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## CH. DICKENS ON AMERICAN NATIONAL TRADITIONS

Speculations concerning the current state of Russian-American relations lead to the conclusion that the current unprecedented confrontation is caused not only by political and economic contradictions. These contradictions, especially between the major powers, have existed at all times: the struggle for regional and global hegemony, trade routes and markets, and, finally, for sources of raw materials. But the current confrontation is so bitter and full of pathos that it is difficult to perceive the politicians' furious outbursts as a mere demagogic cover for vested interests – it seems that there is a conflict between some traditional values inherent in our countries. Even Dostoevsky said that people do not fight as fiercely for bread as they do for an idea.

At the heart of this spiritual confrontation are different values, cultivated for centuries in the public consciousness of Russia and countries of the West. Indeed, the Protestant ethics of the capitalist world, which was particularly evident in its Calvinist guise in the New World, where European Protestants emigrated en masse, contrasts with the assembly ethics that sustained the traditionalist society of the Russian Empire and partly of the Soviet Union, and that has axiological significance in Russia to date.

But what is the essence of these traditional values, inherent specifically in the United States, which encourage America to confront not only Russia, but also, in fact, Western Europe, which is increasingly deprived of political subjectivity and economic independence under pressure of its powerful partner? To answer this question, we should address the experience of Europeans, especially the British who are connected to their former colony; who saw, even at the dawn of the United States, some fundamental traditions

important both to the country and to the outside world, but symptomatic of acute deficiency.

From the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, the state that called itself the "United States of America," hitherto abiding on the periphery of the European consciousness, began to attract increasing interest. The country that rebelled against the overseas empire overthrew the power of the colonizers, won its freedom with arms in its hands, proclaimed, like the ancient Greeks and Romans, the people's power – the republic and free elections; all this evoked respect and even admiration of the liberally-minded European public.

Famous Romantic poets S. Coleridge and R. Southey, disappointed in the results of the French Revolution, wanted to flee to America to establish a commune in this free country, and only a lack of money stopped them.

One of Europe's greatest writers, Charles Dickens, also had an interest in America. By the early 1840s, he, having already achieved all-European fame, was invited to give a course of lectures on ethical and literary topics in the United States. The authorities of the young American state were very concerned about creating a positive image of the country and invited famous academic and cultural personalities to come over.

But hopes for a favorable impression did not come true. First Dickens published "American Notes," then resorted to the artistic form of reflection on the material that struck him – wrote "The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit," a novel where part of the action takes place in the United States.

First of all, Dickens and his protagonist, young Martin Chuzzlewit who, in an attempt of self-fulfilment, moved from England to America, were struck by deep provincialism of American culture. Small events, such as the election of a municipal councilor, are given an almost global dimension by the press. The very first encounter on the American shore vividly portrays the mass media that have tremendous power in the country. The press is loud, unbearably vulgar and corrupt; it will denigrate or glorify for money, constantly distorting the truth. Freedom of press has a very bizarre nature. Dickens lists the names of newspapers, ironically twisting them: "New York Sewer," "New York Stabber," "New York Family Spy," "New York Pri-

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vate Listener,” “New York Peeper.” But Americans like it: “It is in such enlightened means that the bubbling passions of my country find a vent,”<sup>1</sup> says one of them. The American calls the press “the palladium of rational liberty at home and the dread of foreign oppression abroad,” “to the envy of the world and the leaders of human civilization.”<sup>2</sup>

In general, spiritual provincialism is expressed in rejection of not only political reality, but also culture of the Old World; in the conversations of characters one constantly feels an intense, polemical opposition to Europe, which generates both a desire for hard isolationism and militant messianic sentiments. This is not surprising: the American nation was formed as a nation of immigrants who left their homeland in a state of resentment, rejection of their past lives, and incredible euphoric hopes of fulfillment in a world where everyone can start from scratch. The psychology of rejection of the Old World as obsolete, outdated, mired in sin and ignorance becomes a symbol of faith for the new society that grows on a greenfield. “You have brought, I see, sir, the usual amount of misery and poverty and ignorance and crime, to be located in the bosom of the great republic,” the American hails the emigrant. “Here you will learn what the sunlight is.”<sup>3</sup> The very cultural memory of Europe’s great centuries-old achievements is mockingly ridiculed, perceived as something of a relic that the American, the new man, needs to get rid of.

The official American ideology, largely influenced by Protestant fanatical preachers from the very start, offers the society a Manichean myth, in which they are creating the New World – a world of natural men (something like Voltaire’s Savage) unburdened by the weight of tradition and moral prejudice, in opposition to the world of decrepit spiritual values, a world that is unnatural, full of evil and untruth. The old religious and common cultural values – moral judgement, sense of honor, love of neighbor, compassion, mercy – would indeed prevent the new man from pursuing individualistic success at all costs. In a society freed of all these “complexes,” overt social Darwinism triumphs; only the strongest, i.e. the least morally burdened, can survive and succeed.

Here, for example, is how Dickens characterizes a future congressman, Major Pawkins: “He was a great politician; and the one article of his creed, in reference to all public obligations involving the good faith and integrity of his country, was, ‘run a moist pen slick through every thing, and start fresh.’ This made him a patriot. <...> He had a most distinguished genius for swindling, and could start a bank, or negotiate a loan, or form a land-jobbing company (entailing ruin, pestilence, and death, on hundreds of families). <...> This made him an admirable man of business. He could hang about a bar room, discussing the affairs of the nation, for twelve hours together. <...> This made him an orator and a man of the people.”<sup>4</sup>

In absence of connections with world culture, the spiritual core of the society is dwindling, the cult of profit becoming its only religion. All conversations, “All their cares, hopes, joys, affections, virtues, and associations, seemed to be melted down into dollars.” “Men were weighed by their

dollars, measures gauged by their dollars; life was auctioneered, appraised, put up, and knocked down for its dollars.”<sup>5</sup>

In this society, all means are good for enrichment: there is a striking dominance of unbridled advertising consisting of lies, falsification and reticence. Dickens’ protagonist and many other gullible immigrants from the Old World, having no immunity to this kind of brainwashing, acquire land in the wilderness, where they are going to create a “New Eden” – a garden of paradise. Paradise turns out to be hell – harsh climate, terrible diseases, infertile soils; but thanks to advertising there are more and more emigrants, many of them arriving to certain death. Dickens himself, showing grotesque pictures of this Eden, says that it reflects the entire American society.

Messianic intentions are another striking feature of the young, newly formed, culturally backward American state of the 1840s. America’s enthusiastic propagandists present it as an embodied ideal of republican freedom, a true democracy: “...we are a model of wisdom, and an example to the world, and the perfection of human reason.”<sup>6</sup> The American political system and way of life should be an unquestionable model for the rest of the world, mired in despotism. Such America-centric attitude becomes anecdotal in Dickens’ satiric narrative. An article by the local lowly journalist Brick, the Americans are sure, is “the most obnoxious to the British parliament and the court of Saint James’s.”

The rejection of cultural traditions and restraining morals, along with narcissism, give rise to another trait of young American society: imposture and amateurism. The public life is full of self-appointed philosophers and political scientists, delivering endless public lectures and appearing in the press with infallible maxims (“the philosophy of the soul,” “the philosophy of crime,” “the philosophy of vegetables” etc.). A housewife is ready to lecture on human rights, metaphysics, and hydraulics.<sup>7</sup> There is no hierarchy of values: the more shrill, self-assured, and light-weighted the next lecturer is, the more attention he wins. The unparalleled national narcissism often takes an aggressive form: no one should criticize America! “...no satirist could breathe this air. If another Juvenal or Swift could rise among us tomorrow, he would be hunted down.” Any critic of the indigenous national foundations of American life is subjected to the “foulest and most brutal slander,” becoming an object of “the most inveterate hatred and intolerant pursuit.”<sup>8</sup> “You are not now in A despotic land,” says the typical American Chollop. “We are a model to the airth, and must be just cracked-up, I tell you. <...> I have draw’d upon A man, and fired upon A man for less.”<sup>9</sup>

Dickens does not overlook the problem of slavery, which masked a more general problem of racial intolerance inherent in the American society. Even abolitionists find Negroes “funny,” “ridiculous,” “monkey-like,” and the antipathy between blacks and whites – natural.

Dickens primarily relied on his own impressions. But he was ingeniously able to guess some of America’s further social developments, which seemed to him, a representative of the cultural elite of the Old World, not only ridiculous and ugly, but also downright dangerous. The democratic

<sup>1</sup> Диккенс Ч. Собр. соч. : в 30 т. М., 1959. Т. 10. С. 316.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. С. 317.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. С. 329.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. С. 329–330.

<sup>6</sup> Диккенс Ч. Опр. cit. Т. 10. С. 336.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. С. 342.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. С. 352.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. С. 339.

<sup>10</sup> Диккенс Ч. Опр. cit. Т. 11. С. 123.

social order did not at all interfere with the propaganda of the American dream of constant advancement, expanding the borders, first into the Wild West, then around the world. Even at the dawn of American independence, in 1783, George Washington called the newborn country a “rising empire.” The complex of superiority over the Old World, of messianic chosenness, was initially one of the semantic factors of this new civilization.

John Adams wrote in 1765, “I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scene and design in providence, for the illumination of the ignorant and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind.”<sup>1</sup> This complex of chosenness is also reflected in the fiction. G. Melville wrote, “We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people – the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world... God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our race... The rest of the nations must soon be in our rear.”<sup>2</sup> In his famous novel “Moby Dick or The White Whale,” however, Melville eschews unbridled optimism and depicts an allegorical picture: America is like a forlorn ship on a stormy sea, racing after a phantom target under command of a mad captain intent on exterminating the world’s evil.

After witnessing the wonders of young American democracy, Dickens writes with anger and sarcasm about the American elite, which keeps demonstrating a complete lack of understanding of the great principles that created America: “...Who are no more capable of feeling, or of caring if they did feel, that by reducing their own country to the ebb of honest men’s contempt, they put in hazard the rights of nations yet unborn, and very progress of the human race, than are the swine who wallow in the streets. Who think crying out to other nations, old in their iniquity, “We are no worse than you” (*No worse!*) is high defense and vantage ground enough for that republic, but yesterday let loose upon her noble course, and but today so maimed and lame, so full of sores and ulcers, foul to the eye and almost hopeless to the sense, that her best friends turn from the loathsome creature with disgust.”<sup>3</sup>

Dickens sincerely sympathized with the great ideas that inspired the founders of the American state – the ideas of freedom, equality and justice. But he also saw the dangers awaiting this country that were rooted in its very traditions; as he expected, the Americans responded with nothing but indignation. Nor did the people of the Old World harken to his warnings or take them seriously.

<sup>1</sup> Cited from: *Лернер М.* Развитие цивилизации в Америке. М. : Радуга, 1992. Т. 2. С. 428.

<sup>2</sup> Cited from: *Шлезингер А.-М.* Циклы американской истории. М. : Прогресс, 1992. С. 31.

<sup>3</sup> *Диккенс Ч.* Op. cit. Т. 10. С. 447–448.