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Article

The image of the city in the literary digests *Zemlya* (Moscow Publishing House, 1908–1917)



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Abstract. The article describes the image of the city in the literary texts comprising 20 issues of the literary digest *Zemlya* (Moscow Publishing House, 1908–1917). Various city images (buildings and surrounding nature, urban dwellers) are analyzed in the literary works (both prose and verse) by the authors of *Zemlya* (M. Artsybashev, A. Kuprin, F. Sologub, V. Vinnichenko, N. Krasheninnikov, E. Chirikov, etc.). The analysis is accompanied by the journal and newspaper reviews of popular literary critics of the beginning of the 20th century.

Keywords: *Zemlya*, image of the city, Artsybashev, Kuprin, Sologub, Vinnichenko, Krasheninnikov, Chirikov

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Образ города в литературных сборниках «Земля» (Московское книгоиздательство, 1908–1917)

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена образу города в художественных произведениях двадцати литературных сборников «Земля» (Московское книгоиздательство, 1908–1917). Анализируются различные образы, связанные с городом (здания, окружающие пейзажи, городские жители) в прозаических и поэтических текстах авторов «Земли» (М. Арцыбашев, А. Куприн, Ф. Сологуб, В. Винниченко, Н. Крашенинников, Е. Чириков и др.). Анализ дополняется журнальными и газетными рецензиями популярных литературных критиков начала XX века.

Ключевые слова: «Земля», образ города, Арцыбашев, Куприн, Сологуб, Винниченко, Крашенинников, Чириков

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Introduction

Moscow Publishing House was founded by a representative of a Paris paper factory G. A. Blumenberg and his son, an ex-cavalry officer G. G. Blumenberg. G. G. Blumenberg together with D. M. Rebrik, a procurist (authorized representative) of the Blumenberg Trading House, were engaged in the composition of 20 literary digests *Zemlya* issued from 1908 to 1917. Its main authors were M. Artsybashev, A. Kuprin, F. Sologub, V. Vinnichenko, E. Chirikov, N. Krasheninnikov. Soviet historiography looked upon the digest *Zemlya* as a purely commercial venture of “literary shopkeepers”. Moreover, in

literature studies since the Soviet period a stereotyped image of *Zemlya* as a propagating sexual promiscuity phenomenon of popular literature has been firmly established. However, journal and newspaper reviewers at the beginning of the 20th century (Z. Gippius, M. Gershenson, M. Kuzmin, E. Koltonovskaya, D. Filosofov, etc.) considered that the digest *Zemlya* managed to gather the most popular names of modern Russian literature together. *Zemlya* occupied a leading position in the literary marketplace for nine years. Its books are still of undeniable historical and literary interest and of high artistic value. They deserve greater attention of researchers.



It is quite easy to find an urban motif practically in every almanac of the Moscow publishing house. At the same time a city image in *Zemlya* does not hold a prominent position. It generally contributes to emphasizing a particular theme that prevails in a certain issue of *Zemlya*. The only exceptions are the first and the eighth books where urban motifs undoubtedly define a literary digest's context integrity. The image of a city as an integrating factor of an almanac will be shown in a further detailed analysis of Digest 1 and Digest 8 of *Zemlya*.

The image of a city in *Zemlya*: A study case of the first book (1908)

The image of a city was a dominating feature in the first issue of *Zemlya* (1908). A short story by L. Andreyev *The Curse of the Beast* opens the first book of the digest. And its very first phrase refers to the image of a city: "I am afraid of the city, I love the deserted sea and the forest" [1, p. 9]. The narrator spends his day wandering around a big seaport city. The city is associated with a crypt, a limbo, an entrance to an evil afterworld: "<...> and suddenly one feels: these are not houses, these are – enormous stone graves, and the whole of the living city is blighted by them" [1, p. 17]. The city turns people into identical hollow-hearted creatures. It deprives them of their own willpower and desires: "<...> I was beginning to petrify, to turn to stone, to be covered by some hard, impenetrable shell, akin to stone. It was as if I was already clothed in stone, hopelessly separated from the air and the earth and that I was to suffocate in my attire of stone. And it was as if it no longer mattered whether I would keep walking or whether I would fall down, I was hopelessly bound in stone, I was petrified and dead" [1, p. 22]. M. Morozov, a literary critic of the Silver age, characterized L. Andreyev's image of a city using an epithet "scary", explaining: "<...> in its stone and iron it [the city] concealed people's grief and human hearts were turned into stone, and blood, spilled onto the pavement, ceased to be blood" [2, p. 2]. Another newspaper reviewer wrote that L. Andreyev aimed "to demonstrate the domination of the city that ruins personalities making all people look alike" [3]. The image of a dying beast in a city zoo (according to different interpretations a seal, a walrus or a sea lion) who screams at the top of its voice is a key scene of L. Andreyev's short story: "It is a curse sent to the city, it is a heart-cry for help, painful because in pain is a soul corrupted by the city. It curses because it is still alive, yet not totally surrendered to the city, and curses especially hot-blooded as it is already unable to snap the diabolic spell" [4, p. 405].

Another short story of *Zemlya*'s first issue – *The Slip Knot* by A. Fyodorov – also describes a seaport city. Fyodorov's city is vicious and immoral: "<...> a noisy street with rattling horse-drawn trams and carriages, with lots of shops staring outside with their shameless bold eyes" [1, p. 100]. The image of

fog correlates to the image of a city. The fog poisons Fyodorov's city dwellers turning them into slick gits (snails or snakes): "Fog got under the dress and even under the skin to such an extent that you could feel its heaviness. The pavement seemed to be a sort of some sleeping slick git" [1, p. 102]; "Fog seems to dissolve in itself all the objects <...> People look like snails and even thoughts become soft, slippery, cold" [1, p. 103]. Particularly noteworthy is the image of a steamboat roaring in the sea. Its cry clearly correlates to the cursing scream of a dying sea animal from L. Andreyev's short story: "Sometimes therefrom comes the roaring of a steamboat, the cry of a monster growing faint from the grief and loneliness in blue waves of despair" [1, p. 101]. A famous literary critic of the beginning of the 20th century D. Filosofov drew the readers' attention to common features in the short stories of A. Fyodorov and L. Andreev: "Read L. Andreev's *The Curse of the Beast* and then A. Fyodorov's *The Slip Knot*. Strikingly similar again" [5, p. 38].

A short story by A. Serafimovich *The Daughter* reveals its own interpretation of a city. Here the image of a city unfolds before the readers as indifferent, foggy and corrupt (as in the works of L. Andreyev and A. Fyodorov). City dwellers resemble zombies being subordinated to the will of the almighty city: "Suddenly out of some blue shine come to the front ashy-gray faces with ominous spots of black shadows resembling the dead" [1, p. 138]. A. Serafimovich's anthropomorphic city "arching moves its endless alive body" [1, p. 138] and has its own "unceasing heavily unsteady voice" [1, p. 153] expressed as an extensive sound "Ga-a-a-a...". The city seduces the main character of *The Daughter*, a girl named Marusya. At first the city awakens in her anxiety and some vague desires: "The same streets, the same houses, the same relentless rumble and buzzing of the city. And life is just passing you by" [1, p. 153]. Then the tension grows and restless longing gradually turns into obsession: "The city covers everybody just the same, smoothly and cruelly: Ga-a-a-a... And at night she thrashes around in agony and despair" [1, p. 154]. One evening when two men catch Marusya and try to make her sit into their carriage she cries. And the cry of a lonely, scared and desperate girl resembles the curse of L. Andreyev's beast or the roaring of A. Fyodorov's steamboat: "high-pitched beastly shrieks cover incoherent night street noise" [1, p. 139].

In a short novel by A. Kuprin based on a Biblical story *Sulamith* the important theme is the confrontation between urban and natural environment. Here, as in previously described texts, the motif of a city seducing the main female character is also present. Sent to the city center to buy some bread and cheese young Sulamith falls into the trap of temptation and buys rose oil. After that her brothers send Sulamith to work in a vineyard where she meets her beloved King Solomon. The description of this vineyard as a symbol of eternal love echoes through the novel as a



leitmotif: “Their bedding is the greenery, a roofing – cedar, walls – cypress. And love is a banner over their tent” [1, p. 197]. It strikes the attention that feeling her destiny and trying to escape fate just before her death Sulamith asks Solomon to take her from the city to “their” vineyard.

I. Bunin’s sketch *The Shadow of the Bird* is a final work of art in a prosaic section of the first *Zemlya*. I. Bunin’s narrator comes to a seaport city – Constantinople (Istanbul) and, just like the narrator of L. Andreyev’s story, wanders around the city. Unlike *The Curse of the Beast*, however, *The Shadow of the Bird* glorifies love for life in the diversity of its earthly manifestations. The image of a city here is twofold. On the one hand, some parts of Istanbul, for example, Galata district, is called “Europe’s rubbish pit” [1, p. 247] and it is often compared to Sodom. On the other hand, the author’s attitude towards everyday life of people here is totally positive: “And maybe as there was a special beauty in the shamelessness of Sodom, there is a certain beauty in the shamelessness and dirt of Galata. But Galata will survive: all that rabble inhabiting Galata is busy working. They are extremely poor and thirsty for live” [1, p. 247]. Life is described in its full cosmopolitic swing as “flow towards each other colorful streams of people speaking different languages” [1, p. 248]. And the narrator confesses: “I am drunk with the sweet awareness of being a part of this new Sodom. I am so free as a person can be only in Galata” [1, p. 250].

In a poetic section of the first issue of *Zemlya* the image of a city can be traced as well. For example, in I. Bunin’s translation of *The Golden Legend* by Longfellow the Monk Felix is haunted by a vision of the land Elysian – the heavenly city he witnesses while listening to a snow-white bird’s singing. The Monk Felix wanders in the woods as he thinks just for half a day trying to find a way to that blessed city he saw in his vision. But the dream plays a trick on him and after returning to his convent the Monk Felix discovers that 100 years have been already passed. So, the image of a city in *The Golden Legend* is magnetically appealing and at the same time delusive.

In a poem *Sick with an unknown to us disease...* by E. Tarasov the image of a city, a dark crypt with coffin-like houses, is explicitly opposed to childishly naive countryside. The city is provided with magical power by its mystery alluring lights to attract simple-hearted country folks. The city lures them into its web, continuously swallowing up “people and bread” [1, p. 285].

The image of a city in the eighth book of *Zemlya* (1912)

As the Red’kos, a married couple of literary critics, stated, in three out of four texts of the eighth book of *Zemlya* (1912) “people run, in their mind’s eye or literally, from the city or out of the city” [6, p. 117] to the countryside. The reason for such a mass escape is that “the village offers for melancholy inclined representatives of the city

culture some peace of mind among the environment ‘untouched’ by culture” [6, p. 117].

The main character of a short story by Sasha Chorny *The First Encounter*, a writer, an “individualist in a suit”, tells the story in the first person. He runs from the city (St. Petersburg) to the countryside because he has had nothing to live for. But the narrator ends up being disappointed in a village life for “the city has found its way even here” [6, p. 117] influencing country dwellers’ mindset. General mood of country people is the willingness to escape from the village and strong resentfulness of progress and any real action. But city dwellers are not much better. The narrator speculates: “There are a devil and an angel of non-culture, and both of them are lodging inside one person” [7, p. 304]. At the end of the day the narrator returns back to the city wondering if there is nowhere one can find a real life. Neither a city nor a countryside could give him what he truly wants – a rich spiritual life.

F. Sologub’s short story also published in the eighth issue of *Zemlya* is called *The Beastly Life* and is devoted to the daily routine of a big city dwellers. Those people are busy with intrigues, scheming plots; over a matter of money they are ready even to kill a child. The story’s main character, Alexey Kurganov, was happy in the countryside where he spent his childhood. Now living in a city Alexey is extremely frustrated. His wife dies from tuberculosis and Alexey is left alone with a 12-year-old son Grisha. Grisha’s grandfather on his mother’s side leaves the child enormous fortune. All the relatives are infuriated and plotting to kill Grisha. The boy’s father even has to hire a private detective to prevent a murder. The image of a city intertwines with Alexey’s fear for his son’s life: “He started to hate city life because he gradually acquired a clear vision of an ancient beast who was resurrecting and restoring power in a modern city – a great Sodom. All that cruelty happening in the country came from there” [7, p. 194–195]. A literary critic V. L’vov-Rogachevsky analyzed the main character’s state of mind as follows: “Fyodor Sologub’s hero wants to go away from the beast who settled down in cities into wide open space of Russian valleys, to poor everyday life of the Russian village” [8, p. 330]. But at the last decisive moment he is already willing to escape much further – “across the ocean or over the mountains” [8, p. 330].

In the third text of *Zemlya*’s eighth almanac concerning the “city-village” opposition – *The Morning of Life* by E. Chirikov – a rich woman Dunya who lives in a big city while passing her home village on a train starts remembering her happy rural childhood: “Ah, how nice it would be to throw off all those shackles tying up your body from head to toe, jump out of the window and run across a green meadow loose-haired, just in underwear...” [7, p. 157–158]. When she was a child, Dunya felt herself absolutely free. She refers to earth: “My mother-earth! I want to fall upon your warm green bosom and cry with



grief and joy...” [7, p. 158]. At the end of the story lulled by the pleasant memories Dunya falls asleep. A train conductor wakes her up to check her ticket calling her “madam”. The woman opens her eyes struggling to understand who is being called, for she is not a madam, but a little girl. And half asleep Dunya still sees her grandfather disapprovingly addressing her: “Oh, Duniashka, Duniashka! Why are you a madam?” [7, p. 181].

V. L’vov-Rogachevsky supposed that Chirikov’s short story contrasted the rest texts of Digest 8 and called *The Morning of Life* “cheerful laugh at a graveyard”. The critic explained: “Chirikov’s vivid and fresh story *The Morning of Life* stands apart from the rest of the book. This unsophisticated and sweet story’s got the morning smell of green meadows and earth on it. And Sasha Chorny (Black)’s story and everything black in this bulky, as though swollen book positively reeks of death” [8, p. 330].

The image of a city in the general context of literary digests *Zemlya*

Let’s look at the image of a city not only in the context of one book, but from the perspective of all 20 issues of the digest *Zemlya* published from 1908 to 1917. Due to a huge scope of material the future analysis will be based exclusively on the journal and newspaper reviews of popular literary critics of the beginning of the 20th century. Appealing to *Zemlya*’s contemporaries will give a fresh and at times unexpected look at century-old works of art.

Starting from the publishing of the second issue of *Zemlya* (1909) M. Artsybashev became a permanent employee of the almanac. M. Artsybashev can be called a central author in the digest *Zemlya*. In the second book he published a short novel *The Working Man Shevyrev* where the main character, a student living under a fake ID, is depicted among the poorest working class people. Shevyrev (his real name is Tokaryev) shares a communal flat in St. Petersburg. One of the most famous reviewers of the beginning of the 20th century A. Izmaylov described the city life of the main character as follows: “Disguised as a working man he [Shevyrev] lives in a miserable furnished room of a huge Petersburg ‘Noah’s ark’ where hundreds of have-nots – workers, students, needlewomen – are cooped up” [9]. So, in M. Artsybashev’s short novel the image of a city contributes to a vivid description of misery, shabbiness and poverty of the exploited class.

The first part of A. Kuprin’s famous novel *Yama: The Pit* was issued in the third book of *Zemlya* (1909) and the continuation was published in Digest 15, 1914 and Digest 16, 1915. The novel hit the headlines raising an important social issue acute for big cities – the problem of prostitution. A. Kuprin spoke bluntly about that social phenomenon, sincerely and frankly describing lives, attitudes and behavior of prostitutes and brothel-goers of different background. Critics of the Silver age couldn’t help but wonder what city in

particular was described. A reviewer of “Kievskiy vestnik” (The Kiev News) E. Isakov was quite sure that his native city had that doubtful honor: “Indeed some traits of a ‘big southern city’ as well as the physical description of the street where on both its sides the brothels with their peculiar architecture and lights were situated bears a striking similarity to Kiev and its once famous for such very ‘houses’ street” [10]. The author of *Yama* in one of his interviews denied any confirmations of Kiev being a life-like portrait of a city described in the novel. A. Kuprin stated that he had depicted a generalized image and the topic raised in his novel could be applied to any city: “‘Yama’ – it is Odessa and St. Petersburg and Kiev for ‘it’, as they say in this famous joke, is the same everywhere” [11].

It is interesting to note that in the context of the digest *Zemlya* the literary critics often compared another novel concerning the topic of prostitution – *The Legacy of the Fathers* (Digest 14, 1914) by V. Vinnichenko – to A. Kuprin’s *Yama*. A. Ozhigov wrote: “The life of a big southern city is artificially focused on love, filth, sexually transmitted diseases, on all this limitative scope staying outside of real life” [12, p. 3].

A new novel written by M. Artsybashev that is called *On the Last Line* was published in *Zemlya* in three parts from 1910 to 1912 (Digest 4, 1910; Digest 7, 1911; Digest 8, 1912). The novel traces boring and eventless lives of small provincial town dwellers. At the end of *On the Last Line* all of them committed suicide. Critics reflected upon the image of a city and its influence on people’s decision to kill themselves. A. Izmaylov wrote ironically: “There is not a city in front of you, but a sort of a large mortuary where lie down side by side fourteen – if I have counted correctly – corpses of old people, children, men, women, young girls, soldiers, officers, actresses, professors, students, etc.” [13]. A. Izmaylov assumed that M. Artsybashev created his “Necropolis” to prove pointlessness of a human life (that was a modern decadent idea at the break of the new 20th century). The critic questioned a perplexing geographical location of that mystery city: “Where exactly on a map of Russia could you find this city of the dead depicted by Artsybashev – a city with no smiles, births, love, happy innocent hugs, idealistic ideas, – a city of illnesses, deaths, suicides, lust, rivalry, hatred and boring empty rhetoric about advantages of not-being?” [14].

In E. Chirikov’s play *The Forest Mysteries* published in the fifth book of *Zemlya* (1911) the image of a city is associated with a civilization built by humans where culture, education, intelligence, reasoning power come to the fore. City life is contrasted with fabulous wild nature, deep untouched woods where a family of a forest-guard live a sheltered life. These people look like characters from Russian fairy tales: a forest spirit (a forest-guard), a witch Baba Yaga (his wife), a beautiful peasant girl Alyonushka (their adopted daughter). They lead simple poetic lifestyle



until one day it is disturbed by an artist from the city who gets lost in the woods. S. Kirov, a Silver age critic, described an impression made by a wild and magic place on the lost artist as follows: "He feels like he is suffocating among oppressive monstrosities of 'the Yellow devil's city', he just wants to take a deep breath in the arms of the quite, calm, poetic mother-nature. Here he forgets everything, all the racket of modern cultural life, under the weight of which he who has created it feels exhausted. Here he hears long-forgotten sounds of his tired heart strings, free fires of his imagination come out, his thought acquires wings and transfers the person to a new world, a world of carefree happiness" [15]. Unfortunately, any city dweller, even the most romantic and high-souled one, is corrupted by his/her nature. And an unconscious influence of a culture-bearer is inherently destructive. So, the artist cannot spend more than one night in this magic place and he leaves the woods the very next morning.

The main theme of the novel *Amelya* by N. Krasheninnikov (Digest 16, 1915) in the context of the almanac overlaps with *The Forest Mysteries*. A wild Bashkirian girl Amelya who was born in the vastness of the steppe is adopted by a well-to-do Russian family. She is converted to Orthodox Christianity, changes her name to Nona and enters an institute. Living a civilized life in a big city she subconsciously dreams of the steppe. As A. Ozhigov wrote, "Deep in the girl's heart there is a continuous struggle between a craving for returning to her roots and the new living environment she has found herself in" [16]. At last, feeling the call of blood Amelya abandons everything she has and goes into the steppe.

It is also of special interest to note that in pre-revolutionary years, by the year 1916 the attitude in press to the images of a city and of a countryside in the digest *Zemlya* changed, it was a 180-degree focus shift. For example, in 1916 a literary critic L. Fortunatov noticed that localities in which the action of M. Artsybashev's plays *The Jealousy* (Digest 13, 1913) and *The Woman Standing in the Middle* (Digest 17, 1915) proceeded was a summer countryside, not a city in winter. L. Fortunatov explained: "Describing people's life in a city in winter you need to tell the readers about characters' 'life and work'. However, illustrating summer life out in the country you may stay within narrow, Artsybashev's limits. People desired each other, snogged each other, were jealous of each other, beat each other and desired each other again" [17, p. 19]. In 1916 D. Volkov also accused Artsybashev of improbability of his plays that describe different urban sins: "The life in provincial towns over the past years has calmed down, stabilized and acquired the forms of various activities" [18, p. 419].

Conclusion

The article aimed at analyzing a city image in 20 issues of the literary digest *Zemlya* published over

the period of nine pre-revolutionary years, from 1908 to 1917. Although it is totally impossible to embrace all the aspects of this broad topic, some main points have been highlighted: the confrontation between urban and natural environment; the images of city and country dwellers: their dreams, values and lifestyle; the struggle of good and evil in a person's heart. The authors of the digest different in their views on life operating different artistic tools speculate on the same topic under the cover of one almanac.

The first digest of *Zemlya* shows a city as a vicious, sinful, delusive place that breaks people's dreams turning them into feeble-minded zombies. Only in I. Bunin's *The Shadow of the Bird* real, alive, thirsty for pleasure people are never subjected to the author's condemnation. The weakness of mankind before the power of the city is expressed through the motif of desperate scream.

The uniting motif of the eighth *Zemlya* is the desire to escape a city, to run away from its cruelty, to embrace the nature. In Digest 8 such oppositions as "intellectuals vs. ordinary people" and "cold, dead culture vs. true and alive nature" are also depicted. Shallow-minded city dwellers are confronted with open-hearted, often naïve country folks. Only Sasha Chorny in his *The First Encounter* comes to the thought of similarity and imperfection of all people irrespective of their residence.

In the rest issues of *Zemlya* the difficult surviving of misery people pursuing some vague dreams in big cities is often contrasted to free and happy life in the countryside. Penniless city dwellers are crammed in confined spaces of their tiny flats living shoulder to shoulder with their neighbors. In Sodom-like surroundings they go as far as killing others, selling their bodies, and, as a result of some desperate situation or frustration committing suicide. Country people, on the other hand, are shown as strong free heroes resembling legendary characters of fairy tales.

Thus, a motif analysis of the literary digest *Zemlya* shows an integrating role that the image of a city plays in the almanac. Despite the difference in the mindset of *Zemlya*'s authors and their adherence towards rivalry literary camps (for example, symbolists and neorealists), they all create their own image of a city. Besides, under a cover of the same book or in the general context of the almanac the texts of different authors affect each other. Their interactions remind chemical reaction of sulfur and flame: put together the texts provide flashes of similarities in motifs and images. Taken out of the almanacish context these qualities disappear and often certain motifs and images remain inconsiderable for a researcher.

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