

Summary

„Wash with fire and burn with water”. Esoteric motifs in the prose of Alexei Skaldin

At the end of the 20th century, the American poet and literary scholar of Russian origin Vadim Kreyd restored to his contemporaries the works of Alexei Skaldin (1889-1943), an almost forgotten Russian writer of the modernist era. Skaldin wrote poems, novels, short stories (including short texts qualified as children's literature by the researcher Tatiana Carkowa) and journalistic articles. Most of Skaldin's literary legacy has been lost or destroyed (at least eight novels and unpublished poetry). Probably almost all works saved and discovered to this day were compiled and published by Carkowa in 2004, alongside with her commentary. The book contains Skaldin's biography as well as several of his articles, short stories, a novel and volumes of poems. The content of Skaldin's preserved works suggests that he was one of the leading representatives of Russian symbolism, undoubtedly influenced by the esoteric tradition. Its significance is noticeable in the writer's works and is confirmed in the few memoirs and letters of Skaldin's acquaintances and friends, including Vyacheslav Ivanov, Georgy Ivanov, Alexander Arkhangelsky and Alexander Blok.

To this day, Skaldin remains one of the most mysterious writers of the Silver Age. The socio-political situation as well as numerous accusations and investigations conducted against him by the Soviets did not allow him to go down in history. Only now, almost 80 years after the writer's death, are his works being discovered. Such a large (albeit incomplete) spectrum of unexplored material leaves many research questions. This doctoral thesis is an attempt to answer some of them.

The dissertation aims to restore the memory of Skaldin and to inscribe him in the modernist literary and cultural circle, creation of which he undoubtedly contributed to. The proposed research method is based on an esoteric reading of the writer's work and biography. The present doctoral thesis consists of three main chapters. It begins with an introduction presenting the modernist writer's figure, based on the preserved memories of his friends and acquaintances.

The first chapter is a historical and theoretical sketch. In this section, I define the Western esoteric tradition as a set of specific and consistently developed ideas. The conceptual area referred to as esotericism is treated as a specific research tool, supplementing the interpretation of the analyzed texts. It is a kind of "being in the world" that is reflected in literary

activity. This kind of theoretical introduction seems necessary to look at Skaldin's work from a broader perspective. In the case of this modernist writer, esotericism is a way of experiencing and perceiving reality, a set of concepts transformed and put on paper. In his work, Skaldin mixes various esoteric traditions, creating his own individual style of artistic expression.

Skaldin's prose abundant with esoteric motifs appearing and accumulating at various levels is the focus of the present thesis. The subject of the considerations in the second and third chapters is therefore the analysis of Skaldin's prose texts in accordance with the esoteric tradition. In the works that make up a specific intellectual biography of the writer, the category of the life-creation (*zhiznetvorchestvo*) is reflected. Therefore, the adopted system of interpretation is based on two aspects: the chronological order of reading Skaldin's prose and following the initiation path of the characters. The specificity of the preserved texts requires dividing the practical part of the dissertation into two chapters, and each of them into three subchapters, recreating the path of the literary characters to spiritual transformation. The second chapter is devoted to the analysis of texts intended for an adult audience. The starting point is the novel *The Wanderings and Adventures of Nikodim the Elder* (*Странствия и приключения Никодима Старшего*) and *Рассказ о господине Просто* (*The Story of Mister Prosto*). These works seem to contain all the potential motifs and codes developed by Skaldin in subsequent texts. The works with fairy-tale motifs, intended for the younger reader, analyzed in the third chapter: *A Magician and a Scientist* (*Колдун и ученый*), *Of which there was much* (*Чего было много*), *Good hosts* (*Хорошие хозяева*) can be seen as their "extension". The short story *Clue* (*Улика*) goes beyond the fairy-tale theme. Being separate, independent and completed links, Skaldin's prose texts duplicate the same motifs and signs.

The content of the symbolist's works also raises the question about their form. The main building block of Skaldin's prose is esoteric symbolism. Everything begins and ends with its participation. The system of esoteric signs used by the modernist includes the category of language. Searching for a key to interpret the writer's literary works prompts reflection on the specific style of his writings. Delving into Skaldin's language, one can notice a certain dependence that binds his work together – various coding techniques and word games (including anagrams, puns, metagrams). Therefore, language becomes a valuable research tool – it is a guide for the reader, who deciphers individual meanings. By relying on wordplay as a certain principle of text interpretation, the recipient can decode additional meanings of the texts and explore what they stand for. This allows for a deeper understanding of the structure of the protagonists' paths.

In the analysis of Skaldin's language, the "bird language" of alchemy plays a special role. The writer's works are filled with terms, motifs, symbols and sometimes detailed descriptions that are only apparently clear to be unraveled. In fact, colors, shapes and objects, apart from their basic meaning, also hide a depth that can be deciphered when referring to esoteric philosophy. Many symbols and signs "wander" from one work to another, allowing for completion or a different interpretation of a given motif. Thus, the author uses language as a tool of initiation. The words create a world of literary heroes full of symbolic references. The alchemical language of Skaldin's works leads the reader through a labyrinth of terms, images and signs in which the meaning range is very wide and cannot be uttered directly. The heroes' paths are closely related to magical practices, symbols, codes or ciphers, which at the beginning of their path seem to be like hieroglyphs that are impossible to unravel. In the process of reaching self-awareness, individual practices and word games show the process of Skaldin creating a specific vision of the cosmos (order). Language is therefore a source of revelation for the protagonists.

The question of the initiation path corresponds with the elements recurring in his prose. Referring both to the spiritual and physical spheres of the characters created by Skaldin and analyzing the symbolism accompanying these spheres, one can conclude that the paths lead literary characters to self-awareness, self-improvement, and consequently to transformation of both themselves and the world around them. Using the language of alchemy, one can therefore say that the heroes of Skaldin's prose are looking for a philosopher's stone, which at the same time signifies the elixir of immortality, the Holy Grail, wisdom, enlightenment or initiation. Skaldin's characters seem to be striving for such a state of spiritual perfection. Thus, esoteric elements create stories, constituting a source for the motifs appearing in the writer's prose (e.g. paths, journeys, initiation, woman, mother, father and many others). At this point, appears a thought about the inextricable bond between the work and biography of the modernist. The characters in his prose seem to reflect and repeat the path of the author himself.

Everything indicates that Skaldin made use of the wide range of Russian esoteric traditions present in the literature, culture and philosophy of that time. He was inspired by the Hermetic philosophy, gnosis, alchemy, and the Rosicrucianism. By transforming the elements of these traditions, the modernist created his own individual style. The final part of the present work consists in an ordering of esoteric elements in Skaldin's prose works. This part of the dissertation summarizes the arguments supporting the thesis that his writings belong to esoteric prose.