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What is “RUSSIANNES”?

“There is an enormous round of events in nature, simple but mysterious. It’s simple for the whole world but mysterious for every one in particular. Examples are everywhere... But nobody knows about herself or himself, they don’t trace where they started and where they will end. Everyone enters into a mysterious round and goes through what millions have been through” (Prishvin 1990: 24)

These words belong to a Russian writer Michael M. Prishvin (1873-1954) who entered Russian literature as a writer of nature. He lived and worked in turbulent periods of the revolution (1917), the Civil war and the construction of the soviet country and later World war 11 with all their twists and turnings. He was one of the writers who always felt a man being part and parcel of nature and whose best-loved thing was to discover in nature the most beautiful sides of a human character. He believed ‘nature is a mirror of a man’s soul and only a man imparts image and meaning to animals, birds, the grass and the clouds’. Nature creates and forms a human being. Nature is a temple - “The May dawn is for everybody... And these nightingales sing for the whole world. It is not without reason this choir in the garden reminds me of the church.” (Prishvin 1990: 17)

His ideas and philosophy are communicated to a contemporary reader via his Diaries which he kept all his life (from 1905 to 1954) and which are not only a valuable source of the historic events he had witnessed and been part of but also a mirror of his rich inner world (“ I reveal the soul of the poet as I can, the way I managed to penetrate into it. I don’t use any imagination, I depict the real Russian daily life...”); also, they are a valuable literary document immediately conveying the author’s thoughts on literature, art, symbolism, as well as people and life.

Michael Prishvin’s notes on the Russian people remain accurate even now in the XXI century, and they will be adduced here to manifest some of the characteristics Russians are endowed with historically. The questions of cultural differences and identities have been in the focus of linguists, philologists, historians and in fact every one who lives and works in a global world and has to cooperate with people of different cultures, ethnicities and races. Since understanding each other remains the main and most complicated issue in the international environment, the study of the most typical cultural characteristics will, undoubtedly, facilitate

communication and enhance understanding. The processes of globalization, however, making us more and more homogeneous, cause antagonistic processes of preserving and cherishing our cultural identity, the best qualities inculcated in the people in a long course of their historical development.

One of the Russian characteristics pointed out by Michael Prishvin is “exterior” love for foreigners and foreign cultures, which underlies a deep love for Russia. - “Are there any other people in the world that can get so amazed and delighted and love - yes, love life of a different, foreign people staying absolutely quiet about their own or even berating it? Only now, my friends, I quite understand why it is so – admiring a foreign country, Russians express their mortal love for their own country. Praising a different system, they conjure up the unlimited possibilities for their own genuine culture. How could it be explained otherwise? Should they happen to move from their initial admirations to living in a foreign country they suffer from solitude and the lack of belongings, and words necessary to express to a foreigner the unlimited love for their home country – they become foreigners in their exteriors while inside they remain Russians burning from love for their homeland”. (p. 141) Russians’ love for their Motherland is hard to explain, still, Prishvin found his own words to express what sits deep inside the people – “Love for nature, like for Motherland, is the same everywhere: you will be drawn to a hungry desert if you were born there... And there’s another love with different underpinnings: the love of passing and fleeting people... Two loves. You can’t forget the taste of mutton in the steppe; together with it you swallow fresh air like in the sea. I thought about the sky I worship and the desert with the stars where there are no people but only wild horses running across the oases. Suddenly I realize everything... It’s not school knowledge about the times when the nomads once surrounded the Slavs and Rus’ was under the Tatar-Mongol yoke for four hundred years, and all these words borrowed from them... No... All this information is lost on the way. I take a new look at everything. It’s not that... What I do understand is the following... I recognize familiar features of my friends in those faces... I recognize the mysterious half of the Russian soul, which is not in our power to comprehend... Yes, this is my Motherland too... Lord, how boundless is her space... Is there only one soul there?” (49)

Russians’ responsiveness and readiness to share and discuss intimate, secret thoughts with others is probably another cultural peculiarity which can be referred to what is called “Russianness”, the trait allowing people to unburden their hearts and feel closer to each other. - “Walk across Russia and the Russian people will respond to you with their soul, but if you walk with a suffering soul only – they will respond to all your hidden questions, which have been in the focus of the Humanity since the beginning of consciousness. But if you go for an answer to

an earthly matter – there will be revealed an enormous picture of the evil reigning in Russia ... “ (Ibid. p. 75)

Michael Prishvin loved the country and the people - “I have known all the muzhiks and village women since childhood and they seem to be like all people of the Russian state: bad and good, lazy, talentless and very intelligent. Never have I separated myself from them, never have I set the muzhiks apart from other layers of society, they have always been close to me, that’s why I am talking about them.” (p.90) “ ...there is everything in the people – archeology and history, there is everything from the conception...People is the land... (p.52) The writer often refers to people because “The soul of a peasant is the soul of a child, it needs bread and fun, and, interestingly, they are the both – they produce them by themselves. I have always loved this childishness in them...” (p.109)

However, the writer always saw the difference between the people living in the capital(s) and in remote parts of Russia, between a city and a country. They are two different worlds – “All the best of a Russian is preserved in remote places, aside from civilization, but it gets spoiled once it comes into contact with civilization. Besides, it is an extremely talented people judging by the results they achieve in revealing their genius” (p.122)

Prishvin believed that culture is a world deposit of all peoples’ past which is an inseparable part of the future, that’s why writers should be close to people - “...we need to overhear their moaning and collect their blood and tears and new thoughts, grown up on their sufferings, it’s necessary to understand the past in a new light... (p.102)

Spirituality is another feature Russians are proud of, though, it’s also ambiguous. Being spiritual people don’t know what to do with it and how and where to channel their spirituality. - “Homeland has become spiritual all through, we know that nobody can take it away from us and share it with us, but we are not aware how this spirituality will be realized”. (p.86) “Misfortune of our existence is in the fact that we live aside from our spirit and that we are afraid of its slightest movements”. Prishvin, like most Russians, believed that “as long as we have Leo Tolsoy, Pushkin and Dostoevsky, Russia will not perish”.(p.87)

How true are the writer’s words about the role of the middle classes in the country – “All misfortunes in Russia ...come from the lack of average people. An average person is the one who is first of all satisfied with his life, and if the two ends don’t meet for anyone at all, he is ready to subdue to God, boss or law”. (p.41) And it also concerns the “agricultural” talents of the Russians. When you look around and see boundless spaces of uncultivated land you can’t but agree with Michael Prishvin’s words - “I have never considered our people agricultural, this is one of the greatest prejudices the Slavophiles have...there is not any less agricultural people in the world than the Russian people...They never had any time nor place to learn farming on their

plots of land”. (p.90) Or, for instance, another feature characteristic, probably, of the country of vast lands indicated by M. Voloshin (1877-1932), a poet who lived in France for ten years and could better than anyone keep a glance at Russia from outside, - “...The Slavs cannot use water and appreciate it... It’s a young land... They cannot appreciate... Only in spring can one hear the sound of water... “ (p.3)

Fighters by nature, Russians inherited this quality from their great-grandfathers- “Fisticuffs are still alive in home places. One “wall” goes against another “wall”, the whole villages participate in it. Little boys start... A sturdy boy like “kagan” (the leader of ancient Turkish tribes) will knock down the whole “wall”. Finally, the old men fight... With fervor! Impossible to endure it! It’s not out of malice. It’s sport. Then they will carry a man to the Red Cross.” (p.18)

The extremeness of the Russian spirit has become a cultural idiosyncrasy hindering international communication. Learning a different culture is a requirement of our time, it is always invigorating and enlightening, as it gives one a feeling of commonness and humanness and opens a way to a higher life in a modest and unavoidable daily reality.

In order to learn yourself better read literature of the past and the present and you will always know where you started and where you will go. You will always relate to what a Russian writer Michael Prishvin wrote in his Diaries: “Motherland! Russia, dear, dear to me! Only here, on the violet shores of the salt lake did I realize that I love you, that you are beautiful... I love you when after a thunder on a May day drops falling from the leaves gather in bigger drops and fall again until the biggest ones pensively hang on the twigs for the whole day... Then it’s the end of a lightning... And big quiet drops reminisce on the twigs how strangely did the clouds draw together in the sky, and the fire, and the water and the earth were conversing with one another in a vague and threatening way... What about? What did they intend to say? – asked the calm pensive drops after a thunder.

And even lighter and deeper than the drops on the twigs are the stars in the sky of the desert. (51)

Literature:

Prishvin M.M *Diaries*, Moscow: “Pravda”, 1990 (in my translation)