

The Multiple Meaning of Boundary Encounters: On the Caucasus as the Oriental Other in Russian Nineteenth Century Literature

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A **CHARACTERISTIC TRAIT** of nineteenth century Russian literature is the abundance of motives related to cross-border acts and boundary encounters. A recurring theme is the meeting between Russia and Europe, stimulated by Peter the Great's founding of Saint Petersburg in 1703. This event opened up a vast field of cross-cultural contacts, and spurred the creation of the Saint Petersburg mythology, in which Peter's 'Northern capital', his *severnaja stolitsa* was firmly established as the great (Western) Other, the antithesis of traditional Russian values and orientations. This opposition is a decisive factor in the development of classical Russian literature, from Sumarokov to the Russian Symbolists.¹

The boundary encounter becomes a prominent motif also in the Caucasus literature that flourished during the first half of the nineteenth century.² The historical context of this literature is Russia's conquest of Caucasus, which started at the end of the eighteenth century, reached a temporary high point by the inclusion

¹ An outstanding example is Aleksandr Puskin's poem *The Brome Horseman* (cf. Helle 1995). For instructive works on the Petersburg myth, see Lotman (1984) and Toporov (1984).

² On the development of the Caucasus literature, see Layton (1994) and Ram (2003).

of Georgia into the Empire in 1802 and abated after Shamil, the last leader of the Chechens, had been captured by the Russians in 1859.³

Against this historical background, a number of Russian writers of the nineteenth century were involved in a massive textual and cultural production, which from its very beginning is marked by a persistent dichotomy between 'us' and 'them', thereby illustrating a typical problem related to border contacts and cross-cultural connections. In this process of dichotomous mythmaking, the most striking aspect is what we might call the orientalization of the Caucasus. A set of Western stereotypes and schemes, well-known from Edward Said's book *Orientalism* from 1978, are projected onto the Caucasus, transforming both its places and its people into representations of the Other, the foreign, the primitive Asian and Oriental, the opposite of European Russia, the antithesis of civilization and enlightenment.⁴

This antithesis is however not as unidimensional as it may seem initially. Although the Caucasus is construed as a mythologized anti-model to the Westernized Russian Empire, a positive dimension is ascribed to it as well. Especially in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the rendering of border thematics in Russian fiction displays a wide range of different cultural encounters, and the opposition between a Eurocentric Russia and the Caucasian Orient is far from cemented. On the contrary, we can find literary treatments of border-crossing acts that clearly destabilize sharp cultural and national polarisations.

I am thinking in particular of poets and authors such as Aleksandr Puškin, Aleksandr Bestužev-Marlinskij and Jurij Lermontov. In their romanticized and aestheticized contribution to the Caucasus mythology, the Caucasus is not exclusively conceived as the un-

³ On the history of the Caucasus during the Russian Empire, see for example. Baddeley (1969). On the Tsarist conquest of the Caucasus, see the posthumously published manuscript by the Soviet historian Michail Pokrovskij (1995).

⁴ The invention of the oriental *alter* as the primitive alien in nineteenth-century Russian culture can be seen as part of a need in the modernised post-Enlightenment West to construct a picture of the Other in the form of its own inverted image. As Lotman (1990,142) puts it: 'It is entirely to be expected [...] that the rational positivistic society of nineteenth-century Europe should create images of the "pre-logical savage", or of the irrational subconscious as anti-spheres lying beyond the rational space of culture'.

ambiguous Other. Just as often it is understood as a secret, complimentary self.⁵ By the same token, the Asian is presented not as the absolute alterity in relation to the Russian, but rather as a potent, but suppressed alter ego. This is an ego that has been suppressed in the forced Europeization of post-Petrine Russia, but it lives on, hidden behind a mask of European civilization. Many of the invented characters in the Caucasus texts (as well as the readers) therefore experienced this poetic Caucasus as a return to a mythic space, untouched by Western progress and the coercive norms of the European state.

The description of the Caucasus in Puškin's 'Southern Poems' (*Južnye poëmy*), for example, abounds with well-known Romantic topoi, which in various ways thematize this lost primordial condition. The Russian Orient is mythologized as the source of poetry and creativity, serving as a positive counter-point to the stagnated civilization of the Occident, to the decaying culture of *das .Abendland*. Through cross-border confrontations the fictional figures — Europeanized Russian officers and aristocrats — are drawn into landscapes of breathtaking beauty, where they interact with the tribal highlanders, noble savages and ideal Rousseauian children of nature.

This interaction is very evident in Puškin's classic *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* (*Kavkazskij plennik*) from 1822, a text that contributed more than any other to the invention of the literary and mythologized Caucasian landscape.⁶ The poem does not primarily focus upon the atrocities of war and violence. Instead, it concentrates on the inner and outer universe of the enigmatic prisoner, a nameless young Russian, a 'renegade from society and a friend of nature' (отступник света, друг природы) held captive by Circassian tribesmen (Puškin 1994, 95). His captivity, however, turns into a kind of liberation.⁷ Surrounded by fascinating wilderness and exotic settings, the hero finds a refuge from the Imperial state apparatus in his

⁵ As has been pointed out, Russia's cultural and political relations to Asia make the Orient both self and other (cf. for example Emerson 1986,148,245).

⁶ On the importance of *Kai/kaęky plennik* for the construction of the Russian literary Orient, see Žirmunskij (1970,145ff). See also Hokanson (1994).

⁷ On the prison topos in Romanticism as an inner form of freedom, see Brombert (1978).

imprisonment and gives himself over to a Byronic and Romantic rejection of the Europeanized *beau monde*.⁸ For some time, Puškin's protagonist almost identifies with the tribal warriors, thus destabilizing the conventional relations between captive and captors, the captive clearly being captivated by the magnificence of his captors' world.⁹

This captivation also spread to the Westernized reading audience. They were fascinated by the poem's picture of Circassian culture and chose to disregard the disturbing hostility towards the tribes expressed in the poem's jingoistic epilogue.¹⁰ Utterly spellbound by Puškin's bold mountaineers and the sublime scenery of the highland nature, the readers became enchanted by the Caucasus.¹¹ To the disenchanted and overcultivated Russian elite, the Caucasian Orient would symbolize regeneration and rejuvenation. To go there, in real life or in the imagined life of poems and novels, was equivalent to a sentimental journey away from the monotony of inauthentic urbanity and the confined existence of the modern metropolis. The literary image of the submissive, self-sacrificing Oriental maiden had the effect of a revitalizing therapy for the disillusioned Euro-

⁸ On the discussion of Puškin as the Russian Byron, see Žirmunskij (1970).

⁹ The ambiguous bonds between captive and captor have been depicted numerous times, manifesting the continuing vitality of Puskin's theme in a Russian cultural context, cf. Jurij Lermontov's poem *Kavkazskij plennik* (1828) and Lev Tolstoj's story 'Kavkazskij plennik' 1872. See also more recently Andrej BitoV's book *Kavkazskij plennik* (1996), Vladimir Makanin's story 'Kavkazskij plennyj' (1997) and Sergej Bodrov's film *Kavkazskij plennik* 1996. On the captive and captivity as a topos in Russian literature, see Austin (1984). For a discussion of the complex relationship between captive and captor in this literature, see Ram (1999).

¹⁰ Cf. the Great Russian chauvinism of the poem's finale (Puškin 1994, 114), which glorifies the extermination of the natives by the tsarist military machine, introducing a dissonant note into Puskin's romanticized description of the highlanders (О Котляревский, бич Кавказа! / Куда ни мчался ты грозой - / Твой ход, как черная зараза, / Губил, ничтожил племена).

¹¹ The readers' enchantment (мы очарованные прелестными картинами) is illustrated in an exemplary manner in a review of *Kavkaeky plennik* in *Vestnik Evropy* from 1823 (cf. Žirmunskij 1970,151).

peanized Russian male.¹² This prototype of Eastern self-effacing femininity constitutes an obvious contrast to the superficial sophistication of the Russian society lady, tendentiously portrayed as having no real feelings, only calculating thoughts.¹³

The ambivalent fascination with the Russian Orient is especially striking in the depiction of the mountain warrior's virile masculinity (it is no coincidence that the word *dšggit*, master rider, has become part of the Russian language and culture as an image of strength and fearlessness). Certainly this warrior was a formidable foe, but nevertheless, as an unrestricted *Naturmensch* he came to represent an alluring embodiment of the Russians' longing for freedom and independence. In a period when the Europeanized Russian community dreamed of liberalization and reforms within the autocratic Tsarist system (expressed for instance in the Decabrist insurgency of 1825), it is no wonder that an open or perhaps subconscious sympathy for the freedom-loving *džigit* could emerge. Thus, when Russian authors describe how the highlandets perish in bloody combat with the military machine of the Empire, this can easily be seen as a symbolic suicide, since, however ambivalent, the fictional Russian protagonists tended to inject a second self into the Other of the savage fighter.¹⁴

Probably, the attitude of the Eurocentric Russian ruling classes to their Orient was more complicated and contradictory than the attitude of Western European peoples (like the French and the English) to their Orient. From one point of view the Caucasus is the alien Other, from whom Westernized Russia must be protected and segregated. But, on the other hand, the Caucasus is the Orient

¹² The topos of the submissive Oriental woman is highly prominent also in Puskin's *Капкади/plennik*, where a mountain maiden (*deva gor*), a female variant of the Noble Savage, falls in love with the Prisoner and helps him to escape, sacrificing her own life in the rescue act.

¹³ Cf. for example Bestužev-Marlinskij (1995, 178): Бывает, что и светские женщины «умеют любить», но это искусство, а не чувство, это ум, а не душа. The author seems to refer rather ironically to Nikolaj Karamzin (1964, 607) and his *Bednaja Liza* from 1792 (и крестьянки любить умеют).

¹⁴ On the conflict between the Russians as exterminators of the Asian peoples in military action, while at the same time subliminally identifying with them, see Layton (1994, 131).

Where the Russian can regain and renew lost sides of himself, such as spiritual recreation, thirst for liberty, courageous masculinity and uninhibited love.

This blurring of clear demarcation lines undermines the Russians' Eurocentric aspirations, and the borders of national and psychological identity become porous and fragmentary. When the Oriental aspect of the Russian is foregrounded, this also activates the traditional idea of Russia as a two-faced Janus, looking simultaneously toward Europe and Asia (Bestužev-Marlinskij 1958, 599).¹⁵

However, as the military conflict with the Muslim tribes intensifies, the literary image of the Caucasus gradually changes, especially after *jihad*, holy war, was declared against Russia in 1829. Now a new group of Russian writers, mostly unknown today, opens up another aspect of the Caucasus myth. In her book, Susan Layton calls them 'little orientalizers' (Layton 1994), and the 'little' may relate to the aesthetically little or lesser value of their contribution to the literary Caucasus, their writings often being nothing more than hack or trash literature. But they were very influential in their days, actively supporting the Imperial colonial policy towards the indigenous peoples. Consequently, in their texts all doubts about the boundaries between Russia and Asia are eliminated and an iron wall is erected between Europe and the Orient. As a result, the brave warriors of Russian Romanticism lose their ambiguous fascination and the noble savage is reduced from an alternative alter ego to a creature of utterly otherness. From the 1830s and onwards we see how the complex and ambivalent Caucasus of Puškin, Lermontov and Bestužev-Marlinskij coexist and coincide with the new simplistic

¹⁵ Bestužev-Marlinskij (1958, 599) goes on to stress the intermediary role of Russia as a link between West and East (звено между оседлою деятельностью Запада и бродячею ленью Востока).

and unidimensional enemy constructions of for example Pete Kamenskij or Aleksandr Poležaev.¹⁶

The little orientalizers employ a set of rigid dichotomies in order to construct a figure of the foe. A chief metaphor is the conventional picture of European enlightenment dispelling the Oriental darkness, the light of day struggling against a shroud of fog, as Poležaev (1832, 44) puts it in his highly chauvinistic poem *Erpeli*.¹⁷ In addition, frequently exploited oppositions are those between Holy Russia and heathendom, between masculine occidental activity and feminine, orientalized passivity, between Western humanism and Asian brutality. A demonizing islamization produces a fixed fictional body of ethnic traits with a crude emphasis on the bestial aspects of the Muslim. The tribes are systematically depicted as the infernal offspring of Allah, as wild hordes, ferocious animals and New Satans (cf. Poležaev 1832, 46, 56).¹⁸ The strong tendency in this literature to islamize the Caucasus paradoxically leads to Christian Georgia also being depicted as a Muslim country. In this process we can, strangely enough, observe how the Caucasian mountains disappear from the literary landscape, and the characteristic highland scenery starts to resemble Turkish seashores,

¹⁶ Even in this highly chauvinistic period, however, marked by constant attempts from the Russian side at creating a clear cut binary opposition between 'us' and 'them', we find examples, however contradictory, showing that the Caucasus never became quite foreign. As the conservative journalist Rotislav Fadeev in his *Šest' desjat let kavkazskoj vojny (Sixty Years of War in the Caucasus)* from 1860 have it, the mountaineer, for all his backwardness, never sank to the level of the Guinea Negro. He belonged to 'our' superior race, although basically a child in need of colonial supervision (cf. Layton 1994, 255).

¹⁷ Как цвет на утренней заре в борьбе с туманной пеленою. In *Erpeli*, the battle between light and darkness not only repeats a fixed imagery of European enlightenment. It also echoes a well-known motif in the twelfth century Russian epic song *The Lay of Igor's Campaign (Slovo o polku Igoreve)*, linking the fight between tsarist Russia and the Muslim tribes to a legendary, glorious past (cf. Layton 1994, 161f).

¹⁸ *Erpeli* can be read as a poetics of the foe or as a catalogue of traits confirming the infernal nature of the Muslim mountaineers, they being portrayed as shadows and spirits from a underground and hellish realm (мифологическое Царство под-земных теней и духов) (cf. Poležaev 1832, 62).

with palms and minarets.¹⁹ The mountains that do remain are no longer conceived as 'the poetry of nature' (*poëzija prirody*), a sacral sphere of lofty inspiration (cf. Bestužev-Marlinskij 1995, 133). They are rather presented as Allah's diabolic domain; a bulwark of evil against Russia's civilizing forces. Typically, the peaks of the famous Besh-Tau, glorified as the 'new Parnassus' (*novyj Parnas*) and elevated for their beauty and inspirational power in the poetics of the 1820s, are now described as the turbans of Mohammed and associated with the Muslim threat.²⁰

Redescriptions of the Caucasus as the absolute Asian Other serve to strengthen the Europeaness of Russia and in due course compensate for the Russians' feeling of inferiority towards Western Europe. Post-Petrine Russia might be inferior to the West, being consistently criticized by the Western countries for being underdeveloped and Oriental. But, at least when compared to the savage Caucasus, it was a nation of enlightenment, a superior European civilization. Such shifting evaluations demonstrate, amongst other things, the flexibility of the concept of national identity, how it constantly changes according to situation and circumstances.

Besides, when the tribes are reduced to pure barbarism, they administer, as it were, what has been called '*une thérapeutique du Différent*' (Schwab 1950, 429). That is, by showing what the Russians were *not*, these writers sought to lend the conquest of the Caucasus European legitimacy and justify the escalation of the colonial war (cf. Layton 1994, 156 f.). Transformed into the negative Oriental, the natives confirmed Russia's right to subjugate the mountaineers in the name of Enlightenment (or for their own good). Only the shelters of the European state could order and bring harmony to the

¹⁹ Even Bestužev-Marlinskij, who does not belong to the 'little orientalizers' of the 1830s (with their programmatic suppression of the mountain theme) excludes mountains in his 'Ammalat-Bek' (1832), and evokes instead a balmy climate reminiscent of the Turkish coast (cf. Layton 1994, 114).

²⁰ Cf. Puškin's trope of Besh-Tau as the new Parnassus from *Kavkazskij pknik*: Где пасмурный Бешту [...] Был новый для меня Парнас (Puškin, 91). On the islamization of the same mountain, see for instance Dmitriј Oznobisin, one of the 'lesser Russian versifiers of the era' (Layton 164) and his poem 'Caucasian Morning' (*Kavkazskoe utro*) from 1840, in which the transformation of the landscape is clearly in evidence, the islamized peaks radiating hostility to Orthodox Russia.

wild and unruly natives.²¹ Confronted with this mission, the Westernized Russians could in various degrees underwrite or accept the country's bloody conquest (not seldom in the form of genocide) as part of the white man's burden.

The ruthless military conduct of the Empire may thus be glorified as a project of progress. The descriptions of violent colonial encounters in the literature of the 1830s often assign an unrestricted heroism to the Russian side, while the Asian counter-part is portrayed as a wild sub-human creature, the embodiment of a backward and barbarous society. In these stereotypes, the Russian authors totally ignored the obvious parallels to backwardness and barbarism in their own society, such as serfdom, with all its inhumane implications. But even if the authors never hinted at these parallels (something that within the tsarist system of censorship would have been impossible in any case), and probably did not even notice them, there must have been readers who did (we, the modern readers, certainly do). And these implicit parallels clearly puncture the moral borders between 'us' and 'them', between the Russians as saviours and the Caucasians as savages. In this manner, however heroically the Russian colonizer is depicted, the fictional tales of the extermination of the highlanders and their way of life demonstrate the absurdity of representing Russia as a civilizing agent and rises the obvious question: With what right does a tyrannical and suppressive state go to war in order to bring civilization and enlightenment to the suppressed?

At one level one could argue that the boundary encounters between Russians and Caucasians in nineteenth-century Russian literature reflect the constructions of cultural barriers. At the same time, however, the descriptions of them also disrupt these barriers. Firstly, as I have tried to show, many of the Eurocentric Russians in the Caucasus texts seem to regard the Caucasian not as an absolute Other, but rather as a strong, but suppressed alter ego, thereby blurring differences and getting a new perspective on their own national identity. Or, as I have also tried to show, these texts (even

²¹ As Poležnev (1832, 32) phrases this imperialistic logic, for the tribes, happiness and peace are only possible vinder the protection of the Russian power: Они подь кровомь Русской власти / Узнали счастье и покой.

though much more subversively) dissolve rigid cultural and ethnic oppositions by undermining the cemented sections between Oriental cruelty and humanistic civilization. Thus, however obliquely, the fictional Russian border crossers (and their readers) may gain new insights into mechanisms in their own culture.

As I just mentioned, these are insights into their own culture, based on self reflection and self searching, not on mutual dialogical exchange. A central concept in the works of the border-thinker Michail Bachtin is that creative, new understanding is born not while we are hiding inside the walls of our own cultural sphere, but only when we are located *outside* this sphere, in the border zone between ourselves and another, foreign culture.²² As he writes in an early essay from 1924 (Bachtin 1990, 274): 'Every cultural act lives essentially on the boundaries, and it derives its seriousness and significance from this fact. Separated [...] from these boundaries, it loses the ground of being and becomes vacuous, arrogant, it degenerates and dies'. But what happens when the border zone is transgressed and those on the other side are forcibly invaded? Could some of the creative potential of the Bachtinian border meeting be carried over into such invasive border transgressions as those depicted in the Caucasus texts? There is, I think, no simple answer to this. It could be mentioned, though, that Jurij Lotman has argued that even in war there has to be a common language. Accordingly, even violent interventions are invested with a certain potential for dialogue, which gradually opens up the possibility of 'the creation of a new semiosphere of more elevated order in which both parties can be included as equals' (Lotman 1990,142).

There are however few, if any examples of such equality in the boundary encounters rendered in nineteenth-century Caucasus literature. These encounters, as I have pointed out, are fundamentally grounded in an asymmetrical relationship, in which the voice of the Eurocentric, hegemonic Empire always dominates in the Russians' interactions with the Caucasian mountaineers. In these interactions a

²² Cf. Bachtin (1987, 7): In the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding. A meaning only reveals its depth once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and onesidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures'.

mythologized Caucasian Orient plays a role as part of post-Petrine Russia's quest for a national identity.

A literary work that has profoundly contributed to a dismantling of this literary mythology is Lev Tolstoj's anti imperialist novel *Chadži-Murat*. Written in 1904, it was published in 1912, that is after the author's death, and even then only in a bowdlerized version.²³ In the description of the Chechen mountaineers, Tolstoj strives to invalidate both the romanticizing and the demonizing stereotypes of Orientalism. He seeks to present the indigenous population, and especially the main protagonist, without resorting to clichés and preconceived constructions, but as real Others. Instead of turning Chadži-Murat into a hero in the traditional sense, Tolstoj portrays him as a human being with rational motives and valid action patterns. By giving Chadži-Murat a voice of his own, a genuine, individual voice, we understand the reasons for his complex and contradictory conflict with the Russians in the 1850s, befriending them at one moment, fighting them at another. The book has been called a 'masterpiece of the highest order' (Mirsky 1969, 308). And even if it could be considered as somewhat biased by the author's ruthless rejection of all Westernized civilization and society, *Chadžy-Murat* is still the most deep-reaching story ever told about the tsarist conquest of the Caucasus.²⁴ Moreover, the story of the tribal warriors' struggle with the Russian Imperial power still has a regrettable relevance. Post-Soviet Russia's stereotyped images of the

²³ This late work is the aesthetic culmination of Tolstoj's repeated experiments with the Caucasus-theme, cf. the earlier texts 'TSIabeg' (The Raid', 1852), 'Rubka lesa' ('Felling the Forest', 1853-55), *Kajaki* (*The Cossacks*, 1852-183) and 'Kavkazkij plennik' (The Prisoner of the Caucasus', 1872).

²⁴ On the one hand Tolstoj punctures established stereotypes and dichotomies, on the other, he consistently constructs new ones and most strikingly, he creates a new variant of the Rousseauian opposition between nature and civilization: In *Chadži-Murat*, all good forces belong to nature, not only noble savages like ordinary Chechens, but also the Russian peasantry and the Russian conscripted soldiers. The negative forces consist of the ruling classes, represented by the Russian Emperor, Nikolaj I, the Chechen leader Shamil and generally everything connected to the civilized and official world. The opposition between nature and civilization is especially elaborated on the linguistic level. In accordance with Tolstoj's anti-semiotic attitude, the illiterate tribes and ordinary Russian people are on a higher moral level than the officers and the Tsar, who speak and read an inauthentic (and often French) language. On Tolstoj's battle against the demoralizing force of our conventional words, see Helle (1997).

Caucasus and its present policy towards Chechnia remind us in a disturbing way of the colonial regime of Nikolaj I in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Consequentiy, Tolstoj's critique and analyses are no less important today than 100 or 150 years ago, making explicit the challenges and problems of borderland, boundary encounters and cross-cultural interaction.

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