



Report of member of Thesis' Council on the thesis  
***Charlotte Brontë's and Elizabeth Gaskell's Literary Works  
in the Context of the Early Victorian Spiritual Search***

submitted for the degree of Doctor in Philology, specialty 10.01.03  
(кандидат филологических наук по специальности 10.01.03)

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The thesis submitted by Elmira V. Vasileva aims to examine a new approach to the works of two well-known Victorian authors, Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell, under religious and spiritual aspects. The contextualization of a small number of outstanding novels in religious discussions of the Victorian Age allows the examination of several thematic and structural elements in a new light. As Vasileva argues in her introduction, the spiritual background of both writers might appear as a rather obvious question, however, it had never been carried on a concrete and global analysis of Brontë's and Gaskell's works by Anglo-American or Russian researchers.

Vasileva starts her argumentation with an overview of the "Victorian Spiritual Search" (Chapter 1), explaining the importance of religious subjects by a global changing of England under the reign of Queen Alexandrina Victoria, when the emergence of modern industrial society would lead numerous persons to seek footing in spirituality. At the same time, however, the rising of natural science also questions traditional religious believes.

In Chapter 2, devoted to two novels of Charlotte Brontë, Vasileva skillfully suggests the reading of *Jane Eyre* (1847) in the confessional tradition: To consider the whole novel as a research of the protagonist for her own confession explains, in part, the problem of the unreliable narration. The second novel, *Villette* (1853), appears as a strong Anti-Catholic statement and an appeal to hold on to spiritual integrity, but also as a patriotic work.

The third Chapter deals with the work of Elizabeth Gaskell, starting with three edifying short stories that illustrate the "Christian ethics [the author is] actively promoting" (p. 311). On this basis, Vasileva then convincingly shows the title of the novel *Ruth* (1853)

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— might be a key to read this “social novel” rather as a “sermon novel,” as moralistic prose: “ruth” would be the compassion that is shown to the “fallen woman,” the protagonist, and also an example to follow. More widely, Vasileva finally suggests an eschatological reading of *Cranford* (1853), showing the moral victory of compassion in an old crisis-ridden English town.

The richness of details and bibliographical sources considered in this thesis is impressive and worthy of mention. It is obvious that the candidate has undertaken a substantial research of facts, that she is familiar with the history and society of the Victorian Age, with English literature in general, and that she has gained a deep and very detailed knowledge of the texts she is working on. It is also notable that Elmira Vasileva shows a profound knowledge of Christian sects, of religious texts and their structures, which enables her to construct her approach.

The methodological approach and the theoretical fundament of Vasileva’s argumentation remain more fragile. The “Introduction” promises too vaguely a combination of “biographical, historical, comparative and structural methods” (p. 224) and then gives an enumeration of well-known names of literary theory (such as Alexeyev, Bakhtin, Barthes or Jauss). But if these may have inspired some aspects, they are not cited in the argumentation. More, some concepts cited in the work seem to be taken over without profound reflection (“Bildungsroman”, p. 256 should be left to the German domain or would need further explanation). And finally, if the complexity of Charlotte Brontë’s narration is well described, the rather vague reference to “metafiction” (p. 278) would definitely have benefited from the use of a stronger narratological terminology, for example by G. Genette.

The choice of the works as well as the results of the analyses are convincing; the seven statements given in the introduction are confirmed by Vasileva’s argumentation. However, it seems regretful that (apart from few sentences in the “Conclusion”) no concluding chapter offers a real comparison between both works, so that the pertinence of the choice would appear more obviously than through biographical details. In her argumentation, Vasileva takes into count numerous critics from the epoch, but it would also have been fruitful to resume the process of reception, so that the dialogue between fiction and the readers / society could underline the significance of the facts shown in the novels. And finally, it would certainly strengthen the innovative character of this thesis if the “new theory” (p. 357) could be circumscribed and, therefore, appear as a model adaptable to other corpora.

As a result, the thesis of Mrs. Elmira Viktorovna Vasileva, “Charlotte Brontë’s and Elizabeth Gaskell’s Literary Works in the Context of the Early Victorian Spiritual Search” appears as a well-founded and well-informed work. Especially the knowledge on English literature and the familiarity with religious text tradition are to be underlined as profound. Although the theoretical basis could have

benefited from more strengthening and the results would have been more appealing if resumed in an analytical last chapter, the thesis appears to be a solid philological work. It can surely inspire further works on parallelism between spiritual and fictional works.

I therefore 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 September 01 2016 N 6821/1 „On the procedure of the award of the scientific degrees at State University of Saint Petersburg“. The candidate therefore deserves to be granted with the scientific degree of Doctor of Philology in specialty 10.01.03 (кандидат филологических наук по специальности 10.01.03).

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