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Korney Chukovsky's Writing for Children in Soviet Russia

Anton Makarenko, a well known Russian pedagogue, once said that “хорошо рассказанная сказка – это уже начало культурного воспитания [ребенка]. Было бы весьма желательно, если бы на книжной полке каждой семьи был сборник сказок.” (qtd. in Petrovskiy, 210–211) (“A well-told fairy tale is already the beginning of child’s cultural education. It would be very desirable if every bookcase of every family had a collection of fairy tales.”) This was what the writers of children’s literature in post-revolutionary Russia were trying to achieve. During the early 1900s children’s literature was deteriorating due to the overuse of ideological propaganda, and lack of fresh ideas and imagination. After the October Revolution, in the 1920s, children’s literature was rejected by the ideology of the new communist government. Miron Petrovskiy wrote that “[Сказка] была ‘буржуазной’ и подобно тому, как Октябрьская революция покончила с буржуазным строем в [стране], так, по мнению педогогов, нужно покончить и со сказкой,” (Petrovskiy 206-207) (“[Fairy tales] were ‘bourgeois’ and, similarly to the way the October Revolution was done with the bourgeois system, according to the pedagogues, it was necessary to be done with fairy tales,”). Many fairy tales were banned and considered unimportant by Soviet educators, thus leaving the younger generation without the imaginary places that children need to believe in. Implementing the techniques of the Modernist and avant-garde movements, Korney Ivanovich Chukovsky began creating new, energetic and fantastic worlds, producing a legacy of children’s literature widely read even to this day.

Korney Ivanovich Chukovsky, born in 1882, began his literary career writing for numerous literary magazines, satirical and political journals, as well as publishing several books on Russia's most prominent individuals. His career as a children's writer began in 1911, when he published a book "Матерям о Детских Журналах" ("To Mothers regarding Children's Magazines"), in which he first expressed his discontent with the current quality of children's literature in Russia. The traditional educators demanded that all children's literature should hold some sort of social dogmas. The majority of children's literature, if it was to be passed by the censors, had to have "educational value," which was set by conservative adults. Children's needs and passions, however, were not part of the requirements. The author addressed this issue further in 1933 in his book "From Two to Five," which later became a favorite guidebook for parents of small children. (Chukovsky, "Collection of Essays," 164)

When his young son fell ill in 1917, Chukovsky started composing, verse after verse, a tale about an extraordinary crocodile that walked and talked just like a human being. This three-part story portrays the Crocodile as a horrible creature, a loving father of two, and later, an animal revolutionary leader. The tales tells of the adventure of the Crocodile in the city of Petrograd; he eats its inhabitants and is confronted only by a young boy, Vanya Vasilchikov, who causes him to flee to Africa. Upon hearing his tales of the Zoo, the vengeful animals from Africa rise up and travel to the city, where they once again meet Vanya and are offered the chance to stay. After receiving much criticism from Soviet educators, Chukovsky took a break from children's literature, only to come back in 1923 with new stories: "Тараканище" ("The Cockroach") and "Мойдодыр" ("Moidodyr").

“The Cockroach” opened with a humorous scene of animals arriving in the most peculiar ways, such as by an electrically driven tram and a magic broom. But, right away, even the fiercest and largest of the animals were frightened away by a small but menacing cockroach, who was eventually eaten by a little sparrow when everything seemed hopeless. After “The Cockroach” came “Moidodyr”, a story about a child who doesn’t want to wash himself, and thus scares away all his clothes, food and possessions. A sink-like creature Moidodyr appears and chases the dirty boy down the street and into the familiar Crocodile, who scares him and convinces him to wash up.

These highly imaginative stories gave little children amazing and lively action in make-believe cities that were much like their own. The combination of familiar elements of the city with the fantastic elements of talking animals was intriguing to children’s imaginations. The swift tempo and constant change in the plot lines characteristic of all Chukovsky’s works were crucial when trying to enliven an exhausted topic. In addition, the stories possessed a fast rhythm created by the well-rhymed, snappy, short lines and short stanzas that were characteristic of modernist and avant-garde literature. For example, in the very first stanza of The Crocodile, in just six fast lines, a child could get a pretty good image of the creature, with just enough left to the imagination.

“Жил да был
Крокодил.
Он по улицам ходил,
Папиросы курил,
По-турецки говорил, -
Крокодил, Крокодил
Крокодилович!”

“There lived
A Crocodile.
He walked on the streets,
Smoked cigars,
Spoke Turkish, -
Crocodile, Crocodile,
Crocodilovich!”

The “Crocodile” and Chukovsky’s other tales were written in a way that made it easier for young readers to understand them, and even more exciting to follow. This was the first time someone actually wrote for children at their level, and not at the level of learned educators. In addition, the tales gave children a new kind of moral. Unlike the fables, which used similar animal characters, Chukovsky’s stories did not convey the moral bluntly, but produced it obliquely, through the plot line. In Chukovsky’s “Crocodile”, such lessons ranged from small ones, such as disapproval of inappropriate behavior, to larger ones, such as forgiveness and peace. In “Moidodyr” the dirty child not only learns hygiene and proper behavior, but also learns to admit fault (for not washing) and take responsibility (to wash himself). The simple and punctuated structure of the poems made these larger lessons easier to grasp and remember by the young audience and therefore proved to be more effective than the traditional scolding.

One of the major themes of Chukovsky’s poems was the defeat of a powerful and impudent villain by a small but incredibly brave hero. The image of the cockroach paralleled some of the descriptions of and opinions about the Tsar, as well as individuals in power before the October Revolution. With this image Chukovsky commented on the government of pre-revolutionary Russia, where every whim of the Tsar was carried out, just because, like the animals told their leader

“Мы врага бы –
На рога бы,
Только шкура дорога,
И рога нынче тоже не
дешевы”

“We would attack the enemy –
With our horns,
But we value our hides,
And the horns now are not so
cheap either”

Carrying on with the revolutionary theme, Chukovsky once again shaped an image of a small, simple hero, who defeats the dictator without much power, just courage. Like the

simple peasants who rose up against the bourgeoisie, Vanya Vasilchikov defeats the mob of angry animals, and the sparrow is brave enough to confront and kill the cockroach. Chukovsky wrote, “Ребенку всегда необходима иллюзия, что он умнее, искуснее, сильнее, храбрее других” (qtd. in Petrovskiy, 227) (A child always needs to have the illusion that he is smarter, more skilled, stronger and braver than others”). Never directly acknowledging that these metaphors may have been allusions to historical events, Chukovsky strived to let every child know that they could make a difference if they showed the courage that was praised in these stories.

By introducing new literary techniques, Chukovsky kept with the spirit of the modernist era and revolutionized the way children’s literature was written at the time. The rhetoric of the avant-garde writers was indeed to reinterpret old literary styles in non-conforming, innovative ways. Chukovsky’s “Crocodile”, which began as an experiment, managed to do just that. Rhythmic, continuously changing and fragmented narratives and dialogues were prominent features of innovative modernist literature as well as the avant-garde movements. In addition, similar to some late avant-garde fiction, Chukovsky’s “Crocodile” switched between two narrators, and presented two opposing views. One of the voices is sympathetic with the people of Petrograd, but the other is sympathetic with the suffering of the animals. Even though the two voices were divided by the chapters in the tale, they were still a reminder of the experimental nature of the book, as well as the era. Furthermore, as avant-garde art and literature focused on “art for art’s sake”, focusing on aesthetic experience rather than socio-political subtexts, Chukovsky wrote children’s books for the sake of giving children new and innovative literature and not for

their social or political education as demanded by the Soviet government. (Petrovskiy, 211)

Needless to say, Korney Ivanovich's tales were not accepted well by conservative critics and teachers. For example, talking about "Тараканище" in his journal, Chukovsky wrote that in all the bookstores, "кому ни покажешь, говор[или]: дрянь-книжка!" (Chukovsky, "Diary," 225) ("regardless whom I showed the book, everyone said: what trash!") His works were criticized for their unusual verse; the fantastic nature of the simple and ingenious plots; and the lack of a political, proletarian message. Although many of Chukovsky's tales had underlying Soviet ideologies (as discussed earlier), the books were missing the straightforward messages that were required by the government. Teachers looked at children's literature "как на исполнительницу мелких поручений в духе определенных пунктов школьной программы," (Petrovskiy, 203) ("as responsible for carrying out petty tasks of the school program") which most certainly did not include the simply entertaining, and at times ridiculous, children's stories of Chukovsky. The committees of children's pedagogues asked whether or not a proletarian child should need fairy tales and imaginary worlds. They wanted to raise responsible, hard working members of society, not dreamers. Grigoriy Tumim, a critic and teacher, wrote in an angry critique that "наука и болтовня несовместимы. Материальных благ никто (кроме автора) от этого крокодила не получит." (Chukovsky, "Collection of Essays," 168) ("science and chatter are incompatible. No one (besides the author) will benefit from this crocodile.") In a society concerned with quality social education, the emotional education of children was forgotten. Opposing that popular belief, Chukovsky argued that

taking away the imaginary and fantastic from children injured their emotional lives and their future interpersonal relationships.

Like most literature, film and art during the avant-garde era, Chukovsky's children's literature sought to create something new. The main theme of the era, evident throughout Chukovsky's career, was innovation and a shocking, radical divergence from what had become traditional. His stories, unusual, imaginary and quirky, were a challenge to the boring and over-politicized literature of the Soviet era. Fighting bans, negative comments and criticism, Chukovsky's poems gave rise to children's literature that people know and love to this day. The images and plots teach and encourage children to experience a range of emotions: from sadness for the oppressed animals, to joy when the tyrant is removed and peace restored. "Цель сказочника," wrote Chukovsky, "Заключается в том, чтобы какою угодно ценою воспитать в ребенке человечность – эту дивную способность человека волноваться чужими несчастьями, радоваться радостям другого, переживать чужую судьбу, как свою," (Chukovsky, "Collection of Essays," 171) ("The goal of a fairy tale writer consists of the necessity, at whatever price, to teach a child humanity: this marvelous capability of a human being to worry about others' misfortunes, to celebrate the happiness of others, to identify with others' lives as their own.") and whether it was his sick son, or his daughter who didn't want to wash her face, little children were his inspiration.

Works Cited

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