

Eleni Stergiopoulou, Occidentalism in Russian Travel Literature in the Eighteenth Century:

Example of Nikolai Mihailovič Karamzin

Master Thesis

Reviewed by Pavel Himl, Charles University Prague

Eleni Stergiopoulou's master thesis is centred around the question of Self and the Other in the travel writing in the past – a topic which attracted considerable audience in the recent decades' research. On the one hand, the variety of the historiographical production about traveling and travelogues cannot be overviewed, on the other hand there is, more or less, a consensus about the character of this writing – travelogues first represent the writers vision of a foreign country formed by his intellectual position, his discourse or culture, and could be then used for the analysis of cultural perception and representation of Self through the „depiction“ of the Other. This constructivist assumption – the “sources” do not reflect the social reality they refer to – is shared also by Stergiopoulou when she claims *“The present study focuses on the examination of the particularities of the construction of national identity as an imagined entity”* (p. 21); the author, striving for interdisciplinarity, nevertheless adds some other theoretical approaches to her analytical tools. Among these approaches, one can find the Otherness, the invention of (Eastern) Europe, the construction of nation as an emotional community, as well as Lotman's concept of space and time and Burke's concept of the sublime and beautiful. (The study of other travelogues of the same era and the subsequent comparison to the primary text can be termed, at most, as a method but not methodology, p. 15).

Despite the fact that the methodology chapter tries to combine different approaches, it renounces to give an explicit and workable definition of how the (Karamzin's) text and the act of writing are understood. The methodological crux is expressed in the following phrase:

“to detect the construction of the imaginative nation, in our case – the way of how the nation, or better, a pursued national identity, is illustrated in the text of Karamzin” (p. 40).

The same can be found on page 50: *“the Russian identity and how it is portrayed, constructed and revealed”*. On page 17, the author conceives the act of writing as follows: *“Each traveller had a white canvas to draw their impressions on East Europe; however the existing prejudice and the mental detachment from the Orient could only nourish the distance.”* Does the writing of travelogues really represent the creation “ex nihilo” which

could be only “influenced” by prejudices, or is this activity interwoven in the existing web of meanings about the “foreign”/“other”? Moreover, is the national identity constructed in the text, by textual means, or does the text represent only an illustration of a (national) identity, constructed somewhere else, of something to be “revealed”? Having read the whole thesis, one could conclude that the author considers Karamzin’s text as a part of literary or intellectual field which was in the 18th century concerned with the Russian national identity. (It should be added that, analytically, it makes a difference if we see the writer as an actor formulating intentionally the idea of a nation, or if we observe how, by what means the identity, the perception of “we” and “the other” is present(ed) in his writing despite his intention.) In this regard, Stergiopoulou’s thesis is a combination of more or less classical intellectual history, history of literature and history of ideas. It seems that the perspective of history of ideas is mostly owed to the work of Russian scholars (Lotman) dealing with Russian culture of the 18th century. Nevertheless the idea that “Russia” as an undifferentiated whole searched in this period for its identity, is from the social historical point of view rather unsatisfactory. (Another inappropriate generalization can be found on p. 42 “*the characteristics of the Russian national spirit of the time*”, or p. 103 “*Russia was searching to recognise and establish itself*”). While positioning Karamzin’s Letters in the domain of intellectual history, the author should have focused more on its literary patterns as well as on its reception in the press of the era.

In the second chapter of the thesis, *Letters of a Russian Traveller*, the findings can be divided into two groups: first, there are qualities listed which are specially remarkable in the foreign cities and countries and at the same time – because the special attention is never innocent – which distinguish them implicitly from Russia like cleanliness, planning, symmetry and – less abstract – pavement as a sign of progress (p. 56, 59, 66). In this context one has to ask to what extent Karamzin’s depiction of big cities was based on stereotypes/clichés widespread in Russia independently of his real travel experience. Stergiopoulou’s observation in case of London (“*possibly many descriptions are mostly taken from previous travelogues*”, p. 65) can by perhaps applied also to the other choices, accentuations and judgments in the travelogue.

The perception of Russia by the “Western” public is the second main issue of this chapter. When starting his travel as well as his writing, Karamzin doesn’t find himself in face of a “white canvas” but he follows the line of thinking about the relationship between Russia and

Europe marked – as Stergiopoulou captures – by the opposite of closeness/familiarity and otherness/strangeness (p. 60, 79). Karamzin tries to overcome this gap by emphasizing his qualities and virtues as a cultivated citizen of any Enlightened state. The insertion of Karamzin to the enlightened European society (by cultivation, education, habitus), asserted in his Letters, should have been followed by Russia as a country (p. 101). Karamzin wants himself to be a representative of egalitarianism or “*panhumanism*” (p. 102) but all his qualities and practices through which he aspires to become a member of the European society are deeply rooted in an elite habitus/way of life (lecture, travelling, mastery of foreign languages etc.). This shows clearly the limitations of the project of Russia’s “Europeanization”, even if this process is presented as not unilateral.

Exactly at this point a deeper reflection about Orientalism and Occidentalism could have been placed. However, the concept of Occidentalism contained in the thesis’ title does not seem to have been applied systematically, although the source suggests such an application (for example p. 103 “*The remarks on European people being callous or polite but not authentically, proposes that he inclined to see himself and his compatriots as sincere, caring, real*”). Also the use of the term Orientalism should be more attentive – when reading that “*The approach of Westerners to Russia suggests that there are traces of ‘Orientalism’ in Karamzin’s depictions.*” (p. 98) we may not be sure if Orientalism is a significant feature of Karamzin’s approach, or if he only reports about the “Orientalistic attitude” of people encountered in the West. (Furthermore, the attitude of unknowing Europeans is rather to be described as simple ignorance than Orientalism.)

The main problem of the thesis rests in the fact that the author alternates in her text between the analysis of Karamzin’s text “from exterior” and the employment of categories/concepts supposedly used by Karamzin himself. When Stergiopoulou speaks for example about “invented East” (p. 97-98) she uses it not for the analysis of Letters (Karamzin is not an “inventor of the East”), but for the designation of a stereotyped attitude of Western people toward Russia depicted in the Letters (“*“Invented East” by Larry Wolff, it seems that the westerners did have prejudiced view on the East. Russia for most of Karamzin’s interlocutors was associated with clichés as a North and cold country and not educated or cultivated*”).

On the contrary, the author succeeds in presenting convincingly the emotional part of Karamzin’s construction of imagined national community by employing the notions of the

sublime and beautiful. This helps “*to reduce the cultural distance between Russia and the Occident*” (p. 96) but, according to Anderson’s definition, the most dominating imagined community seems therefore to be not the national one, but the cosmopolite, intellectual community of enlightened citizens, reading and discussing for example Laurence Stern’s book across the traditional boundaries (p. 101). In this context, the virtual absence of religion and religious issues doesn’t surprise so much as such a potentially controversial topic should have been banned from the enlightened communication.

The Orthodox Church as a social factor remains largely unmentioned even in the introductory historical survey; regarding the unquestioned position of Church in comparison with Western Europe it is exaggerated to state that “*The era of Peter the Great in the history of Russia is marked by the transition from a religious culture of the Middle Ages to a secular one*” (p. 24). The sharp contrast between the Greek-Slavic pilgrimage walks and the Latin and Western tradition of secular travels seems to be simplified as well.

On the formal level, the thesis is written in a rich and accurate language. It contains few errors (missing word p. 38 „*exemption from some ??? and more*“, p. 48 “*He borrows this already existing Western literary style ??? incorporates it into the Russian language and tradition through his writings*”), the spelling of Karamzin’s first name is not unified (Nikolai in the second title, further p. 46, Nikolay p. 94, Nikolaj elsewhere), the writing differs also in time indication (*in the forties of the nineteenth century vs. in the Seventies of the eighteenth century* p. 13). Finally, the sciences historiography belongs to are correctly called human, not “*humanitarian*” (p. 35).

Considering not only Eleni Stergiopoulou’s thesis on the whole but also her previous study work, her efforts to define the subject of the thesis and to find an appropriate approach to it must be acknowledged. On the other side, the thesis is methodologically not convincing and stringent, but rather eclectic which is owed to the wide range of secondary literature. While for some students the variety of theoretical concepts can be stimulating, some others can get lost. My final marking – **good (3)** – corresponds to the fact that it will be the thesis which remains as document of Eleni’s work.

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