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SERGEY ARNO'S PERSONAL COMMENTS ON THE VALUE OF LITERATURE AND THE FUNCTION OF LITERARY CRITICISM INCORPORATED IN HIS WORKS

O WARTOŚCI I WARTOŚCIOWANIU LITERATURY. ODAUTORSKIE KOMENTARZE SIERGIEJA ARNO

Abstract

On the one hand, Sergey Arno's prose stands out due to its black humour, full of paradoxical thoughts and absurd imaginations, but on the other hand, it deals with the condition of literature, its function, value, and literary criticism (i.e. its assessment). Apart from addressing literary subjects, his works relatively often reveal autobiographical and self-referential elements. For this reason, it is possible to extract from Arno's texts fragments investigating the value of literature and its assessment that can be identified with the author's own position. This article is an attempt to reconstruct the writer's views based on four of his works in prose: three fictional pieces and one non-fiction book.

Streszczenie

Prozę Siergieja Arno wyróżnia z jednej strony pełen paradoksalnych myśli oraz absurdalnych wyobrażeń czarny humor, z drugiej zaś strony stosunkowo ważne miejsce zajmują w niej odniesienia do kondycji literatury, jej funkcji, wartości, a także do krytyki literackiej (tj. wartościowania). Ponieważ twórczość prozaika, obok literaturotematycznych, stosunkowo często wykazuje też cechy autobiograficzne i autotematyczne, z niektórych tekstów Arno



daje się wydobyć fragmenty dotyczące wartości i wartościowania literatury, które można utożsamiać ze stanowiskiem samego autora. Niniejszy artykuł stanowi próbę takiej rekonstrukcji poglądów pisarza w oparciu o cztery utwory prozatorskie: trzy fikcyjne oraz jeden faktograficzny.

Keywords: Sergey Arno, Russian Literature, Contemporary Russian Literature, St Petersburg Prose

Słowa kluczowe: Siergiej Arno, literatura rosyjska, współczesna literatura rosyjska, proza petersburska

The beginnings of Sergey Igorevich Arno's (b. 1958) literary career reach back to the 1990s. He has written nine novels, numerous short stories, as well as journalist and feature articles. An important part in his work is played by autobiographical and self-referential elements, from which often comments on phenomena observed in the literary world – in the broad sense of the term – emerge. Intentionally engaging into a discourse with the reader, Arno seems to achieve one of the objectives of autobiographical literature, as set out by Małgorzata Czermińska:

What is important for an autobiographical stance is a principle of 'checking on one's own', of personally taking part in a statement and taking one's personal responsibility for that statement. It is also a need to communicate one's self to a given You. The interlocutor's response is their opening up for contact with a person similar to themselves, and not waiting for some fiction [...].¹

Arno's works – apart from the plot that engages the reader – contain characteristics typical of the autobiographical stance; the writer, sometimes giving in to an essayistic mannerism, clearly reveals his own beliefs and opinions. As a result, 'Reflection about the world', inherent in these views, 'becomes, first of all, a reflection about one's own process of learning about the world',² the words 'one's own' taking here a double meaning: on the one hand, they may refer to the speaker, and on the other hand, when situated on the other side, they may refer to the interlocutor, encouraged to meditate on problems under discussion.

I suggest to consider a few selected works by Arno in chronological order first, and then to extract from them the essence of his views on the value of literature and on literary criticism.

¹ M. Czermińska, *Autobiografia i powieść, czyli pisarz i jego postacie*, Gdańsk, Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1987, p. 17.

² Ibidem, p. 24.

Arno's novel *Frederik Ruysch and His Children* [*Фредерик Рюйш и его дети*] appeared in 2006.³ The narrative is made up of two intertwining threads: a story about the brilliant Dutch anatomist Frederik Ruysch, and a detective fiction plot revolving around a teenage girl infatuated with the narrator who experiences a midlife crisis. The latter is the voice of Arno himself: the protagonist has the same name as the author of the book, identifies himself as a writer, mentions the name of his spouse, which is identical with that of the author's wife, mentions the titles of books he had written, which are the titles of Arno's novels, and so on.⁴ These fragments of the novel are also a pretext to bring up subjects related to literature. In one of the scenes, the character identified with the author, when asked by an underage interlocutor about what, in his opinion, is most important in life, responds after much thought:

[...] я думал над твоим вопросом по поводу того, что есть на свете самый главный вопрос, на который знают ответ люди, поднявшиеся до определенных вершин. [...] В молодости я хотел стать писателем, чтобы прийти к нему, чтобы встать над всем. [...] Человек всю жизнь поднимается по своей лестнице, но у каждого есть свой предел. Я посещал литературное объединение с молодыми людьми, на первый взгляд значительно одареннее меня. Их хвалили, ставили в пример. Но сейчас, оглядываясь назад, я вижу этих теперь уже немолодых людей, которые так и остались в литературе на уровне отличников литературного объединения. Хотя некоторые и продолжают писать, но они не смогли подняться. Или другие, которые писали много, легко, первыми выпустили по книжке, вступили в Союз писателей... и все. Больше одной-двух книг они не написали. Рост их прекратился. Они так и умрут на этом уровне: у них нет перспектив. Но есть другие, их не так много, которые движутся вперед, выпускают книгу за книгой, получают литературные премии, их ценят коллеги... Когда остановится их рост, никто не знает. С другой стороны, все это движение может ничем на закончиться, но у них есть перспектива и есть шанс.⁵

[...] I was thinking about your question because it is the most important question in the world to which people who have risen to certain heights know the answer. [...] When I was young, I wanted to become a writer, come to it, and rise above everything. [...]

³ С. Арно, *Фредерик Рюйш и его дети*. Роман, Санкт-Петербург, Союз Писателей Санкт-Петербурга, 2012, pp. 3–143. The novel originally appeared in the literary journal "Нева" (no. 4, 2006), then, in 2009, re-titled as *The Father of Monsters* [*Отец монстров*] it was published in a book form, and again, slightly modified and under the original title given it by the author – *Фредерик Рюйш и его дети* – in 2012. Subsequent editions came out in 2014 and 2017.

⁴ See B. Brązkiewicz, *Ku tajemnicy życia wiecznego. Piotr I i Frederik Ruysch w historyczno-fantastycznej powieści S. Arno "Фредерик Рюйш и его дети"*, [in:] *Sacrum świata wschodniego i zachodniego w kulturze słowiańszczyzny*, „Musica Antiqua Europae Orientalis. Acta Slavica”, vol. 17, C. Nelkowski, E. Harendarska (Eds.), Bydgoszcz, Filharmonia Pomorska im. Ignacego Jana Paderewskiego w Bydgoszczy, 2014, pp. 442–443.

⁵ С. Арно, *Фредерик...*, op. cit., p. 88 (all quotations from Arno's books translated into English by the present author).

People climb their ladders all their life, but everyone has their limits. I joined a literary association of young people who, at first glance, were much more gifted than me. They were praised and set as an example. But now, looking back, I see these no-longer-young people who remained in literature at the level of excellent students of the literary association. Though some continue to write, they failed to rise. Or others who wrote a lot, easily, were the first to publish a book, joined the Writers' Union... and that's it. They never wrote more than one or two books. Their growth stopped. They will die at this level: they have no prospects. But there are others, not many of them, who are moving forward, publishing book after book, winning literary prizes, being appreciated by their colleagues... When their growth will stop, no one knows. On the other hand, all this movement may end up in nothing, but they have a perspective and a chance.

Then, the writer continues, this time ruminating on his own life:

Не для того я положил свою жизнь на алтарь литературы. Если бы я хотел жить ради денег, я бы нашел другие пути, чтобы жить хорошо. Нет, я шел за Тайной. Я хотел стать писателем, чтобы быть выше всех – нет! не за тем, чтобы подняться над другими, а только потому, что Тайна наверху.⁶

It was not for this that I laid my life on the altar of literature. If I had wanted to live for money, I would have found other ways to live well. No, I followed the Mystery. I wanted to become a writer to be above everyone else – no! not to rise above others, but only because the Mystery is above.

The Mystery (sometimes also 'great Mystery'), spelt with a capital letter, that appears here, is given by the author his own, special meaning:

Так вот, чем выше человек поднимается по этой своей лестнице, тем ближе он подступает к великой Тайне. [...] Причем не имеет значения, по какому пути человек поднимается вверх: как бизнесмен – богатея, как чиновник – поднимаясь по ступеням власти, или как писатель... Каждый из них постепенно подбирается к этой Тайне со своей стороны, но каждый знает только свою ее часть.⁷

So, the higher a man climbs up this ladder of his, the closer he comes to the great Mystery. [...] And it does not matter which way a person rises up: as a businessman – becoming rich, as an official – climbing the steps of power, or as a writer... Each of them gradually gets closer to this Mystery from his own side, but each one knows only his part of it.

It follows from the above that what Arno means when he speaks about the directions – 'higher', 'in the highest' – is mostly a constant development, an increase-oriented quantitative growth, with a qualitative potential inherent in it, a striving towards perfection. Virtuosity that becomes an end in itself does not necessarily have to be related to a religious or spiritual sphere; rather, in the writer's understanding, the

⁶ Ibidem, p. 89.

⁷ Ibidem, pp. 88–89.

essence of Mystery spelt with a capital M is solved within an individual order, and it is progress that is the only constant feature here. The story about Ruysch and his collection of curiosities, the secrets of embalming (or 'thanatopraxis'), descriptions related to his attempts at penetrating the mystery of death, and strivings to extend the length of the posthumous 'life', reveals a significant analogy that binds the temporal plane of the novel and its main plot: just as Ruysch was haunted by a desire to penetrate the mystery of eternal life in its bodily dimensions, so, in Arno's understanding, this very mystery resides in the permanence of an author's literary work that ensures him an eternal life. Arno elaborated on this view in his subsequent works.

Arno's novel, *Strait Jacket for Geniuses. A Nonsensical Novel* [*Смирительная рубашка для гениев. Роман-бред*],⁸ published in 2012, recounts a story of a writer-narrator who, while trying to understand how a psychiatric hospital works, unwittingly becomes one of its patients. He finds himself in a special ward that carries out the government-funded programme intended to cure writers of their morbid tendency to write. The political project described in the novel sets out a new direction for the writers' work: commercialisation. They have to awake because, as the psychiatrist treating the novel's main character asserts, they have sunk into a sort of stupor, and although they seem to be slowly taking notice of the stimuli coming from the outside world, they do not react to them. This is how the narrator comments on this statement of his interlocutor:

— Красивый образ, — В просоночном состоянии находится вся наша литература. Да что литература, вся страна в таком состоянии. Когда проснулись, как вы говорите, низшие функции — выпить, пожрать, за границу съездить, машину купить... Вышшие функции мозга, отвечающие за духовность, спят. Хороший образ — 'просоночное состояние'.⁹

— A beautiful image. — All our literature is in a sleepy state. And not only literature, the whole country is in such a state. Although, as you say, the lower-level bodily functions — drinking, eating, going abroad, buying a car — are awake..., the higher-level functions of the brain, responsible for spirituality, are asleep. 'Sleepy state' is a good image.

There are both Russian and foreign writers among patients of the hospital. Their names are intended by the project's masterminds to be used in publicising proprietary brands under which a few titles yearly could be published, or would be employed in launching literary projects taking the fullest possible advantage of the economic potential of particular names.

⁸ С. Арно, *Смирительная рубашка для гениев. Роман-бред*, Санкт-Петербург, Издательство Союза писателей Санкт-Петербурга, 2012.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 40.

These parts of Arno's novel clearly reveal references to George Ritzer's theory of McDonaldization, along with two of its most prominent elements – that Ritzer himself described as its 'downsides' – namely, efficiency and calculability.¹⁰ The 'number theory' presented in the novel, that is, a conception aimed at treating writers like objects by replacing their proper names by numbers, e.g. 'seven times eight', 'zero' (Paulo Coelho), 'fourteen-fifteen' – the last-mentioned being a number assigned to the narrator, perfectly fits the model outlined by Ritzer.¹¹

Arno suggests that this pathological quantifying of reality has also affected Russian literature, dubbed by him 'fast-food',¹² in which only quantity, instead of quality, counts, and cites in full his earlier essay, *Epidemic of Talentless Writing – A Threat to Humanity?* [*Эпидемия графомании – угроза человечеству?*], published in "Literaturnaiia Gazeta" ["Литературная газета"] in 2008. In the novel, however, the essay's title is devoid of question mark.¹³ Arno demonstrates in the paper that nowadays anyone can write – from a figure skater to bus or train conductor, to politicians and oligarchs, to music stars and prostitutes, summing up this trend as follows:

В наш век компьютерной грамотности, когда орфографию и синтаксис знать не обязательно – нужно только уметь нажимать клавиши на компьютере, а уж он сам будет проверять ошибки, – любой может стать писателем или поэтом. Нужно только найти немного времени, чтобы сесть за компьютер и лупить по клавишам, и в конечном итоге запросто можно налупить книжку – так сейчас и поступают многие граждане, на самом деле к писателям не относящиеся.¹⁴

In our age of computer literacy, when you don't need to know spelling and syntax rules – you just need to be able to press the keys on a keyboard, and the computer will check for mistakes – anyone can become a writer or a poet. All you have to do is to find some time to sit down at a computer and press the keys, and in the end, you can easily produce a book: that's what many citizens, who are not really writers, do nowadays.

In this context, the main character of Arno's novel makes a paradoxical, and at the same time sad, statement:

Что же тогда держит в этой странной профессии, кроме, пожалуй, одного – безумия?! В мире литературы человека может удерживать только болезнь.¹⁵

¹⁰ See G. Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* 6, Thousand Oaks [USA], SAGE Publications, Inc., 2011, p. 16.

¹¹ See С. Арно, *Смирительная...*, op. cit., pp. 125, 147, 182.

¹² Ibidem, p. 127.

¹³ See ibidem, pp. 113–118. С. Арно, *Эпидемия графомании – угроза человечеству?*, „Литературная газета” 2008, no. 14 (2 April), p. 15.

¹⁴ See С. Арно, *Смирительная...*, op. cit., p. 115.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 144.

What, then, keeps you going on in this strange profession, except, perhaps, for one thing – madness?! In the world of literature, only illness can hold a person back.

A flicker of hope is brought to the writer, doubting about his future, by an Angel who has regularly appeared to him. Referring to phenomena observed in the world, the Angel states:

Мир сейчас выстроен таким образом: государством руководят деньги, человеческой душой – религия. Промежуточное звено – творческая интеллигенция, в первую очередь писатели – оказались лишним звеном в структуре. Государству они не нужны, потому что они не несут денег, религии не нужны, потому что во всем сомневаются и слишком много размышляют, не всегда в правильном направлении, поэтому писателей и превращают в числа. Я же говорил, что мир условен. Писатели не нужны государству, но пройдет лет сто, и этих же писателей будут поднимать на пьедестал и гордиться перед всем миром именами тех, кого сейчас именуют числами.¹⁶

The world is now structured in this way: the state is ruled by money, and the human soul by religion. An intermediate link – the creative intelligentsia, first of all writers – has turned out to be a redundant link in the structure. The state doesn't need them because they don't bring money, and religion doesn't need them because they doubt everything and think too much, not always in the right direction; that's why writers have been turned into numbers. I told you the world is conditional. The state does not need writers, but in a hundred years these same writers will be elevated on pedestals, and those whose names have been now replaced by numbers, will be extolled before the whole world.

The Angel, referring to the Bible, reminds in the first place that, 'In the beginning was the Word',¹⁷ and goes on to explaining that the Word that had earlier been with God, was soon appropriated by writers and poets who came to be seen as those who were in the possession of the greatest knowledge, the knowledge of God, unknown to anyone else, and they started to be treated as spiritual leaders, the conscience of nations or, in the worst case, as engineers of human souls.¹⁸ However, the Word broke loose and ended up in undesirable hands, and nowadays everyone owns it (this is precisely what is meant as the above-mentioned epidemics of talentless writing), and that is why the Word has been confronted with numbers. The Angel explains to the novel's protagonist that, while the essence of the contemporary world can be presented by means of digits and numbers, which stand for value, the spiritual reality, the quintessence of which is the Word, is made up of letters. Perhaps, attempts at

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 160.

¹⁷ 'Вначале было Слово', ibidem, p. 161.

¹⁸ See ibidem.

restoring to the Word the place it is entitled to, made by some writers, may bear fruit in the future in the form of a renaissance of literature.¹⁹

The novel *Strait Jacket for Geniuses* is an interesting voice in the discussion on the condition of contemporary literature.²⁰ Although – as noted by Irina Dudina – the questions of ‘why’, ‘for what reason’ and ‘to what end’ remain in fact beyond the scope of Arno’s novel,²¹ the writer makes the reader consider, at least, the problem of the commodification of literature. Further, since culture, as stated by T. S. Eliot, is not the sum of distinct cultural activities,²² and anything that appeared in print is not necessarily literature, then what is it? Finally, should the name of genius be ascribed to authors of ‘unrecognised’ works, or to those who are undergoing ‘treatment’?

Another work under discussion is a novel, *The Dead Themselves Know Why. Stories of the St Petersburg Evil* [Мертвые сами знают отчего. Истории петербургской нечисти], published in 2020.²³ It is a phantasmagorical narrative written according to the conventions of the St Petersburg tales, in which immortal characters pass through three successive temporal dimensions: starting from 1859, to the years immediately after the October Revolution and the civil war period, to the present day. Although the ‘present day’ is not specified, the action may be assumed, with all probability, to be occurring in the second decade of the twenty-first century. And again, the author appears in the pages of the novel as himself. Seated on a bench opposite the statue of the Bronze Horseman, the narrator states:

На этой скамейке я задумал когда-то ‘Роман о любви, а еще об идиотах и утопленниках’, принесший мне премию Гоголя.²⁴

It was on this bench that I once conceived ‘A Novel of Love, and also of Idiots and Drowned Women’ that brought me the Gogol Prize.

Therefore, what we have here is the same device of autobiographical narration and discussion of topics related to literary criticism that appeared in the novel about Ruysch. Seated on the very same bench overlooking the statue commemorating Peter the Great, Arno delves into the problems related to the present state of Russian literature:

¹⁹ See *ibidem*, pp. 161–162.

²⁰ See B. Brązkiewicz, *W zderzeniu z teraźniejszością. Dialogiczność współczesnej prozy petersburskiej*, „Ethos” 2020, no. 1(129), pp. 103–104.

²¹ See И. Дудина, *Просоночное состояние*, „Аврора” 2018, no. 2, p. 124.

²² See T.S. Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, London, Faber and Faber Limited, 1948, p. 41.

²³ С. Арно, *Мертвые сами знают отчего. Истории петербургской нечисти*, [in:] *idem, Восстание слов*, Санкт-Петербург, Союз писателей Петербурга, 2020, pp. 3–92.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 63.

Рассеянно глядя по сторонам, я размышлял о современной российской литературе. Меня, как писателя, не могла не волновать ее судьба – последнее десятилетие она развивалась как-то однобоко. Существует литература, существует читатель, но не хватает одного важного связующего звена – критики. У нас множество литературоведов и критиков, которые занимаются книгами мертвых писателей, изучая их творчество до последней запятой, но никто не хочет изучать живых писателей – от этого литературный процесс заходит в тупик и буксует. Живые слишком увлечены мертвыми – на них быстрее можно сделать карьеру. А мы, живые писатели, вынуждены обходиться без критики и ждать смерти. И, может быть, тогда наши книги будут изучать.²⁵

I was absent-mindedly looking around, thinking about contemporary Russian literature. As a writer, I couldn't help but be concerned about its fate – it has been developing lopsidedly for the last decade. There is literature, there is a reader, but one important link is missing – criticism. We have many literary critics and critics who study the books of dead writers, examining their work to the last comma. Still, no one wants to study living writers – this makes the literary process deadlocked and stalled. The living are too keen on the dead – making a career out of them is quicker. And we, the living writers, must do without criticism and wait for death. And maybe then our books will be studied.

Thus, if the living authors complain about the lack of interest in their writing from the living critics – because these critics deal exclusively with the dead authors – the deadlock may be broken either by inverting the situation, with the author dying, or by reversing it, with a world in which dead critics become interested in the work of living authors. Interesting as it may be at first sight, this conception – which matches a theory formulated by Mariusz M. Leś, who states that 'Every piece of fictional writing brings to life a possible world, suggesting at the same time that it is not the only message generated by that world'²⁶ – initially seems to be directing narration in the sense described above: dead characters that the reader had become acquainted with in parts of the novel dealing with the nineteenth and early twentieth century, start to appear in the Writers' House. Yet, it turns out that the deceased believed to be literary critics, who take part in meetings with the author, are in fact not dead:

- А мы не покойники!
- А кто же вы?
- Мы бессмертные.
- Ну, допустим... Но писатели-то вам зачем?
- Мы прям среди писателей ищем бессмертных.²⁷
- And we are not dead men!

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 64.

²⁶ M.M. Leś, *Paradoks i precyzja. Studia o fantastyce naukowej*, Białystok, Temida 2, 2020, p. 102.

²⁷ С. Арно, *Мертвые...*, op. cit., p. 90.

- Then who are you?
- We're immortal.
- Well, let's assume you are... What do you need writers for?
- We are just looking for immortals among writers.

Arno, yet again, turns to the motif of eternal life, referring to the fact that a literary work becomes timeless in the memory of the succeeding generations, as in the Horatian topos expanded to encompass all literary genres. One of the 'immortals' suggests:

— Ваши книги, как и мы, будут бродить по земле, жить на книжных полках в квартирах людей. Писателя будут помнить до тех пор, пока читают его книги, пока волнуют читателя его герои и мысли. Созданные вами образы будут жить на этой земле, пока не сгорит или не истлеет от времени ваша последняя книга. Книга, которую не читают, – надгробная плита с именем автора: она может стоять на полке бесконечно долго, пока кто-нибудь от скуки не возьмет ее в руки... и оживут герои вашей книги, а вместе с ними оживете и вы, хотя кости ваши давно истлеют. И, значит, вы, писатели, как и мы, – бессмертны. И так же, как мы, будете шляться по земле после смерти.²⁸

— Your books, like us, will roam the earth, live on the bookshelves in people's flats. A writer will be remembered as long as his books are read, as long as his characters and thoughts excite the reader. The images you create will live on this earth until your last book is burnt or decomposes. A book that is not read is a tombstone with the name of its author written on it: it can stand on the shelf indefinitely until someone takes it in his hands out of boredom... and the characters of your book will come to life, and together with them, you will come to life, although your bones have long since decayed. So, you writers, like us, are immortal. And just like us, you'll wander about the earth after death.

In this context, Arno reflects also on his own literary work:

Но вот сейчас я вдруг понял, для чего пишу свои книги, что в книгах своих я стремлюсь не к известности земной, – я стремлюсь остаться на этой земле, когда меня уже не будет. Я стремлюсь к бессмертию.²⁹

But now I suddenly realise why I write my books; that in my books I am not striving for earthly fame – I am striving to remain on this earth when I am no more. I strive for immortality.

Close similarities to subjects dealt with in the narrative of *The Dead Themselves Know Why* can be found in Arno's another work, *History of the Literary Process from the Sheremetev Palace to the Sewing Workshops. Leningrad–Saint Petersburg*

²⁸ Ibidem, pp. 90–91.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 91.

[*История литературного процесса от дворца Шереметевых до швейных мастерских. Ленинград–Петербург*],³⁰ also published in 2020. It is a work of non-fiction, in which Arno, starting from the 1990s up until the present day, chronicles a number of events and describes phenomena occurring in the literary milieu of Leningrad, later St Petersburg. The book opens with a statement closely resembling Arno's views quoted above:

Писатель не умирает: он живет, пока читают его книги.³¹

The writer does not die: he lives on as long as his books are read.

In conclusion, in turn, he refers to an authentic story, on which he comments, in his characteristic way, as follows:

На презентации в Доме писателя у одного поэта спросили:

— Зачем вы пишете?

Признаюсь, я тоже всегда искал ответ на этот вопрос.

— Наверное, я неосознанно стремлюсь к бессмертию, – ответил он.

К бессмертию! А иначе к чему? Ведь занятие литературой – один из путей к бессмертию. Это шанс для писателя «остаться» на этой земле, как остались его предшественники: Анна Ахматова, Марина Цветаева, Даниил Хармс, Михаил Булгаков, братья Стругацкие...³²

At a presentation at the Writer's House, the poet was asked:

— Why do you write?

I confess that I have always been looking for an answer to this question, too.

— Perhaps I unconsciously strive for immortality – he replied.

To immortality! What else? After all, making literature is one of the ways to immortality. This is a chance for the writer to 'remain' on this earth, as his predecessors did: Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Daniil Kharms, Mikhail Bulgakov, the Strugatsky brothers...

He further adds that numerous fantastic writers and excellent poets can be found in the Writers' Union, but no one knows to whom of the contemporary writers a place in the history of literature will be secured, whose literary work will be selected for school reading lists, whose writings will be studied at the university and which author will be the most read by future generations. According to Arno, an author usually writes for his own generation and even if he rises to the pinnacle of fame during his lifetime, his death, or the demise of his readers, result in his work's fading into oblivion. This is the most frequent sequence of events, because it is extremely

³⁰ С. Арно, *История литературного процесса от дворца Шереметевых до швейных мастерских. Ленинград–Петербург*, Санкт-Петербург, Союз писателей Петербурга, 2020.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 4.

³² Ibidem, p. 153.

difficult for a writer's work to be close and comprehensible for a new generation of readers – literary immortality is reserved for very few. And, at the end, in a sentence concluding the book's Afterword, Arno sums up:

И на собрании Союза писателей, глядясь в знакомые лица сидящих в зале коллег, я пытаюсь угадать в них 'бессмертных' – тех, кто навсегда останется в литературе.³³

And at the meeting of the Writers' Union, with my eyes fixed on the well-known faces of colleagues sitting in the hall, I try to guess in them the 'immortals' – those who will remain in literature forever.

The following observations should be emphasised as a summing up with regard to Arno's views on the value and critical assessment of literature appearing in his work. Firstly, his texts are overwhelmingly autobiographical, full of self-referencing devices, which results in the obliterating of a division between fiction and non-fiction: the narration is in the first person; the main characters often the same name as the writer and are authors of actual novels; they are the author's doubles, his textual alter egos, identical with the writer's 'I'.

Secondly, it is highly probable that, according to Arno, what is the measure of true value in a literary work is its timelessness, and the measure of the author is his constant development. Schematism and repetitiveness are the least valuable attributes.

Thirdly, what we can see here is Arno's critical, at least, or perhaps even negative, attitude towards mass literary production, which on the one hand, makes the writer incapacitated, and on the other, reduces the reader to a consumer manipulated by external forces.

And last but not least, in the opinion of Arno, who takes into account the inertia of literary critics, to identify a truly valuable piece of contemporary writing may be a problematic, often debatable, and sometimes even an impossible task, similar to attempts at identifying a true genius. In this regard we can see here a resemblance to Stanisław Lem's *A Perfect Vacuum* [*Doskonała próżnia*], in which – in accordance with a typology of geniuses, set out by the main character of a fictional book *Odysseus of Ithaca* by Kuno Mlatje – 'the geniuses of the first order are never known – not by anyone, not in life, not after death'.³⁴

³³ Ibidem, p. 154.

³⁴ S. Lem, *A Perfect Vacuum*, trans. from the Polish by M. Kandel, Evanston [USA], Northwestern University Press, 1999, p. 104.

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