Imperialism as an Infectious Disease: The Theme of Death in "Kavkazskii plennik"*

Adrian Wanner

> Тебя я воспою, герой,
> О Котляревский, бич Кавказа!
> Куда ни мчался ты грозой—
> Твой ход, как черная зараза,
> Губил, ничтожил племена… [1]

The dithyramb to Russian military power in the epilogue of "Kavkazskii plennik" has created somewhat of a quandary for Pushkin scholars. While the author draws a seemingly sympathetic portrait of the Caucasian natives in the main body of his poem, in the epilogue he glorifies their extermination by the Russian military machine. We also observe a substantial change in style: the earlier elegiac, romantic tone is replaced by a classicist, bombastic diction reminiscent of eighteenth-century solemn odes. This observation has led critics from Pushkin's time until now to formulate two sets of questions, or rather, accusations. One objection is of an aesthetic nature and berates the poem's lack of internal coherence.[2] The second, perhaps more damaging, reservation concerns Pushkin's ethics. In a letter to A. I. Turgenev on 27 September 1822, Pushkin's friend P. A. Viazemskii writes:

> I regret that Pushkin bespattered the last verses of his tale with blood. What sort of a hero is Kotliarevskii, Ermolov? What good is it, that he
>
> *like a black infection,*
> *Destroyed, annihilated the tribes?*

---

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1999 Pushkin Conference at Pennsylvania State University. I am indebted to Caryl Emerson and an anonymous reader of *Pushkin Review* for helpful comments and suggestions.

[1] "Kavkazskii plennik," Epilogue (34–38). All quotations are from *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 17 vols. (Moscow: AN SSSR, 1937–58), henceforth referred to as *PSS*. Passages from "Kavkazskii plennik" will be identified by verse number.

[2] This point has been stated most categorically by Walter N. Vickery, who claims that the epilogue "runs counter to the spirit of the preceding narrative and … destroys the poem's artistic unity." See "Pushkin: Russia and Europe," *Review of National Literatures* 3: 1 (1972), 21.

Pushkin Review/Пушкинский вестник 3: 133–50, 2000.

> Such glory makes the blood freeze in our veins and our hair stand on end. If we enlightened the tribes, then there would be something to celebrate. Poetry is not the ally of henchmen; politics might need them, and then it is up to the tribunal of history to decide whether it was justified or not: but hymns of a poet must never be a celebration of slaughter. I am sorry for Pushkin: such enthusiasm is a real anachronism.[3]

One may object that odes and other celebratory genres have always done what Viazemskii accuses Pushkin of doing. Nevertheless, Pushkin's generic switch does raise both aesthetic and ethical concerns. Leaving aside for the time being the question of Pushkin's "sincerity" in his support for Russian imperialism and genocide in the Caucasus, my aim in this paper will be to highlight a link between the epilogue and the main narrative of "Kavkazskii plennik." As I will demonstrate, the poem is held together by an underlying semantic cluster of death.

The unity of the poem is not in itself a new claim. Most Russian critics of the twentieth century have insisted that "Kavkazskii plennik" is not an assemblage of unconnected elements, but an organic whole. In asking how exactly the pieces fit together, however, we find a variety of sometimes contradictory answers.[4] Furthermore, in accordance with Stalinist historiography, which celebrated the Russian conquest of the Caucasus as a historically progressive and desirable event, Soviet scholars since the 1930s expressed only kind words for the patriotic feelings extolled in the poem's epilogue, which could even be mobilized as ideological ammunition

---

[3] *Ostaf′evskii arkhiv kniazei Viazemskikh,* vol.2, 274–75. Quoted from B.V. Tomashevskii, *Pushkin (1813–1824). Kniga pervaia* (Moscow-Leningrad: AN SSSR, 1956), 406. All English translations of Russian quotes are my own.

[4] Tomashevskii sees the epilogue as a "correction" to earlier statements made in the text, where Pushkin seems to reject European civilization in favor of a life in unspoiled, idyllic nature. But at the end of the poem, Pushkin wants to make clear that a return to primitivism is no solution for Russia (*Pushkin*, 409). Conversely, D. D. Blagoi, and after him V. Sandomirskaia, see not a contrast, but a correspondence between the epilogue and the main text: both parts are permeated with a spirit of "Anti-Rousseauism," since the hero, although a "friend of nature," fails to find happiness among the primitive tribes of the Caucasus, where he becomes a prisoner and slave. See D. D. Blagoi, *Tvorcheskii put′ Pushkina (1813–1826)* (Moscow-Leningrad: AN SSSR, 1950), 268, and V. Sandomirskaia, "'Estestvennyi chelovek' i obshchestvo: 'Kavkazskii plennik' v tvorchestve poeta," *Zvezda* 6 (1969), 184–90. A. Gurevich, in an attempt to reconcile Tomashevskii's and Blagoi's position, claims that Pushkin rejects neither modern civilization nor primitive nature, but seeks a "harmonious synthesis" of both. The "joining" (*prisoedinenie*) of the Caucasus to Russia described in the epilogue is, in this author's opinion, "the historically concrete path to a rapprochement of nature and civilization" ("Ot 'Kavkazskogo plennika' k 'Tsyganam,'" in *V mire Pushkina* [Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel′, 1974], 70).

in the struggle against Western imperialism.[5] The only notable exception is Boris Èikhenbaum, who took up this question in his 1933 article on the "Battle Theme in Early Nineteenth-Century Russian Poetry." Èikhenbaum declared that we cannot take the ideas expressed in the epilogue of "Kavkazskii plennik" for Pushkin's own. According to Èikhenbaum, Pushkin undertook a "tactical maneuver" to gain the favor of the authorities, hoping to obtain permission to return to Petersburg from his southern exile. As Èikhenbaum put it:

> Apparently, Pushkin counted on the fact that the patriotic spirit of the poem would enhance his reputation and have an influence on the authorities. Therefore, I think that the epilogue of "Kavkazskii plennik" has to be seen as an intentional stylization (an "anachronism," in Viazemskii's words), conditioned by political considerations and calculated to have a specific effect. To draw direct conclusions from the epilogue about Pushkin's views would be too naive and ahistorical.[6]

The fact that such statements were still printed in 1933 in the Soviet Union is rather astonishing. The editorial board of *Zalp* (which was, ironically enough, the military journal of the Leningrad Writers' Union), deemed it necessary to distance itself from Èikhenbaum's position by pointing out that they published his article because it contained interesting "factual material," but that his conclusions remained "within the limits of a formalist approach to the history of literature."[7]

In American scholarship, the question of Pushkin's implication in the Russian conquest of the Caucasus has become a topic of interest since the late 1980s. "Kavkazskii plennik," after long years of critical neglect, has emerged as the focus of several recent studies concerned with the question of Russian orientalism. However, there is no unanimity in the interpretation of the epilogue. The most monolithic reading is offered by Stephanie Sandler, who sees the whole text of "Kavkazskii plennik" as a tale of misogynist and colonialist subjugation. It comes as no surprise then that the epilogue, harkening back to the dedication of the poem to Nikolai Raevskii, expresses Pushkin's "unqualified support for the military ac-

[5] I. Pikkiev claimed in *Stavropol′skaia Pravda*, 12 July 1953, that "the epilogue of 'Kavkazskii plennik' is Pushkin's protest against the predatory English pretensions to the Caucasus" (Source: *Bibliografiia proizvedenii A.S. Pushkina i literatury o nem 1952–1953* [Moscow-Leningrad: AN SSSR, 1955], 40).

[6] B. Èikhenbaum, "Batal′naia tema v russkoi poezii nachala XIX veka," *Zalp* 5 (1933), 54.

[7] "Ot redaktsii." *Ibid.*, 57.

tions of the Russian government."[8] By contrast, Susan Layton notes a contradiction between the sympathetic portrayal of the native Circassians and the epilogue. She speculates that Pushkin may have added the latter as a "conciliatory gesture toward government officials, in the hope of winning release from his exile."[9] In addition, Layton mentions Tomashevskii's theory that the epilogue was probably influenced by Pavel Pestel′'s approval of Russian colonialist expansion.[10] Katya Hokanson also underlines the congruence between Pushkin's endorsement of Russian imperialism and the position of the Decembrists. Although the epilogue "appears as a stark contrast to all that comes before it," Pushkin may have felt compelled to add it in order to restore the Circassian threat to Russia. Hokanson argues that, despite his seemingly positive feelings for the Caucasian natives, Pushkin commits an act of "literary imperialism" by assuming control of the narrative.[11] Harsha Ram, finally, has cast some doubt as to whether the epilogue can really be understood as an unequivocal endorsement of Russian imperialism. As he observes, the future tense of "ia vospoiu" places the Russian triumph outside the timeframe of the narrative. Just like the quotes from Zhukovskii's "To Voeikov" and Derzhavin's "Ode to Count Zubov," which Pushkin added to his text as footnotes, the epilogue "citationally invokes the eighteenth-century sublime in order to absorb it within the operations of elegiac memory."[12]

None of these critics has paid much attention to the imagery in Pushkin's epilogue. When we take a closer look at the text, it is hard not to be amazed by certain expressions—regardless of whether we find in the epilogue a correction to the overly idyllic description of the Caucasian people earlier in the poem, a celebration of civilization and progress, or a patriotic outburst. If it was Pushkin's intent to glorify the heroic deeds of the Russians in Asia and the benevolent spread of civilization in a barbaric land, did he really have to use words like "black infection" (*chernaia*

---

[8] Stephanie Sandler, *Distant Pleasures: Alexander Pushkin and the Writing of Exile* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 164. Sandler's view of the epilogue is fully shared by Joe Andrew. See "'The Caresses of Black-Eyed Captive Women': Narrative, Desire and Gender in Pushkin's *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*," in Elena Semeka-Pankratov, ed., *Studies in Poetics. Commemorative Volume Krystyna Pomorska* (Columbus: Slavica Publishers, 1995), 115.

[9] Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 102. Layton seems to be unaware that this explanation was first suggested by Èikhenbaum.

[10] See Tomashevskii, *Pushkin,* 407–08.

[11] Katya Hokanson, "Literary Imperialism, *Narodnost′* and Pushkin's Invention of the Caucasus," *The Russian Review* 53 (July 1994), 351–52.

[12] Harsha Ram, "Russian Poetry and the Imperial Sublime," in Monika Greenleaf and Stephen Moeller-Sally, eds., *Russian Subjects: Empire, Nation, and the Culture of the Golden Age* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 48–49.

zaraza) to describe General Kotliarevskii's army? Such expressions evoke the language of Valsingham's famous (or infamous) hymn to the Plague in *Pir vo vremia chumy*, another evocation of death and destruction in the mood of the eighteenth-century panegyric ode. In both cases we find a combination of feast and horror. The triumph of the Russian military is made possible through the cruel downfall of the Caucasian people, which the text explicitly describes as a horrible event: "Srazhalis′, gibli vy uzhasno" (50).

It is important to note that this macabre tone can be found not only in the epilogue, but also in the main text of "Kavkazskii plennik." We in fact observe it from the very beginning of the narration, if we remember the way the *plennik* is first introduced to the reader:

> "Вот русский"—хищник возопил.
> Аул на крик его сбежался
> Ожесточенною толпой;
> Но пленник хладный и немой,
> С обезображенной главой,
> Как труп, недвижным оставался.
> Лица врагов не видит он,
> Угроз и криков он не слышит…
> Над ним летает смертный сон
> И холодом тлетворным дышит. (1.19–28)

The description contains no fewer than three references to death: "kak trup," "smertnyi son," and "kholodom tletvornym." The third formulation is of special interest: the prisoner not only appears as a "corpse," but he is "*tle-tvornyi,*" i.e., able to spread his decay unto others. In Pushkin's universe, only the poisonous anchar tree shares this deadly force:

> К нему и птица не летит,
> И тигр нейдет—лишь вихорь черный
> На древо смерти набежит
> И мчится прочь, уже тлетворный. [13]

If we read "Anchar" as the poetic treatment of the deadly effects of absolute power, the connection with the Russian prisoner becomes rather significant. In what capacity the nameless Russian visits the Caucasus remains unclear: does he belong to the Russian military or is he simply a "tourist"? The former seems, after all, more likely. In this sense, the Russian is a cog in the imperialist machine which will exterminate the

---

[13] *PSS*, 3: 133. According to *Slovar′ iazyka Pushkina*, this is the only other occurrence of the word *tletvornyi* in Pushkin's works.

Circassian natives. The introductory passage sets the tone for further development of the plot: the preoccupation with death will surface as a main feature of the prisoner's character, and he will indeed spread his death wish like an infectious disease. Just as the Russian generals in the epilogue appear as agents of death, so does the *plennik*, although of a different sort. He is not a bellicose exterminator like Kotliarevskii and Ermolov, but rather himself a victim of dark forces which he is unable to control.

What can we say about the identity of this macabre character? The fact that he has no name and is described only as "Russian" suggests that he is less an individual than a type: an exemplar of nineteenth-century Russian civilization ("Vot russkii!"). Pushkin himself wrote that he wanted to portray in him "this indifference to life and its pleasures, this premature senility of the soul (*prezhdevremennaia starost′ dushi*), which became the distinctive feature of nineteenth-century youth."[14]

The theme of aging plays an important role in Pushkin's poem. In a lyrical digression, the narrator depicts the loss of youth as a gradual, irreversible fading of life's pleasures, as a slow, but steady process towards death:

Не вдруг увянет наша младость,
Не вдруг восторги бросят нас,
И неожиданную радость
Еще обнимем мы не раз…
Но вы, живые впечатленья
Первоначальная любовь,
Небесный пламень упоенья,
Не прилетаете вы вновь. (1.177–84)

Pushkin, faithful to the Byronic technique of the "broken tale,"[15] gives only sparse and fragmentary details of the prisoner's *Vorgeschichte*. Apparently disappointed with society because of some bad experiences, notably with treacherous friends and a woman who failed to respond to his ardent love, the hero, a "friend of nature," sets out in search of "freedom":

Отступник света, друг природы,
Покинул он родной предел
И в край далекий полетел
С веселым призраком свободы. (1.79–82)

---

[14] Letter to V. P. Gorchakov, October–November 1822. *PSS*, 13: 52.

[15] On the notion of "broken tale," see V. M. Zhirmunskii, *Bairon i Pushkin* (Leningrad: Academia, 1924), 50.

However, once he has fallen into captivity, his urge for freedom—in fact nothing more than the pursuit of a "veselyi prizrak"[16]—is quickly overshadowed by another, apparently more powerful impulse: the longing for death.

Он раб. Склонясь главой на камень,
Он ждет, чтоб с сумрачной зарей
Погас печальной жизни пламень,
И жаждет сени гробовой. (1.95–98)

The preoccupation with death, as we learn later, is not primarily caused by the prisoner's slavery, but existed already in his earlier, urban life. He is reminded of his past while watching the "cruel games" of the Circassian youth, who amuse themselves by killing slaves:

Но русский равнодушно зрел
Сии кровавые забавы.
Любил он прежде игры славы
И жаждой гибели горел.
Невольник чести беспощадной,
Вблизи видал он свой конец,
На поединках твердый, хладный,
Встречая гибельный свинец. (1.345–52)

This reference to duels makes us wonder whether the barbaric inhabitants of the Caucasus are really all that different from the civilized Russian of St. Petersburg. Rather than serving as a model of an alternative society fundamentally opposed to the Russian way of life, the Circassians are strangely reminiscent of the prisoner's own youthful existence before he became disenchanted with life. His encounter with the natives of the Caucasus is thus perhaps less a journey in space than a trip back in time.[17]

The Circassians seem to feel a hidden affinity for their prisoner. They are impressed with his "Byronic" indifference to hardship and danger:

[16] For a discussion of the term *svoboda* in "Kavkazskii plennik" and in Pushkin's poetry in general, see S. G. Bocharov, *Poetika Pushkina* (Moscow: Nauka, 1974), 3–25.

[17] The affinities between the Russian prisoner and the Circassians have been highlighted by Susan Layton. She argues that their spontaneous machismo confers on the Caucasian natives the status of "an underground Russian self" (*Russian Literature and Empire*, 95).

Беспечной смелости его
Черкесы грозные дивились,
Щадили век его младой
И шепотом между собой
Своей добычею гордились. (1.367–71) [18]

These feelings of affinity are not returned by the prisoner. At best, his attitude is at times one of an interested, yet detached observer, who watches the foreign culture around him with the curious attention of a European "anthropologist" ("evropeitsa vse vniman′e / narod sei chudnyi privlekal," 1.224–25). Ultimately he is dismissive of the Circassians ("uzhasnyi krai ostavim oba," 2.252). He is unable to find a common ground with his captors or to respond to the love of the Circassian woman. A return to nature, or to the plentiful, immediate existence of his youth, proves to be impossible.[19]

Although they are both agents of death, the Russian prisoner differs from the Russian generals. After all, he is attempting to flee the constraints of the autocratic state in some unstated way. His alienated narcissism directs his desire for violence inward rather than against an outward enemy. Although allegedly a lover of freedom, he seems neither to resist capture nor to seek to escape from captivity. Unlike the Circassians and the Russian forces in the epilogue who convert their aggressive instincts into open war and killing, he seems primarily preoccupied with his own death. In contrast to the first part of the poem, where he does not utter a single word, the elegiac effusions in which he indulges in the second part become the only outlet for his dark impulses.

Many critics have noticed a change in the hero's character between Parts 1 and 2. As K. P. Morozov puts it: "From a 'sinister, demonic,' proudly reserved sufferer, the hero turns into an elegiac 'whiner' [*nytik*]."[20] If there is a change in style, the fundamental gloominess of the hero

---

[18] As Matvei Kagan points out, the Circassians perhaps misunderstand the *plennik*'s real character: "The prisoner himself, after he is freed by the Circassian girl, seems rather unworthy of the Circassians' pride—they would hardly respect a man who did not jump in the water." M.I. Kagan, "O pushkinskikh poemakh", in *V mire Pushkina,* 103. The Circassians do not seem to realize that, despite his "vek mladoi," the prisoner suffers from a "prezhdevremennaia starost′ dushi."

[19] From this it does not necessarily follow that Pushkin's poem is a polemic attack against Rousseau, as Blagoi and Sandomirskaia believe. Rather we could see in it a case study of modern civilization's baneful influence on the human soul—a view with which Rousseau certainly would have agreed. Layton describes the Russian prisoner as "a man emotionally diminished by westernization" and "a walking admonition of the injuries enlightenment could inflict" (*Russian Literature and Empire*, 99).

[20] K. P. Morozov, "Kavkazskii plennik," in A. S. Pushkin, *Sochineniia* (St.Petersburg: Brokgauz-Efron, 1908), 2: 36.

nevertheless remains unchanged in part 2. Whereas earlier it is conveyed through the narrator's descriptions, it now surfaces in the words of the hero himself—with fatal consequences for the Circassian woman who falls in love with the prisoner and provides the only audience for his verbal performance.

It must be said, however, that the heroine could hardly have been "infected" and eventually destroyed by the prisoner's taedium vitae, if she had not already harbored an attraction to death. She talks about it herself in her declaration at the beginning of part 2:

> Я знаю, жребий мне готовый:
> Меня отец и брат суровый
> Немилому продать хотят
> В чужой аул ценою злата…
> Но умолю отца и брата,
> Не то—найду кинжал иль яд. (2.22–27)

The diffuse longing for death characteristic of the prisoner ("on zhazhdet seni grobovoi"; 1.98) takes a different form in the mind of the Circassian woman: she considers a violent termination of her life as a viable option, and—as the only character in all of Pushkin's writings to do so—she indeed commits suicide. This preoccupation with death links the woman inevitably with the prisoner. The parallels in their destiny are obvious—they both love without being loved in return. Their relationship fails perhaps less because of the cultural and sociological difference between them, as most commentators believe,[21] than because of a "time gap." The prisoner regrets that he has not met the woman earlier:

> Несчастный друг, зачем не прежде
> Явилась ты моим очам,
> В те дни, как верил я надежде
> И упоительным мечтам! (2.60–64)

Like the Circassians in general, the woman represents an earlier stage in the life of the prisoner. But at the moment when she falls in love with him, he has already passed this phase and is nothing more than a "corpse." As he points out himself, he is "dead for happiness" ("Umer ia

[21] "People of opposed natures and different social cultures cannot be happy together." A. L. Slonimski, *Masterstvo Pushkina* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel′stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury 1959), 222. Slonimskii's remark may be correct in itself, but in my opinion is not sufficient to explain what is happening between the prisoner and the Circassian woman.

dlia schastia," 2.64), adding to his speech, in Joe Andrew's words, "a modish necrophiliac frisson":[22]

Как тяжко мертвыми устами
Живым лобзаньям отвечать (2.68–69)

The dialogue in which the *plennik* and the woman engage is strangely unreal. The woman must possess an extraordinary linguistic talent to learn Russian so quickly, and even to formulate statements of a highly elaborate lyrical style. Rather than talking to each other, the heroes, like actors on stage, seem to address their tirades and grandiloquent confessions to a fictive audience.[23] While rejecting the love of the Circassian woman, the prisoner finds time to perorate on his favorite theme: death.

Нет! я не знал любви взаимной.
Любил один, страдал один,
И гасну я, как пламень дымный,
Забытый средь пустых долин.
Умру вдали брегов желанных…
Мне будет гробом эта степь…
Здесь на костях моих изгнанных
Заржавит тягостная цепь… (2.143–50)

This language does not fail to leave an impact. The Circassian woman becomes the victim of a "linguistic infection." Not only has she learned the Russian prisoner's language, she also starts to imitate his style.[24] At their next and final meeting, the woman shows that she has learned to talk in the same elegiac vein as her beloved:

Она исчезла, жизни сладость…
Я знала все, я знала радость,
И все прошло, пропал и след. (2.254–56)

As Stephanie Sandler has pointed out, "the Circassian woman absorbs the Russian man's deadness."[25] Even her physical appearance

[22] "The Caresses of Black-Eyed Captive Women," 119.

[23] For a discussion of this "lozhnyi dialog," see Zhirmunskii, *Bairon i Pushkin,* 74–75.

[24] Susi Frank argues that the Circassian woman's miraculous acquisition of the Russian language marks her as "a prisoner of Russian culture and literature," who symbolically assumes the role of a "Bednaia Liza." See "Gefangen in der russischen Kultur: Zur Spezifik der Aneignung des Kaukasus in der russischen Literatur," *Die Welt der Slaven* 48 (1998), 73.

[25] Sandler, *Distant Pleasures*, 149.

begins to resemble that of a corpse. After being rejected by the prisoner, her gaze becomes "unmoving," she is "pale as a ghost" and her hand turns "cold" (2.104–09). However, although their verbal expression is very similar, the Russian prisoner and the Circassian woman differ in one important point: the woman, as an active, naive person, can understand death only *literally* (she also mistakes the "tainyi prizrak" (2.87) by which the prisoner is haunted for a real woman and, with an endearing naivity, urges him to rejoin her). Whereas the prisoner talks endlessly about his destroyed life and his longing for death, the woman turns this rhetoric into action: she liberates the prisoner and throws herself in the river.[26] As abruptly as she appears ex nihilo at the beginning of the story, she disappears without a trace.[27] The prisoner, rather unmoved by the woman's death, walks away without any attempt to save her.

This ending of the story stirred controversy. Pushkin gave the following answer to the critics (among them Viazemskii) who would have preferred a happy ending and deplored the hero's heartless behaviour:

> Others feel sorry that the prisoner did not throw himself in the river to pull out my Circassian girl—well, go ahead, I used to swim in the Caucasian rivers,—you will drown there yourself and not find a thing; my prisoner is a reasonable man (*umnyi chelovek*), judicious, he is not in love with the Circassian girl—he is right not to drown himself.[28]

---

[26] The woman's drowning in the river is foreshadowed by the second stanza of the Circassian song inserted in part 2:

> Казак, утонешь ты в реке,
> Как тонут маленькие дети (2.200–01)

[27] Some textual evidence seems to indicate that the Circassian woman is a mere hallucination:

> На деву, молча, смотрит он
> И мыслит: это лживый сон,
> Усталых чувств игра пустая. (1.118–20)

It is interesting to note that all appearances of the woman, and also her final disappearance, are closely connected with the moonlight:

> Но кто, в сиянии луны
> Среди глубокой тишины
> Идет, украдкою ступая? (1.111–13)
>
> Когда же рог луны сребристой
> Блеснет за мрачною горой... (1.154–55)
>
> По белым хижинам аула
> Мелькает бледный свет луны... (2.217–18)
>
> И при луне в водах плеснувших
> Струистый исчезает круг... (2.284–85)

[28] Letter to Viazemskii, 6 February 1823. *PSS,* 13: 58.

Although Pushkin's statement is no doubt tongue in cheek, it seems problematic to interpret the denouement of the story in terms of the hero's "spiritual rebirth," his "rising from the dead," through his love for the Circassian woman, as most critics have understood the ending of "Kavkazskii plennik."[29] It is true that certain expressions in the text seem to point to a "resurrection" of the prisoner ("K cherkeshenke proster on ruki, / Voskresshim serdtsem k nei letel"; 2.265–66), but, as the prisoner's later actions show, his outlook on the world seems essentially unchanged. Even while making a declaration of love, the prisoner cannot stop referring to his favorite theme: death.

«О друг мой!—русский возопил,—
Я твой навек, я твой до гроба.
Ужасный край оставим оба,
Беги со мной…» (2.250–53)

The final lines of the tale are hardly as optimistic as some Russian critics have claimed. This is how the story ends:

Редел на небе мрак глубокий,
Ложился день на темный дол,
Взошла заря. Тропой далекой
Освобожденый пленник шел,
И перед ним уже в туманах
Сверкали русские штыки,
И окликались на курганах
Сторожевые казаки. (2.294–01)

Slonimskii comments on this passage as follows:

> This is the calm after the storm, the awakening from a heavy dream, the departure from romantic torments into the wide arena of life. There is no sun yet—only dawn. But we can already distinguish—although still in the morning fog—the outlines of the objec-

[29] "… the closing verses of the poem represent not the tragedy of hopeless despair, but the spiritual rebirth of the hero, his return to life and freedom, the cheerfulness and freshness of the dawning new day." Sandomirskaia, "'Estestvennyi chelovek' i obshchestvo," 190. "An abrupt enlightenment occurs. The prisoner suddenly comprehends the real value of life. All his disenchantment disappears, his heart rises again for joy. […] This sudden turn creates a bright, purely Pushkinian dramatic effect. We discover the thirst for life which was hidden behind the disenchanted exterior appearance of the prisoner." Slonimskii, *Masterstvo Pushkina,* 221.

> tive world (*ochertaniia predmetov predmetnogo mira*), we can hear—still from far away—the voices of real life.[30]

What does this "real life" consist of? The first objects of the "objective world" to become visible are bayonets. And the first acoustic impression—and at the same time the closing of the story—is the call of guards. After his liberation from captivity, the hero finds himself in a world of weapons and warriors. One could add that the word *kurgany* contains a lingering semantic connotation of death.[31]

The presence of the death theme creates a strong link between the main text of "Kavkazskii plennik" and the epilogue, to which the last lines of the story serve as a transition. Once the hero has crossed the river which separates the romantic, dreamy Circassians from the "real world" and has woken up from his dream, the death theme appears from a new, "realistic" perspective. The text turns from fiction to nonfiction, from moonlight to sunshine, from romantic elegy to the classicist patriotic ode. The "smertnyi son" which floated over the prisoner at the beginning of the story now becomes bloody reality, the bayonets glittering in the fog enter into action, and the prisoner's "prezhdevremennaia starost′ dushi," this infectious disease which killed the young Circassian woman, turns into a "chernaia zaraza," the slaughtering of the Caucasian tribes by the Russian army.

One might object that this reading fails to take into account the complex generic composition of "Kavkazskii plennik." It is certainly true that the different manifestations of death are to some extent conditioned by generic parameters. As Oleg Proskurin has noted in his recent monograph on the role of intertextuality in Pushkin's oeuvre, "the only poetic genre which dealt with a 'contemporary' hero, outside of the comical, was the elegy."[32] In his depiction of the Circassian woman, since no tradition of a "female" elegy existed in nineteenth-century Russian literature, Pushkin had to resort to an "experiment" by applying the traditional elegiac style to a female character.[33] The prevalence of the death theme, in this interpretation, would be a consequence of Pushkin's generic choice, laments and melancholic contemplations of death being the traditional stock elements of elegy. Moreover, the suicide of the Circassian woman, in Proskurin's view, can be explained by the fact that Pushkin borrowed the plot of Karamzin's "Bednaia Liza" as a "minimal motivation" to hold to-

---

[30] Ibid., 225.

[31] In the two other instances where the word *kurgan* appears in the text, it is explicitly linked with death: "… padaet kazak / S okrovavlennogo kurgana" (1.308); "Kurgany, tikhie grobnitsy" (Epilogue, 15).

[32] Oleg Proskurin, *Poeziia Pushkina ili podvizhnyi palimpsest* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1999), 113.

[33] Ibid., 115.

gether his heterogeneous concoction of romantic alpine sceneries and elegiac monologues.[34] Although Proskurin has nothing to say about the epilogue, one could add that the treatment of death in this part of the text is governed by the generic conventions of the solemn ode, which makes the death of the enemy a necessary condition for the military triumph of the hero.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that "Kavkazskii plennik" is more than a "collage of separate parts, addressed to different audiences, in different meters and styles, and flaunting, rather than attempting to disguise, its discontinuities, obscurities, apparent planlessness, and general aura of improvisation"—to quote Monika Greeleaf's characterization of Pushkin's Southern Poems.[35] The consistent presence of death, both as a metaphorical trope ("kak trup"), as a rhetorical ingredient of elegiac discourse, and as an event in the plot, creates a sort of kaleidoscopic effect. Linked by a common thematic thread, the various generic conventions employed by Pushkin enter into a dialogue with each other. The odic ending with its glorification of genocide lends an existential urgency to the previous evocations of death, as the text moves from a figurative to a literal treatment of the topic. Whereas the prisoner, as a thoroughly passive, introverted character, internalizes his death wish and confines himself to elegiac complaints, the Russian generals engage in active warfare and generate a historic event: the Russian conquest of the Caucasus. As Sigmund Freud has argued in his letter to Albert Einstein on the reasons of war, warfare results when the death instinct, aiming at reducing life to its original condition of inanimate matter, is directed outwards and thereby turns into the destructive instinct.[36] There is, indeed, something of a merciless necessity in the downfall of the "dikaia vol′nost′"—like the irreversible passing of time which brings our naive "flaming youth" to disillusioned rationality. The Russian generals are, there can be no doubt about it, "umnye liudi," representatives of a "higher" civilization, but unlike the prisoner, they are ready to engage in action, not only in words.

One conclusion we can draw from these observations is that the epilogue is *not* a gratuitous addition to the text. General Kotliarevskii's "chernaia zaraza" contains in fact the semantic kernel, the structural matrix[37] of the whole poem, stretching from the prisoner's "tletvornost′" and his "infection" of the Circassian woman to the genocide in the epilogue. The encounter of the "civilized" and the "primitive" man, first exposed in a

---

[34] Ibid., 119.

[35] Monika Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion: Fragment, Elegy, Orient, Irony* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 117.

[36] See "Why War?" (1932) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1964), 22: 203–15.

[37] On the notion of matrix, see M. Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

Byronic tale and then in a Lomonosovian ode, follows in both instances the same pattern: that of a "black infection."[38] The confrontation between Caucasian nature and Russian civilization is intertwined with a whole set of bipolar semantic oppositions: "youth" (*plamennaia mladost'*) versus "old age" (*prezhdevremennaia starost' dushi*), "joyfulness" (*zhizni sladost'*) versus "coldness" (*kholod tletvornyi*), "life" versus "death." In each case, the first element is destroyed by its opposite. For the *plennik*, this process of destruction is already completed when he first appears on the scene: he lives in a realm of death, a ghastly world where the "secret specter" (*tainyi prizrak*) of passed love looms behind the "cheerful ghost of freedom" (*veselyi prizrak svobody*).

The persistent presence of the death theme lays to rest one of the accusations against "Kavkazskii plennik" mentioned earlier. As the preceding discussion demonstrates, there is indeed an artistic coherence in the text linking the main narrative with the epilogue. The second, ethical objection against the epilogue poses a more difficult problem. Pushkin's intentions have to remain by necessity a matter of speculation. Is it true, as Walter Vickery believes, that "Pushkin simply could not resist the music of Russian boots on the march"?[39] Or was the writing of the epilogue, as Èikhenbaum and Layton suggest, essentially an act of political opportunism? Pushkin's correspondence seems to shed some light on this issue. Tomashevskii (and after him Vickery) quote a letter Pushkin wrote to his brother on 24 September 1820, as proof for his allegedly sincere support of the Russian conquests in Asia:

> The Caucasus region, the sultry border with Asia, is curious in all respects. Ermolov filled it with his name and beneficial genius. The wild Circassians are intimidated; their old audacity is disappearing. The roads become safer with every hour, the numerous convoys become superfluous. One must hope that the conquered land, which so far has not yielded any substantial profit to Russia, will soon bring us together with the Persians through safe trading; that it will not be an obstacle for us in future wars—and, maybe, that Napoleon's chimerical plan concerning the conquest of India will come true for us.[40]

It is true that most liberal Russians of the early twenties, including the future Decembrists Ryleev and Pestel', did not feel disturbed by the

---

[38] During the Silver Age, the expression *chernaia zaraza* resurfaced in Innokentii Annenskii's poetry, where it evokes the gloomy atmosphere of a library reading room. See the poem "Ideal" in "Tikhie pesni" (I. F. Annenskii, *Stikhotvoreniia i tragedii* [Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1990], 59).

[39] Vickery, "Pushkin: Russia and Europe," 18.

[40] *PSS*, 13: 18.

Russian imperialist conquests in Asia. On the contrary, they hailed them as a prerequisite for the further spread of civilization and progress. Even Viazemskii, as we have seen, concedes that "henchmen" may be necessary for the purpose of spreading enlightenment. However, as Matvei Kagan has noted, Pushkin became quickly disillusioned with the imperialist policy of Alexander I, and expressed his disappointment in poems like "Nedvizhnii strazh" (1824). Kagan suggests that "we should also understand the letter to L. S. Pushkin about the Caucasus not as the light observation of a thoughtless traveller, but as something deeper, already tragically contradictory, but permeated with irony and an artificial cheerfulness."[41]

A similar claim could be made about the epilogue of "Kavkazskii plennik." Boris Èikhenbaum draws a parallel between this text and the patriotic scenes in "Poltava," which are in his opinion also deeply ambiguous and could be read as a mere parody of Lomonosov's odes, written at a time when Pushkin was again in trouble with the authorities and needed to produce something that was palatable to their taste.[42] Èikhenbaum probably would have agreed with Harsha Ram's assessment of the epilogue as "more citational than actually performed."[43] He draws another provocative parallel with the battle scene in "Ruslan i Liudmila," where the Kievans and Pechenegians are presented as comic opera buffoons, fighting with cardboard swords and spilling the stage with artificial blood.[44]

The most obvious parallels with "Kavkazskii plennik" can be found in *Puteshestvie v Arzrum,* where Pushkin revisits both the locality and the text of his earlier poem. He even resorts to the time-honored device of the "found manuscript" to make his point clear: while travelling through the Caucasus, the narrator comes across a blotched copy of his own "Kavkazskii plennik" along the roadway. He reads it with great gusto, commenting that "it was all weak, youthful, incomplete (*nepolno*); but a great deal was discerned and expressed truthfully."[45] Unfortunately Pushkin refrains from further elaboration, leaving it up to the reader to distinguish the "weak" from the "truthful" aspects of the poem and to guess what is in need of further "completion."

The parodistic nature of *Puteshestvie v Arzrum* has been noted by many critics.[46] In his deadpan travelogue, Pushkin deflates many of the

---

[41] Kagan, "O pushkinskikh poemakh," 98.

[42] "Batal′naia tema v russkoi poezii," 54.

[43] "Russian Poetry and the Imperial Sublime," 48.

[44] "Batal′naia tema," 53.

[45] *PSS*, 8.1: 451.

[46] See in particular Iurii Tynianov, "O *Puteshestvii v Arzrum*," *Vremennik Pushkinskoi komissii*, vol.2 (Moscow-Leningrad, 1936), 57–73; Anthony Alcott, "Parody

cliché-ridden romantic depictions of the Caucasus and its "exotic" inhabitants. This becomes obvious in Pushkin's treatment of the encounter between the European male and the indigenous woman. Rather than offering sustenance and love to the traveller, the girl upsets his stomach with indigestible food, and her "Kalmyk coquetry" forces him to beat a hasty retreat.[47] The military conquest appears in an equally de-glorified light. Ermolov, the former hero of the Caucasus, has become a somewhat befuddled character who cannot remember Pushkin's full name when the poet pays him a visit. Confined to his home, Ermolov shares the fate of Kotliarevskii described in the epilogue of "Kavkazskii plennik." After calling him the "scourge of the Caucasus" and praising his campaign as a "black infection," the epilogue continues:

> Ты днесь покинул саблю мести,
> Тебя не радует война…
> Скучая миром, в язвях чести,
> Вкушаешь праздный ты покой
> И тишину домашних долов… (Epilogue, 39–43)

The image of the former military hero as a dissatisfied and bored retiree, whose belligerent nature prevents him from enjoying a peaceful life, tempers the jingoistic fervor of the preceding passage. In this sense, the epilogue of "Kavkazskii plennik" already contains germs of an "anti-heroic" approach, which will come to full fruition in *Puteshestvie v Arzrum*. Pushkin's travelogue presents the military commander, Count Paskevich, as a smooth socialite who conquers the city of Arzrum "to the tune of French phrases and a marching band."[48] The narrator, incongruously dressed in a civilian frock coat, stumbles around the battlefield like Pierre Bezukhov at Borodino. More importantly, the conquering Russian army leaves in its wake a wasteland of ruins and cemeteries, and a population with a simmering hatred for the Russian colonizers. Interestingly enough, the "black infection" makes a return, but this time in *literal* form: the narrator's departure from the front is hastened by an outbreak of the plague.

The return to Russia in *Puteshestvie v Arzrum*, like the "plennik's" escape from captivity, constitutes an anti-climax. The first thing to capture the narrator's attention after he crosses the border are the latest journals from St. Petersburg and Moscow lambasting his work. His response con-

---

as Realism: *The Journey to Arzrum*," *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, vol. 10 (Fall 1974), 245–59; Monika Greenleaf, "Pushkin's 'Journey to Arzrum': The Poet at the Border," in *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 138–55; and Ian Helfant, "Sculpting a Persona: The Path from Pushkin's Caucasian Journal to *Puteshestvie v Arzrum*," *The Russian Review* 56 (July 1997), 366–82.

[47] *PSS*, 8.1: 447.

[48] Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion*, 148.

sists in a long bout of laughter. This outburst of good humor could be read not only as Pushkin's anwer to his critics, but also as his final comment on all Byronism and heroic bombast. The ending of the story harkens back to the foreword of *Puteshestvie v Arzrum*, where the author addressed previous criticism of his writings on the Caucasus and the 1829 campaign. Pushkin's drafts reveal that the person whom he had in mind most of all was Faddei Bulgarin. In 1830, Bulgarin had expressed his dissatisfaction with the lack of heroism in Pushkin's depiction of the Caucasus:

> We thought that the author of "Ruslan and Liudmila" turned to the Caucasus in order to be filled with lofty feelings of poetry, to enrich himself with new impressions and to pass on to posterity in sweet songs the great exploits of our contemporary Russian heroes. We thought that the great events in the East, which astonished the world and gained Russia the respect of all enlightened nations, would awake the genius of our poets—and we were wrong. The famous lyres stayed silent, and in the desert of our poetry appeared again Onegin, pale and weak... It hurts the heart to look at this colorless picture.[49]

In his foreword to *Puteshestvie v Arzrum*, Pushkin claims that he was forced to publish the full text of the journey in order to defend himself against the accusation of having turned heroic military conquest into satire. As Ian Helfant has noted, however, Pushkin is patently disingenuous here: "Although his preface creates the expectation that the text will 'clear' him, the *Journey* does exactly the opposite."[50] In this sense, one can surmise that *Puteshestvie v Arzrum* completes what "Kavkazskii plennik" had left incomplete. It confirms the parodistic nature of the earlier text and thereby fundamentally undermines Pushkin's status as a cheerleader of Russian imperialist expansion in the Caucasus.

The Pennsylvania State University

---

[49] *Severnaia Pchela* 35 (1830). Quoted in A. Tertz (A. Siniavskii), *Progulki s Pushkinym* (London: Overseas Publications Interchange, 1975), 112. Siniavskii adds that Bulgarin was wrong only in one point: there is nothing heroic about "Ruslan and Liudmila" either.

[50] Helfant, "Sculpting a Persona," 373.