



HISTORICISM AS AN ARTISTIC PRINCIPLE IN V. PIKUL'S NOVEL "THE FAVORITE"

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the implementation of the principle of historicism in Valentin Pikul's novel "The Favorite" through the artistic interpretation of the character of Grigory Alexandrovich Potemkin. It examines methods of reconstructing the character based on documentary sources, as well as stylistic and compositional techniques that contribute to a faithful recreation of the historical era. It demonstrates how the author combines biographical accuracy with artistic interpretation, creating a multifaceted portrait of a statesman whose fate is inextricably linked with the fate of the Russian Empire in the second half of the 18th century.

Valentin Savvich Pikul's novel "Favorite" (first published in 1984) is a large-scale biographical reconstruction of the life and work of one of the key statesmen of the era of Catherine the Great—Prince Grigory Alexandrovich Potemkin. Unlike many works of historical adventure fiction, where fiction prevails over fact, Pikul consistently adheres to the principle of historicism, understood as the pursuit of maximum authenticity in the depiction of a real historical figure against the backdrop of the era in which he lived and acted. Potemkin's character in the novel becomes the central bearer of this principle.

The concept of historicism in the context of the historical novel presupposes not only the accuracy of the presentation of facts, but also the holistic recreation of the spirit of the times through the inner world, actions, and speech of the character [1, 45]. Pikul constructs the character of Potemkin, relying on a wide range of authentic sources: correspondence with Catherine II, diplomatic documents, the memoirs of contemporaries (in particular, J.-B. Zelinsky, de Ségur, B. Bolingbroke), as well as the works of Russian historians of the 18th and 19th centuries. The author includes quotes from archival materials in the text of the novel without reworking them, thereby creating the effect of documentary evidence. Thus, already in the first part of the novel, an excerpt from a letter from Catherine is included in which she calls Potemkin "her only friend" [2, 156] - this episode becomes key to revealing their special relationship.

The artistic interpretation does not replace historical reality, but reveals it from a new perspective. Pikul avoids both demonization and idealization of Potemkin. The hero is presented as a complex individual: a talented organizer and strategist, an energetic

administrator of Novorossiia, yet also passionate, power-hungry, and prone to weaknesses. This approach is consistent with the method of "psychological realism" characteristic of the mature historical novel of the Soviet period [3, 78]. The author does not strive for mythologization, but emphasizes the scale of a personality whose decisions directly influenced Russia's geopolitical position.

Pikul devotes particular attention to Potemkin's activities as a statesman. The novel describes in detail his role in organizing the Black Sea Fleet, the construction of Kherson, Nikolaev, and Odessa, the development of the southern steppes, and diplomatic negotiations with Austria and Prussia. These episodes are based on reliable historical data. As A. B. Kamensky notes, "Potemkin was the architect of Catherine II's southern policy, and his contribution to the annexation of Crimea and the colonization of the Black Sea region is difficult to overestimate" [4, 94]. Pikul reproduces this assessment in artistic form, depicting Potemkin not as a court favorite, but as one of the main architects of imperial policy.

The novel's composition is governed by the logic of biographical development. The plot moves from Potemkin's arrival at court (the 1760s) to his death in Iasi in 1791. The chronological sequence allows the reader to trace his evolution: from an ambitious guards officer to an influential statesman, the de facto co-ruler of the empire. At the same time, Pikul preserves the hero's inner drama: his loneliness at the pinnacle of power, the conflict between personal ambition and national debt, and his agonizing reflections on the price of historical achievement. This presentation corresponds to the principle of "tragic realism," whereby the greatness of an individual is revealed not in spite of, but through, its contradictions [5, 115].

Stylistically, Potemkin's image is shaped by his speech, which combines military directness, diplomatic sophistication, and emotional expressiveness. Pikul avoids modernizing the language, employing vocabulary and syntax characteristic of the 18th century. Potemkin's speech is replete with military metaphors, ecclesiastical idioms, and elements of courtly rhetoric, emphasizing his social status and intellectual development. As V. M. Zhivov writes, "the language of a historical figure is not only a means of communication but also an indicator of his mentality and social role" [6, 203].

Importantly, Pikul does not introduce fictional characters into the narrative that could "illuminate" Potemkin from the outside. The entire novel is built around real historical figures: Catherine II, Platon Zubov, Alexander Suvorov, Ekaterina Dashkova, and others. This emphasizes the author's commitment to documentary principles and enhances the effect of historical authenticity. Even Potemkin's internal monologues are based on real accounts of his moods, recorded in his memoirs and correspondence.

However, Pikul's historicism is not limited to a passive reproduction of sources. The author interprets facts, revealing their hidden connections and meanings. For example, the episode with the "Potemkin villages" is presented not as a legendary, deceptive spectacle, but as a complex political gesture—a demonstration of the successes of colonization to foreign diplomats against the backdrop of the empire's limited resources [4, 98]. This interpretation is consistent with modern historical research, which refutes the myth of "Catherine's deception."

In the novel "The Favorite," historicism is realized through a holistic, documented, and psychologically accurate recreation of Grigory Potemkin. Pikul demonstrates that a historical novel can be simultaneously a work of fiction and a form of historical knowledge if the author adheres to the principle of respect for the source and strives for a profound understanding of

the individual within his historical context. Pikul's portrayal of Potemkin is neither fiction nor apologetics, but an attempt to reconstruct a man whose fate has become part of national history.

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