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Kraszewski's *Jermola* and George Eliot's *Silas Marner*

Some literary critics indicate that there exists a certain plot resemblance between a Populist work, entitled *Jermola*, written in 1854 by the Polish author, Józef Ignacy Kraszewski (1812-1887), and *Silas Marner*, a novel first published in 1861 by the feminist Victorian novelist, George Eliot. In this paper, an attempt is being made to study the genesis and the plot of both novels, and the critical and biographical literature to determine whether there was a literary link between Eliot and Kraszewski.

Various critics of Polish literature claim that Kraszewski was the most prolific Polish novelist.¹ Some even go further and call him the most prolific writer in world literature.² An author of some seven hundred volumes of novels, Kraszewski, in addition, conducted a many-sided intellectual activity as a man of letters, poet, playwright, publicist, literary and art critic; he was also talented in painting and music. Kraszewski did much to spread at home and abroad a knowledge of Polish national history during the years of foreign domination. He evidenced great sensibility with regard to the novel and great ease in writing.³ Kraszewski's career began when the Polish novel was in its infancy (1830s), and he left the literary scene after fifty-five creative years, when Sienkiewicz had already established himself as a national figure. Kraszewski spanned the nineteenth century with his novels, but they also depicted the history of Poland from pagan times to the uprising of 1863. They dealt with topical and exotic subjects and with regional and domestic themes. In style, they were similar to the realistic prose of Flaubert, Dickens and Turgenev. As a young student at Wilno University, Kraszewski read voraciously the works of Walter Scott, Jean Paul

- 1 Czesław Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983) 256. Julian Krzyżanowski, *A History of Polish Literature* (Warszawa: PWN, 1978) 319.
- 2 *Zarys dziejów literatury polskiej* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1972) 350.
- 3 Manfred Kridl, *A Survey of Polish Literature and Culture* (Leiden: Mouton & Co., 1956) 393.

Hoffmann, Stendhal, Paul de Kock, Balzac, Washington Irving and others, and was influenced by them.⁴ He also read extensively the writings of the great Polish romantic poets, among them poetry and dramas of his contemporary Zygmunt Krasiński.⁵ Some of Kraszewski's novels are still widely read, for example the novel *An Old Legend*, which was his stylized vision of pagan Poland. His peasant tales, although nowadays mostly forgotten, were very popular at the time and they marked an innovation in subject matter. Many Polish novelists were indebted to him, and many foreign readers knew him in translation, for he was the only Polish novelist before Sienkiewicz to enjoy a wider reputation abroad. He popularized a number of literary forms in Polish literature from which later novelists benefited. Importantly, Kraszewski shaped the historical novel in Poland. Some of his more imaginative stories, drawn from eighteenth-century sources, conveyed a vivid atmosphere of the past. Out of his peasant themes arose a new tradition in Polish letters which Reymont was later to infuse with a more universal quality. His prolific fiction and other aspects of writing embrace so much that few critics feel competent to discuss his total output.⁶

Kraszewski spent twenty-two years of his life (1838-1860) in Volhynia. As a young landowner and tenant farmer, he apparently sympathized with the serf population, as witnessed by his Populist stories and novels of that period.⁷ Among some ten titles belonging to this cycle, *Jermola* is one of his best known novels.⁸ During this time he had the opportunity to observe the Ukrainian or Belorussian peasant-serf, to learn his language, customs, and way of life. In these novels he sympathetically portrayed peasant protagonists.⁹ He was among the first such authors in Polish literature and, immediately before and during the period of serf emancipation in the Russian Empire, his Populist novels enjoyed the widest readership. In this cycle he raised the depiction of lowly peasant characters to an acceptable literary topic of the time — an innovation in Polish literature. This sensitivity and literary innovation attracted the Ukrainian serf-poets, Taras

Shevchenko's praise of two of these works.¹⁰ It is very probable that the cycle attracted also the interest of Turgenev, who some few years before had published his *A Hunter's Sketches* and of a Ukrainian woman writer, Marko Vovchok, who co-operated with Turgenev on a Russian language edition of her *Folk Tales*, and who in 1857 published, in Ukrainian, her own stories about the life of serfs. And, vice-versa, Kraszewski must have known of their works, since the title of the novel, *Jermola*, is reminiscent of Turgenev's *Sketches*. Yermolai is the hunter's peasant companion and servant on his trips, and this name appears frequently in the stories, as well as in the title of one of them. Furthermore, Turgenev, with whom Kraszewski corresponded, was to be later present at Kraszewski's 50-year jubilee celebration of his creative work, held in Cracow in 1879.¹¹

In his "Introduction" to the 1872 edition of *Jermola*, Kraszewski wrote that the genesis of the novel goes back to 1855 when he was in charge of a Polish school in Zhytomyr, situated some 100 km west of Kiev.¹² But also his memories of his previous sojourn in the region between Volhynia and Polesie further to the north-west of Zhytomyr, went into the plot structure and the descriptions. In this novel he depicts Polesie the way it was at the end of the third decade of the nineteenth century. The marshes and the huge forests held a fascination for Kraszewski, and this region was the locale for his other Populist novels and stories as well. This was also the period in his life when he was very conscious of the fate of the local peasants, resulting in pro-Populist tendencies, despite his gentry origins. Reading the introductory part, one learns about Kraszewski's warm feelings toward the common folk. But it is not only the introduction — the work itself is a good example of Populist literature. The novel is dedicated to Władysław Syrokomla (Ludwik Kondratowicz, 1823-1862), a close friend and another Polish bard of the Pripet marshes. The occasion for the dedication was Syrokomla's visit to Kraszewski's estate.¹³ Although the author does not say where and how the theme of the old man Jermola originated, it is quite possible that he learned it from someone local or from Syrokomla himself. The first Polish language publication of the novel appeared in Warsaw in the spring of 1856, but with the date of 1857.¹⁴ Julian Krzyżanowski, the Polish

4 Maxine Herman, *Histoire de la littérature polonaise* (Paris: Nizet, 1963) 250. Kridl 343.

5 Wincenty Danek, *Józef Ignacy Kraszewski* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1973) 243.

6 Wincenty Danek, *Józef Ignacy Kraszewski. Zarys biograficzny* (Warszawa: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, 1976) 5.

7 Danek 168.

8 Anna Mińska, *Pisarze polscy* (Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy CRZZ, 1975) 202.

9 Halina Maria Dobrowolska, *Tytan pracy. Opowieść o Józefie Kraszewskim* (Warszawa: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, 1955) 98.

10 *Shevchenko'skyi slovnnyk* (Kyiv: Instytut Literatury imeni T.H. Shevchenka Akademii Nauk Ukrainy'koi R.S.R., 1976) I 328.

11 Danek 1976, 326. *Literaturnoe nasledstvo. Iz parizhskogo arkhiva I.S. Turgeneva*, (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo "Nauka," 1964) II 408, 415, 428.

12 J.I. Kraszewski, *Jermola*. Obrazki wiejskie. Wydał i wstępem poprzedził Julian Krzyżanowski (Wrocław: Wydanie Zakładu Narodowego im. Ossolińskich, 1948) 1.

13 *Jermola* 2.

14 Ibid. XL.

literary historian, who did some in-depth study of Kraszewski's works, maintains that the novel was serialized before it did appear in its entirety in one volume. This dating of publication would shift the time of its writing to one year earlier, i.e., to 1854.¹⁵ The first French and foreign language translation of this work appeared in Paris in 1868.¹⁶ From French it was then translated into other languages, among them German, still during the author's life.¹⁷

The plot of the novel is fairly simple. The protagonist, Jermola, is an older man, in his sixties, who, after years of service at the squire's manor, has retired to a deserted and dilapidated hut in the village. He becomes almost apathetic in his solitude, until one day he finds an abandoned infant boy under an oak tree near his abode. The author does not tell us the year when the action takes place but only indicates that it all happened before industrialization and before modern technology reached that part of the country. Jermola realizes that the abandoned baby must have belonged to wealthy people because its clothing and sheets are of fine, expensive material. In addition, the baby has a gold medallion around its neck, and a sizeable amount of gold coins is enclosed in his swaddling clothes. Jermola announces the news of the baby's appearance to his neighbours but does not divulge information about the gold. However, he plans to keep the money in trust for the boy and to give it to him when he has grown up. Since no one claims the infant, he decides to adopt it and devotes himself completely to taking care of the child. In the unfamiliar task of nursing the baby, he is helped by a neighbouring widow. His energies revive, he learns the trade of a potter as well as how to read and write in his advanced age, and assumes friendly relations with his neighbours. When the boy is twelve years old, his parents, the master and mistress of the manor in the neighbouring village — following the death of the young squire's tyrannical father — claim him as their own child. Jermola's world and his happiness are shattered when he and the boy have to submit to the will of the boy's parents. Eventually, the two ran off to hide in the forest. There the child dies of hardship and Jermola ends his days as a melancholy recluse.

When Kraszewski began writing his Populist novels he had no models to go by, thus he had to rely on his own experience and instinct and had to create his own ideals and models. To the readers at the time, this was an innovation. It is true, there are vestiges of sentimentalism in his Populist

works which are also apparent in *Jermola*: His pro-peasant feelings made Kraszewski depict the serf as a morally better person than his masters.¹⁸ Perhaps, there is a certain idealization of the peasant of which, however, a large number of nineteenth-century Populists was guilty. Yet, on the whole, the story is realistically presented and treated. There are, especially in the beginning of the novel, digressions and philosophizing passages which jar and detract from the plot. However, this was a feature of this genre at the time. Similarly, the use of Latin phrases shows Kraszewski's erudition but seems to be superfluous and out of place in a novel of this kind. On the other hand, the proverbs of the people, very often not only in Polish but also in the local Ukrainian-Belorussian language, and the presentation of humorous situations, add colour and authenticity to the plot. Sometimes these were overdone. There is something Gogolian in the description of life in the backwoods of Polesie at the time.¹⁹ Although the author does not make it explicit in the novel, the milieu is multi-ethnic. The local peasant population is of east-Slavic stock, the landowners are Polish, the merchants and inn-keepers are Jewish, and the authorities Russian. The names of characters reflect this ethnic variety. Thus Jermola, Horpyna and Chwedko are of eastern-Slavic provenance, while the name of the master of the manor is Drużyna, more Polish than eastern Slavic. The name of the inn-keeper is Szmul, and his wife's, Sara. The origin of the boy's name, Irodion-Radionek, could be east Slavic (Rodion), or perhaps Kraszewski was influenced by the title of Krasieński's drama, *Irydion* (1836) — "the son of the rainbow."²⁰

In general, Kraszewski scholars note the strong and weak points in the literary devices of this novel. For example, Danek emphasizes the sentimental elements which are also responsible for an idealistic presentation of the protagonist.²¹ What should be noted, however, is that at the time of the writing of this novel, romantic and sentimental features were still very much a literary device and, as mentioned earlier, Kraszewski was brought up on romantic literature. The idea that a 'natural' man, uncorrupted by civilization (the *noble savage*), was superior to a 'civilized' man, was inherited by the Romantics from Rousseau and was in turn accepted by the Populists. Kryżanowski, however, saw the idealization of Jermola as an unrealistic factor which made the ending of the novel appear

18 Dobrowolska 104.

19 Apparently, Gogol's Ukrainian stories were known to Kraszewski.

20 Cf. Zygmunt Krasieński, *Irydion* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975) 16 and Danek 1973, 243. Kraszewski was interested in Krasieński's works and in the 1880s edited and published the latter's correspondence (Danek 1973, 477, 486).

21 Danek 1976, 181.

15 Ibid. X. It is important to establish the date of *Jermola*'s publication, especially in its French and German versions, since this fact will explain whether it was possible for George Eliot to have read the novel before she wrote *Silas Marner*.

16 Ibid. 3.

17 Danek 1976, 181.

conventional, sentimental, and melodramatic.²² He also notes that Kraszewski portrays the twelve-year old Radonek in too sophisticated a fashion for a country lad his age.²³ Occasionally, the critic maintains, the author's statements are banal and artificial.²⁴ As to the source of the plot, Krzyżanowski believes Kraszewski found it in some 'moralistic' tale of French provenance going back to the eighteenth century.²⁵ Thus, Kraszewski adapted the east-Slavic milieu to a western story, including the application of individual words, proverbs, and expressions of that region.²⁶ So far no clues have been found in Kraszewski's papers about the origin of the story.²⁷

Let us now turn to George Eliot. She was a native of Warwickshire in the Midlands. Her father was a land agent and manager of an estate and thus a member of the middle class at the time. As a young girl, she read extensively and, in her twenties, became interested in philosophical and religious questions. She also studied German, French, and Italian. Among the French authors, one of her favourites was George Sand.²⁸ She began writing fiction at a mature age, and with the publication of *Adam Bede* (1859), her literary reputation was made. She knew quite well the rural England of the time and a number of her novels reflect this familiarity with it. Her literary output, in addition to articles, reviews and translations, consists of sixteen titles some of which contain more than one volume. Some of her novels give us the most vivid picture now extant of the manners and customs of the rural folk of the Midland counties in the first half of the nineteenth century. Perhaps her rustic characters are less idealized and more realistic than those presented by Kraszewski. Nevertheless, their delineation clearly shows the dignity and worth of an unsophisticated society and people. As a descendant from the lower middle class, but an intellectual by self-education and by social contacts, she realized that the lowly country folk and artisans displayed higher moral values than their better-to-do squires and members of the middle class. George Eliot's success with these novels depended greatly upon her creative impulse moving freely and confidently in the world of her own experience.

22 *Jermola* XXX.

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.* XXXI.

25 *Ibid.* XXXV.

26 *Ibid.* XXXXVI.

27 Danek 1976, 5. It should be mentioned that Kraszewski's letters, correspondence, and other materials have not yet been catalogued.

28 Anne Fremantle, *George Eliot* (London: Duckworth, 1933) 42, 71.

The idea to write *Silas Marner* occurred to George Eliot during her first visit to Florence, which places it between May 17 and June 1, 1860.²⁹ Later, she wrote to her publisher John Blackwood that the plot for the novel

came to me first of all, quite suddenly, as a sort of legendary tale, suggested by my recollection of having once, in early childhood, seen a linen-weaver with a bag on his back; but as my mind dwelt on the subject, I became inclined to a more realistic treatment.³⁰

The actual writing of the novel began on September 30, 1860³¹ and on November 28, 1860, she recorded in her *Journal*:

I am engaged now in writing a story the idea of which came to me after the arrival to this house [i.e., 10, Harewood Square in London — V.B.] and which has thrust itself between me and the other book I was meditating. It is 'Silas Marner, the Weaver of Raveloe.'³²

The initial 230 pages of its manuscript were expeditious to Blackwood on February 15, 1861, with an estimate of one hundred more pages to follow.³³ In his reply to her, dated February 15, 1861, Blackwood praised the first portion of the manuscript. He had very few objections to the story as such, except that it struck him as being very sad.³⁴ George Eliot's answer to Blackwood's letter, February 24th, was that the story was not sad at all — it was intended to put in "a strong light, the remedial influences of pure, natural human relations."³⁵ At first, she thought of putting the idea to verse, in Wordsworthian style, but later decided on prose.³⁶ Wordsworth was George Eliot's favourite romantic poet and the story of Silas was Wordsworthian in character, with the epigram to the novel being derived

29 Gordon S. Haight, *The George Eliot Letters* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1954) III 281. M. Laski, *George Eliot and Her World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973) 78.

30 Haight III 382. Fremantle 106. Laski 78. Felicia Bonaparte, *The Trippych and the Cross: The Central Myths of George Eliot's Poetic Imagination* (New York: New York UP, 1979) 7.

31 Haight III 281.

32 *Ibid.* 360. Bonaparte 6.

33 Haight III 377.

34 *Ibid.* 379. George Eliot, *A Writer's Notebook 1854-1879. And Uncollected Writings* Joseph Wiesenfarth, ed. (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1981) 249.

35 *Ibid.* Haight III 382.

36 *Ibid.*

from his poem.³⁷ The novel was published in book form on April 2, 1861.³⁸ Almost all the reviewers were delighted with it because there were no 'immoral' scenes in it as in some of the previous works of George Eliot.³⁹ This was also the only English-set novel by Eliot, in which real-life resemblances have not been traced.⁴⁰ Still in the same year she was approached by individuals who wished to have the novel translated into French and German.⁴¹

As a novel, *Silas Marner* had been very successful and very much liked by readers in England.⁴² The plot takes place at the time of the Napoleonic wars in an imaginary village of Raveloe, situated somewhere in the Midlands, probably in Warwickshire.⁴³ At the outset, the protagonist had been embittered by a grave injustice at the hands of the members of his sect who falsely found him guilty of a crime really committed by his accuser. He had to leave his native community and move to Raveloe, where he lived as a recluse linen weaver. The money that he labouriously earned through tedious toil gave him some degree of satisfaction as he began to hoard it. But all his money was stolen from him in mysterious circumstances and this contributed even more to his rejection and general mistrust of people. However, Providence compensated Silas for human injustice — he found one day in his hut a little baby girl whose mother had died of exposure. Since there were no claimants of the child, the weaver became its adopted parent and began the difficult task of raising the baby. The existence of this child changed his outlook on life and his personality: Once again he became a complete human being, trusting and caring. The love toward the child and its reciprocation as she began to grow made Silas satisfied and happy. When the real father of the girl, a local squire, tried to claim his daughter when she was already a young woman, the girl refused to leave her adopted father and declined to go and live in the manor. Thus Silas remained happy to the end of his days. In addition, the stolen money was found and the mystery of its disappearance explained.

The novel is a good example of George Eliot's belief in the law of retribution, namely, that people who lead a virtuous life are essentially rewarded by contentment, while those who commit evil or unethical deeds

are punished according to the severity of their transgression.⁴⁴ Eliot is at her best when depicting her native countryside and its inhabitants. The rustic setting of *Silas Marner*, although some critics find it too 'bucolic,'⁴⁵ is really not idyllic. The sentimentalism of the Wordsworthian romantic idyll is also not evident. Eliot tries to deal with the topic in a realistic way. Although there is a combination of fortuitous coincidences in the novel, the author provides a rational explanation for everything that happens, reserving at the same time, a sense of mystery.⁴⁶ The use of local dialect in the dialogues adds authenticity to the story. Similarly, Eliot's use of proverbs and humour make for colour in the novel. What this writer found distracting are George Eliot's philosophizing paragraphs and her digressions from the topic. As was the case in Kraszewski's novel, they disturb the sequence of narration. Also, in her characterization of the protagonists, who are supposed to be simple country folk, she makes them too sophisticated: Silas is very eloquent in his conversation with the squire, and Eppie seems to be too wise for a girl of eighteen and gives the impression of being much more experienced. They both exhibit high moral values while, on the other hand, the representatives of the higher class seem to lack any nobility of character.⁴⁷ Like the Romantics before her, George Eliot believed in the goodness of nature among the common folk and in the corrupting influence of material wealth which was associated with the propertied class.

A number of George Eliot's biographers and critics noted the similarity of plot between *Jermola* and *Silas Marner*. Mathilde Blind in her *Life of George Eliot*, published in 1883, pointed out the marked resemblance of this novel to Kraszewski's *Jermola the Potter*.⁴⁸ Leslie Stephen in his *George Eliot* edition of 1908, observes the same.⁴⁹ Anne Fremantle's biography of Eliot (1933), goes even further, contending that the stories are identical.⁵⁰ Since Kraszewski wrote his novel before George Eliot wrote hers, the question comes up about the possibility of borrowing the idea. The existing facts, however, indicate that it was impossible for Eliot to have read Kraszewski's novel in the original at the time of its first publication, and its French and German translations appeared only after *Silas Marner* was already printed. But there still remains the possibility that she might have

37 Eliot, *A Writer's Notebook 1854-1879* 29, 162. Bonaparte 113.

38 Laski 78.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Haight III 425.

42 Ibid. 426.

43 Fremantle 106. Ian Adam, *George Eliot* (New York: Humanities Press, 1969) 18.

44 David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists* (London: Constable, 1960) 303. Fremantle 57.

45 Laski 78.

46 Adam 96.

47 Cf. Note 18.

48 Laski 79.

49 Leslie Stephen, *George Eliot* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1908) 105-06.

50 Fremantle 106.

heard of the plot of the story. Marghanita Laski, in her book, *George Eliot and Her World* (1973), conjectures that perhaps the English Slavic scholar, William Ralston, could have relayed the plot of the novel while visiting the Leweses or while talking with George Eliot.⁵¹ His first recorded visit with them was in May 1867, but, apparently, his acquaintance with the Leweses was of longer standing.⁵² There exists another hypothesis about the origin of the story. George Eliot read the works of her more audacious French counterpart George Sand with great enthusiasm and it was quite possible that she obtained the idea from one of Sand's novels of French country life.⁵³ However, there is no evidence that she borrowed the plot from Sand. Still another theory, advanced by Julian Krzyżanowski, is that both Eliot and Kraszewski, each independently from the other, were using the same source for their plot, a moralistic tale from eighteenth-century France.⁵⁴

No literary critic or biographer indicated the possibility of Ivan Turgenev being the source of the novel's plot to George Eliot, directly or indirectly. Turgenev knew a great many authors, Slavic and West-European. He corresponded with Kraszewski,⁵⁵ and apparently read some of his works. Turgenev also knew Ralston very well.⁵⁶ William Ralston (1828-89), was Turgenev's close friend and translator, who also wrote memoirs about Turgenev.⁵⁷ Eliot read a number of Turgenev's works in French translation, corresponded with him and finally met him at Six Mile Bottom in October 1878.⁵⁸ In the 1860s and 1870s, Ralston did pass on to Eliot a number of individual works in and about Russian literature.⁵⁹ Therefore, it is not inconceivable that Eliot heard about the plot, indirectly, from any one of the three.

There have been cases where some famous authors borrowed plots from other writers. One can furnish here, as an example, the case of Leo Tolstoy who borrowed the plot for his moralistic story, "Where love is, God is," from "Le père Martin," a tale by an obscure French writer called Ruben

Saillans.⁶⁰ However, in connection to Kraszewski and Eliot, it is this writer's opinion that both of them conceived the plot independently from each other and likely independently from other written sources. They could have been influenced by stories told or heard by the people or by actual occurrences in the vicinity of their place of residence or travel. After all, the abandoning of unwanted babies has not been uncommon. A number of authors have incorporated the story of an abandoned and adopted child in some of their best works. One can list here the names of such predecessors of the two authors in question as Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Victor Hugo.

More importantly, this writer does not find the plot of the two novels in question identical. In the case of Kraszewski, the child, a boy, is found with a sizeable amount of money in his wrappings, and there is no dead parent in the vicinity. Silas Marner finds the child, a girl, and the body of the child's penniless mother. His own life savings disappear in mysterious circumstances while Jermola has some money of his own to help him take care of the boy. The ending of Eliot's story is a happy one, whereas Kraszewski's novel ends in tragedy. Although the adopted children had country squires for their real parents, in the case of Eliot's novel, Eppie was squire Cuss's daughter but he did not abandon her — he only did not claim her at the time of her discovery by Silas, while in the case of Kraszewski both Drużyna and his wife abandoned their infant son. The elements that are similar in both tales are, firstly, the fear to recognize one's offspring on account of a tyrannical father — both couples have to wait until the father dies to claim the child and, secondly, the positive change in the two men which is caused by the adaption and raising of the child. However, both the feeling of fear of an authoritarian parent and the feeling of parental love are fairly commonplace occurrences in people's lives. In sum, our conclusion must be that the controversy about Eliot's possible borrowing of Kraszewski's story of Jermola may be put to rest.

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51 Laski 79.

52 Ibid.

53 Stephen iii.

54 *Jermola* XXXV.

55 Danek 1976, 326.

56 Cf. *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* I 324, 330, 400, 430; II 24, 100, 303, 389, 390, 439.

57 Ibid. I 24.

58 Haight V 171; VI 34; VII 73.

59 Ibid. IV 478; V 132, 262.

60 N.N. Gusev, *Letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva L.N. Tolstogo, 1828-1890* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennoi Literatury, 1958) 599, 698.