Yuri Lotman, “On one reader’s understanding of N.M. Karamzin’s “Poor Liza”: An attempt to conceptualize popular consciousness in the eighteenth century”

Nominated and introduced by Damiano Rebecchini, Università degli Studi di Milano

The short essay by Yuri Lotman “On the reception of Poor Liza by N.M. Karamzin: A case study (On the structure of mass conscience in the 18th century)”, published in 1966, represented an important contribution, especially in terms of methodology, to the development of studies on the history of reading in the Soviet Union. In this article, Lotman interprets reading as a form of translation from an artistic language, that used by the author in his work, to that already acquired by the reader before his reading. This way of interpreting reading helped Soviet scholars to recognise that, historically, the author and the reader hardly ever share the same aesthetic code. It furthermore encouraged them to consider the work being read not only as a message that must be interpreted but also as a new language to be learned. By comparing reading to a form of translation, Lotman was proposing to identify all the factors that come into play in the complex process of reading. The literary critic put forward questions such as how has the artistic language of the reader developed? Through which sorts of texts? How competent is he (or she) in the literary genre of the text he (or she) is reading? Which elements of the text can he understand, and which can be misinterpreted, based on the reader’s specific artistic language? Finally, how does the work's new language contribute to changing the language already acquired by the reader? As the critic underlines at the end of his essay, since the work being read is a code as well as a message, it could contribute to modifying the reader’s aesthetic norms, for example by developing a sensitivity toward the descriptions of natural landscapes that the reader did not possess before. To this aspect, i.e. how reading and art in general can transform their beneficiaries, Lotman was to dedicate several brilliant articles in the following decades.

The article, first published fifty years ago, appears today more interesting for the questions it poses than for the conclusions it draws. To a certain extent, this can be ascribed to the context in which the article appeared. Lotman’s essay tried to create a dialogue between different disciplines, such as social history, book history and semiotics, which were still rigidly separated at that time in the Soviet Union. After decades during which even sociology was unrecognized as an autonomous

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1 The essay was published with the title “Ob odnom chitatel’skom vospriiatii ‘Bednoi Lizy’ N.M. Karamzina: (K strukture massovogo soznaniia XVIII v.)”, in XVIII vek. Sbornik 6, Moscow-Leningrad, 1966, pp. 280-285.

discipline, the Soviet Union saw interest in both book history and reception theory slowly but steadily re-awaken from the 1960s onwards. At the same time, thanks to research by Lotman and other scholars, the foundations were being laid for what would become the all-important Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics. In the field of social history, however, they kept on resorting to rigid Marxist categories, employing concepts such as “mass conscience” – which Lotman himself used in the title of his essay – that seem today positively inadequate. Lotman published his article in an institutional publication of the Academy of Sciences, and had to comply with those categories. And some of his conclusions, for instance on how love was conceived by the working classes and the absence of a conscience of the individual’s value among artisans, are deeply affected by the ideological conditioning of the Soviet context.

The article focuses on an interesting source: an aristocratic intellectual's 1799 transcription of a conversation between an artisan and a peasant about a classic of Russian sentimentalism, Nikolay Karamzin's short story *Poor Liza* (1792). Karamzin's famous tale, as recounted by a captivated narrator, tells the tragic love story between an aristocrat, Erast, a basically kind-hearted but flighty young man, and a young and innocent peasant, Liza, who gives in to her passion for him. Abandoned by Erast, poor Liza drowns herself in desperation in the place where the two used to meet, a lake close to Simonov Monastery, not far from Moscow. Built upon the model of Rousseau’s *Nouvelle Héloïse*, Karamzin’s tale sparked many literary imitations and generated significant proselytism among Russian readers, similar to the reaction produced by Rousseau's masterpiece. As many sources of the period report, crowds of sentimental Russian readers took to visiting the locations where the moving tale was set, sighing over their unfortunate romances and carving verses dedicated to Karamzin’s heroine into the bark of birch trees. The site consecrated to Saint Simon, who was commonly believed to have healing powers, became a place of pilgrimage for Russian readers touched by the tale of *Poor Liza* for many decades. As the first lines uttered by the artisan show, the literary myth blends and overlaps with ancient religious beliefs.

In his article, Lotman does not analyse the social position of the witness who transcribed the conversation between the artisan and the peasant, the scholar Aleksey Fedorovich Merzljakov. Hence, the apparent naiveté of the critic’s statement that “there’s no reason to doubt the accuracy of his tale”. Actually, Lotman well knows what he is talking about. He had studied in depth not just Merzljakov’s epistolary, which is his source, but also the minor scholar’s literary position and

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attitude towards Karamzin and his work. He had in fact already dedicated an extensive critical study
to him5. What is perhaps more interesting than his conclusions on the working classes’ “mass
conscience” is what he does not, and maybe cannot, say about his source – something which
emerges clearly in the unabridged version of the article. It is striking, for example, how fast a high
literature text aimed at a mainly aristocratic audience and telling a tale that is not without erotic
allusions circulated first in a monastic milieu and later among artisans. According to the source,
Karamzin’s book is given by a Simonov monk to a group of artisans who were working at the
monastery’s iconostasis. The artisan, despite his misunderstandings, prizes it to the point of buying
a copy of it for himself and recommending it to a peasant during a village festival. The source,
therefore, showed that, in spite of what the Soviet critics maintained, texts circulated rather freely
among different classes, and even the work of a “reactionary-aristocrat” such as Karamzin could be
equally enjoyed by czarist aristocrats, artisans and peasants alike. On the other hand, the artisan's
“translation” seems to underline another aspect of the text that maybe Lotman could not draw
attention to in a Soviet context, but which clearly emerges from his source. In telling Karamzin’s
tale, the artisan, completely overlooking the social and psychological conflicts described in the text,
pays careful attention to the economic mechanisms at the basis of the relationship between the two
main characters. While he hardly says anything about their feelings and emotions, he gives a
detailed account of all the sums and transactions between the two mentioned in the book. Thus, in
the artisan’s narrative, Poor Liza is reshaped from a sentimental tale into an account book of the
revenues and expenditures of the main characters.

By publishing his source and commenting on the artisan's “translation” of Karamzin’s text,
Lotman was ultimately responsible for another achievement by the Soviet scientific community. He
shifted the attention from a purely phenomenological analysis of the act of reading (as conducted by
Roman Ingarden and later Wolfgang Iser), or from an entirely semiological analysis (as in Umberto
Eco’s The Role of the Reader), to an analysis of the concrete textual traces left by readers in the
past. When reading is considered as a translation, it no longer appears to be an abstract process but
the production of a new text, whether oral or written, with all the implications that this production
entails. If, on the one hand, this interpretation erased the immaterial, unsystematic and ephemeral
nature of reading, on the other, according to Lotman, it allowed a reconstruction of the aesthetic and
axiological system of the readers of the past, based only on their “translations”.

In conclusion, Lotman always integrated his theoretical reflection on the semiotic
mechanisms of culture into a detailed historical analysis of the texts of the past; this is what makes
him one of the most inspiring Russian scholars of the latter half of the 20th century.