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“THE STONE FLOWER”:

THE POWER OF BEAUTY BETWEEN TRUTH AND FANTASY

Fusco A.

The life of Russian writer Pavel Petrovich Bazhov (1879-1950) was marked by important historical events: the decline of the Russian Empire and the Great Revolution, which brought to the rise of the Soviet Union. Since his childhood he cultivated a great passion for old tales from the Ural Mountains where he grew up. Moreover, he was animated by a deep rebel spirit which guided him in the years of Socialist Revolution. He became the “voice” of his land shared between legends and real social conflicts. He suffered for being deprived of his freedom but found, through the strength of his poetical narrative creativity, a sense of life which goes beyond any possible restriction.

Keywords: tale, fairy-tale, freedom, oppression, reality, fancy, dream, truth, conscious, unconscious, faith, deception.

«КАМЕННЫЙ ЦВЕТОК»:

СИЛА КРАСОТЫ В ПРАВДЕ И ФАНТАЗИИ

Фуско А.

Жизнь русского писателя Павла Петровича Бажова (1879-1950) ознаменована важными историческими событиями: падением Российской империи и великой революцией, которая привела к расцвету Советского Союза. С детства он испытывал огромную любовь к старым сказкам Уральских гор. Кроме того его увлекал дух сопротивления, развитый в годы революции. Он стал «голосом» своей Родины, разрываясь между легендами и реальными социальными конфликтами. Он страдал, лишившись свободы, но нашел смысл жизни в силе слова и творчества, которое преодолевало любые запреты.

Ключевые слова: сказ, сказка, свобода, репрессии, реальность, вымысел, мечта, правда, сознание, бессознательное, вера, иллюзия.

Introduction

Pavel Petrovich Bazhov was born in 1979 and died in 1950. His life was marked by important historical events: the Russian Empire (1721-1917) and the Great Revolution which brought to the rise of the Soviet Union (1922-1991).

Since his childhood he cultivated a great passion for old tales from the Ural Mountains where he grew up. Moreover, he was animated by a deep rebel spirit which guided him in the years of Socialist Revolution.

He became the “voice” of his land shared between legends and real social conflicts. He suffered for being deprived of his freedom but found, through the strength of his poetical narrative creativity, a sense of life which goes beyond any possible *restriction*.

A long time ago in a village in the Urals there lived a famous craftsman named Prokopych. An orphan, named Danila, was sent to him to learn gem carving. Prokopych found out that Danila was amazingly gifted and loved the boy as if he were his own son.

One day Danila had to work on a vase ordered by the bailiff following the drawing he wanted.

Danila began the hard work but was not satisfied with the idea of the master’s project. He wanted to create *his own* “goblet” with a pattern of thorn apple and “bring forth all the power of beauty in the stone” [1, p. 59]. His desperate search for “beauty in the stone” [1, p. 64] brought him many times on the way of the mysterious Serpentine Hill. Finally he entered into the Mistress of the Copper Mountain’s reign and saw the wonderful Stone Flower he had been searching for a long time.

However, in the same marvelous cave the warning of the ancient legend revealed its truth: “If a man sees it, life loses all its sweetness” [1, p. 62].

So, Danila chose to go back to the outer world he had left with all people he loved.

A life spent between reality and legend

Pavel Petrovich Bazhov was born in a village in the Sysert mining District, home of many folk tales. The Gumeshevskiy mine, the *famous Copper Mountain*

where the mythical “Mistress of the Copper Mountain” reigned, was not a fantastic place but one of the most famous copper mountains of the Urals. Pavel, whose father and grandfather were only serfs in a hierarchical czarist system had a hard childhood as it happened in most factory towns on that Ural region.

He enjoyed hearing passionate legends from storytellers who might be his own family or old men at the plant. However, he not only grew up hearing about legendary fancy characters, but he also knew the real factory conditions of his geographical area.

The result of all his experiences and observations of local people, was the publication of his Ural tales in 1924 (the Ural during the 1880s-1890s), *true* tales of the Ural Factory Folklore where the author describes the history of the working people in the Urals, a region famous for its natural resources, various mineral and precious stones.

Danila Nedokormysh, an orphan aged twelve, blue eyes and curly hair, is the real prototype of poor children living in unbearable conditions in “those hard times” [1, p.49]. In a big city of the Ural region, Yekaterinburg, there is a street named after Danilo (1858-1938), an orphan who was so short and thin that the citizens gave him a nickname “Lyogonkiy” meaning “lightweight”. He also had another nickname “Nedokormysh” meaning “underfed” or “famished”.

As we read in Bazhov’s tale, Danila and the herdsman were punished for “their fault” in “the whipping post” [1, p. 49]. Danila is a brave boy and faces human brutality of his times with such a great courage “Danilushko didn’t make a sound. A second blow, and a third-and not a cry from the lad. Then the flogger got savage and started laying on as hard as he could” [1, p. 49].

Bazhov underlines such pitiful silent sufferance against human violence repeating once again “He was flogged till he fainted, but never a cry out of it” [1, p. 49].

Danila was a poor orphan but a great dreamer. He took shelter from reality in his own world made of beautiful little things without realizing what he was doing. He was completely absorbed by the joyful beauty of little things “I don’t know myself,

Grandad...Just naught special. I was watching, like...there was a bug crawling on a leaf. It was not quite blue and not quite grey, and there was just a mite of yellow under the wings; and the leaf was long wide one...the edge was jugged, curling a bit, like a fringe, and darker, but in the middle it was real bright green, as it had been painted. And there was the bug crawling about it” [1, p. 48]. The author with his great creativity paints the scene of pure natural beauty through the innocence of the lad’s eyes.

Little Danila will be named “sharp eyes” by his old craft teacher, who was surprised by his carving art genius. [1, p. 53]. Danila was not at all a “fool” [1, p. 48], he could play the horn very well and the forest resounded of his sweet melodies “it would be like the forest rustling and the brook babbling and birds singing all at once, real nice it sounded” [1, p. 48].

The forest was the legendary place where he was told by Granny Vikhorikha, the “Flower of stone grows in the malachite mountains...it has great power on the Snake Festival.” [1, p. 50].

The forest is the heart of “Living Folk Traditions” as Cherry Gilchrist entitled her book on “Russian Magic” [3]. The mythical creatures such as the Great Snake or the Mistress of the Copper Mountains are part of the ancient folk Russian heritage transmitted for centuries and centuries.

Granny Vikhorikha, however, as it usually happens in the world of magic stories, warns little Danila that “the flower of stone ...has great power on the Snake Festival. But unhappy the man that sees it” [1, p. 50]. Danila will have to find out his own answer to the question: “Why’s he unhappy, Granny?” [1, p. 50].

“The Stone Flower”: the search for the real beauty

Danila, the quick and skillful craftsman, was in search of the Power of beauty. He went desperately to the Serpent Hill where he found a piece of malachite patterned like a bush and turned the stone into a “real thorn apple bush” with “veins all real as life” [1, p. 63]. He created his own goblet, “his cup was just like the thorn apple” [1, p. 63] but “he was not pleased” [1, p. 64]. He was tormented by his quest for *perfection*, his goblet was only a stone and he “could not grasp the power of

beauty in his stone” [1, p. 64]. His flower was dead and the beauty was lost” [1, p. 63-64].

Danila goes to the Serpent Hill once again: that way is like a bridge between Past and Present. Grandad, “ancient and shaky” [1, p. 61] is the voice of Past Legends which resounds in the Present and opens the door to a young man in search of the mysterious Stone Flower: “and the voice by the mine, it had told him to go to the Serpent Hill” [1, p. 64].

The mythical Mistress of the Copper Mountain appears in front of him: there were no more obstacles between fancy and truth, Danila could enter into the secret reign, a “garden” [1, p. 65], where “the flower exists” [1, p. 62] and “that flower holds the heart of all beauty” [1, p. 62].

Can a dream come true?

Danila makes his choice: he leaves the real world with all valuable things, to enter into a mysterious world focused on “other things” [1, p. 65]. “The earth there was like ordinary clay with bushes velvety black. Great green bells of malachite swung from the bushes, and in each was a star of golden antimony. Glowing fiery bees hung from the flowers and the stars tinkled though they were singing” [1, p. 65-66].

The author reaches his height of poetical beauty creating a Paradise where man enjoys a heavenly harmony out of ordinary world. “Stone to make these”, said Danilushko, “is not to be found” [1, p. 66].

Unfortunately, his utmost feeling of pleasure in finding what he had been searching hard, changes into great sorrow and the living beauty of stone flower turns into “dead stone” again [1, p. 79].

Danila’s conscience is shared between two worlds represented by two women: the Mistress who represents beauty and sexuality, lure and richness, and Katya who represents “wisdom” and “faith” [1, p. 80]. Danila renounces at the eternal beauty in front of him “it was all so beautiful, you could have looked an age and never wearied of looking” [1, p. 80]. He chooses living beauty that is “living people” [1, p. 80]

personified by Katya. She, like Beatrice in Dante's masterpiece "La Divina Commedia", will let Danila find the light in the melancholy darkness.

Hume wrote in 1757: "Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty...every individual ought to acquiesce his own sentiment..." [2].

"The Stone Flower": escape from possible frustration

In 1937 or 1938 (the dates are unclear) at the height of Purges, Bazhov and his wife lived a period of self-confinement (about a year or more) in their house. Their only link with the world was Bazhov's sister-in-law. In that period the author wrote "The Stone Flower".

Terror and isolation were substituted by motifs and images of old tales. He lived the traumatic experience of the fear of being arrested any minute and maybe took shelter in his old legendary world.

Pavel and Danila share the common experience to live apart from the real world. Pavel makes of his own house the magic garden, the heart of the Mistress's realm. He reaches the height of his creativity as story-teller escaping from the torment of self-imposed seclusion.

Both Danila and Pavel are in search of the "flower of beauty". They both live a fantastic dream which comes true. Katya is the key to find the truth, but she is not a *magic helper* as the queen of the copper kingdom in Afanasyev magic tale "the three kingdoms". Katya belongs to the real world with its most valuable things that are "wisdom" and "faith" [1, p. 80].

Katya bears a resemblance to Valentina, the loyal lifelong companion of Pavel Bazhov. When the successful writer was celebrating his 70th birthday, he said: "We always look back in annoyance at the stone, on which we stumbled on the way, but we hardly ever remember with gratitude those people who have paved for us the wide and comfortable path through the forest or through the swamp. For me, the path in life has been paved by my wife Valentina, who deals with all worldly cares and burdens that complicate our life. Thanks to her, I have lived on the trodden path and could work in peace..." [4].

Danila the Mountain craftsman and Katya lived happily in their cottage. They were “well off” [1, p. 82].

Nonetheless, shadows of a mysterious Past sometimes wrapped Danila’s thoughts: “Only sometimes Danilo would get sort of thoughtful. Katya knew what he was thinking about, of course, but she said naught” [1, p. 82].

There are no off-limits between past, present and future, no borders between conscious and unconscious, dream and reality: maybe Art is the only way to let a free spirit to survive his hard times.

After his traumatic experiences in 1937 Bazhov continued writing tales and stopped writing non-fiction until his death.

As for the future generations, both children and adults can enjoy the reading of magic tales (skazka) or find the key-deep messages contained in tales (skaz). They both can learn a lot about real life from a tale.

“The Stone Flower”: Reality or Illusion?

“The Stone Flower” was one of the first color films produced in the Soviet Union. The movie was shot in 1946 and in 83 minutes the director Aleksandr Ptushko represented a piece of Ural mountains history at the end of the 19th century based on Bazhov’s tale.

Ptushko talks through an old man’s voice, a storyteller, narrating a legend from the Ural to children. He strongly warns that his story is *true* and not a fairy-tale.

The director reflects the image of reality through a mirror using all his creative power. The spectators can follow a game of reality and dream in the magic atmosphere of a fairy-tale.

Ptushko is interested in dealing with social problems such as the gap between rich and poor, serfs and landlords. You can enter into the barin’s house with all its luxuries. You can see the barin and his wife taking a cup of tea while an old wrecked serf kneels in front of them with great reverence. The scene of Danila being flogged is really a pitiful picture of children’s exploitation in *those hard times* characterized by oppression and punishment.

Condemnation of human injustice is accompanied by scenes of a natural paradise: wild tender animals and beautiful flowers are part of a picturesque landscape. The forest resounds with Danila's sweet notes creating a musical magic harmony. Moreover, very interesting is Ptushko's attention to traditions, costumes and songs on the promise wedding day ceremony. The spectator is surely wrapped in a joyful atmosphere of sounds and colors far away from human brutality.

Ptushko puts in evidence the contrast between reality and dream, the *stone* and the *flower*, but he goes beyond the border of "skaz" and let the spectator enter into the wonderful sphere of the magic.

The Mistress of the Copper Mountain is presented as a marvelous maid, a bright figure, brilliant in her changing colors, *brilliant* like the little diamonds on the stones of the secret cave. Moreover, the spectators can live a tale where the *truth* is revealed through a mirror and then vanishes. The scene reminds "Snow White", the famous fairy-tale by the Grimm brothers.

Ptushko used all his art creativity to make "a dream come true" in a magic atmosphere of shadows and lights, love and sorrow overwhelmed by the wisdom of our ancestors.

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