

SOCIOLOGICAL CONTENT OF ISAAC ASIMOV’S “THE END OF ETERNITY”

Rafael Sharifovich AKHMEDOV¹
Gulistan State University
Senior Lecturer
rapha84@mail.ru

Abstract

The article includes speculations about social science fiction on the example of Isaac Asimov’s “The End of Eternity”. Comparative-historical and literary analysis of the novel shows that sociological content plays central role to reveal novel’s main idea and author’s attitude by considering the social consequences of the scientific and technological progress on the development of society itself.

Key words: Social science fiction; Asimov, “The End of Eternity”; content; idea; scientific-technological progress.

Science fiction is designed to systematically explore possible paths of social development, timely warn about dangerous trends and, most importantly, make rational thinking about the fate of mankind and the property of the broadest possible masses. The growing popularity of this genre of literature at the beginning of the 21st century only increases the moral and social responsibility of writers. The works of even the most gifted representatives of the genre, devoid of sociological content, will appear only as a kind of entertainment literature. For a long time, Asimov was a victim of the primitive understanding of social science fiction by literary critics [1, p.174]. Some of his novels, including “The End of Eternity”, were regarded as dark prophecies and reactionary technocratic utopias. But to judge them this way is like considering “Don Quixote” only as a novel about chivalrous adventures, and “Anna Karenina” as a story about love affair. In fact, Asimov’s social science fiction is the exact opposite of what has been attributed to it by some naive or clearly unfriendly critics deprived of fantasy. His writings were conceived and created not as a justification for reactionary utopias, but as a social criticism of such utopias.

“The End of Eternity” is a science fiction novel that can be realized at least on two levels. The first level – a fascinating topic of time travel – arouses the natural curiosity of the reader, while the dramatic plot and the clash of characters capture the imagination. The novel discusses obvious implications and potential paradoxes of time traveling (including meeting yourself, or a Bootstrap Paradox). The plot is centered around the Eternity –organization that shapes human history by conducting surgical modifications in its normal course, thus creating multiple realities.

The author’s innermost thoughts, however, lie much deeper than the external development of events in the novel. To get to the second level of understanding and get a correct idea of what fears and hopes Asimov wanted to share with the readers, one must take into account the oppressive spiritual atmosphere in which there were wide sections of the creative intelligentsia in the United States of that time. Their concern for the fate of humanity and civilization is associated with the fact that scientific and technological revolution of the 20th century in the United States is accompanied by a colossal concentration of economic wealth and political power in the hands of the ruling classes. Relying on the unlimited material resources placed at their disposal by the rapid development of the science, monopolies can establish their dominance in society. Their dictatorship would rest not on physical suppression, but on the spiritual enslavement of the masses, not on primitive robbery, but on the sophisticated exploitation of the working people under the guise of a “welfare state”. In such a society, the oppressed would not even be aware of their oppression. Such a dictatorship of

monopolists, according to many American science fiction writers of that time, was more dangerous than fascism in its traditional form. Aldous Huxley, Ray Bradbury, as well as one of the most popular philosophers in the USA, Erich Fromm, spoke about the possible prospects for such a future [4, p.4]. Asimov considers social consequences of the scientific and technological progress incomparably more far-sighted than most American philosophers and sociologists [2, p.236]. For him, the omnipotence of the technocratic oligarchy is not a fatal outcome, but only one of the possible consequences of scientific progress in the event that a privileged minority, a “higher caste,” whatever its origin, takes possession of its fruits in selfish interests. Both the hero of the novel and its reader come to realize this danger gradually, are convinced of it by the course of events. At first, Harlan does not question the rationality of the order established in Eternity, nor the right of the Eternals to tailor and reshape the history of mankind at their own discretion. Moreover, this order seems to him the only fair, and the activities of the Eternals are dictated solely by concern for the well-being of the human race. Their constant interference in the fate of people is perceived by him as a heavy burden, but voluntarily imposed by the Eternals on themselves for the sake of the happiness of all past, present and future generations. However, under the influence of various circumstances, Harlan begins to hesitate in his convictions, he is more and more outraged by the hierarchical system, where ordinary people are at the social bottom. He learns about the intrigues among the Eternals, about their use of eavesdropping and spying devices, about sophisticated methods of reprisals against violators of the established order. In the course of dramatic collisions with reality, in the process of personal experiences, Harlan revises the moral values that guided him before. With extraordinary artistic skill and psychological tact, the writer shows how these changes take place in the soul of the protagonist of the novel.

In “The End of Eternity” Asimov “analyses and critiques different aspects of society as he creates what he himself has termed as social science fiction” [5, p.9]. Asimov addresses the “eternal” philosophical and moral problem – the conflict between the goal and the means of achieving it. This problem, over which entire generations of thinkers fought in the past, has become extremely acute in our era, when the development of science and technology has put into the hands of people incomparable means of destruction and creation, putting humanity in front of a dilemma: for the sake of what goals they will be used. The solution offered by Asimov is deeper and more convincing than in the overwhelming majority of philosophical works and moral speculations on this topic. His novel contains a refutation of the famous principle that “the goal justifies the means”, which actually justified the most terrible crimes in history.

Asimov does not dwell on the relatively elementary and obvious things when noble goals are hypocritically proclaimed to mask the selfish interests of individuals. He is occupied with much more difficult situations when people are sincerely convinced of the nobility of their goals and when these goals are really noble. In his novel, Asimov shows how completely different motives can be hidden behind noble goals, in which people are not aware. At first glance, the Eternals in the novel set themselves only one goal – to increase the amount of human happiness. They truly believe in it. However, it turns out that the intervention of the Eternals in the lives of people could subconsciously be dictated by them simply by the desire to perpetuate their dominance over humanity.

The idea of time travel, embodied in the novel, allows Asimov to pose the problem of goals and means on the scale of human history as a whole. How can one person know, in fact, what is the greatest good, the highest goal from the point of view of the entire human race? In the epilogue of the novel, Asimov, through one of the characters, expresses his reflections on the place and vocation of humanity in the universe: “The greatest good?... What is that? Your machines tell you. Your Computaplexes. But who adjusts the machines and tells them what to weigh in the balance?” [3, p.248] On the scale of world history, each definite goal, as soon as it is realized, turns into a means of achieving subsequent goals. According to the materialistic understanding of history, the development of society is the result of those material resources that were used for various purposes. It is these means, set in motion by people, regardless of their subjective intentions, that is the only acting reason in history, it alone can affect the course of social development. But Asimov considers the best goal to be the one that assumes the use of the most humane means for the achievement. By forcing the reader to think about these problems, Asimov’s novel thereby helps to realize that there are no such goals that in the eyes of mankind would justify thermonuclear war, the dictatorship of anarchists, armed intervention, suppression of the democratic rights of the people, racial hatred and other social evils. Every person, albeit to a small extent, is a Harlan of his own; it also depends on his decisions and actions whether or not the antagonistic social system with all its cataclysms and injustices will be perpetuated.

Despite the active use of the theme of time travel, “The End of Eternity” is not a scientific work on the properties of time and the role of chance in history, but a science fiction novel about the possible social consequences of today’s scientific-technological progress. Without those hypothetical assumptions that the author made, there would be no fascinating novel, no timely warning about the real dangers on the way to the great future of humanity.

References:

1. Ackermann R. (2009). Complying with the Rules of Asimov. In “Wissens management 2009”: Proceedings of the 5thConference on Professional Knowledge Management: Experiences and Visions at Bonn, Germany: 174-183.
2. Akhmedov R.Sh. (2017). “The End of Eternity” as a Novel of Prevention. In “European Research”: Proceedings of the 11thInternational Conference at Penza, Russian Federation, August 20, 2017: 236-238.
3. Asimov I. (2011). The End of Eternity. New York: Orb Books. 256 p.
4. Mathpati S. (2020). Aldous Huxley as a Social and Visionary Writer: A Study. In “Postmodern Literary Theory and Literature”: Proceedings of National Seminar at Nanded, India, January 27-28, 2020: 1-4.
5. Ralte L. (2010). Asimov as a Social Critic: A Select Study of His Science Fiction. MP dissertation. Shillong: North-Eastern Hill University. 112 p.

References

1. Мирзаев Т. “Алпомиш” достонининг ўзбек вариантлари, – Тошкент: Фан 1958.
2. Гачечиладзе Г. Художественный перевод и литературные взаимосвязи. –Москва: Сов. Писатель 1980.
1. Reichl K. Alpomisich. Das usbekische Heldenepos. – Wiesbaden: Verlag Otto Harrassovitz 2001.
2. Reichl K. Rawśan. Ein usbekisches muendliches Epos. – Wiesbaden: Verlag Otto Harrassovitz 1985.