

Publikacijos

SOME REMARKS ON THE TURKIC MYTH IN RUSSIAN FICTION

Fatima Eloeva

Vilniaus universiteto Klasikinės filologijos katedros profesorė

*О Русь моя, жена моя! До боли
нам ясен долгий путь
Наш путь стрелой татарской воли пронзил нам грудь.*

*Oh, Russia, my wife! To the point of pain
The long road is clear to us
Our way, like ancient will's Tatar arrow pierced our breast.
(Alexander Blok, *In the field of Kulikovo*)*

The title of this paper allows for several interpretations. I originally intended to speak exclusively about the way in which Turkic speech is rendered in Russian fiction, aiming to provide a purely linguistic analysis. Looking at the material, however, it was immediately clear that there is such an intimate relation between linguistic expression and issues of self-identification, otherness, nationalism and cosmopolitanism that it would be impossible – and, more importantly, pointless – to remain within a purely linguistic framework.

Ever since Ferdinand de Saussure first stated that there is nothing in language except oppositions and similarities, we have tried to explain our perception of the world from this perspective, and the structural approach has proved to be very fruitful. There

is no *us* without the idea of otherness, no union without division. So, somewhat depressingly, it turns out that the concept of otherness is essential for any culture – without it the process of self-identification is impossible. On the other hand, during certain periods of time and for various reasons, self-identification matters less; in such cases we are dealing with syntagmatic rather than paradigmatic relationships, with a combination rather than an opposition – and we realize that *the concept of the Other* continues to be extremely important, tending not to be rejected but inevitably integrated into the concept of Self. The latter, more or less, seems to be the case with Russia and the Turkic element.

One of the main symbols of the Russian state is the famous “Monomakh’s

shapka” – the crown of the Russian tsars, traditionally assumed to be the crown of the Byzantine emperors brought from Constantinople to Russia. In actual fact, it was an oriental cap – golden and decorated with filigree work and sable fur – and came from Middle Asia, presumably as a gift from Khan Uzbek to the Russian prince Ivan Kalita (Uspenskij, 2002: 97) in the 14th century. This oriental cap became the crown of the Russian tsars and later was reinterpreted, strangely enough, as the crown of the Byzantine emperors. Both Byzantine emperors and Tatar khans were called “tsars” in Russia. The idea of “tsar power” was sacred in Ancient Russia, and so for the Orthodox church the tsar was the Byzantine emperor, whereas for a great prince who owed his power to the Tatar khan in the epoch of the Golden Horde, the “tsar” was the Tatar khan.

The magical transformation undergone by the Asiatic golden cap, whereby it turned into the ancient crown of the Byzantine emperors, is highly revealing semiotically and shows how the perception of the tsar’s power underwent change in Ancient Russia.

Discussing the problem of language contact, Paul Kretschmer once claimed that when a borrowing has occurred a long time ago, it stops being classified as a borrowing and can be interpreted as an autochthonous lexeme in the language. A similar conclusion can be drawn with respect to cultural contact, since it is evident that the relationship between Russian culture and the Tatar-Mongol element is (as mentioned above) mostly syntagmatic, a case of combination and not opposition, whereas the interconnection with other cultures which have greatly influenced

Russian culture – firstly German in the era of Peter the Great and then French (in Russian aristocratic society of the 19th century a kind of bilingualism existed) – can be characterized as paradigmatic. In these latter two cases we have an opposition; we are talking about the perception of the role of these elements on the synchronic level, in the present time.

It is traditionally claimed that most borrowings occur on the lexical level. Words are borrowed easily from other languages, whereas morphological borrowings are extremely rare, indeed almost impossible.

However, it is worth mentioning that a number of Russian words which are now interpreted as belonging to the autochthonous archaic lexicon and sound Slavonic – such as *zodchij* “architect”, *lovchij* “hunter” – consist of a Russian stem with the suffix /chi/, derived from the Turkic {ČI}, a very productive suffix expressing agency. This linguistic example sheds light on cultural attitude, since no ordinary speaker would ever perceive this suffix as a borrowing nor even be aware of the Turkic origins of the suffix /chi/. It is also worth noting that all the words which contain the borrowed Turkic suffix of agency have Slavonic stems.

In the same way, a phenomenon which we may call “Turkic intonation” constitutes part of our polyglossia, and in Russian literature in most cases it can be interpreted as an interplay between different voices, not Bakhtin’s dialogue but some kind of polyphony. Naturally, this phenomenon could be interpreted in terms of Orientalism, a theory which, as is well known, is based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and the West. The Orient is adjacent

to Europe; it has helped to define Europe as a contrasting place in terms of image, personality and experience. It seems that in certain cases – and Russia is far from being the only one – Turkic oriental features became inherent in Russian culture and mentality. The well-known Russian proverb “scratch any Russian just a little and you will discover a Tatar underneath” certainly possesses many connotations.

In the present paper, I shall give a brief and fragmentary sketch of how the ways of interpreting the Turkic elements developed in the Russian tradition. Within this framework, several issues need to be considered:

1. The way in which the Turkic Tatar-Mongol dominion contributed to the formation of the idea of the Motherland in Russian mentality.
2. The way the Turkophone characters in Russian fiction are described.
3. The interpretation of Turkic elements by the Russian romantic episodic tradition.
4. Orientalism in the mirror of Russian fiction.

From the moment the Russian epic tradition was formed (here we are talking about the famous Russian bylines – poems about heroes), the images (and the etymologies of the names) of all the enemies of the heroes – the Kalin tsar, Nightingale the Brigand (who kills his victims by whistling unbearably loudly) and the never-dying Koshej – all possess features which go back to Turkic tradition. At this early stage of Russian literary tradition, it is still mostly a matter of the Tatar–Russian, evil–good, darkness – light oppositions. However, in later periods, as mentioned above, the influence of the Tatar-Mongol culture ceased to be an expression of something

hostile and became intricately connected and intermingled with the idea of Russian identity.

In certain periods and for certain poets and writers, the Tatar–Russian opposition (we have to remember here that both terms are to a large extent conventional) became a very important means of expressing the idea of motherland and their own identity. It seems that there is actually no other way to express the idea of motherland, of belonging somewhere than to resort to this opposition.

We shall concentrate on the Silver Age – arguably the most important and meaning feature of Russian poetry. On the threshold of the Russian Revolution, great Russian poets, who always played the role of prophets in Russia, were trying to solve the mystery of Russia, the Russian soul, the future of Russia.

In the poem “На поле Куликовом” / “On the field of Kulikovo”, traditionally learnt by school children as an example of patriotic verse, Alexander Blok, one of the greatest Russian poets, wrote:

*Oh, Russia, my wife! To the point of
pain
The long road is clear to us
Our way, like ancient will's Tatar
arrow
pierced our breast.*

For the quotation I chose the translation of Donald Rayfield (a brilliant British Slavist) who decided to translate the word *воля* /volia/ as “will” (the arrow of Tatar will). Here, we are immediately drawn into problems having to do with the difficulties of translation and the cultural differences reflected in different languages. As was once elegantly demonstrated by Anna

Verzbitskaja, the Russian /volia/ cannot be translated into any other language; the word has many connotations in Russian and combines two ideas – “Freedom” and “Will”. It also has some connection with the idea of “Open Space”. Pushkin wrote in one of his famous poems: “There is no happiness in this word but tranquility and freedom”, where we have translated *volia* as freedom. So, a Russian reading Blok’s text will not be able to ignore the other connotations of the word *volia*, and the passage /streloj tatarskoj voli/ might well be translated as “the arrow of the Tatar’s freedom”. The latter is highly suggestive of Russian mentality and the Russian perception of motherland: the very idea of national identity cannot be separated from the Tatar presence – our way as the ancient arrow of the Tatar’s will, or the Tatar’s freedom piercing our way.

It is no coincidence that one of the most famous and charismatic Russian poets – and the real muse of Russia – Anna Akhmatova changed her name from Anna Gorenko (of Ukrainian origin) to Akhmatova, a Tatar name adopted from her maternal great grandmother. It is worth mentioning that Akhmatova’s family may not actually have been actually Tatar: the family legend had it that in the epoch of the Golden Horde the Akhmatov family followed the example of many other noble families and chose to adopt a Tatar name because such a name was connected with the idea of prestige and power.

Anna Akhmatova was arguably one of the most beautiful women in the context of Russian culture, a potent symbol of the Silver Age; in antique shops in Russia one can still buy a charming porcelain statue showing her standing, wrapped in her fa-

mous shawl. This statue of Akhmatova was designed by her friend, the sculptor Elena Danko, a fact which we mention because it was very important for the poetess not only to be a Russian muse, but also to look and sound like one. While her poetry has a masculine intonation, she deliberately played a feminine role all her life. In order to fulfil that role in the tragic times in which she was destined to live, and write, she needed not only a tremendous talent but also incredible courage. Throughout her life Akhmatova contemplated and moulded both her poetic production and her own image – from the very beginning it was very important for the poetess to become, and to remain, a Russian muse, and so her decision to change her name from the common Ukrainian Gorenko to the noble and refined Tatar Akhmatova is quite important semiotically. Her poetry often plays with the idea of her Tatar connection, and here there is certainly some sort of mythologisation and stylization going on.

*Мне от бабушки татарки
Были редкостью подарки
И зачем я крещена
Горько гневалась она.*

*А пред смертью подобрела
И впервые пожалела
И вздохнула «Ах, года!
Вот и внучка молода».*

*И простивши нрав мой вздорный,
Завещала перстень черный
Так сказала: «Он по ней,
С ним ей будет веселей».*

*From my Tatar granny
I seldom got gifts*

*She could not stand that
They baptized me.*

*But before her death
She became more benevolent
And sighed – How the years pass
Look – my granddaughter is already a
young girl.*

*She pardoned my bad temper
And gave me a ring with a black stone
She said: it suits her
She will wear it and be merry.*

Akhmatova's close friend Osip Mandelshtam had no Tatar roots or memories whatsoever; he belonged to the generation of Jewish poets in Russian literary tradition who abandoned Yiddish and German for Russian. During the First World War he wrote the wonderful poem "To the German language" in which he pays homage to German culture. Mandelshtam's poetry belongs within the vast framework of European culture, and he is certainly one of the most cosmopolitan Russian poets. Here, I shall examine his famous poem "Сохрани мою речь" / "Preserve my speech". The poem was written in the tragic time of Stalin's purges during which many poets tried to praise Stalin in order to survive the holocaust, a fact which can be interpreted within the more general framework of the relationship between tyrant and poet. In his article "Stalin, Beria and the Poets" Donald Rayfield remarks: "A myth of Russian literature is the *iurodivy*, the Holy Fool, who questions tsars with impunity. That right, practiced long after Ivan the Terrible, becomes surrogate dialogue" (Rayfield, 1993: 23). In the context of the Russian Silver Age, Osip Mandelshtam

was certainly the Holy Fool. He wrote "Preserve my speech" while desperately trying to survive exile in Voronezh where had been sent for having written an incredibly bold anti-Stalinist poem. It was obvious to him that exile would be considered far too mild a punishment and that another, much more fitting penalty – death – was to follow. He was perfectly aware of this, and yet "the adrenalin of fear spurred him on" (Rayfield, 1993: 25). By contrast, poems written by his contemporaries in praise of Stalin were usually of poor quality.

Mandelshtam starts his poem intending to praise the tyrant but is unable to control himself and his tragic and reckless muse. As we shall see below, the truth was that he could neither praise the tyrant nor write bad poetry:

*Сохрани мою речь за привкус
несчастья и дыма
За смолу кругового терпенья, за
совестный деготь труда
Как вода в новгородских колодцах
должна быть горька и сладима
Чтобы в ней к Рождеству
отразилась пятью плавниками
звезда.*

*И за это мой друг и отец и
помощник мой грубый
Я непризнанный брат, отщепенец в
народной семье
Обещаю построить такие
дремучие срубы
Чтобы в них татарва опускала
князей на бадье.*

*Preserve my speech for its aftertaste of
unhappiness and smoke
For the pitch of collective patience, for
the conscious tar of labor*

*The water of the black wells has to be
bitter and sweetish
So that by Christmas the star's five fins
will be reflected in it.*

*And for that, you, our father, friend
and rude assistant
I – the rejected brother in the people's
family
I promise you to build such huge
wooden wells
That the Tatars could drown the
princes in them.*

Interestingly enough, this poem – which is not particularly transparent for the reader and contains many hidden meanings and allusions – is sometimes learnt by schoolchildren. Like Blok's "On the field of Kulikovo", it is regarded as a patriotic poem, because while being forced to express his devotion to Stalin, Osip Mandelshtam actually speaks about his love for his mother tongue. And from the very beginning, he expresses this love in his own unique way – the poem is written as a prayer. The question is who is the poet appealing to: God or the tyrant? Presumably to both. In his prayer, the poet asks that his speech be preserved for its "aftertaste of unhappiness and smoke". The first lines and the way the poem continues, with images of black wells and the pitch of patience, takes us back to the dark days of the attacks by the Golden Horde or the destruction of Novgorod by Ivan the Terrible (the link "Ivan the Terrible-Stalin" was the most popular historic metaphor of that period, and Stalin himself was very fond of the allusion). The Christmas star undergoes several metamorphoses – first it is the Christmas star, then the star with the five

points, the symbol of the Bolshevik revolution; the star's five fins are reflected in the water, and the fins in turn bring to mind a fish, a Christian symbol for Jesus.

Such a flow of associations is very characteristic of Mandelshtam. In the second verse he appeals to his father, friend and rude assistant, promising him to build such huge wooden wells that the Tatars will be able to *drown* Russian princes in them. Given that he promises this to his interlocutor, one may ask whose side he is on and why he should have to rehabilitate himself – on the one hand, calling himself a rejected brother in the people's family, while on the other he is promising to the father of the nation to build wells in which the Tatars will be able to drown princes. It is evident from this stanza that he identifies himself and Stalin with the Tatars. Whether or not he meant this from the very beginning, we shall never know; we may view it in terms of submission to the dictates of language. There is one other interesting detail: in the first stanza the star is "drowned" in the dark wooden wells, whereas in the second, we have the image of the Tatars drowning the Russian princes in these same wells.

This theme could be continued. However, the aim of this paper was to demonstrate the complexity of the interpretation of the Tatar-Mongol component in the prophetic voices of the great Russian poets.

Another subject, of some anthropological interest and worth discussing in this context, is the mythologizing approach to the earliest stages of the relationship between the Russians and Turks, in which myth serves as an instrument of scientific analysis. Of course, the latter statement appears to be oxymoronic, since myth

is supposed to be strictly separated from scientific research and interpretation. The evolution of human thought and the interpretation of the world would appear to be in constant opposition, and yet this opposition is valid only on a theoretical level; in practice, the two can often be combined. This is true in the case of the famous Russian scholar Lev Gumilev – the son of Anna Akhmatova and Nikolay Gumilev, an outstanding Russian poet. Nikolay Gumilev produced a very interesting interpretation of the theme of Orientalism in Russian poetry and was subsequently persecuted by Lenin's government in the first wave of the red terror, accused of having participated in a plot against the Bolshevik Government. Lev Gumilev in his turn was arrested twice and spent sixteen years in prisons and concentration camps. As he once bitterly remarked, he spent eight years behind bars for his mother and eight for his father.

An extremely talented scholar, his first scientific interests were history and oriental studies. His years of imprisonment had a significant influence upon his scientific style which became extremely expressive and often resembled a detective story or historical novel. He also left very interesting texts which illustrate the sad enrichment of his language due to the many years he spent in prison amongst criminals, for example, "The History of the Netherlands", a strict historical work written in the criminal jargon. Some of his books (for example, *From Rus to Russia*) were deliberately published without a bibliography – this also can be interpreted as a reflection on the years of imprisonment, when books were not available to him. For many reasons (partly political), Gumilev's

position in the academic world was ambivalent. Official historiography has never accepted him, accusing him of producing theories which are not based on reliable arguments. It is not my aim here to establish the scientific value of Lev Gumilev's theories; however, I believe that this work provides support for this paper's main thesis that Turkic elements are very important in Russian self-identification and for the corresponding, rather positive, approach to Turkic influences on the cultural level.

In his books *Ancient Russia and the Great Steppe* and *Turks* (1989), Lev Gumilev discusses the role of Tatar and Mongol elements in the formation of the Moscow State and the rebirth of Russian ethnicity after the period of Mongol domination in the 13th to 15th centuries. In his book *From Rus to Russia* (1992), he analyses the choice made by the Russian national hero and saint, the prince of Novgorod Alexander Nevsky: finding himself in an extremely difficult situation when the independence of the Republic of Novgorod was under threat, he preferred a union with the Tatar khan Batyi (Tatars as non-Christians were quite indifferent to Christian religious matters) to the two alternatives, namely subordination to Rome or collaboration with Swedish and Teutonic knights (who were also Catholics). According to Gumilev, Alexander Nevsky saved Russia by pursuing this policy, since otherwise it would inevitably have become assimilated into Catholic culture.

For many years Lev Gumilev lectured at the Geography Faculty of the Leningrad University. Hundreds of people came to his lectures, for he was extremely charismatic and popular, and his style of narration was lively and informal. Sometimes it seemed

that the stories he was telling were fairy tales of his own invention, while at other times he gave the impression that he had actually been witness to some of the events he was describing. This often irritated his more academic—and often rather dull—colleagues. On the other hand, he always had plenty of admirers from outside the academic world. It should also be mentioned that, although he was a definite turkophile, he was always admired and valued in nationalistic circles. Nikita Mikhalkov called him “the last poet of history”.

Another noteworthy name in this connection is Olzhas Suleimenov, a well-known Khazakh poet whose book *Аз и я / Me and az* (where *az* is the Old Russian for “me”) recalls the title of Gumilev’s *From Rus to Russia* (where *Rus* is an Old Russian ethnonym). The book analyses the famous poem “Слово о Полку Игореве” / “Song of Igor’s Campaign” (hereinafter *Slovo*), which is thought to have been written in the 12th century and describes the defeat of the Russians by Tatar troops in 1185. Analyzing *Slovo*, Olzhas Suleimenov hypothesizes that Turkic-Russian bilingualism existed in the 12th–13th centuries. He claims that Russian has a long history of co-existence with Turkic languages, since from the very beginning of its history in the 9th century AD Russia was in contact with nomadic tribes of Khazars, Pechenegs, and Tatars. Analyzing the “obscure passages and words” in *Slovo*, Olzhas Suleimenov finds Turkic etymologies for them. As in the case of Lev Gumilev’s works, I shall not discuss the scientific value of Olzhas Suleimenov’s book; what is interesting for us is the fact that its fate was somewhat similar to that of Gumilev’s books. The academic world was rather skeptical

about it but it was accepted by the general public with great enthusiasm and became extremely popular. This suggests that, on the level of myth, the idea of a close connection between ancient Russian and Turkic elements is inherent in the Russian mentality.

Turkophone heroes are encountered fairly frequently in Russian fiction – in Konstantin Aksakov’s *The Years of Childhood of Bagrov-grandson*, in the Caucasian novels of Bestuzhev-Marlinski, in the prose of Tolstoy and Lermontov and in Gorky’s *At the Bottom*. One can easily continue the list.

The language we encounter in this fiction is in fact neither Turkic nor Russian but evidently some sort of pidgin. Before commenting on this, however, a few words are in order to regard the character of the Turkic-speaking heroes who are usually portrayed as extremely naive and noble, pure and generous, continuing the Rousseauian idea of the return to nature, a certain kind of personality uncorrupted by civilization. Interestingly, in some cases it is unclear whether we are really dealing with a “Tatar” idiom or just with some generic Caucasian language; in *Hero of Our Time*, for example, Lermontov refers to the Tatar language even though the character Bella is Circassian. There are two possible explanations for this: either the actual language was not important to Lermontov – and in any case, there was a tradition of calling all Caucasian languages “Tatar” and interpreting them as such; or (which is also quite likely) there existed a lingua franca in the Caucasus, which was some form of Turkish.

There are supposed to have been a large number of Russian-based pidgins, which are often claimed to have emerged when

Russians came into contact with the peoples of the Caucasus, Siberia, the Urals, and Central Asia. Most of the pidgins became extinct and were never documented, surviving mainly in the form of quotations in fiction and in various memoirs and travel diaries. With very few exceptions, these fragments are not adequate linguistically: while it is usually possible to identify them as being based on Russian, they are too short to study properly. Nevertheless, examples of Tatar-based pidgin in Russian fiction seem to be quite numerous.

Importantly, the samples of Russian-based pidgins are all very similar to one

another, in spite of the different degrees of accuracy of the documented texts. Numerous quotations from Russian literature demonstrate that the pidgin tends to be centered around a verbal stem, which is usually imperative, sometimes with the Russian imperfective form added to it, and occupies the last place in the phrase. This immediately brings to mind the classical Turkic sentence structure with its usual SOV word order. The next stage of investigation might then be a detailed analysis of samples from the speech of the Turkic-speaking characters of Russian literature.

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Autorės adresas:

Vilniaus universiteto

Klasikinės filologijos katedra

Universiteto g. 5, LT-01513 Vilnius

El. paštas: fatimaeloeva@yandex.ru