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## The Image of Maria Lazich in Afanasy Fet's Prose Memoirs\*

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Obraz Marii Łazich w prozie wspomnieniowej Afanasija Feta

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**Abstract.** The article is devoted to the analysis of the image of Maria Lazich in Afanasy Fet's *Ранние годы моей жизни* [*Early Years of My Life*]. The author's beloved appears as Elena Larina in this work, which belongs to the prose memoir genre. Biographical and fictionalising elements (literary references, use of known character models, and the dramatisation of the love theme) used to build this literary portrait are discussed. The article shows social and literary phenomena, such as Georgesandism and the re-evaluation of the notions of marriage, which influenced the shaping of Maria's character.

**Keywords:** Maria Lazich, Elena Larina, prose memoirs, love theme, fictionalisation, Georgesandism

**Abstrakt.** Artykuł poświęcony jest analizie obrazu Marii Łazich w dziele *Ранние годы моей жизни* Afanasija Feta. Ukochana autora pojawia się w utworze, gatunkowo należącym do prozy wspomnieniowej, jako Jelena Łarina. Omówione zostały elementy biograficzne oraz beletryzacyjne

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(nawiązania literackie, wykorzystanie znanych modeli charakterów postaci, dramatyzacja wątku miłosnego) wykorzystane do budowania tego portretu literackiego. Ukazane zostały zjawiska społeczne i literackie, takie jak np. georgesandyzm, przewartościowanie pojęć dotyczących małżeństwa, które wpłynęły na ukształtowanie charakteru Marii.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Maria Łazicz, Jelena Łarina, proza wspomnieniowa, wątek miłosny, beletryzacja, georgesandyzm

The love poetry of Afanasy Fet (1820–1892), who is considered to be the leading representative of the “pure art” trend in Russian poetry of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is inseparably connected with the character of Maria Lazich (1826–1850). Their short, intense love affair, which ended with the tragic death of the woman, became an inspiration for a series of poems, which form an informal lyrical cycle. Although Fet’s love poetry was addressed not only to Maria, it is she who is widely regarded as the muse who inspired the author of *Diana* (Buhštab, 1953; Blagoj, 1983; Toporov, 1987).

The subject of consideration in this article is the image of Maria, captured in Fet’s prose memoirs. Most researchers treat the story of Fet’s love for Lazich shown in this work of art mainly as a biographical context for the analysis of his poetry. Only Lev Suchotin in his treatise *Фет и Елена Лазич* [*Fet and Elena Lazich*] (1933, after Klenin, 1991) and Emily Klenin in the article *Fet and Maria Lazič* (Klenin, 1991) reflect on the theme of love in Fet’s prose memoirs and poetry. Considering the fact that the history of the acquaintance with Maria and her poetic image, recorded in Fet’s love poetry, is extensively analysed in detail, it is worth making an attempt to examine how they were presented in the prose of the same author.

Fet’s prose memoirs consist of two works. The first is *Мои воспоминания* [*My Memoirs*], published in 1890, on which the artist began working in the early 1860s (Čeremisinova, 2008, p. 42). In this volume, Fet describes the events that took place after 1850. He presents the history of his service in the army from 1853–1863 (he took an active part in the life of the literary circles of St Petersburg at that time), a period of “creative pause” (1863–1883), when he devoted himself to managing the estate and working as a land judge, leading the description to the events of 1889.

It was not until 1890 that Fet began recording memoirs that included the first part of his biography – his childhood and adolescent years (the period of his studies and his first years of military service). However, the book entitled *Ранние годы моей жизни* [*The Early Years of My Life*] was published posthumously in 1893. It is in this volume that the author talks about Maria Lazich and their tragic love affair, which ended in the death of his beloved.

*Ранние годы моей жизни* is marked by a clearly defined autobiographicality. The book is both an individual account and a documentary at the same time, which,

according to Małgorzata Czermińska, determines the autobiographical character of the text (Czermińska, 2009, p. 13). In this essay, however, I use the term “memoir” prose instead of “autobiographical.” This is due to the broader semantic range of the term “memoirs,” because:

Memoirs are also a form close to a diary and the term is sometimes used synonymously in relation to a diary and an autobiography, although research tradition stresses that the composition of memoirs is sometimes more open, with a tendency to fragmentation, and the subject can move even further away from the foreground, organising individual parts of the text around selected events or people. (Czermińska, 2009, p. 14)<sup>1</sup>

In classical framings, memoirs are defined as a variation of the diarist form (Mažarina, 2011, p. 201; Głowiński, Kostkiewiczowa, Okopień-Sławińska and Sławiński, 2002, p. 369), but this approach, in my opinion, narrows down the understanding of the term.

### LITERARY INSPIRATIONS

The figure of Maria Lazich appears in *Ранние годы моей жизни* as Elena Larina or M-lle Helene. The choice of a literary pseudonym was certainly a thoughtful one and was part of the author’s playing with the reader. The name evokes certain associations with a set of traits attributed to Pushkin’s Tatiana – the heroine of *Евгений Онегин* ([*Eugene Onegin*], 1831) (Blagoj, 1981). Both characters share a love of nature and art, a sublime sensitivity, a poetic soul, honesty, and the ability to love deeply. Both are characterised by a certain secrecy and moderation: Tatiana is “quiet, sad, silent” [“тиха, печальна, молчалива”], Maria “reserved” [“сдержанная”].

We can also find many common points between the two pieces in the composition and presentation of the characters. The contrast between Tatiana and Olga is repeated in the juxtaposition of Elena and Nadezhda:

A tall, shapely brunette, her face she did not measure up to her sister’s beauty [Nadezhda Buynitska – J.D.], but surpassed her with the extraordinary grandeur of her steel black hair. As lively and playful as Nadezhda Buynitska was, so Elena Larina was reserved. (Fet, 1983, p. 211)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Wspomnienia to również forma bliska pamiętnikowi i termin niekiedy używany synonimicznie w stosunku do pamiętnika i autobiografii, aczkolwiek w tradycji badawczej podkreśla się, że kompozycja wspomnień bywa bardziej otwarta, z tendencją do fragmentaryczności, i podmiot może się w nich odsuwać jeszcze dalej w głąb od pierwszego planu, organizując poszczególne partie tekstu wokół wybranych zdarzeń lub osób.”

<sup>2</sup> “Большого роста, стройная брюнетка, она далеко уступала лицом своей сестре [Nadezhda Buynitska – J.D.], но зато превосходила ее необычайною роскошью чёрных с сизым

However, the heroine of the affair turns out to be not the sister who is commonly regarded as a beauty, but the one who hides a beautiful soul under a less attractive outer shell. The love stories in both works take place in the Russian province, in the community of Russian landowners (Klenin, 1991, p. 150). The authors show daily life, mentality, and customs of this social class, although in different epochs. To some extent, Fet also uses Pushkin's motif of letters in which the characters confess their feelings or, conversely, reject this feeling.

There is another literary reference to the figure of Maria – Elena. Fet describes a scene in which his beloved reads him Ivan Turgenev's (1818–1883) *Parasha* ([*Параша*], 1843). According to author's idea, the poem was to be a parody of Pushkin's romance in verse. The plot of the love of a country maiden and a young man from a big city, which appears in *Евгений Онегин*<sup>3</sup> and *Параша*, is also repeated in the story of Maria and Fet, who lived and studied in the capital city for several years before he began his service in the army. The poet writes:

And besides, she was the first to introduce me to Turgenev's poem *Parasha*. I remember when, not without irony, she read the lines:

“He stood sideways a bit  
And started talking  
About Turkey, pursued by a malicious fate.”

I remember how suddenly I did not want to stand in front of her in a similar undesirable position. (Fet, 1983, p. 214)<sup>4</sup>

Maria's ironic attitude towards the protagonist of the poem – a caricature of a romantic hero – indicates her maturity as a reader who knows how to understand the author's idea properly. Perhaps her irony also applies to the idealised love story because she senses that in her case, the affair will not end happily.

Fet's repetition of the scheme of the love story and references to the works of Pushkin and Turgenev seems to be an intended concept of the writer. Each of the authors presents a different ending to this theme. Pushkin's Tatiana prefers moral principles over love, she wants to remain faithful to her husband and keep her word, so she rejects Eugene's love. The heroine of Turgenev's poem, in turn, marries

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отливом волос. Насколько Надежда Буйницкая была резва и проказлива, настолько Елена Ларина была сдержанна.”

<sup>3</sup> This scheme is also repeated by Pushkin in the novella *Барышня-крестьянка* [*The Young Lady-Peasant*], written at the same time as *Евгений Онегин* and belonging to the *Повести Белкина* [*Belkin Tales*] series. Both works were written in 1830 during the so-called “Boldino Autumn.”

<sup>4</sup> “И между прочим, она первая познакомила меня с поэмой Тургенева *Параша*. Помню, как она не без иронии прочла стихи: / »Стал как-то боком / И начал разговор / О Турции, гонимый злобным роком.« / Помню, как мне вдруг сделалось нежелательно стать перед нею в таком невыгодном положении.”

her beloved and leads a happy life of a stable wife. Elena, on the other hand, does not want to submit to conventions, she wants her relationship with her beloved to continue even though she cannot count on marriage. Fet, in a way, "completes" this field of possible variants of ending the love story.

While Larina's name directly refers to the heroine of *Евгений Онегин*, the name Elena, or M-Ile Helene, does not lead to such clear associations. However, if we consider Fet's work as a whole, it seems that the sources of this literary pseudonym can be discovered. As we know, in the 1840s, a group of "anthologist" poets was formed in Russian poetry, including Fet (Czykwin, 1984, p. 192). This trend continued the tradition of Konstantin Batyushkov's (1787–1855) "anthological" lyric poetry, inspired by ancient poetry and the culture of ancient Greece and Rome. In this context, the choice of a name evokes associations with the mythological Helen, who in ancient culture was considered a symbol of femininity and beauty. And although physical beauty plays a secondary role in the image of Elena Larina, even in the sparing description of her appearance there is an echo of the southern type of female beauty (tall height, thick dark hair).<sup>5</sup> Fet devotes much more space to the spiritual beauty of his beloved, describing her sensitivity, musical talent and love of art. This focus on beauty is also the main feature of the "pure art" trend of which Fet was the main representative and theorist.

#### GEORGESANDISM AND THE ISSUE WITH WOMEN IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE OF THE SECOND HALF OF THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Maria and Fet were linked by a similar sensitivity and sphere of aesthetic and literary tastes. What brought them closer, however, was the work of George Sand and her new concept of love, about which the poet writes:

The main field of convergence was George Sand with her charming language, inspiring descriptions of nature and completely new, unprecedented lovers' relations. Presenting personal impressions while reading each of her new novels led to a mutual evaluation of these feelings and to endless explanations of them. (Fet, 1983, p. 214)<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The southern beauty of Fet's beloved was due to the fact that Maria's family, both mother and father, came from Serbia. In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a group of Serbs, including the families of Petkovich and Lazich, settled in the Kherson Governorate by order of the tsarist authorities.

<sup>6</sup> "Главным полем сближения послужила нам Жорж Санд с ее очаровательным языком, вдохновенными описаниями природы и совершенно новыми небывальными отношениями влюбленных. Изложение личных впечатлений при чтении каждого нового её романа приводило к взаимной проверке этих ощущений и к нескончаемым их объяснениям."

This excerpt proves that the poet was interested in the phenomenon of “Georgesandism” [“жоржсандизм”] which was popular in Russia at that time, and which formed in the 1840s and 1860s as a result of social and moral changes that took place under the influence of ideas and images contained in the French writer’s works (Kafanova, 2012, p. 462). George Sand’s new philosophy of love rejected the idea of original sin and referred to Saint-Simon’s theory of rehabilitation of carnality. “Georgesandism” brought to the fore the value of love itself, proclaimed the “sacredness” of emotions, even if it was not sanctioned by the church.

Love for nature and emotionality brings the heroine of *Ранние годы моей жизни* closer to the character of Genevieve from the novel *Andre* (Klenin, 1991, p. 136). Elena’s views on love, her contempt for convention, idealisation of love and her declared lack of interest in marriage also indicate, according to the American scholar, that the heroine’s worldview is shaped by the ideas proclaimed by Sand (Klenin, 1991, p. 155).

The idea of “Georgesandism” is one of many factors<sup>7</sup> that contributed to the polemics about emancipation and “issue of women” [“женский вопрос”] that took place in Russian society in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The old patriarchal social structure was becoming a thing of the past, and the new times needed a reshaping of the roles to be played by women. The previous functions of wives and mothers, subordinated to men, turned out to be insufficient. The personal freedom of women was also an important issue. The disputes around these issues (usually taking place in magazines) are also reflected in the literature. The figure of the woman who strives for freedom in the sphere of feelings wants a moral life in harmony with her conscience, which is characterised by high spiritual values, appears in many works of the most eminent realist writers of that period. Such characters include, among others, Catherine of *Гроза* ([*The Storm*] 1859) by Alexander Ostrovsky (1823–1886), Vera – the heroine of Ivan Goncharov’s novel (1812–1891) *Обрыв* ([*The Precipice*] 1869), Natalia from Ivan Turgenev’s (1818–1883) *Рудин* ([*Rudin*] 1856), or the eponymous Anna Karenina from the novel of the same name by Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910). The position of writers connected with the group of revolutionary democrats was even more radical on the issue of emancipation. In his novel *Что делать?* ([*What Is to Be Done?*] 1863) Nikolay Chernyshevsky (1828–1889) addressed the new morality and presented a new model of family life, based on the partnership of spouses and the free nature of their relationship. The

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<sup>7</sup> Another factor was, for example, the economic crisis in Russia after the abolition of serfdom laws in 1861. This reform led to the collapse of a large number of landholding estates. As a result, many women from the impoverished nobility were forced to look for work to support themselves and sometimes their families. This phenomenon was shown by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in his portrayal of Dunya Raskolnikov from *Crime and Punishment* ([*Преступление и наказание*] 1866).

picture of Vera Pavlovna, the main character of this work, is an emancipated woman, materially and spiritually independent of a man. A similar stance was presented by Alexander Herzen (1812–1870) in his work *Кто виноват?* ([*Who Is to Blame?*] 1846). The author preached the idea of equality between men and women, but he also understood the existence of differences resulting from the different nature of both genders. According to him, a woman, like a man, had the right to develop her personality and realise herself in the social sphere.

The literary portrait of Elena Larina recorded in the prose memoirs can, it seems, be read as the voice of Fet in this dispute about emancipation and reformulation of the traditional definitions of family and marriage. Like Leo Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*, Fet focuses on the inner life of his heroine, poses questions about the human being's right to happiness, and points to the negative role of commonly accepted social norms that determine human fate and often lead to personal tragedies.

At the same time, the story of this affair can be interpreted as a kind of attempt to justify the writer, his “playing for *image*, the literary image of the author” [“gra o *image*, literacki wizerunek autora”] (Zaleski, 2004, p. 65). Fet's contemporary critics repeatedly emphasised the dissonance between his poetry, in which the themes of art, love and beauty were at the forefront, and his attitude in real life – which consisted in the fact that he subordinated his entire activity to restoring the title and family name lost in the family turmoil, gaining possessions and a stable position in the sphere of nobility. Fet, describing the habits of his social sphere, tried to explain the motives that guided him in his life choices, including those concerning his emotional life.

In *Ранние годы моей жизни*, Fet not only outlines his and Maria's difficult financial situation but also writes about the rules of marriage in the sphere of the nobility. He points out that without money, he cannot marry a young woman without property. It would be, in his opinion, a dishonest act, as he could not support his family:

And at the same time, remembering Okonor's advice, I understood well that for an officer, receiving 300 roubles from home, marrying a girl without a fortune means recklessly or dishonestly making a vow he is unable to keep. [...] We were not children: I was 28 and she was 22, and it would be unforgivable if we turned our backs on everyday life completely. In order to immediately burn the ships of our mutual hopes, I gathered myself together and expressed my thoughts loudly about how much I considered marriage impossible and selfish. – “I like talking to you” – Elena said, – “without any infringement on your freedom.” Our evening conversations continued. (Fet, 1983, p. 216)<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> “И в то время, припоминая совет Оконора, я ясно понимал, что жениться офицеру, получающему 300 руб. из дому, на девушке без состояния, значит необдуманно или недобросовестно брать на себя клятвенное обещание, которого не в состоянии выполнить. [...] Мы оба были не дети: мне 28, а ей 22, и нам непростительно было совершенно отворачиваться от

Fet's seemingly cynical attitude was not an isolated phenomenon at the time. Although the poet's practicality and materialism was often the subject of biting criticism of his contemporaries, it should be remembered that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, marriage was seen as "an element of family policy, as a property contract and a source of legal offspring... [...] Marriages were concluded by many men for dowry, profit and opening the way to a career" ["element polityki rodzinnej, jako kontrakt majątkowy i źródło legalnego potomstwa... [...] Małżeństwa były zawierane przez wielu mężczyzn dla posagu, zysku i otwarcia sobie drogi do kariery"] (Przybył, 2006–2008, pp. 38–39).

Elena's position on marriage is also clear. The words spoken by the heroine indicate that she understands her position and is not counting on marriage. In fact, she is in a similar situation to Fet, if not worse. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such behaviour – public displays of affection, frequent visits, *tête-à-tête* conversations were commonly perceived in the sphere of landed gentry as courtship, which should be followed by a marriage proposal. Breaking this convention was seen as an affront or even a disgrace to the young woman. An educated, talented young woman from a good but impoverished family could only improve her social position through a wealthy marriage. The opportunities for getting to know a candidate for a husband were also hindered, because, as Iwona Przybył writes:

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, unmarried young women had very limited possibilities of contact with the opposite sex. The opportunity to get to know a future husband could be found in all kinds of social events, family meetings and trips, in which the woman took part exclusively under the care of her family. [...] Young men had much more freedom in choosing their life partners, and they also had the initiative to continue their acquaintance. (Przybył, 2006–2008, pp. 38–39)<sup>9</sup>

Maria–Elena is internally torn between heart and mind. In accepting the hopelessness of the situation, the heroine insists on maintaining her acquaintance, although this is connected with her friends' judgement and rumours. She knows Fet is not going to marry her, but she refuses to part with him. Going against established customs, making decisions on her own, putting affection first connects the heroine

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будничной жизни. Чтобы разом ежечь корабли наших взаимных надежд, я собрался с духом и высказал громко свои мысли касательно того, насколько считал брак для себя невозможным и эгонистичным. – »Я люблю с вами беседовать«, – говорила Елена, – »без всяких посягательств на вашу свободу«. Поздние беседы наши продолжались.”

<sup>9</sup> “W wieku XIX niezamężne dziewczęta miały mocno ograniczone możliwości kontaktu z płcią przeciwną. Okazją do poznania przyszłego męża były wszelkiego rodzaju imprezy towarzyskie, spotkania rodzinne i wyjazdy, w których kobieta brała udział wyłącznie pod opieką rodziny. [...] Młodzi mężczyźni mieli znacznie większą swobodę w doborze partnerek życiowych, do nich też należała inicjatywa kontynuowania znajomości.”



with the aforementioned trend of "Georgesandism" on the one hand, and on the other hand, it reflects the previously discussed trends in Russian literature of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in presenting female characters.

### THE DRAMA OF THE LOVE STORY

The description of Elena and Fet's relationship against the background of the principles and customs of the aristocratic milieu is interwoven in the memoirs with a poetic account of the feeling they share. The poet gradually shows the history of his acquaintance with Maria Lazich in his work (Klenin, 1991, p. 138). He builds the love story based on the scheme of the dramatic structure: he outlines the exposition showing the milieu of the Russian provincial landed gentry, gradually builds up tension by introducing a description of his first enchantments, and then moves on to the story of his acquaintance with Maria, while the climax coincides with the moment of the heroine's tragic death.

Presenting a picture of the Russian province and landed gentry, the author unveils an exhibition of future events before the reader. He writes about the first years of service in the Kherson Governorate in Krasnosel'e. He describes his daily life, his service in the army, his social life, and his material situation. Fet compensates for the lack of money and noble title with his talent and personal charm, which is why he is willingly invited as a guest by the local landowners. At one of the balls, he makes friends with Alexei Brezhsky and his wife Alexandra. This acquaintance turns into a long-standing friendship. It is thanks to Brezhskys and their relatives, the Petkovich family, that the poet meets the family of the retired general Kozma Lazich and his two daughters.

Gradually, the fictionalisation of the text is intensified by the introduction of more and more individualised descriptions of the internal state of the author-narrator. Fet recalls his infatuations and friendships with women whom he was seeing at the time. The platonic objects of the author's affections include, among others, the Misses Priefatsky – Yulia and Camilla, as well as Aleksandra Brezhska and the beautiful Varvara Andreyevna Bezrodnaya (Venclova, 1985, p. 90).

The time perspective of the story, thanks to the possibility of a better view of the past and the extraction of what is most important from it, allows Fet to distinguish the young man's first enchantments and ephemeral fascinations from his true feeling. The first signal that announces the appearance of Maria Lazich is the recollection of her grandfather, Ilya Petkovich, and her parents. Helene herself appears for the first time in the narrative as if in the background. The author's attention is initially focused on her older sister, the beautiful Nadezhda Buynitska:

General Larin's two daughters were also guests; the elder, a wonderfully beautiful brunette was with her husband, the treasurer of the Oldenburg Regiment, Rittmeister Buynitski. He was a very handsome, resourceful and prudent officer, nearly 35 years old. Restrained in society, of course, he knew the value of his beautiful wife and was not surprised that she was like a magnet in the regiment, attracting young people. (Fet, 1983, p. 208)<sup>10</sup>

Fet's advances to the married Buynitska, who loves her husband, have no chance of success. The infatuation lasts for a short time and soon the poet starts to take an interest in her younger sister Maria. The poet recalls the moments of the first meeting as follows:

The younger Elena Larina, who enjoyed the full and well-deserved affection of her hosts and the sincere affection of her brother-in-law Buynitski, took little part in her friends' loud games and, being a great musician, preferred to play the piano for dancers. (Fet, 1983, pp. 210–211)<sup>11</sup>

The thread of understanding between them is quickly born. They share literary and artistic tastes. Fet, himself extremely sensitive to the melody of the word, draws attention to Maria's uncommon musical talent. The writer also tells of a beautiful musical phrase – a goodbye, which Franz Liszt (1811–1886), delighted with Maria's virtuosity and mastery of playing, dedicated to her. Under the influence of this work, the poem *Какие-то носятся звуки* [*Sounds Float in the Air*] was written in 1853. In this work, the motif of unfulfilled love appears, whose memory returns to the poet in melody, in bright trembling sounds.

In the course of the narrative about the relationship with Elena Larina, the word "love" is not used. The poet replaces it with the words "feeling," "relationship" as if leaving a certain sphere of understatement. He also puts forward his own original vision of love, understood as spiritual closeness. This closeness is in itself poetry that does not need words. People who feel this way understand that language is not able to fully express the feelings they share. That is why Fet confesses, elsewhere: "We never talked about our mutual feelings. Anyway, that would be completely unnecessary" ["Никогда мы не проговаривались о наших взаимных чувствах. Да это было бы совершенно излишне"] (Fet, 1983, p. 215).

<sup>10</sup> "Гостили и две дочери генерала Ларина, и притом старшая, замечательная красавица брюнетка, с мужем своим — казначеем Ольденбургского полка ротмистром Буйницким. Это был весьма красивый, находчивый и расторопный офицер, лет 35-ти. Сдержанный в обществе, он, очевидно, знал цену своей красавицы жены и не удивлялся, что она в полку представляла магнит, привлекавший молодежь."

<sup>11</sup> "Меньшая Ларина Елена, пользовавшаяся вполне заслуженною симпатией хозяев и задушевными ласками своего зятя Буйницкого, мало участвовала в шумном веселье подруг и, будучи великолепной музыкантшей, предпочитала играть на рояли для танцующих."

Behind this poetic concept of love, there is a profound tragedy of the position in which they both find themselves. Their relationship is at an impasse and Fet asks for a transfer to a remote regiment to break off contact with Helene. The decisive conversation, which was supposed to explain and end the relationship, does not bring about any solution, but only makes the situation worse, bringing them both pain and a sense of hopelessness. Maria still desperately insists that they do not break off their correspondence. Her bad mental state grows worse and, the autumn of 1850, she dies in tragic circumstances.

Fet learns about the death of his beloved from Mikhail Petkovich's account. The circumstances of this event were tragic. Maria's dress caught fire from a carelessly thrown match. The fire was difficult to put out and the girl suffered severe burns. She died several days later. Fet does not comment on this event, locking the traumatic experience in a sphere of oblivion.

The image of Maria Lazich in *Ранние годы моей жизни* is subordinated to two areas. On the one hand, in the presentation of facts concerning this figure, the author, in accordance with the feature of memoir prose (Savinkov, 2008, p. 118), strives to convey the biographical truth, giving concrete facts from the life of his beloved. On the other hand, he uses a strong fictionalizing element by introducing direct and hidden literary references, using character models known from the literature (Pushkin's Tatiana, Sand's Genevieve) and compositional procedures (presentation of characters by contrast). Fet fictionalises both the autobiographical love story and the figure of Maria herself. By creating a literary portrait of his beloved, the poet transfers her from the real sphere to a text functioning in timelessness, and in essence mythologising his true love, Maria–Elena (cf. Zaleski, 2004, p. 53).

*Translated into English: Lingua Lab*

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