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CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S AND ELIZABETH GASKELL'S LITERARY WORKS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EARLY VICTORIAN SPIRITUAL SEARCH

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The thesis submitted by Mrs. E. Vasilieva focuses on the early Victorian period through the examination of the works published by two well-known writers; Elizabeth Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë. The religious aspects of these writers are enlightened by many references to the historical and spiritual context in which their works were elaborated. In the introduction, the spiritual background of this period is thoroughly examined. Mrs Vasilieva has selected the most relevant bibliographical references in English of critical works and also in the Russian tradition of thoughts about the English Nineteenth Century. She explains clearly the methodological basis of her research by the intersecting of biographical, historical, and comparative approaches of the authors.

The first chapter of the thesis is dedicated to the historical foundations of what Mrs Vasilieva calls « The Evangelical Revival in England ». As the influence of this thought concerns especially young unmarried women, some women preachers emerge at that period. The thesis deals also with the influence of many schools of religious thoughts; Calvinism, the doctrine of predestination had an increasing influence in the society. Congregationalists and Presbyterians, tried to accommodate those doctrines to the modern world. The influence of these trends is so strong in the Victorian society that it is possible to assert that most of Dicken's texts can be interpreted as parables. At the same time the rising of natural science and the scandal of Darwin's perspective challenge the principles of religion.

The second chapter deals with Charlotte Brontë's novels ; *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*. Mrs. Vasileva insists on the fact that when *Jane Eyre* was published, it was first described as a « pre-eminently anti-Christian composition ». The critics were in their majority hostile to the heroin's vision of world. Mrs Vasileva convincingly explains that they did take into account the fact that the storyteller was a liar. This narrative strategy is enlightened by E. Rigby who shows that the same story is told on two different levels. Of course, this complexity has been a source of misunderstanding. Another controversial work is *Villette* which has been described as an Anti-Catholic novel.

The chapter three is dedicated to Elizabeth Gaskell's work, depicted as an evolution from ethics to poetics. Mrs. Vasileva starts with three edifying stories. Elizabeth Gaskell is generally considered as an heiress of Jane Austen. The typology of her works (Christian short stories, sensation short stories and everyday short stories) is relevant. The author believes in the educational power of fiction which makes her novels sometimes too didactic. The analysis of Ruth as a « sermon novel » is quite convincing. Less convincing is the artistic program of this writer which seems inexistent.

The thesis quotes an impressive number of critics and writers and Mrs. Vasileva unmistakably read Elizabeth Gaskell's and Charlotte Brontë's works. Mrs. Vasileva shows also a real knowledge of the period, and a deep knowledge of the religious atmosphere and controversies in the Nineteenth Century. The bibliography is well organized, and the principle relevant works about the period and the writers are systematically quoted.

Nevertheless, I have serious doubts about the « comparative » method of the thesis. In fact, the analyses of the writer's novels are not really compared but juxtaposed. Even if some similarities are pointed out, they don't lead to a real comparison between the writers; their beliefs, (or lack of faith!) their poetics, or their conception of literature. On the other hand, the descriptions of the novels are serious, well informed, but does not lead to a self-reflexive description of the aims of this topic of research. The biography of the authors is not a relevant criterion for a real comparison of their novels.

Mrs. Vasileva refers to many critical traditions, but she does not choose between different critical points of view. This leads to an impression of « critical syncretism » which does not make a distinction between several approaches of literature. You cannot equate, for example, dialogism and H.R Jauss perspectives. Some remarks belong to a tradition of critical thought but are not identified as such. And the critics referred to in the introduction disappear in the analysis of the texts. For example, it would have been useful to remind the theories of reception in the chapter two (about the reception of Brontë's *Jane Eyre*).

In spite of these comments (which will be, I hope, useful if Mrs. Vasilieva wants to publish the issues of her reflection), this thesis demonstrates a very close link between the author's positions and the religious context. The analyses of the reactions provoked by the novels of the authors are very relevant. The thesis also shows a close reading of the authors and a relevant choice of references. Mrs. Vasilieva has intensively worked on a difficult subject. She translated her thesis in a perfect English, and that is the reason why I recommend accepting this thesis.

The thesis submitted by Elmira Viktorovna Vasilieva « Charlotte Brontë's and Elizabeth Gaskell's Literary Works in the Context of The Early Victorian Spiritual Search » corresponds to the requirements by the Decree from 01 2016.N.6821.1 « On the procedure of the award of the scientific degree at State University of Saint Petersburg » The candidate therefore deserves to be granted with the scientific degree of Doctor of Philology in speciality 10. 01.03.

