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## THE FRONT DOORBELLS IN TAT'JANA TOLSTAJA'S STORIES: THEIR DESIGN AND CULTURAL MEMORY

*Abstract: In some stories by Tatyana Tolstaya, published between 2004 and 2015, of Soviet and post-Soviet setting, the doorbell, in the representation of living contexts, seems to take on a non-secondary significance. Sometimes, it is its aesthetic value to be highlighted; while, in other moments, it is its function to be emphasised. This article aims to investigate the meaning the doorbell acquires in Tolstaya's narratives, the way it relates, each single time, to the surrounding system of objects, as well as with the main characters of the stories. Although its being a product of modern technology, the doorbell, located on the front door, connects to the threshold, a place steeped in stratified mythical and ancestral values.*

*Key words: Tat'jana Tolstaja, front doorbell, Russian literature, Russian culture, Soviet culture.*

The attention that Tat'jana Tolstaja gives to doorbells in some of her stories, is striking. Although the reason for their very existence is apparently spent in the function assigned to them, actually they are also of aesthetic interest. They are an element with a dual portrayal - external and functional - firmly placed in an accurately described cultural and social context. The doorbell is at the same time a semantic catalyst, which marks the phases of a narration and foretells or reveals previously unknown realities. It announces, calls, condemns. From the pre-revolutionary years and the Soviet era, to the period following the dissolution of the USSR the meaning of its sound changes in the social imaginary – and in its literary representation – and the reactions it induces also change. In the narrated memory the sound of the bell, which in the remembrance leaves a powerful trace of itself, underlines the caesurae, the transformations, the changes that escaped consciousness in their making.

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In the short story *Devuška v cvetu* [*A Young Lady in Bloom*], the narrator recalls her own experience as a postwoman at the time when she was studying at the University of Leningrad. The story provides an opportunity to describe the sample of humanity that the girl encounters every day and which reacts in different ways to the delivery of telegrams, letters and postcards. The bell is the tool that makes contact between the postwoman and the inhabitants of the Leningrad district that has been assigned to her possible. The apartments in which the recipients of the correspondence entrusted to the protagonist live are essentially *kommunalki*, vestiges of a past recalled in the architecture, the decorative elements, and the coatings that have survived the succession of generations. The narrator lingers on the style and mechanism, often ingenious, of the doorbells made in the first two decades of the twentieth century: “А на одной двери был звонок удивительный. Стекаянная коробочка, имя хозяина, и когда ты звонишь, загорается лампочка в коробочке и высвечивается надпись: ‘Слышу. Иду’. И они слышат! И идут! Какие чудесные люди! А если никого нет дома, то надпись ‘Извините, дома никого нет’” (Tolstaja 2004: 9).<sup>2</sup>

As usual, on the entrance door of each *kommunalka*, there were many bells of all shapes and sizes:<sup>3</sup>

“встречались и старые-престарые, – плоская щеколда размером с половинку бабочки, с надписью кругом по латунному кружку: ПРОШУ ПОВЕРНУТЬ. Это был звонок механический, не электрический [...]. От бабочки идет проволока, потом там под потолком латунная планка, и к ней подвязан колокольчик. Повернешь бабочку – колокольчик зазвонит” (Tolstaja 2004: 9).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> English transl. “One door had a particularly remarkable doorbell: a glass box with the owner’s name underneath it, and, when you rang, a light went on inside the box, illuminating a sign that read ‘Heard It. Coming’. They can hear me! They’re coming! What lovely people! And if there were no one there, it would read ‘Sorry’. Not Home” (Tolstaja 2018: 104).

<sup>3</sup> Il’Ja Utechin refers to the “cluster of bells” hanging on the front door of each *kommunalka*. The distinctive element of each of them is the plate on which the name of the tenant is shown and from which, above all, it is possible to guess his character (Utechin 2004).

If there was only one bell, “you had to memorise the number of rings, and if they were short or long, i.e. the combination which alerted the corresponding tenant” (Piretto 2018: 174).

Unless otherwise indicated, translations are by the author of this article.

<sup>4</sup> English transl. “Some dating back to the turn of the century – a flat brass knob, the size and the shape of half a butterfly, with a sign encircling it that read ‘Please turn’. Those were mechanical doorbells, not electric [...]. From that half butterfly a wire ran up to the ceiling, where a brass strip with a little bell attached to it stuck out from the wall. If you turned the butterfly, the bell would ring”. (Tolstaja 2018: 104).

But the re-enactment of a distant era not experienced by the protagonist, synthetically and aesthetically reconstructed in the detailed description of the bells, is suddenly interrupted, discontinued by an abrupt change: “(Когда население обнаружило, что латунь содержит медь - ценный металл, все эти милые ‘ПРОШУ ...’ были вырваны по-манделштамовски, с мясом, и сданы в металлолом; отвинчивали и медные ручки с дверей, но их не сдавали, они просто наполнили собой комиссионные магазины [...])” (Tolstaja 2004: 9).<sup>5</sup>

The mutilated bells become an intertextual literary reference, motivating, in the narrating self itself, the reference to the verse of the Mandelstamian lyric *Leningrad*, composed in 1930: “я на лестнице чёрной живу, /в висок ударяет мне вырванный с мясом звонок” (Tolstaja 2004: 9).<sup>6</sup> Along with the bells, the bronze handles were also unscrewed and removed from the entrance doors, and then delivered to commissioned shops. The protagonist seems to express a feeling of nostalgia, perhaps not wholly conscious, aroused by a type of bell, in particular its shape, the material it is made of, its use, and by the lifestyle typical of the *belle époque* of which it was a witness: the bell bearing the inscription “Прошу повернуть” (Please Turn) recalls its round mechanical counterpart in *art déco* style with the inscription “Tournez s. v. p.”, popular in France between 1910 and 1940. The same bell, with its kind invitation, also appears in the short story *Vyšel mesjač iz tumanu* [*The Moon Came Out*]. Made of copper, it is placed on the entrance door of a shared Moscow apartment and is connected to the room occupied by a certain Konovalov. The protagonist of the story, the lonely and unfortunate Nataša, now well into adulthood, suddenly feels the irresistible need to find the only man who had ever shown her affection, but whom she had rejected. She remembers his surname, quite common in Moscow. The beginning of her search is accompanied by the cheerful and festive sound of the *déco* bell, contrasted by a long silence, listless shuffling footsteps, the bolt scraping, the chain rattling, and finally the smell of iron – of the half-meter long hook used to lock the door – and of *kaša*. The sound of the bell thus gives rise to a series of sinister noises and unpleasant smells that herald the appearance of a suspicious old woman, enveloped in darkness, who after

<sup>5</sup> English transl. “When people found out that brass contains copper, a valuable material, all those sweet ‘Please Turns’ were ripped out by their roots, [in the words of Mandelštam, together with the meat] and sold for scrap metal” (Tolstaja 2018: 104). It is important to observe the descriptive technique adopted by Tatiana Tolstaja and characterised by an even provocative figurativeness, obtained through the use of revealing details, metaphoricality and unusual verbal juxtapositions. (On the subject, see Os'muchina 2012).

<sup>6</sup> English transl. “I live on the backstairs, and the doorbell buzz/Strikes me in the temple and tears at my flesh.” (Zeeman 1988: 100).

having asked the stranger whom she is looking for, and hastily replying that Konovalov is not at home, vigorously closes the door. The noises which accompany the opening and closing of the entrance door, an indirect consequence of the ringing of the bell, seem to evoke the noises that accompany the opening and closing of a prison cell door, and symbolically connote the contrast between the Soviet present, characterised here by the grumpiness of the old woman and the darkness in which this object is placed, and the pre-revolutionary past of which it is an emanation, thus becoming an ironic icon of a promise, and then denied, acceptance. In the story *Fakir* [*The Fakir*], on the one hand the bell emphasises an opposition – of a social rather than historical and cultural nature – and on the other, a process of unmasking. Filin, a mature collector, a man of refined manners and tastes is pivotal. He is well read, affable and a charmer when he welcomes his guests into his luxurious apartment from the post-Soviet era, embellished with art objects of exotic workmanship and materials from various countries, each of which is in reality the pretext for a story that Filin knows how to narrate with emphasis and wise rhetoric. His charisma fascinates Galja, who in turn represents the observation and listening point of Filin's stories. There are two apparent and opposing realities: the world of Filin, who lives in an apartment in a tall building, in the imaginative transfiguration of Galja, similar to a castle; and the world of Jura and Galja, confined to a peripheral space and perimeter defined by the narrow confines of an ordinary and anonymous apartment. The doorbell of Filin's apartment is mounted on a copper plaque, “медная табличка: ‘И. И. Филин’, звонок - и наконец он сам на пороге” (Tolstaja 2015: 10).<sup>7</sup> The bell can be imagined as an object of refined workmanship – the copper plate is in itself a precious ornament – a detail inserted in a system of objects and references that structure a clearly connoted context: the collectible pieces, enhanced and ostentatious; the refined delicacies, praised and then offered; women, also exhibited by the landlord as expensive rarities. In such a living scenario – revealing a lifestyle marked by the appearance and aestheticisation of every moment of one's biography, real or invented; of every gesture and movement studied in a theatrical way; of each word uttered with an authoritative tone – the aesthetic characterisation of the bell, which prevails over its function, is therefore highlighted. The host appears on the threshold, ready to welcome his guests. At a later stage, when Filin tells the story of a certain Ol'ga Ieronimovna Sobakina, the bell appears

<sup>7</sup> English transl. “the brass plate: I. I. Filin, the bell; and then the man himself on the door-step” (Tolstaja 1989: 161).

a second time: it is simply named and metonymically reduced to its sound:<sup>8</sup> “Тут звонок в дверь: пришли уплотнять” (Tolstaja 2015: 110)<sup>9</sup> – although its identification in a sought-after object is legitimized by the environment that surrounds the woman: the elegant furniture, the costly furnishings, and the smoky topaz gemstones she collects – since the aesthetic characterisation here prevails the function. It is therefore the latter, calling those who are on the other side of the house, that determines an abrupt detachment in Filin's narration, marking the temporal boundary between a before and an after and, at the same time, the overcoming of a spatial limit. As a symbolic realisation of a social process imposed by power, the strangers at the door are emissaries of the City Council, charged with requisitioning the apartment, destined to become a *kommunalka*. The third and final appearance of the bell takes place at the end of *The Fakir*, as an indirect allusion. Galja learns from Filin's latest lover that the collector is actually a braggart. The apartment he occupies does not belong to him, nor does he own the objects that adorn it. Galja hastily reaches Filin's house and rings the bell, which is not named, but simply evoked in the gesture: “Талья позвонила. Филин открыл и изумился” (Tolstaja 2015: 112)<sup>10</sup>. The place of the action is the same – the building and the apartment – whilst the scene is a completely different one, heralded by the unpleasant reek of fish that the tenant Filin is cooking in the kitchen and that can be smelt on the landing: he no longer impatiently waits on the threshold for the arrival of guests he can astonish with his tales. The initial context in which Filin moved and acted was completely false: it was pure theatrical illusion and the sound of the bell at the end of the story, highlighting the function and not the aesthetic value of the object, signals a sudden discontinuity, and in an act of unmasking, announces the crossing of a threshold, beyond which the true reality bursts unexpectedly. The bell appears only fleetingly in the first lines of the story *Perevodnye kartinki* [Translated images] and is not evoked again in the course of the narrative. It announces an unwelcome presence to the narrator – the possible projection of the author herself – which evokes a clear childhood memory. The character introduced by the ringing of the bell is the surly French teacher, preceded by a cold draught of air, which causes a genuine jolt in the protagonist. As in *The Fakir*, in this story too, the sound of the bell marks the boundary between two worlds, both

<sup>8</sup> It is inevitable to note that the term *zvonok*, 'bell', derives from *zvon*, 'sound', which also originated the verb *zvonit*, 'to ring': the name of the object already indicates the function performatively.

<sup>9</sup> English transl. “At that moment the doorbell rang: they'd come to move more people into her apartment” (Tolstaja 1989: 171).

<sup>10</sup> English transl. “Galja rang the bell, Filin opened the door and was astonished” (Tolstaja 1989: 177).

imbricated in the protagonist's childhood and both marked by a specific atmosphere, the cause of a specific state of mind. The sudden ringing resounds loudly through the winter darkness, interrupting the game she is playing with her sister, and ruins the evening: “как вдруг звонок в дверь; сердце падает; из прихожей тянет холодом” (Tolstaja 2008: 153).<sup>11</sup> Here too the doorbell, the shape of which is not described, is placed in an elaborate system of objects, in a micro-world consisting of a two-storey doll's house with real tiny light bulbs, a miniature bathroom, a toilet, and a small balcony. It is an enchanting building – which someone had brought from Germany after the war – not entirely intact, but still functional. The reality contrasted with the protective and reassuring *igrovoj ugolok*, with the dolls and their little house, coming from a fascinating elsewhere, is the boring French lesson, suspended, in its abstractness, in an undescribed environment, devoid of objects and invaded by the tormenting abstruseness of verbal conjugations, similar to expressions, branded in fire, of a complicated linguistic algebra.

Finally, the bell motif appears at the beginning of the story *Samaja ljubimaja* [*Most Beloved*]. As in *Perevodnye kartinki*, here too the ringing of the bell – which is not described – announces a presence – “раздавался звонок в дверь” – (Tolstaja 2015: 90),<sup>12</sup> however, of an opposite sign in the semantics of perception connoting the characters with which it interacts. In this case it is also a teacher, but of the Russian language: Ženečka is a single woman, *naïve*, lonely, above all passionate about her work, as a dispenser of obsolete educational recommendations and values, as well as obsolete and not appreciated gifts. In the instant immediately following her appearance, various objects materialise – who knows how they survived devolution – real junk: figurines, fabric pins, old cups with broken handles. Not only people faded away: the passage of time has made large objects disappear, such as wardrobes and pianos; while the various ceramic dogs, cups, jars, rings, drawings, photographs, boxes, cards, and trinkets have survived unscathed and clutter up Ženečka's tiny room near the sea. It is precisely this peculiar *congerie*, a symbolic emanation of a not too chronologically distant era, but one relegated by a contradictory sentiment of time to a remote district of cultural memory, brought to life by the vibrating sound of an anonymous *zvonok*.

In the aforementioned stories by Tat'jana Tolstaja, the bell is the subject of a composite and changing biography that initially refers to a distant origin and a social belonging indirectly alluded to. The mechanical bell is an ornamental and

<sup>11</sup> English transl. “Suddenly the doorbell rings; a sinking heart; a cold draught from the corridor”.

<sup>12</sup> English transl. “There would be a ring at the door” (Tolstaja, *Most Beloved*, in *Sleepwalker in a Fog*, tr. J. Gambrell, London, Penguin, 1993, p. 98).

functional object, an aesthetic complement to an elegant apartment, in turn an expression of an unequivocally bourgeois taste. Subsequently, with the requisition of large apartments in aristocratic edifices and the consequent redistribution of living spaces under the strategic plan known as *uplotnenie*, those apartments were converted into *kommunal'nye kvartiry*, or *kommunalki*. They become recent vestiges of a no longer existing social class and not infrequently the former owners "shared the fate of the new tenants, confined to only one of the many rooms that had once seen them as exclusive owners",<sup>13</sup> whose furnishings are grafted onto the damaged remains of the previous bourgeois home. In the surviving library, perhaps a record player, a bicycle or a poster can be found; external and material signs of the rise of a new social class, that of the workers, relegated to a microcosm destined to transform itself into an amorphous social entity, indefinite and undifferentiated, where separateness, as well as social and cultural consolidation, prove to be nothing but utopian visions.<sup>14</sup>

Although the biography of an object contemplates the identification of its origin, its sociological and cultural location - therefore the identification of its function whether realised over time or not - and finally the change of its use<sup>15</sup>, over time the surviving *déco* bell<sup>16</sup> is deprived of its aesthetic connotation<sup>17</sup>, and in the Soviet era retains nothing but its functional connotation<sup>18</sup> only to reappear subsequently

<sup>13</sup> See: Piretto 2018: 82.

<sup>14</sup> See: Schlögel 2000.

<sup>15</sup> See Kopytoff 1986.

<sup>16</sup> Bodei recalls the "enormous quantity of orphaned objects", abandoned by their previous owners, which, by virtue of "a sort of *translatio imperii* or metempsychosis" continue to live on even "after the death or distance of their custodians" and "become material links of continuity between generations" (Bodei 2011: 27). The Art Deco bell that attracts the attention of the protagonist of the story *Devuška v cvetu* is an object abandoned following the forced departure of its original owner. It thus becomes a material link not of continuity, but rather of discontinuity between generations - of that hiatus between two eras produced by the sudden change of regime and its immediate and tragic effects - a tangible sign of a radical change of social paradigm and its cultural translation.

<sup>17</sup> Kopyhoff observes that in a specific situation of cultural contact a foreign object can be acquired by a given culture: it is not, in fact, a question of a real adoption, but rather of a redefinition of its role and function. The bell, as such, is obviously not a foreign object for the new culture - the one expressed by the proletariat - but its aesthetic function is foreign, and it does not arouse interest in the new tenants of the *kommunal'naja kvartira* (Kopytoff 1986).

Each tenant, Utechin points out, attaches more importance to his or her own, often rudimentary, nameplate under the doorbell than to the tapestry of the antechamber or the architectural friezes of the building. Utechin calls such disinterestedness *gosudarstvennoe*, governmental (Utechin 2004).

<sup>18</sup> The well-known repertory *Tovarnyj slovar'* [Dictionary of Goods] contains the entry *Zvonki dvernye mehaničeskie* [Mechanical doorbells], in which these devices, belonging to the category of hardware, are divided into bells with a revolving lever and bells with a button. The mechanisms of both devic-

in a different shape, mounted on a precious copper plaque, as a social indicator designating a high status, even if it is a phony nobleman to boast of it. Having lost its external characterisation, the *zvanok* ends up being identified solely with its function. The bell therefore seems to dematerialise and become a sound substance announcing the sudden change of a situation or the arrival of an unexpected entity. In each of its appearances, however, it is connected with a large system of objects, distinguished by its own internal order, which on the one hand contributes to forming in the individual the capacity to negotiate with the world around him or her, (Roberts 2017) and on the other, shapes his or her unconscious order or habitus through the material conditions of existence and pedagogical action. (Bourdieu 2000). In the narratives mentioned, it can be observed that initially the *art déco* bell recalls, *in absentia*, a system of objects and relations made up of the atriums of large sumptuous buildings with marble fireplaces, runners on the stairs, the aroma of coffee and vanilla, concierges with a moustache, and elegant lifts - luminous boxes enclosed in finely perforated wrought iron shafts.<sup>19</sup> Its identity is redefined in a subsequent system, determined by the darkness of the shared flat, from which the yellowish nose of a hirsute and rude old woman<sup>20</sup> protrudes, and which is imagined to be divided into rooms with multiple destinations – bedroom, dining room, living room and study – and occupied by members of several generations (Utechin 2004). The objects representing the references of the two vital spheres of each tenant are the dining table and the television set protected by a velvet drape with gold embroidery, once used to cover the icon. The television stands on a small table covered with a typical Russian shawl - a sort of religious altar consecrated to Soviet comforts (Utechin 2004; Boym 1995). The galaxy of objects with which the doorbell of a luxurious post-Soviet home is connected is quite different: the elegant living room, the showcase containing beaded trinkets, wall sconces, cups, saucers and milk jugs made of Wedgwood porcelain, the scent of roses, *canapés* and diffused music, if a

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es are described and illustrated in detail. They may be nickel-plated, chromium-plated or, more rarely, painted. The quality requirements are also specified: the mechanism must function correctly, without jamming; the cap of the bell must not come loose and imperfections in the finish that compromise the appearance of the product are not permitted. There is no mention, in the case of Soviet-made bells, of any ornamental elements: the bell is not a decorative object. And, nevertheless, the description of the bell with a revolving lever specifies that such a device may be equipped with an externally fixed rosette “обычно с надписью ‘Прошу повернуть’” [usually with the inscription ‘Please turn’], making the inevitable reference to this type of bell and to another epoch (Pugačev 1957: 936).

<sup>19</sup> See: *Devuška v cvetu*, (Tolstaja 2004); English transl. *A Young Lady in Bloom* (Tolstaya 2018).

<sup>20</sup> See: *Vyšel mesjac iz tumana*, (Tolstaja 2015); English translation: *The Moon Came Out*, (Tolstaya 1995).



symbol of elitist social belonging; the bare and malodorous kitchen and the fried zander, if a reference to a modest existential condition marked by loneliness and accompanied by the melancholy of autumn.<sup>21</sup> Finally, the immaterial appearance of the bell, as the expression of a nostalgic feeling, refers to other systems of objects, capable of defining the cultural identity of a distant era and of their protagonists: the magnificent doll's house, an enveloping and protective microcosm for the little girl (*Perevodnye kartinki*); the small room crammed with objects of Soviet memory for the elderly single woman (*Samaja ljubimaja*), the personification of a historical period which she imagined as definitive and eternal.

The *zvonok* object, in its various narrative meanings, gives rise to a further, perhaps conclusive, reflection: it marks the threshold,<sup>22</sup> a limit which divides, separates and, at the same time, unites, and whose passage is made possible by the door which, as Bachelard observes, represents the Cosmos of the ajar: a *princeps* image, the origin of a reverie in which desires and temptations accumulate, and the synthesis of two antithetical orientations (Bachelard 1961): the closed here, locked with bolts and padlocks – think of the door, stubbornly closed, of the *kommunalka* in the story *Vyšel mesjac iz tumana* – as opposed to the open here, wide open, symbolised by the open and welcoming door of the story *Fakir*. The idea of threshold implies, therefore, the idea of crossing, of communication between two spaces, between the inside and the outside: both become imaginable only in relation to what puts them in communication, “to that passage which cannot but take place, to that crossing which allows access to a new and unexpected horizon” (Bassanelli 2015: 320). The bell, whose sound exerts a kind of despotic terror, Benjamin observes, “derives its force no less from the magic of the threshold. Some things shrill as they are about to cross a threshold. But it is strange how the ringing becomes melancholy, like a knell, when it heralds departure” (Benjamin 1999: 88). The threshold thus designates a mysterious and complex topology, a space marked by ambiguity between inside and outside that establishes and at the same time abolishes separation, and represents, concretely and symbolically, a passage (Lazzarini 2016). The threshold is characterised by a tension – the crossing and the pause – which refers to a rite of passage: “a liminal experience, a space-time entity in which the subject is suspended between a before and after, inside and outside,

<sup>21</sup> See: *Fakir* (Tolstaja 2008); English translation: *The Fakir* (Tolstaya 1989).

<sup>22</sup> If the threshold is one of the constitutive arguments of architecture – a place of passage between interior and exterior and between public and private, from which one can access to enter a new environment – it is not the bell, an accessory applied (Bassanelli 2015). Orlando specifies that the door, if not equipped with a bell, handle or lock, symbolises the interruption of a spatial contiguity (Orlando 1993).

between a condition that he is about to leave and one that does not yet belong to him” (Lazzarini 2016: 50). Van Gennep highlights the relationship between space and ritual and subdivides spatial transitions into three phases: rites of separation, rites of transition, and rites of incorporation, (van Gennep 2019) while Boettger, identifying in the threshold, from its origins, the dual function, of crossing and exclusion, notes the specific rituals that determine its own realisation. Above all, the peculiar experience of the crossing determines the cultural development of the rituals which, in turn, characterise this moment by means of an artistic decoration, sometimes emphasised, of the threshold itself: over time and in various civilisations, Boettger points out, they have been made thresholds of wood, natural stone, metal (Boettger 2014). Eliade also emphasises the persistence of the symbolic value that equates crossing the threshold of a house with the transition from the sacred to the profane dimension. There are many rituals that accompany this act – bows, prostrations, light touches of the hand – offered to the powerful spirits and divinities who protect the threshold from both human enemies and demons and diseases: it is precisely in this liminal space – invested with symbolic and religious value – that sacrifices are offered to the tutelary deities of the house (Eliade 1987). Benjamin evokes the spell of the threshold, a spell of very ancient origins,<sup>23</sup> which «prevails more covertly in the interior of the bourgeois dwelling. Chairs beside an entrance, photographs flanking a doorway are fallen household deities and the violence they must appease grips our hearts even today at each ringing of the doorbell» (Benjamin 1999: 214). Once again, the threshold is a metonymic indication of the feeling of eternal amazement that originates from the dwelling itself, (Bley 2017: 82) the scenario in which the tension between others and one's own is expressed, and the contrast between inside and outside makes it possible to transgress the limit – the crossing of the threshold – and the consequent welcoming of the guest, the stranger, the other person saves the intimate dimension of the house from asphyxiation and from turning in on itself. The sense of asphyxia is symbolically recalled by the unpleasant smell of fried fish that permeates the landing overlooked by the apartment occupied by Filin and which marks the definitive closure of the threshold to those who come from outside who are no longer a generously welcomed guest, but a stranger, perhaps hostile, and therefore unwelcome.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> The astonished admiration of Odysseus, motionless on the bronze threshold of Alcinoos's palace, at the sight of the precious materials and furnishings and of the intense light, of sun and moon, notes Orlando, is a sort of enchantment that induces the hero to stop and meditate (Orlando 1993).

<sup>24</sup> Benveniste focuses on the complex, ambivalent meaning of the term 'guest', which derives from the Latin *hostis* in the meaning of 'equality by compensation'. *Hostis* is therefore the one who compensates for the gift received with a counter-gift, just like the corresponding Gothic term *gasts*, which in turn

Crossing the *porog* constitutes a solemn ritual in the Russian cultural tradition: it defines the boundary between the home and the outside world, marking the opposition between 'closed' and 'open' and thus acquiring the universal character of sacredness (van Baak 2009). It opposes the forest to the house (*les / dom*), the concrete result of the *svoj / čužoj* opposition which, at socio-ecological level, can be understood as the antinomy between one's own (what pertains to human civilisation) and what is an emanation of nature). In the house we distinguish the centre, the hearth, where, according to a ritual and patronal perspective, the raw / not really (*čužoj*) and impure is transformed, crossing the threshold, into brick / proper (*svoj*) and the instrument of purification and appropriation here is the fire (Ivanov, Toporov 1965). The *porog* therefore highlights the exact point in which the hostile and malignant forces can be denied entry (in *Vyšel mesjac iz tumana* the now disillusioned Nataša is denied permission to cross the threshold; and in *Perevodnye kartinki* the draught of cold air that attacks the child, tearing her away from the game, to the announcement of an enemy entity, coming from outside), and it is therefore an act of trust and benevolence precisely on the threshold to welcome the guest. In the ancient tradition the guest was welcomed *na poroge* with the gifts of bread and salt, symbols of the flesh and blood of Christ, and the behaviour of Filin, who welcomes his guests at the door of the house to welcome them, appears as a sort of symbolic re-enactment of this custom. Finally, lingering on the threshold is not advisable: either you cross it quickly, or you do not cross it at all so as not to irritate the spirits of the ancestors who live there. The Domovoj, who represents them and lives behind the stove, is invoked and honoured right on the threshold (Clay Trumball 2000). Therefore, *porog*, both in ancient tradition and modernity, not only marks the separation between one's own and the other, but also at the same time separates the inside from the outside. Assuming that Lotman considers the apartment as the centre of the so-called "normal life", then the stairs and the entrance to the building constitute the borderline between the house, intended as a domestic hearth, and the non-home.<sup>25</sup> Some specific elements – Lotman points

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refers to the term *gost'*. The classical meaning of 'enemy', Benveniste observes, was most likely affirmed when the relations of exchange from clan to clan were replaced by the relations of exclusion from *civitas* to *civitas*. (Benveniste 1969). The term *gost'*, therefore, also designates the desired stranger, *želannyj čužestranec*, the merchant, *kupec*; but also the stranger, *čužoj*, even the enemy. See the entry *gost'* (Vasmer 1986, I: 447-448); (Šanskij 1972, I: 149).

<sup>25</sup> Bachelard, too, underlines the contrast between the concepts of 'home' and 'non-home', determined by situations, conditions and elements not infrequently connected with the seasons (snow, storm, wind) underlined by adverse weather conditions assimilated to real attacks on the home itself (Bachelard 1961).

out – are always external. If the inner world reproduces the Cosmos, everything that lies beyond its boundary is chaos, anti-world, unstructured chthonic space inhabited by monsters. Yet, in the space of the threshold – comparable to the extreme limit of the semiosphere – an uninterrupted dialogue takes place: each semiosphere is contiguous with others, each is characterised by its own organisation and strives towards a constant exchange, longing for a common language, a *koine* (Lotman 1990).

In Tat'jana Tolstaja's short stories analysed in this article, the front doorbell thus takes on an essentially symbolic value in light of the theoretical reflection concerning the meaning that the threshold acquires in the context of Russian culture. It becomes a kind of mobilising index referring to binary oppositions such as inside/outside; own/other; known/unknown capable of activating in Tat'jana Tolstaja's characters some ancestral codes, apparently forgotten, in fact still communicating and revealing man's place in the Cosmos.

It is also interesting to notice that the front doorbell, as a product of the modern age of technology, becomes a proper mechanical guardian of the boundary, a sort of semiotic indicator, capable, therefore, of preserving, at least ideally, the deep cultural meanings, dating back to the most ancient epochs of Slavic civilisation and deeply rooted in the collective imagination.

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## КУЋНО ЗВОНЦЕ У ПРИПОВЕТКАМА ТАТЈАНЕ ТОЛСТОЈ: ИЗМЕЂУ ДИЗАЈНА И КУЛТУРНЕ МЕМОРИЈЕ

### *Резиме*

У неколико приповедака Татјане Толстој које су објављене у периоду између 2004. и 2015. године, у совјетском или, прецизније, постсовјетском окружењу, кућно звонце у свакодневним ситуацијама има улогу која није занемарљива. Понекад се ради о естетској вредности, док у неким другим случајевима његова важност може да се идентификује са функцијом.

Овај прилог на енглеском језику има за циљ да анализира значај овог елемента на наративном и културолошком плану, тако што ће се истражити начин на који се уклапа у околину, са другим објектима/ предметима који поседују неки свој сопствени и аутономни систем, али и у односу на протагонисте самих прича. Мада је кућно звонце производ модерне технологије, може се повезати и са прагом као простором, носиоцем митских и анцестралних вредности.

► **Кључне речи:** Татјана Толстој, кућно звонце, руска књижевност, руска култура, совјетска култура.

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