

THE FORMATION OF THE CONCEPT OF “NATIONAL LITERATURE” IN RUSSIA AND THE WORKS OF ALEKSANDR PYPIN

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PREFACE

The purpose of this study is to see how the concept of “Russian National Literature” was formed and understood in the works of the historian of Russian literature A. Pypin.

The French literary sociologist R. Escarpit has pointed out that, in the West, the study of the history of national literature began to take shape in the Romantic era and was established as a scientific discipline in the second half of the 19th century.¹ In Europe, so-called “national literature” – a concept characterized by an emphasis on the unity of nationality, ethnic cultural tradition and language in literature – was formed after the work of German critic J. Herder, who was considered to be the founder of the notion of “nationality,” and it later played a decisive role in the appearance of the well-known work of French philosopher H. Taine, *The History of English Literature*, published in 1863-64 and regarded as the first work on the history of national literature in our time. Thereafter, the scientific study of the history of literature was mainly developed on the basis of this concept.

The case of Russian national literature is also far from exceptional. In Russia, the concept of “Russian national literature” was probably born at the beginning of the 19th century under the influence of Russian Romanticism, and its historical study as science was established by scholars belonging to the so-called “Cultural-historical School,” the most important figure of which was the prominent Russian scholar Aleksandr N.

1 R. Escarpit, “Histoire de l’histoire de la littérature,” *Histoire des Littérature III* (Encyclopédie de la Pléiade) (Paris, 1978), pp. 1749-1826.

Pypin (1833-1904), who published his 4-volume major work, *History of Russian Literature*, in 1898-1899. To date, this book is regarded as one of the most important, standard works on the history of Russian literature² and, therefore, we can expect to find a typical example of the formation of the concept of “Russian national literature” in 19th century Russia in either this or other works by Pypin. By studying Pypin’s works we are able to examine the origins and history of the concept of “national literature” in Russia and to understand the ideological basis that makes it possible.

1. ROMANTIC IDEA OF NATION

It is very interesting that in the preface of his *History of Russian Literature* (1898) Pypin said: “The study of the history of literature widely growing today is the science of our time.”³ This means that study of the history of literature was regarded as a rather new field of human science just prior to the 20th century.

Of course, despite the fact that the study of literary history had begun slightly later in Russia than in West and that the well-known literary critic of early 19th century V. Belinskii once even dared to say that Russia didn’t have its own literature, a work titled “The History of Russian Literature” had appeared as early as the 1820s. In 1822, N. Grech, a representative of Russian Romanticism, published his *Brief Essay on the History of Russian Literature*, which is considered to be the first attempt to study the history of national literature in Russia. In 1835, in place of the traditional courses on rhetoric, courses on the histo-

2 For example, contemporary historian of Russian literature A. Grishnin said that the perspective of the historical progress given by A. Pypin and his school “is even now the most reliable point of view on the history of literature.” See, *Akademicheskie shkoly v russkom literaturovedenii* (Moskva, 1975), p. 124.

3 A. Pypin, *Istoriia russkoi literatury*, vol. 1, 4th ed. (St. Peterburg, 1911), p. V.

ry of Russian literature began to appear in many Russian universities.⁴

Pypin, however, was not alone in the opinion that the study of the history of national literature was still only in its infancy in Russia. For example, the late 19th-century historian of Russian literature A. Arkhangel'skii emphasized: "In our country, *the history of literature*, in the sense of a more or less historically related description of the past masterpieces of literature, not only didn't exist in the 18th century but also for the greater part of the 19th century."⁵ For Pypin and the scholars who followed him, almost all attempts at writing the history of Russian literature in the first half of the 19th century seemed to be far from successful because such attempts could still not be called "history" in the strictly scientific sense of the word. In his *History of Russian Literature*, Pypin wrote of Grech's book:

...The first consistent attempt was Grech's *Brief Essay on the History of Russian Literature* (1822), but, as it was said afterward, this was merely an enumeration of curriculum vitae and could hardly be regarded as a history. ...The defeat of the old understanding of literature was brought about in our country through the Romantic movement that was developed under the influence of Germany, France and England. This trend was very powerful because it contained in itself two very obscure but new moments that claimed the progress of literature as its own right. One of these moments was the claim for the maximum freedom of form and content in poetic creation. The second moment was that it established for the first time an interest in nationality (*narodnost'*). This new trend was also reflected in the posing of the problems of the history of literature. In the history of literature it is necessary to find out the progress of immanent elements.⁶

For Pypin, the attempt at an historical description of literature in the first half of the 19th century, such as Grech's, should

4 See, A. Arkhangel'skii, "Trudy akademika A.N. Pypina v oblasti istorii russkoi literatury," *ZhMNP* 351 (1904), p. 78, or M. Sukhomlinov, "O trudakh po istorii russkoi literatury," *ZhMNP* 156 (1871), p. 148.

5 Arkhangel'skii, "Trudy akademika A.N. Pypina...", p. 76.

6 Pypin, *Istoriia russkoi literatury*, p. 18.

not be regarded as a “history of literature” because there was still no point of view that would make it possible to understand the history of literature as an immanently consistent and organically unified process, and there was also no concern for “nation (*narod*),” which should be the subject of such a unique and unified process. The history of literature had to be the history of creation by the nation. In other words, the description of the history of literature required an original process of the history immanently created by the nation.

In Russia, such a history was found for the first time in the Romantic movement; Pypin and his followers had been well aware of the influence of Romanticism on the development of ethnology, mythology and the study of history in the 1830s and 1840s in Russia. In fact, S. Shevyrev’s *History of Russian Literature*, well known as the first attempt at a history of literature from the point of view of Russian Romanticism, had appeared in the 1840s. This work, first published in 1846, had been considered the first remarkable book on the history of Russian literature, and though it was written by one of the eminent representatives of Russian Romanticism and a famous ideologue of Slavophilism, its description of the history of literature was excessively nationalistic and arbitrary. For example, N. Tikhonravov, a literary historian who together with Pypin was known as an initiator of the new trend in the study of history of national literature in Russia, described the work as follows:

Shevyrev made an indisputable contribution: he drew our attention to the study of the history of language and literature. We should never forget that his work was the first attempt at giving the entire perspective of the historical development of Russian literature although his “history” of Russian medieval literature was not free from sentimental idealization of medieval life and its progress. Shevyrev on one side was captured by a certain idea. But this was the idea of the Russian nationality.⁷

Shevyrev was evaluated thus, not because he wrote the first book on the history of Russian medieval literature, which had

⁷ V. Komarnitskii, *Kratkoe kritiko-bibliograficheskoe obozrenie nekotorykh trudov po istorii russkoi literatury* (Varshava, 1911), p. 15.

for a long time not been the object of historical study, but because he could, for the first time, create a consistent perspective of Russian literature in which the works of literature that had until then existed separately without relation to each other were now placed by him in chronological order to demonstrate the process of the development of national spirit.

Pypin often criticized Shevyrev for his naïve and sentimental views on nationality.⁸ It is, however, obvious that Pypin's history of literature was also based on a similar romantic idea of national literature. He wrote: "The literature of one country is the creation of national spirit... The more the spirit of the people (*narod*) forms a part of its base, the more sublime it can be."⁹ For him, literature was not merely an object of philological or bibliographical description, rather it was the expression of the sublime element of national spirit. Therefore, "it is impossible to think about an absolute artist just as it is impossible to think about an absolute man existing outside ethnic and social relations. Literatures are always *national*; in other words they convey in themselves a mark of national and social characteristics and ideas."¹⁰ He further argued:

I especially think that my task is to define the phenomenon of literature in the continuity of historical development, in its immanent correlation and in its relation to the State, nation (*narod*), everyday social life... In the strictly scientific sense it is never possible to talk about the completion of study on the history of Russian literature.¹¹

His contemporaries and today's historians often criticize Pypin's understanding of literature as inseparable from society

8 Later, in his memoirs, Pypin noted: "I wasn't so content with Shevyrev's book that had just begun to be published. For, in fact, it is the didactic praise of old Russia in the style of Karamzin rather than history." See, A. Pypin, "Moi zametki, Leto 1900 – iun' 1904," *Vestnik Evropy* 1 (1905), p. 506. See also, A. Pypin, "O sravnitel'no-istoricheskom izuchenii russkoi literatury," *Vestnik Evropy* 5 (1875), p. 644.

9 Pypin, *Istoriia russkoi literatury*, vol. 4, 4th ed. (St. Peterburg, 1913), p. 265.

10 Ibid., p. 588.

11 Ibid., p. III.

or social thought, contending that he sometimes found in literature a mere reflection of these elements.¹² Although such criticism is to some degree justified, it ignores the most essential idea of Pypin's historical study of literature. For him, the history of literature was nothing but a kind of history of national social thought because he saw literature as national from the outset and it could be formed only in the historical process of the social development of the national spirit. Pypin said:

In the first place, the history of literature today has the task of giving an account of the fate of literary works in the sphere of artistic writings, and in the second place, it has the task of studying similarities between national or social thought and the expression of feelings in literature by regarding the works of literature as expressing the psychology of the nation and society, and, finally, it has the task of studying the phenomenon of literature in comparison with other literatures in their international correlation.¹³

Pypin's history of literature is far from a neutral, chronological description of the facts of literature. It is completely ruled by the idea of writing the history of realization of the Russian national spirit. Arkhangel'skii also recognized this:

After all, the internal and spiritual development of Russian society, and the "realization of nationality" within it – the development of this "realization" expressed in the entire progress and expansion of education, science, literature, criticism and social thought – is the basic point of view of Academician Pypin in his study of history and literature. In his scientific research, Academician Pypin particularly emphasized the concept that the literature of a nation and its general socio-political development are closely connected. Among the works of our well-known scholar, *History of Literature* is first of all a history of social development, a history of national progress in general.¹⁴

The study of the history of literature only appeared when the history of literature began to be understood as a national

12 See, *Akademicheskie shkoly v russkom literaturovedenii*, p. 137.

13 Pypin, *Istoriia russkoi literatury*, vol. 1, p. 33.

14 Arkhangel'skii, "Trudy akademika A.N. Pypina...", pp. 108-109.

literature that was considered to be the process of the development of national spirit.

Of course, it is obvious that the study of the history of Russian literature as national literature only became possible through means other than the naïve idea of nationality originating from Romanticism. As we have mentioned, Pypin and his successors often asserted that the history of literature is a science of the new age. We have to pay a great deal of attention to the fact that, for them, this newness doesn't mean merely the romantic idea of nationality. There also still existed some important moments without which the formation of the concept of the history of Russian literature as national literature was impossible. It is necessary to now examine those moments in Pypin's works.

2. SCIENCE AND NEUTRALIZATION OF NATION

In this relation, it is necessary to point out that Pypin always took a negative view of the nationalistic point of view claimed by Slavophilism or Populist ideology, though his own view of the nation or national spirit was, as we have already seen, at first sight also significantly nationalistic. For example, in his essay *On the Historical Formation of Russian Nationality (1884)*, after pointing out that "the mission of nation," an expression frequently used by conservative nationalists such as the Slavophiles, was simply borrowed from German Idealism of the 1820s, he argued:

Another dogmatic conclusion derived from the notion of nationality is that a nation has some qualities that seem to be unchangeable. In this sense, the term "national character" is used as if today's people were absolutely the same as our ancestors of the 16th and 17th centuries or even of the 13th or the 10th century.¹⁵

Pypin criticized such nationalism because he thought that there was no place in it for history. It is certain that the nationalism originating in Romanticism was the starting point for the

15 A. Pypin, "Ob istoricheskom sklade russkoi narodnosti. Istoriko-kriticheskie zametki," *Vestnik Evropy* 5: 9 (1884), p. 211.

concept of national literature and it encouraged a search for the history of a nation. Nevertheless, it did not recognize the historical development of a nation, contending that in such a kind of nationalism, the nation should by all means have consistent and unchangeable values or missions. On the contrary, Pypin assumed that it was only through the dynamism of the historical progress of a nation that national spirit could be developed:

There is no doubt that there is some inherent value in national activity. This is the basis of and indispensable condition for national history. However, this condition is not absolute and has very obvious limits. It means that once the historical activity and the process of progress have begun in a nation, this process never permits homogeneity thereafter. Homogeneity is the same as unchangeability and it is possible only where there is no historical progress.¹⁶

For Pypin, the notion of “Nation” or “people (*narod*)” did not mean a homogeneity continuing from the very beginning. By admitting such homogeneity, we would lose the very possibility of a history of a nation because history is the process of change.

If this is so, what makes it possible to think about the “national spirit” or “national awareness” asserted by Pypin in *History of Russian Literature* and other works? In his essay *Herder* (1890) he wrote:

In our country, as is known, obvious attempts at studying the nation date back to the second half of the previous century... This attempt was succeeded by the works of our ethnologists in the 1830s and 1840s, and finally, when our own study had been reinforced by the systematic theory of the West, especially German science, it became a steady field of our science and public interest... We are accustomed to considering the development of such kinds of study as a proof of the very fact of our national awareness. It is true. But we have to recognize that it could be made possible only by means of science.¹⁷

16 Ibid., p. 212.

17 A. Pypin, “Gerder,” *Vestnik Evropy* 2:3 (1890), p. 211.

He argued that “national awareness” owed its formation to science. He clarified this idea in his following statement:

...The recent spread of Russian literature in the West means the end of the old relation between Western and Russian literatures. In this end result we find the meaning of the first borrowing. It was for the development of an independent national creation. However, in the field of science the old attitudes still remain. In spite of many wonderful results in this field, without the necessary factors to support its development, such as the wide popularization of general education and freedom of scientific study, Russian science cannot be on a par with the West.¹⁸

Pypin thought that Russian “national creation” was only possible on the basis of “the wide popularization of general education” or “freedom of scientific study.” Moreover, he not only recognized that it first began as a “borrowing” of Western culture and science but even set its goal as to “be on a par with the West.” Of course, it is a well-known fact that Pypin lived and worked in the second half of the 19th century, the heyday of positivism, and he was a leading representative of Russian bourgeois liberalism which developed from Westernism. Therefore, it seems natural for him to praise positivist science and to see the West as a model for Russia to emulate; however, in this case it is important to know why and how his liberation was tied with the formation of his ideas about Russian national literature. Why were science and the West necessary for the formation of the History of Russian national literature?

As Pypin himself said, the history of national literature cannot exist on the basis of naïve and purely romantic nationalism because such nationalism insists that superiority and identity are given to nation a priori (for example by Providence). This implies that in this case all the events of national history of all times are to be regarded as proof of the existence of such a transcendental will. We should regard this as mythical time rather than as history.

18 Pypin, *Istoriia russkoi literatury*, vol. 1, p. 642.

If history can be defined as a series of unique events developed by cause-and-effect relations through the irreversible process of time, it is only the process of time that is given a priori, and historical phenomena, including that of nation, must be changing constantly and irreversibly. The development of new historical phenomena can only be understood in relation to this process of time. Therefore, from this point of view, national qualities are not unchangeable and are never given a priori. On the contrary, if one can guarantee the objectivity and neutrality of the process of time, the mythical ideology of nation formed in the Romantic period can be neutralized and objectified by means of the objective process of time, and can thus be recognized as an historical fact. Moreover, it is only positive science and positivistic human sciences born under the influence of Romanticism that allow for this neutralization and objectification based on the objective process of time. Pypin said:

Contemporary science has abandoned the previous transcendental system and started to seek an explanation of the development of mankind through an analytical method of study. This leads us to another, more precise and persuasive universality since its basis is assumed to be strictly fixed facts. The result of this method was the rapid growth of new sciences that opened the previously unknown perspective of historic and prehistoric past.¹⁹

Science refuses to evaluate the idea of nation from a transcendental point of view and tries to interpret the historical perspective solely by “analytical” means; that is, only through causal relationships existing in the irreversible process of events that occur in the stream of natural and neutral time. If the meaning of time was arbitrarily decided in advance from the outside, it would be impossible to analytically select separate objective facts of history. Therefore, in the study of history, time must have an absolute natural and neutral objectivity for all nations. This means that all nations without exception are equal in their existence in this neutral and objective time, and in this relation none

19 Pypin, “O sravnitel’no-istoricheskome izuchenii russkoi literatury,” p. 642.

of them is superior to any others. Differences between nations are caused by differences in the chronological combinations of the objective factors in its development. That is why Russian people can "borrow" Western culture, and that is why to "be on a par with the West" by means of "science" and "education" may be considered "national creation." Indeed, Pypin believed it possible to explain the origins of human civilization by observing today's barbarian. For him, both the barbarian and civilized races live in the same process of time and only their stages of development are different.

Thus for Pypin, the history of a nation could never be understood from the outside. "National spirit" is to be interpreted *immanently* by facts within the process of natural and neutral time. Consequently, the facts that occurred unconsciously within the nation itself and, at first sight seem to be trivial, are much more important than words written about the nation from the outside (for example, books of history). On the contribution of comparative linguistics, Pypin wrote as follows:

Comparative linguistics first discovered the process of history in languages. Through its observations it found out facts concerning the immanent life of various nations that are unknown and incomprehensible by the written history... The formation of languages is almost unconscious and resembles the natural-historical process; it shows the validity of the nations themselves without arbitrariness or intent. In language, nations have felt the sense of unity.²⁰

The nationalistic value given to literature from the transcendental point of view of Romanticism had thus become a process of the inner life of the nation itself by its passage through the prism of "science." We have to remember that this idea is already not merely conscious or intentional, but exists on a deeper, "unconsciousness level." The idea of nation, scientifically criticized and ideologically neutralized in this way, became more natural and immanently objective. The idea of nation was reorganized as the object of the science of national history, its basis

20 Ibid.

became steadier and more authoritative, and thus the “history of national literature” began to be regarded as one of the important disciplines of scientific history. The study of the history of national literature became a “science of our time” once passed through the criticism and neutralization of a positivistic idea of history. In order to be recognized as a new scientific discipline, the history of national literature had to neutralize its own naïve romantic idea of nation and transform it into the objective facts of the inner life of a nation.

3. POPULARIZATION OF NATIONAL LITERATURE

For Pypin, the history of national literature became possible only when the idea of nation had come to be immanent in the history of culture by passage through prism of the objective science. As we have already seen, he attached great importance to scientific positivism and exactitude. We must not forget, however, that it contains in itself some obvious inconsistencies. If the history of national literature is the “creation of national spirit,” if national literature and its society are closely tied with the general history of the political development of country, it must inevitably pay a great deal of attention to the masses of people that comprise the great majority of a nation. This means that studying only excellent, highbrow works of literature by a strictly academic and scientific method is not sufficient for it to be called “the history of national literature.”

Of course, Pypin was well aware of this. That is why he, with his colleague Tikhonravov, always insisted that the history of literature has to take writers not only of the first rank but also of the second or third rank into consideration. Indeed, it is not by chance that his career as a literary historian began with the study of that little known playwright of the 18th century, Lukin, and the collection and publication of medieval secular literature and some kinds of apocrypha widespread among the people. However, it was not only this breadth of materials that was required by the history of national literature. Arkhangel'skii well captured the characteristics of Pypin's works in the following comment:

In the field of Russian literary history in the last 10 years there are few scholars who have written works that are at first sight as rich and various, highly scientific and erudite but at the same time as easy to read as Pypin's.²¹

Pypin believed that the history of literature needed to be understood by the masses. For example, in a review of a book by another famous historian of literature, A. Veselovskii, he wrote:

...His [Veselovskii's] works remained the property of only a small number of people. It is regretful that he was never concerned to make his own works more accessible. To attain this, that is, to bring specialist study to generalizations easily understandable by most readers or to reduce it to the reinforcement of the basis of science in a society seems to be not so difficult.²²

Scientific works should be readable by all the people. In his memoirs, Pypin himself recognized that he decided to study the history of Russian literature because, when he was a student, there was no textbook on Russian literature that could give a general perspective to the whole of Russian literature.²³ Arkhangel'skii argued that Pypin's aim in his *History of Russian Literature* was "to introduce to the masses the general characteristics of the works and research mentioned here, to help the educated readers to become more familiar with them, and finally to remove these results from the cabinet of the scholar to the class of the 'educated masses of readers'," in short, to aim for a "science for all people" or "serious popularization."²⁴

In fact, the various books on the history of Russian literature published in that time with a large circulation were, on the one hand, books of scientific study, but, on the other hand, they were also read as guidebooks for the general readers. For example, Komarnitskii, who wrote an interesting guide to works on

21 Arkhangel'skii, "Trudy akademika A.N. Pypina...", p. 73.

22 A. Pypin, "Novye rozyskaniia v narodno-poeticheskoi starine," *Vestnik Evropy* 6:12 (1886), p. 791.

23 Pypin, "Moi zametki...", pp. 493-494.

24 Arkhangel'skii, "Trudy akademika A.N. Pypina...", p. 119.

the history of Russian literature, was well aware of this dual nature:

...As you know well, both in our country and abroad, interest in Russian literature is increasing more than ever before. Recently, various books of study, books on the history of Russian literature, various essays, criticism, textbooks and so on, have begun to appear. Editors of such books are extremely varied in their talent and their training as scholars, in their taste and tendencies in literature. Therefore, we can rather easily understand that it is impossible even for specialists to examine all works appearing in the book market.²⁵

From around the end of the 19th to the beginning of the 20th century, the demand for a guide to the history of Russian literature increased significantly. Historically, it was the time when Tolstoi, Dostoevskii and other Russian writers were discovered in the West, and the value of Russian literature had been recognized all over the world. Moreover, in Russia after the 1870s, giant publishing companies began to publish cheap volumes of classical works of literature in large numbers. Further, the rise of Russian nationalism prompted by the war with Turkey in the 1870s turned newspapers and journals into popular and nationalistic media. Thus, the popularization and nationalization of literature in late 19th century Russia prepared positive conditions for the development of the historical study of Russian national literature.

In this sense, there is another thing we should never forget: the fact that Pypin himself, having resigned from the university in 1861 for political reasons, lived outside academia and worked as an editor of journals almost to the end of his life. Almost all his major works that later won him his position as an academician, including his *History of Russian Literature*, were published in journals like *Contemporary (Sovremennik)* or *European Herald (Vestnik Evropy)*. Pypin's idea of the history of national literature was finally made possible by the appearance of popularized journalism and mass readership. In this sense, it can be said that it really intended to become "national" literature.

25 Komarnitskii, *Kratkoe kritiko-bibliograficheskoe obozrenie...*, p. 3.

CONCLUSION

We have examined of the cognitive perspective or socio-cultural conditions necessary for Pypin to formulate his idea of national literature. The results can be summarized in the following three points:

The first appearance of the idea of national literature in Russia can be observed in the search for a national history in Russian Romanticism at the beginning of 19th century.

However, in order for the history of Russian literature that we see today to be possible, this naïve romantic idea of nation that assumed, a priori, its constant and specific character needed to be criticized and neutralized from a strictly scientific point of view and to be reinterpreted as an immanent process of historical progress. The objective scientific point of view neutralized the idea of nation. Thus, nation ceased to be an ideology and became an immanent quality, as if it were naturally contained in the history of culture. Here, it first became possible to talk about the "spirit of a nation" in an objective description of the literary history.

Moreover, we have to keep it in mind that, though national literature became possible through such neutralization by a strictly objective and scientific point of view, it was also based on mass journalism and the popularization of literature. The study of national literature must be strictly scientific and at the same time must be the property of the entire public.

In short, the idea of Russian national literature was formed by the scientification of romantic nationalism and by the popularization of such a neutralized notion of nationality by the mass media. Therefore, national literature has a fundamental duality; on the one hand it is the object of observation and study, and, on the other hand, it is also an asset that the nation should be proud of.

Hence, it is not so surprising that S. Vengerov, a well-known scholar and a prominent representative of the second generation of Pypin's school, proudly declared in an unabashed nationalistic tone:

In the individual talents demonstrated at a higher level and, more importantly, in its basic stream, Russian literature finds itself much higher than contemporary Western literature.²⁶

Pypin's idea of the study of Russian literature as national literature appeared as discussed above, and his method and ideas were inherited by early Soviet scholars, such as Vengerov, Sakulin and Kogan, and, through them, these ideas are still reflected even in today's orthodox view on the history of Russian literature.

26 S.A. Vengerov, *Geroicheski kharakter russkoi literatury* (St. Peterburg), p. 21.