their pimples and spots through a magnifying glass.

Thackeray did not resort to warts; a character's outward appearance had no meaning for him, and he was only interested in his or her inner properties ... Thackeray represents real human nature, whereas Dickens primarily caricatures it. On reflection, caricature merely reflects a person's bad sides – hence its limitations. Our generation generally prefers Dickens to Thackeray; future generations, as it seems to us, will prefer Thackeray to Dickens.

Our generation has given all its sympathies to Dickens, a man as illogical as ourselves who manages to satisfy both our appetite for 'hard, dry facts' and our thirst for miracles. At the same time, we have not favoured Thackeray because he is more sober and more logical than Dickens. But whomever we may prefer, Dickens or Thackeray, we must admit that they complement and correct each other. With all their shortcomings and advantages, they give us a true picture of the life of England in the second quarter of the 19th century. Being more sober, more realistic, and more utilitarian than Dickens, Thackeray used to paint only aristocratic life, with all its attributes. Dickens, as the more poetic talent, with an aesthetically refined sentiment, would describe the life of the people, the middle class, the manufacturers and merchants. After reading the complete works of Dickens, one can fully comprehend England as if one had lived in it all one's life without ever travelling abroad, and understand it better than most of the British. If England is now different from the way it appears in Dickens's novels, it is because these very novels have influenced the nation's advancement.

His last works were positively poor. In his later years Dickens was a mediocre writer, a literary industrialist who exploited the fame of his identity as the author of *Bleak House*, *David Copperfield*, *Hard Times*, and *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Despite his bad writing Dickens did not become a bad citizen or a reactionary. Until his death, he remained politically pure and did not change

one iota of his former progressive beliefs and aspirations. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, as he deserved. In the pantheon of the great people of England, his grave is located near the grave of Thackeray.

The following obituary appeared in the 'Weekly Sketches and Pictures' section of the moderate-liberal political and literary newspaper *St. Petersburg Vedomosti*. The author of this column was a well-known Russian journalist and publisher, Alexey Suvorin.

[A. Suvorin] *St. Petersburg Vedomosti*, 'Weekly Sketches and Pictures', 21 July 1870, no.168, p. 2.

I do not know, reader, whether the news of [Dickens's] death impressed you; but as for me personally, I consider the death of this man to be a 'heavy loss'. The fact is that I belong to the generation that, since adolescence, read with a passion the works of the author. Dickens and Thackeray are two writers who, in our youth, were the main examples of modern novelists for us. We considered them to be leaders of thought. For us, the images evoked by the fruitful work of these English novelists are almost as familiar and close to us as, for example, the characters of Turgenev. A long string of diverse personalities of the incomparable humorous panorama that we once adored with such admiration, thanks to the creative imagination of Dickens and Thackeray, has not been erased from our memory so far.

...In that sad period of time when Russian magazines, in their colourlessness, in their lack of a living direction, somewhat resembled the current organs; when the Department of Russian fine literature was dominated by poems of Fet, and sentimental stories with 'psychological analysis', as vulgar as the current 'novels with new men'⁸ — at that time, I say, the excellent works of English writers were manna in the desert, and were absorbed by most readers with an interest that now, perhaps, will hardly be understood. Recalling the influence of Dickens in Russian literature, it would be superfluous to recall a man who, through his excellent translations, introduced Dickens and Thackeray to our public and, so to speak, acclimatised them to our soil. I am talking about Vvedensky, already dead and, as is almost always the case in our country, completely forgotten. This man should not be forgotten by Russian literature.

We can positively say that we have had few such excellent translators as Vvedensky. ... Vvedensky assimilated the spirit of the writer he translated perfectly and was able to convey his manner and his language, as far as possible. Those who think that it is as easy to translate Dickens or Thackeray, or any other such first-class and original author, as it is to translate a newspaper article, are very much mistaken. ...Vvedensky had the highest degree of insight into the essential qualities of the authors he translated, and combined this wonderful ability with a deep, conscientious study of those authors.

It is a curious circumstance that Vvedensky, being a philologist, and possessing an excellent knowledge of the latest languages, understood them only in books, and not in current oral speech. Like all who began their

Alekseev M. P. 'Charles Dickens (To the 75th Anniversary of the Death)'. *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 9 June 1945, no.132, p. 4.

...Dickens aroused such unanimous admiration in such a vast and heterogeneous number of readers as no other writer of his country has done, with the exception of Shakespeare.

...Dickens's works were reprinted endlessly, and they were read everywhere in originals and translations, wherever thoughts and true artistic language were valued. People of all ages, ranks, professions and tastes have read Dickens's books with the same enthusiasm for many decades. The images created by Dickens became the property of all the most important literatures of the world and an inseparable part of history itself. It is impossible to think of England as it would have been a hundred years ago without imagining a scene from a Dickens novel. ...In the work of Dickens there were no collapses or late weakening of skills, but there were continuous and sometimes very anxious and painful searches for truth and style. All his work consists of continuous masterpieces, starting from the Pickwick Club sparkling with joy and love for man, which was his first glory, right up to the novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which was not understood by many.... England in the mid-19th century provided Dickens with a wealth of material for disclosures of all kinds. He was genuinely disgusted with hypocritical parliamentary politicians, he attacked his compatriots for their desire to cover up mundane concerns with external piety, despotism, self-interest – with an equally hypocritical declaration of service to higher goals. The historical significance of the work of Dickens is great, and his influence was long and diverse. This influence has affected almost all the most important Western European literature over the past hundred years.

...Dickens and Gogol have much in common, and it is not without reason that they were so interested in each other. Gogol enthusiastically and joyfully read Dickens's works during the creation of *Dead Souls*, and Dickens, much later, in 1868, paid tribute to Gogol's novel *Taras Bulba*, which he read in an English translation. Soft lyrical humour, love for the little man, and sharpness of sight were common to them.

...We can say with confidence that in Russia Dickens was understood and appreciated. He was read and loved, and – what is more – studies in creative writing were based on his works. But he responded in kind. Dickens was in correspondence with his Russian translator, a friend of Chernyshevsky – Vvedensky, and once, having met with him in London, he questioned him a lot about Russian literature. ⁹From translations and critical articles, he knew the poems of Koltsov and *Tarantas* by Sollogub, not only loved Turgenev, but was also one of the first to acquaint the English reader with him, in his magazine *Household Words*, in the mid-1850s. Dickens printed translations of several stories of Turgenev from *A Hunter's Sketches* – 'The Singers', 'Lgov', 'The Steward'. The community between Russian and English literature started in this way – in the joint defence of human rights, in a common love for those offended by fate and for those who were bypassed by happiness. Let us pay

tribute to the memory of the great English artist who fought for happiness, friendship and love.

- 1 Dostoevsky, p. 206.
- 2 Herzen, p. 367.
- 3 Some examples: Nekrasov, Nikolay. 'From the editorial Board of *Contemporary*' (pp. 146–156); 'A few comments on the latest antics of *Fatherland Notes* against *Contemporary*'. (pp. 173–178). *Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy i pisem. [Complete Works and Letters]*. Vol. 12, Moscow: State Publishing House for Literary Works, 1953. (In Russian).
- 4 Tolstoy, p. 24.
- 5 Mackail, p. 46.
- 6 'Charles Dickens (An Obituary)'. *Syn Otechestva*, Sunday, 7 (19) June, 1870, p. 318.
- 7 Ferretti, p. 37.
- 8 'Novels with new men' is a subgenre of Russian Literature of the 1860s about the new revolutionary generation of Russians (Chernyshevsky's *Prolog* is an example).
9. It is still unclear whether Vvedensky met Dickens in London. Yuri Levin writes that the encounter between Vvedensky and Dickens did not take place (Levin, 117), whereas Vvedensky himself said that two hours which he had spent with Dickens had been the happiest hours in all his life (Milyukov, 76). The problem needs further investigation.

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