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## From Bestial to Human: Neo-Mythological Reinterpretations of the Image of Delilah in Russian Literature at the Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> Centuries

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The article examines one of the eternal images of the world culture in a diachronic aspect, namely the interpretation and reinterpretation of the image of Delilah in Russian literature, primarily in poetry, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. The novelty of the article involves the introduction into the scientific context of a number of neo-mythological texts and the provided scholarly commentary, as well as the study of the poetics of the myth and neo-myth with an emphasis on the ethical aspect in the context of ideas of Dmitry Ovsyaniko-Kulikovskiy.

The relevance of the goal is connected with the opportunity to solve several interrelated scientific problems, since the functioning of mythological images and biblical stories, more precisely, the vector of conceptualization of their meanings, makes it possible not only to understand the specifics of the culture of perception, but also to evaluate the moral condition of society.

In the course of the study, the following trends in the reception of the plot were identified: a consistent shift in the interest of Russian authors from the character of Samson to Delilah, a change in the system of characters and methods of narration, a change in the modality of the image of Delilah, her transformation into a predominantly idyllic character. Particular attention in the article is paid to the political conceptualization of the image of Delilah, which is associated with the inclusion of the plot into the so-called barber text of Russian literature and culture.

The author of the article comes to the conclusion that the image of Delilah becomes conceptually dual in modern neo-mythological reinterpretations. The humanization of the image of Delilah, her evolution from bestial to human can be traced in love poetry. The refocusing of the authors' attention from Samson to Delilah in social poetry leads to an increase in her role in the eternal plot, turning her into a politically ideological killer. The conducted research may also be interesting in the aspect of gender studies, since the analyzed material gives grounds to consider the image of Delilah in modern Russian literature as one of the representations of the femme fatale.

**Key words:** Dmitry Ovsyaniko-Kulikovskiy, mythological image, biblical story, neomyth, "barber text", Delilah, Samson.

The appeal of the European culture to myth and, as a consequence, the establishment of neo-mythological consciousness as one of the main trends in the cultural mentality of the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> centuries explains and justifies the sustained scientific interest in the poetics of myth and neo-myth [6; 22]. Among the latest scientific projects, it is possible to highlight the series of scholarly conferences "Literature and Religion", held at the University of Latvia under the leadership of professor Ieva Kalniņa since 2005 [14; 15]. One of the conferences in the series (2017) was dedicated to three biblical couples – Samson and Delilah, Boaz and Ruth, Joseph and Potiphar's wife.

The functioning of the mythological images and plots, more precisely, the vector of conceptualization of their meanings, makes it possible not only to understand the specifics of the culture of perception, but also to evaluate the moral condition of society. Thus, trying to comprehend *everything strange, absurd, monstrous in myths, in religious beliefs, in cult rituals*, Dmitry Ovsyaniko-Kulikovskiy came to the idea of the progressive development of humanity, its movement *from immorality to morality, and in the general structure*

*of the psyche and life – from bestial to human* [16]. According to the scholar, *sacred prostitution*, a clear illustration of which is the biblical story of Samson and Delilah, can be attributed to the *bestial and monstrous* in ancient texts. Let's consider the plot, i.e. the conceptualization of artistic meanings in the context of Ovsyaniko-Kulikovskiy's idea.

The plot about Samson and Delilah is quite common in Russian literature and has existed in author's interpretations since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The reception of the plot in a diachronic aspect makes it possible to identify some trends.

First of all, it should be noted the gradual **shift of interest of the Russian authors from the character of Samson to Delilah**. Until a certain time, the attention was indeed focused on the character of Samson, as evidenced by the titles of the works: *Samson* by Lev May (1840 and 1861) and Nikolai Yazykov (1846); *Samson* by Semyon Frug (1888) and Ivan Bunin (1903-1904), as well as *Samson in Chains* by Leonid Andreev (1915, 1923) [10;11] and *Samson of Nazareth* by Vladimir (Zeev) Jabotinsky (1927) [21; 23]. In modern texts the title *Samson and Delilah* predominates; the variant *Delilah* is also possible, but not *Samson*. The only identified exception was Alexander Leontyev's

poem *Samson in Peterhof*. In the poems without a title, Delilah appears in the first or second verse.

The changes in the title complex indicate **the changes in the character system**. The first works devoted to the legend are relatively small poems, the genre form of which does not imply a detailed narrative about the entire life of the legendary hero. The authors focused mainly on one episode – on a fallen and enslaved Samson who later takes revenge on his offenders. The poets pay special attention to the reasons for the protagonist's fall, and, as a result, all the texts contain the image of Delilah. In the poems by Leo Mey, Nikolai Yazykov, Semyon Frug and Ivan Bunin the image of Delilah is revealed in varying degrees of completeness, but everywhere Delilah acts as a plot function – she provokes the protagonist and leads him to death, she personifies the motif of the fall of the protagonist. As for the motivation of Delilah, the authors are not interested in it.

Delilah becomes an actor, a character, only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It can also be applied to the texts entitled *Samson and Delilah*. It is significant that in these texts Samson is depicted as a sleeping or falling asleep character, i.e. it is inactive Samson [7; 9]. In modern texts, Delilah is given a voice. Mark Berkolaiko's short story *Delilah* reconstructs the biblical story from Delilah's point of view. Although she is forced to submit to the elders of Gaza, she sincerely falls in love with Samson. Delilah cleanses him in both literal and figurative senses, makes his skin and soul tender. In the short story *Like a Flower at Dawn* (the title uses a quote from Delilah's aria), Lyudmila Petrushevskaya tells the story of a holiday romance between two young students. The author does not say their real names, but refers to them as Samson and Delilah. The narrator takes the internal psychological point of view of **the female character**, who, unlike the male character, never realizes that the fleeting connection was in fact their only true love in life.

The most significant changes in the reception of Delilah are associated with a **change in the modality of her image**. Both in the original legend and in the texts of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Delilah is the embodiment of carnal sin, the visualization of temptation, the hypostasis of the biblical Serpent. To solve this problem, the authors introduce into their texts an external description of the beautiful Delilah, of her *insidious beauty* (Leo Mei) (it should be noted that there is no description of Delilah's appearance in the Old Testament text). Most often, authors point to sparkling black eyes, pink lips, blush on her cheeks, lush bosom and, of course, the captivating, *voluptuous sound* (Nikolai Yazykov) of her voice. All these features are quite traditional; they are well-established signs of female beauty. At the same time, the poets use traditional high poetic vocabulary – not eyes, but *очи*, not cheeks, but *ланины*. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the external image of Delilah had already been created in Russian literature, therefore, Ivan Bunin limits the presence of the unnamed Delilah in

the text with two metonymies: *не обольстит очей ни пурпур, ни виссон!* (Ivan Bunin). It is sufficient to hint at the image of a temptress and a harlot.

In neo-mythological texts of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Delilah is a satirical image, evily ridiculing modern unspiritual, greedy women who are ready for any deception for the sake of profit. In Hieronymus Yasinsky's story *Dalida*, the biblical legend and the main female character are projected onto the modern situation. Dalida in Yasinsky's text is a young girl, Sonya, who seduced her boyfriend and, thereby, forced him to abandon his service to society and to get married. The motif of false beauty that is created with the help of cosmetics appears in the works: *Современные Далилы. / Также лживы, хоть и милы / (если смыть с их лиц белила) / Самсонов, ослепив красотой, терзают, / Кошелек их истощают, / А порой в острогах губят, / Потому что роскошь любят* [20, p.32]; *В кухню женского обмана / Поспеши, Самсон с Далилой! / Здесь из зорь творят румяна, / Из снегов творят белила...* [4, p. 64].

In modern literature, the satirical interpretation of the character almost completely disappears; on the contrary, Delilah becomes predominantly an idyllic character, the embodiment of an unattainable ideal love, for the sake of which the lyrical subject is ready to do anything – to get tormented, betrayed and tortured. In these works, Samson is not present, his place is taken by a lyrical subject: *Не кричи об убийцах, идущих с рассветом, / Этот глиняный дом даже богу неведом, / только запах, любимая, нас предает – / запах твой сумасшедший прекрасный... / Далила, ай, Далила, ты все еще любишь меня?* [19]; *Ни за какие кадильца / не отдал бы нежных наград, / лишь бы эта ходила / в мой вертоград* [2].

For the sake of Delilah's love, the lyrical subject is ready to exchange fate with Samson: *Пока Далила пела, я мечтал – / Самсон дождался всех своих мечтаний. / Я букву «к» ненужную сорвал / И обменял на «м» его страданий*. The author exploits his real name, Saxon, and includes it in the language game and in the context of ancient history. The motive of substitution becomes the leitmotif: the betrayal and torture become grace, the synonyms of love, and Delilah's refusal to betray the protagonist, i.e. her refusal to love him, is regarded as a sin: *Очнись, очнись! Неужто и предать / Меня не хочешь ты? ... / Но ты поешь, и стража не идет, / И пытку все никак не начинают* [18]. In Maria Petrovykh's poem *The Wind Howls, the Wind Whistles* the love story appears in the form of a love triangle, where the lyrical female subject loses to Delilah, for whom a man in love is ready to die: *Я глазам не верю – ты ли, / Погруженный в сон, / Преклонившийся к Далиле / Гибнущий Самсон. / То ль к Далиле, то ль к могиле, / Только не ко мне* [17].

It should be noted that poets easily pair Delilah with Cleopatra, Helen of Troy, and the Persian princess of Stepan Razin, and, as a result, the image can be interpreted as one of the incarnations of the femme fatale archetype: *Обернется легендой когда-нибудь позже / эта ночь – через тысячелетье. / От*

пчелиного жала до нильського ила / только  
капелька яда да гибель светила, / да **рождение**  
**мира от пары собак.** / Как зовут тебя,  
**женщина? Помню: Далила.** / Я забыл, почему я  
назвал тебя так. / Ворота отворила и кровь  
отворила, / отравила, оплакала, похоронила; /  
слышишь – ждуть на пороге, клинками звеня. /  
**Кто – там? Греки? Волхвы ли с дарами? /**  
**Далила, ай, Далила, ты все еще любишь меня?**  
[19]. In Lydia Grigorieva's poem [7], Delilah, who  
secretly from Samson carries a baby hidden in a  
basket to the river, is paradoxically, achronically  
projected onto Moses' mother, Jochebed.

The most important change in the interpretation  
of the image of Delilah is due to the fact that in the  
modern works **the image of Delilah and her**  
**opposition to Samson acquires ideological**  
**meanings and political connotations.** On the one  
hand, it brings us back to the original biblical story.  
In the *Book of Judges*, the reason for Samson's fall  
was the love for a woman of a hostile tribe, for a  
Gentile. On the other hand, the politicization of the  
image of Delilah is associated with the inclusion of  
the plot in the so-called barber text of Russian  
literature and culture [3].

In the poem *Didn't you know, eh, Delilah?*  
Arkady Zastyrets refuses to justify the deeds of  
Delilah by the idea of the revenge on the tyrant, the  
enslaver-Gentile. The poet states that it is  
unacceptable to justify violence with any noble idea,  
for instance, the idea of the national liberation: *Да*  
*разве ты не знала, а, Далила? – / Что стоит*  
*дать на йоту слабины, / И сразу утвердится в*  
*праве сила, / Ремни горазда резать из спины? /*  
*Да разве твой народ сложен иначе? / ... такую*  
*же он прячет / Бесправедность на дне или в*  
*огне... / И может, может собственных*  
*тиранов / Любой язык, не мучаясь, рождать!*  
[24].

Delilah turns out to be able to personify  
different political forces at different historical  
periods of the Soviet Union and Russia. Thus, in  
Yuri Sidorin's long poem *The Good Vampire*,  
behind the bloody story of the confrontation  
between the vampire Samson and the vampire  
Delilah, the author hides the history of the October  
Revolution of 1917: *Далилу царицей своею /*  
*Признал вампиров народ слепощарый / И*  
*преклонился рабски перед нею, / Решил Самсону*  
*волосы повырвать / И казнь придумать ему,*  
*лиходею. / Какой лишь день бы для этого*  
*выбрать? / Октябрь. Двадцать пятое* [8, p.84].  
In the poem by Gennady Kanevsky *here come ivan*  
*and danila* there is a hint of the period of the civil  
war: *удалилы есть предписание / от её*  
*сородичей серых / от когорты левых эсеров / да*  
*от их крыла боевого – / чтоб глядеть на*  
*волосы в оба ... / и отрезать волос солдата* [9].  
In Marina Kudimova's poem *The Echelon* Dalila  
personifies the totalitarian Stalinist regime with its  
total lack of freedom and general leveling:  
*Сформировали по этапу / Национальный эшелон, /*  
*И – не без бреда, не без храпу – / С устатку*

*спит народ-Самсон.* / Что за дебая Далила, / Не  
ошибься на волосок, / **Одной машинкой всех**  
**обрела / На разный срок, на разный срок?** [12]. In  
the poem by Alexei Alexandrov, the first verse alludes  
to the political situation of 1968, the Prague Spring:  
*Эпоха с человеческим лицом. / Поскрипывая*  
*бритвою, Далила / В цирюльне над клиентом*  
*гоношит.* [1]. Alexander Leontyev's poem *Samson in*  
*Peterhof* discusses the modern Russia, where Delilah  
falls into the context of far-right political forces: ***Про***  
***руки мы знаем того брадобрея.*** / Пусть  
*стриженный, бритый – какая ж тут сила! – /*  
*Вовсю фонтанирует. Что им Далила. /*  
*Скинхеды повсюду млада* [13].

Special attention should be paid to the fact that in  
the poems of Kudimova, Aleksandrov and Leontyev,  
Dalila does not cut hair, but shaves hair or a beard  
(although in the original legend she did not cut  
Samson's hair herself). This transformation of the plot  
is explained by an allusion in Leontyev's poem – ***Про***  
***руки мы знаем того брадобрея;*** in Osip  
Mandelstam's poem *Ariost – В Европе холодно. В*  
*Италии темно. Власть отвратительна как руки*  
*брадобрея.*

Mandelstam personalized the state power in the  
image of a tyrant barber. It is possible for the poet to  
transfer the image of a barber from the sphere of  
everyday life, from the service sector, to the sphere of  
power and violence against the individual because of the  
preceding context of Russian literature and culture,  
where the so-called barber text has been developed:  
*What brings barbers closer to executioners is their*  
*toolkit: razors and scissors, which easily become*  
*murder weapons. The tradition in paganism of*  
*sacrificing hair makes it possible to compare the*  
*profession of a barber with the functions of a priest.*  
*Samson can be considered the first in the history of*  
*culture to experience the power of “barber-art”. The*  
*barber's manipulation acquires the meaning of murder*  
[3], so in all political interpretations of the image,  
Delilah becomes a barber-murderer.

Therefore, nowadays, without a doubt, for the  
Russian cultural consciousness the plot of Samson and  
Delilah is universal, eternal, it is endlessly repeated and  
reproduced, generating more and more new meanings.  
In Nikolai Rudkovsky's play *The God of Tickling*, the  
personal story of two young people Ilya and Eva is told  
in 14 scenes as a neo-mythological version of eternal  
plots and images – *Little Red Riding Hood, Sinbad the*  
*Sailor, Little Match Girl, Thumbelina, Massacre of the*  
*Innocents, Arabian Nights, Cinderella, Tom Thumb,*  
*Abraham and Sarah, The Good News, Pinocchio,*  
***Samson and Delilah, Garden of Gethsemane,***  
*Bluebeard.* In Sveta Litvak's conceptualist poem  
*Famous People*, along with Sylvester Stallone,  
Giovanni Boccaccio, Osama bin Laden and 120 other  
famous characters, there are also Samson and Delilah.  
As stated in the poem by Elena Elagina *И снова*  
*Самсон и Далила / навеки сплелись в темноте* [5].

In modern neo-mythological reinterpretations, the  
image of Delilah is conceptually dual. The love poetry  
traces the implementation of Dmitry Ovsyaniko-  
Kulikovsky's idea – the development, the movement of

the image of Delilah from bestial to human. However, the humanization of the image affects only the sphere of gender relations, where Delilah is now given both a voice and the right to the destiny. The re-emphasis on Delilah also occurs in social

poetry, but here it creates the opposite effect – it highlights Delilah's bestial essence, strengthening her role in the eternal plot to the level of a politically ideological murderer.

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**«Від звіриного до людського»: неоміфологічні реінтерпретації образу Даліли в російській літературі межі ХХ–ХХІ століть**

У статті в діахронічному аспекті розглядається один із вічних образів світової культури, а саме інтерпретація та реінтерпретація образу Далили в російській літературі, перш за все, в поезії, починаючи з 19 століття і до наших днів. Новаторство статті пов'язане із запровадженням у науковий контекст цілої низки неоміфологічних текстів та їх коментування, а також вивченням поетики міфу та неоміфу з акцентом на етичному аспекті у руслі ідей Дмитра Овсянко-Куликовського.

Актуальність поставленої мети пов'язана з можливістю вирішити кілька взаємопов'язаних наукових завдань, оскільки функціонування міфологічних образів та біблійних сюжетів, а саме вектор концептуалізації їх смислів, не тільки дає змогу зрозуміти специфіку культури сприйняття, але й дозволяє судити про моральний стан суспільства.

У ході проведеного дослідження були виявлені наступні тренди в рецепції сюжету: послідовне зміщення інтересу російських авторів з фігури Самсона до Даліли, зміна в системі персонажів та способу нарації, зміна модальності образу Даліли, її трансформація у переважно ідилічну героїню. Особливу увагу в статті приділено політичній концептуалізації образу Даліли, що пов'язано з включенням сюжету в так званий перукарський текст російської літератури та культури.

Автор статті дійшов висновку, що у сучасних неоміфологічних реінтерпретаціях образ Далили стає концептуально двоїтим. У любовній ліриці простежується гуманізація образу Далили, її еволюція від звіриного до людського. У соціальній поезії переакцентування уваги авторів із Самсона на Далілу призводить до посилення її ролі у вічному сюжеті, перетворенню на політично ідейну вбивцю. Проведене дослідження може бути також цікавим і в аспекті гендерних досліджень, оскільки залучений матеріал дає підставу розглядати образ Далили в сучасній російській літературі як одну з репрезентацій фатальної жінки.

**Ключові слова:** Д. Овсянко-Куликовський, міфологічний образ, біблійний сюжет, неоміф, «перукарський текст», Даліла, Самсон.

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