

Péter Erdósi

Report on the Master Thesis

“Occidentalism in Russian Travel Literature in the Eighteenth Century: Example of Nikolaj Mihailović Karamzin” by Eleni Stergiopoulou

In my report, besides giving an assessment of the submitted version of Eleni Stergiopoulou's thesis, I would like to evaluate the last year of the writing process which I could follow as her supervisor in Budapest. I think that an indication of the progress she made during her MA studies at TEMA is as necessary as the judgment of its final outcome.

The thesis offers an analysis of Nikolaj Karamzin's work which represents his journey to Western Europe made during 1789/90. The research problem is valid and well formulated. The basic idea is “to explore how the national and cultural identity of Russia was constructed in the eighteenth century through the vehicle of travel writing.”

The novelty of thesis lies not in a philological contribution to the Karamzin scholarship (which Stergiopoulou has briefly reviewed, relating her own work to the preceding ones) but in the creative application of a research question shaped by the scholarly literature on issues as ample as travel, identity and nation building. Nevertheless, it was an important detail from the existing body of Karamzin philology that guided the student in her assessment of the production of the source: a previous study has shown that Karamzin, while assembling this work, relied heavily upon other authors. This was the reason, among others, that made Stergiopoulou conscious of the fact that the text is a calculated construct, and not simply the expression of the author's feelings – the recognition of this was a useful antidote against taking Karamzin's sentimental manners at face value. This finding affected the student's work in the second year to a great deal.

It is praiseworthy that Stergiopoulou read the source in the original language, Russian, and could appropriately observe and select the passages that were relevant for the subject even if

she did not entirely exploit the possibilities in the analytical part of her work. The meticulous reading of the source in original turned out to be rather time consuming, took much of the student's energy, and temporarily prevented her from taking a distance from the source. This difficulty was, then, overcome in the last phase, and she gradually found her own voice.

As to her theoretical and methodological directions, the student was recipient of many insights, in accordance with the plurality of disciplines interested in travel and travel writing. A certain phase of her work was marked by the encounter with a great variety of impulses from readings on travel literature, the problem of identity, and the like, by a search for conceptual and methodological tools that may give clues for the analysis – this took place at the expense of dividing time, for a while, between reading the primary source and the secondary literature. Besides some inconsistencies of the student's heterogeneous toolkit, I see also the positive, enriching side of the query she made.

The structure of the thesis is coherent and logical, though the proportion of the introductory chapter and the analytical one is not optimal. The analysis of the source does not accomplish fully what was outlined in the introductory part. But this feeling of lack is, however, counteracted to some extent by the conclusion which not only resumes the results but opens up new perspectives that were unexplored in the previous chapters, by revisiting and reconnecting the basic concepts of the thesis in the light of the findings.

Throughout the thesis, Eleni Stergiopoulou has shown an ability to understand and creatively use theoretical approaches and made efforts to adapt them to her own material. At some points, the conceptual work was achieved, however, at the expense of making rather general and broad statements on culture, identity etc. The language used by Eleni Stergiopolou is often metaphorical. Using metaphors, obviously, can be necessary, even unavoidable in the historian's work, but for the future, I advice her not to be content with huge concepts but to see them in their colours and varieties. For example, the Russian "Self" and the European "Other" make up a useful counterpoint on a theoretical level, but in actual fact, a proper historical analysis needs more detail. Behind the political and intellectual program of bringing

“Russia” closer to “Europe”, there were very different social and cultural realities, and obviously, the program itself was limited to the elites.

Two years ago a beginner has chosen an ambitious research problem that, during the work, turned out to be more difficult than she had expected. There were moments when the challenge seemed to surpass her preparation. Nevertheless, in the end, she succeeded to make great advances, overcoming most of her difficulties, and the effort by which she reduced the incipient problems is remarkable. Had she chosen a simpler research problem, avoiding most of these difficulties, she could have learnt and realized less about scholarly writing. As to the evaluation of the results, the situation is twofold. On the one hand, there is a thesis which is not flawless, but on the other, there is the valuable intellectual effort and the progress achieved in the craft. Moreover, I think that Stergiopoulou’s progress reflects the positive effect of TEMA education which introduces students to grand concepts of European social and cultural history. Unfortunately, some of the promises made in the beginning were not entirely fulfilled, partly because of the problematic timing of the phases of the research. Therefore, in my opinion, the thesis is not excellent, but it is by all means suitable for defence. The final text may have deficiencies but is elegantly written. Even if the work is not faultless, Eleni Stergiopoulou has prepared it with dedication to the subject and has shown a significant enrichment of her competence. Thus, I evaluate the thesis better than mediocre, and recommend the good grade (4), according to the Hungarian grading scale.

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