

The image of the Flying Dutchman in the literature of Romanticism

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Abstract:

The paper touches upon the peculiarities of the so called “marine theme” in Romantic art as a whole, and its central image – the Flying Dutchman, in particular. The etymology of this image, as well as its numerous literary interpretations make up the subject of the research. Three key literary works of Romanticism, the ballad by S.T. Coleridge, the libretto by R. Wagner, and the novel by H. Melville, are in the spotlight of the given paper. The roots of the Flying Dutchman can be traced in the texts by Apollonius of Rhodes and Homer – their legendary books “Argonautica” and “Odyssey” respectively, as well as in the Norse mythology, in Edda – a notorious Naglfar, the ship made of deadmen’s nails. At the Age of Discovery the story of a mysterious ship came to its final form. Being first mentioned in various European folk tales, with the course of time the plot became highly popular in late XVIII – XIX centuries. In Romantic literature the legend of the Flying Dutchman transformed into the allegory of a man punished by Heaven for being too proud to resign himself to God’s will – a symbol of purgatory for sinners begging for mercy and forgiveness to rest in peace.

Keywords: Flying Dutchman, Romanticism, Coleridge, Wagner, Melville.

1. Introduction

In the literature of Romanticism “marine theme” was developing in two directions: a tragic image of a cursed ship – the Flying Dutchman (primary) and the ship and the sea as the allegory of protagonist’s inner world (secondary). The latter direction is masterfully characterized by a famous Russian philologist, Vladimir Toporov: talking about the poetic complex of the sea and its psychophysiological basis in Romantic literature, he notices that romanticists “describe not the sea proper..., but something different, for which the sea serves only as a form (a “sea” code of the “non-sea” message), a sort of a deep metaphor” (Toporov, 1995, p. 578).

In Romantic arts the title work demonstrating the mythopoetic image of ship functioning as such a “deep metaphor” belongs to a French artist Théodore Géricault – “The Raft of the Medusa” created in 1819 in memory of tragic events of July 2, 1816. In Romantic literature of the second half of XIX cent. a similar idea is introduced in Victor Hugo’s passionate ode to the sea – a novel “Toilers of the Sea”, in which the metaphor “man-ship” receives its best embodiment. To some extent, the “trend” is continued by Jules Verne in his adventure novel “Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea”.

2. The etymology of the image of the Flying Dutchman

However, turning to the key image of Romantic literature – the one of the Flying Dutchman, let's first of all highlight its folk etymology. In Germany, for instance, the ghost captain is named von Falkenberg, in Spain – Pepe de Mallorca, in Scotland there is a popular legend about a mysterious ship Carmilhan, while in Slavic folklore there exists a tale about Prince Svyatoslav's ghost boat. In accordance with an original Dutch myth, dating back to XVII century in the late autumn of 1641 some Dutch sailor van Straaten (or Hendrick van der Decken) on his way back to Amsterdam from East-India, with spices and two passengers on board, was sailing by the Cape of Good Hope when ran into a gale. Being mad, stubborn or proud, and possibly also drunk, van der Decken refused to hear the crew's prayers to turn back and wait out a storm in a quiet bay. Having killed several rebellious sailors, he threatened others telling them that no one would come ashore until the ship sailed round the Cape – even if it took eternity. The glove was taken up. Since that time meeting with a Dutch sailing ship either meant trouble at best or death at worst. The Anglo-Dutch military conflicts of that time largely promoted the legend across Europe, and in particular, across English speaking countries.

3. Artistic interpretations of the legend

Two books quite different both in idea and artistic value became a prelude to the chain of numerous literary interpretations of the Dutch folk legend. The first is "Voyage to Botany Bay" (1795) by one of London's most notorious pickpockets George Barrington, while the second is the poem in four parts "Scenes of Infancy" (1803) by a Scottish orientalist John Leyden. Since that time the tale of a ghost ship became extremely popular. The list of literary works touching this plot upon includes the poem "The Flying Dutchman" (1804) by Thomas Moore, a short story "Vanderdecken's Message Home; or, the Tenacity of Natural Affection" (1821) by John Howison, a short story "The Storm Ship" (1822) by Geoffrey Crayon (Washington Irving), "The Tale of the Ghost Ship" (1825) by Wilhelm Hauff, the poem "The Ghost Ship" (1832) by Christian von Zedlitz, a satirical novella by Heinrich Heine "From the Memoirs of Herr von Schnabelewopski" (1833), and, finally, an adventure novel "The Phantom Ship" (1839) by Captain Frederick Marryat. In 1842 the opera in two acts and three tableaux "The Phantom Ship" by Pierre-Louis Dietsch to a French libretto by Paul Foucher and Bénédicte-Henry Révoil (strongly influenced by previous literary adaptations) was premiered by the Paris Opera. In 1871 Arthur Rimbaud composed "The Drunken Boat" in which its readers were introduced to one of the most striking images of a rebellious ship. The most intriguing transformation of the folk legend was created by Stéphane Mallarmé – "A throw of the dice will never abolish chance" (1897). Meanwhile in painting the image of a cursed captain was successfully referred to twice – in canvases by Albert Ryder (1887) and Howard Pyle (1900).

Obviously, every new literary adaptation provided the original text with new details, supplementing its plot, broadening the limits of its symbolic meaning, and adding more philosophy to the narration, as a whole. In this respect a lot was done by three key Romantic works: "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by S.T. Coleridge, "The Flying Dutchman" by R. Wagner, and "Moby Dick; or the Whale" by H. Melville.

4. The image of the Flying Dutchman in Coleridge's ballad

In 1797 the English reading public was offered the first literary adaptation of the Dutch folk legend in which it turned out to be a story with much more profound message than that traditionally associated with an old sea tale. One of the most prominent representatives of the so called "Lake school" Samuel Taylor Coleridge published "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in which a popular story was transformed into the allegory of the human's life. As it follows from the poet's journal of that time, while working on his ballad Coleridge was mainly busy with creating the "epic story of the origin of evil in Milton's manner. He was reflecting on the conflict of belief and sense, God and Nature, mechanic and transcendental world view, about the mysteries of life and pangs of conscience" (Gorbunov, 2004, p. 17).

The story of the Mariner in which he tells about his fatal voyage to the Equator comes to the foreground. The crew firstly judging the murderer of an albatross soon justifies him thus sharing his guilt for the sacred bird's spilled blood. As a punishment, the ship stops its move: "Day after day, day after day/We stuck, nor breath nor motion//As idle as a painted ship/Upon a painted ocean//"(Coleridge, 1912, p. 190); "The very deep did rot: O Christ!//That ever this should be!//Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs/Upon the slimy sea/" (Coleridge, 1912, p. 191). Not willing to admit its fault, the crew blames the Mariner: "Ah! well a-day! what evil looks/Had I from old and young!//Instead of the cross, the Albatross/About my neck was hung/" (Coleridge, 1912, p. 191). The vessel that soon appears on the horizon turns out to be a ghost boat on which Life and Death are playing human souls in dice. The Mariner stays alive while all others turn into half-decayed corpses: "Four times fifty living men/(And I heard nor sigh nor groan)/With heavy thump, a lifeless lump/They dropped down one by one//"(Coleridge, 1912, p. 196). The ship continues its move though without wind and the steersman, and while it is sailing the mariner is revealing the beauty of the surrounding world blessing God's creation: "The self-same moment I could pray//And from my neck so free/The Albatross fell off, and sank/Like lead into the sea//"(Coleridge, 1912, p. 198). Since this moment every night the deadmen take on life to fall on their duties. At dawn they start praying and then sink into a sleep to restart their labour the next night. On completing the time period, when the Mariner sees the native seashore, the crew receives mercy: "Each corse lay flat, lifeless and flat/And, by the holy rood! //A man all light, a seraph-man/On every corse there stood//"(Coleridge, 1912, p. 205).

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" full of "dualism, the unsolvable play on contrasts – chaos and harmony, natural and supernatural, water and air, the Sun and the Moon, unexpected blessing, the loss of God and Grace of God" (Gorbunov, 2004, p. 17), showed to its readers a new, Romantic, odyssey to secret depths of human soul. The ballad of the Lake poet greatly influenced subsequent interpretations of the Dutch folk legend. Firstly, the manner in which the captain used to be portrayed changed radically – from a heartless drunkard he turns into a man with deep emotional stress, a complex personality with tragic fate. Secondly, more attention is now paid to the atmosphere prevailing on board, expectations and passions of the cursed crew. Thirdly, the motives of repentance, and hope for mercy and salvation have become much stronger.

5. The image of the Flying Dutchman in Wagner's opera

Next significant literary adaptation of the legend was introduced in the libretto by Richard Wagner to his new opera “The Flying Dutchman”. The German composer made his first acquaintance with the Dutch tale in 1834 in “The Memories of Herr von Schnabelewopski” by Heine. Later on, during years spent in Riga, Wagner heard a lot about the cursed ship from local sailors. However, the idea to embody a popular plot in the opera was formed in Wagner’s mind only during his voyage to London from Prussian Pillau. A small merchant vessel, the Thetis, in which the composer was travelling together with his wife, was in constant danger of sinking amidst the ocean; sailors were desperately fighting with the storm while it was raging again and again making passengers feel their complete isolation from the dear land. Later on Wagner was recollecting: “The passage through the rocky Norwegian skerries made a tremendous impression on my imagination; the legend of the Flying Dutchman, which I heard repeated by the sailors, acquired for me a distinctive coloring such as only the experience of such an adventure at sea could provide” (Grey, 2000, p. 178-179).

“The Flying Dutchman” became Wagner’s “first reformatory opera” (Zalesskaya, 2011, p. 74), and at the same time the first example of the composer’s use of a universal mythological plot. As he remarked himself, “The figure of the Flying Dutchman is a mythic-poetic creation of the folk: a primeval trait of human nature finds the most gripping and powerful expression in this figure. In its most general significance this trait can be identified as the longing for peace in the wake of life’s storms” (Grey, 2000, p. 181); “It was the first folk-poem that forced its way into my heart, and called on me as man and artist to point its meaning and mould it in a work of art” (Henderson, 2013, p. 237). To fulfill the task Wagner refused to follow contemporary literary interpretations not willing to compose a libretto based on any existing story (as he used to do before) and wrote a new text in which revealed his own vision of the wandering captain’s tragic fate and expectations. “From here begins my career as poet, and my farewell to the mere manufacture of opera-texts” (Wagner, 1994, p. 314), – claimed the playwright.

“The Flying Dutchman” in Richard Wagner’s stage is a story about the man’s everlasting life journey, his search for freedom, peace and rest from daily stresses. The opera’s protagonist is shown as a mythological image, a traveler similar to Odysseus not destined to reach his dear land no matter which shore he harbours. As Sarah Lenton remarks, it was the Dutchman’s situation that fascinated Wagner most of all – “a loner, cut off from love and ordinary life, alienated and suffering” (National Opera House, 2015).

6. The image of the Flying Dutchman in Melville’s novel

In 1851 one of the most prominent novels of Romantic literature “Moby Dick; or the Whale” by Henri Melville saw the light. On its pages the image of the infernal ship received its best personification. The book by American literary critics of mid. XIX cent. called “strange”, presents a grandiose composition reluctant to any formal genre definition. According to one apt remark, “Moby Dick” is a “supermarine” (Kovalyov, 1972, p. 192) novel. In Melville’s epic the early Renaissance metaphor “world-ship” brilliantly manifests itself: “Yes, the world’s a ship on its passage out” (Melville, 1922, p. 48), –

exclaims Ismaele. With the development of narration this metaphor is transformed into a reverse one – “ship-world”: the Pequod with its crew consisting of representatives of various races and nationalities functions as the image that can be symbolically interpreted as the United States of America or the humanity as a whole sailing to nowhere in pursuit of some illusive destination.

However, the key idea of this novel is the revelation of the personality of a rebellious captain overwhelmed with the only passion that has already become the curse for him and his crew. “This grey-headed, ungodly old man, chasing with curses a Job’s whale round the world, at the head of a crew, too, chiefly made up of mongrel renegades, and castaways, and cannibals”(Melville, 1922, p. 233) is the principal image of Melville’s narration. A fatal *idée fixe* of Ahab seeking for “audacious, immitigable, and supernatural revenge”(Melville, 1922, p. 233) pervades the novel’s atmosphere. The Pequod conducted by a madman (“I’m demoniac, I am madness maddened!”(Melville, 1922, p. 210) – says the captain himself), with the crew imprisoned on board, the ship headed by a “Terrible old man!”; “Gnawed within and scorched without, with the infixed, unrelenting fangs of some incurable idea”(Melville, 1922, p. 232), is dashing across boundless watery wastes – surmounting immense distances it disregards storms as if protected by some witcheries which will not be destroyed until the captain’s soul finds peace having finally achieved its only goal. The unraveling of the plot does not leave any doubts to readers – this is a new Flying Dutchman.

Melville’s version of the legend compared to Coleridge’s ballad and Wagner’s opera turns out to be more dramatic. Being deprived of any hope for a sinfull captain salvation, it becomes an example of a more profound and polysemic allegory. What did the American romanticist plan to say having drowned his main character without even giving him a little chance to find peace after death? Is it the demonstration of the man’s impossibility to conquer his own nature? Or, probably, a finale like this is an allegory of invincible power? The works of such a scale allow us to make as many assumptions as we wish successfully finding the proof of each of them in the text. Doubtless is that the image of a rebellious captain with curse on his face and hellfire in his eyes has become so influential in the arts of Western-European countries that in the majority of subsequent (if not all) artistic interpretations of the Dutch legend (especially relating to the so called “mass culture”) the image of the captain cursed by God inevitably looks alike the most infernal of all Flying Dutchmen – Melville’s Ahab.

7. Conclusion

Nowadays the mythopoetic image of the Flying Dutchman remains relevant being intensely reproduced in various genres of contemporary arts. It is especially popular in “mass culture” that eagerly reproduces the story of a ghost ship with its cursed captain and rebellious crew. Judging by various modern interpretations of the Dutch legend, it is its infernal theme that comes to the foreground (as it was characteristic for early variations); though from time to time the narration with more social-philosophical basis sees the light. All in all, the Romantic image of the Flying Dutchman, as we know it nowadays, can be officially regarded as one of the three components all together constituting the image field of the Ship – along with the Noah’s Ark and the Ship of Fools.

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