

Opponent's review on the Master Thesis of Eleni Stergiopoulou *Occidentalism in Russian Travel Literature in the Eighteenth Century: Example of Nikolaj Mihailovič Karamzin*

The aim of the thesis is to analyse the construction of Russian national and cultural identity at the end of the eighteenth century. The principle source is the travelogue *Letters of a Russian Traveller* by N. M. Karamzin, who between 1789 and 1790 visited several European countries. To interpret Karamzin's text Eleni Stergiopoulou employs several theoretical approaches and concepts, especially the complementary concepts of Otherness, Orientalism (E. Said, L. Wolff) and Occidentalism (J. G. Carrier), the constructivist approach to formation of the nation as either imagined (B. Anderson) or emotional (S. Ahmed) community, the conceptualization of categories of sublime and beautiful (E. Burke) and space and time (Û. Lotman).

I find the idea to explore the Russian cultural identity from the "Oriental"/"Occidental" point of view extremely stimulating. Suitable is also the choice of the source (i.e. the travel literature) and the research period (i.e. the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Koselleck's *Sattelzeit*). Under the influence of to the cultural turn the travel literature has been used in recent years as a popular source for studying the cultural identity of the authors and communities that produced the texts. However, so far it has been more frequent to study the way in which the "Western" or "Occidental" perspective projected in the description and evaluation of societies and places that were regarded as inferior. The juxtaposition of the geographic entities of "West"/"East" or "Occident"/"Orient" brought about the whole set of dichotomies such as "progress"/"backwardness", "rationality"/"emotionality", "future"/"past" etc. The relative novelty of Eleni Stergiopolou's approach is to employ the reverse perspective and to study the process of "Othering" or constructing the "Self" and the "Other" from the point of view of an individual who was in the context of the constructed cultural divisions of Europe considered to belong to an "inferior" (i.e. Eastern) rather than the "superior" (i. e. Western) community. This approach if combined with suitable methodology could shed light on the construction of Russian identity in the late eighteenth century and on the interactions between the Russian and European cultural milieus. It could help to answer the question to what extent the Russian identity developed in the opposition to the image of the West that was among others created also in Karamzin's *Letters*.

The thesis is divided into four parts: Introduction, Chapter One that provides us with the background information on travel literature and the culture of Enlightenment, Chapter Two that gives the analyses and Conclusion. Though it is helpful to present the analysis in the literary and sociocultural context of the period (as provided by Chapter One) I find the proportional structure of the thesis rather unbalanced. The analytical part is too short (less than half of the thesis) and contrasts with the lengthy and in places superfluous building up material based on the secondary sources. Also the sub-chapter Concepts of Interpretation (pp. 87–93) would fit better in the Introduction than at the end of the analytical Chapter Two.

Taking into account the theoretical and methodological part, the main research question (i. e. the construction of cultural and national identity) is stated quite clearly. However, I would welcome a more accurate definition of the term national and cultural identity that would help (especially in the context of the late eighteenth century) to distinguish national identity from patriotism. The concept of “Otherness” is well presented on the example of Larry Wolff’s study *Inventing Eastern Europe*. Yet, the concept of “Occidentalism” that (as suggested by the title of the thesis) seems to be of key importance is mentioned only briefly (pp. 16 and 22) without using it to develop any working hypothesis. However, the most important problem is the uncertain use of methodology. Despite referring to the method of “critical text analysis with subordinate constructivist and semiotic approach”(p. 23), the analytical part does not have a coherent methodological structure and there is a considerable gap between the theoretical and analytical sections. In consequence the possibility of interpretation and conclusion is rather limited.

The Chapter Two reveals the richness of the source. Most of the quotations are well chosen to demonstrate Karamzin’s literary and interpretative style (like the tendency to make national generalization), his political opinions (like his conservatism) and his aesthetic, cultural and social values (while describing London, Paris or Rhine Falls, when praising the education and hospitality etc.). Yet, I regard some of the conclusions and interpretations as open to discussion or ambivalent. Following statements could be therefore discussed during the defence of the thesis:

- Karamzin’s admiration of the order and cleanliness of the villages in Switzerland and England is interpreted as a sign of the lack of order and cleanliness in Russian villages (pp. 72–73). However, equally possible is that Karamzin does not compare the

observed state to the situation at home but to a certain normative ideal that corresponds to the aesthetics values of Enlightenment.

- The fact that Karamzin did not reflect very strongly the act of crossing the political boundaries between the Russian empire and Poland is interpreted as a sign of “closeness of the Russian identity with the western one” (p. 79). Yet, in my opinion, the importance of the political boundaries for marking the cultural identity at the end of the eighteenth century is rather questionable.
- Unclear is also the application of the concept of sublime and beautiful. In Karamzin’s *Letters* we are said to be “dealing with the concepts of sublime and beautiful, because of their political aspect and their relation to the imagination of the nation in the text” (p. 90). And further, “the encounter with the Other in the case of Karamzin generates an awe for the beautiful and sublime while connecting the traveller’s national identity with its historical past. (p. 93)” Taking in account the generally accepted aesthetic character of the concept of sublime and beautiful, it would be interesting to know what is meant in the thesis by the political aspect of the concept of sublime and beautiful and in what way is the concept related to the imagination of the nation?
- What was the actual relationship between Russia and Western Europe as represented in Karamzin’s text? Are they constructed as opposing images (p. 97) or not (p. 102)?

In conclusion, Eleni Stergiopolou was able to choose an interesting research topic and suitable primary source. She proved to be well acquainted with the source material and she introduced it in very engaging way. However, the quality of the thesis is considerably lowered by the conceptual and methodological problems. Therefore, I recommend the thesis to defence only with certain reservation and I suggest final grade **3 (good)**.

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