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

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The way in which a reader perceives a work is always constructed. It is selective: some elements of the author’s conception gain emphasis, while others go unnoticed. The writer addresses his or her readership using the “language” of a specific literary system. This language may or may not coincide with the language of the reader’s perception. If it does not, the reader may begin either to learn the language of the author’s literary structure, or (often subconsciously) to “translate” the text into the language of his or her own literary awareness. Studying this second phenomenon is of twofold interest: it allows us to reconstruct the mental framework of the reader interpreting the text, and it reveals which aspects of the author’s system are made more prominent through being translated by the reader into a different “code.”

On August 3rd, 1799, A. F. Merzliakov wrote a letter to Andrei Turgenev:

On the third, I was present at the festivities taking place near the Simonov Monastery. It was a merry affair to begin with; the common folk an endless flowing sea... After gazing awhile upon this new world which had arisen in its entirety here around the monastery, along I went to the lake, where Karamzin had his Poor Liza drown. Once I had heard what each birch tree had to say about her, down I sat on the shore, wishing to listen to the conversation of the winds as they bemoaned the lot of that unfortunate beauty. I sank gently into a reverie, and would have slept longer had I not been woken by the following conversation:

A journeyman (aged around twenty, fastening up his dark blue coat): They bathe in this lake against fever. They say the water helps.
A peasant (aged around forty): Is that right, brother? Well, I ought to bring my wife down, she’s
been ailing this past half year.

Journeyman: I don’t know whether it’d help wives. Didn’t you know? Women drown here, every last one of them.

Peasant: How’s that?

Journeyman: Around eighteen years ago, Fair Liza drowned here. Because of that, see, they all do.

Peasant: Who was she, then?

Journeyman: She was a girl from yon village, like; her old mum was a haberdasher, while she was a flower-seller; used to take them into town, like...

Peasant: But how come she drowned?

Journeyman: Well, one day this posh feller runs into her. Sell me your flowers, my girl, he says. And he slips her a ruble. But she says that’s way too much. I sell them for three kopecks a piece. Anyway, he asks her where she lives, like, and he starts paying her visits; then he, like, takes a great deal from her, like, and then he takes it into his head to get married! She, in her misery, goes and throws herself in the water... Mind you, though, that’s not all! Listen to this: he sends her off, like, with a hundred rubles. Away she goes, and runs across her friend on the way. She goes and gives her friend the money, like: here, she says, take ninety to my old mother, and keep ten for yourself. Anyway, she comes here, like, strips off, and plunges into the water!

Peasant: Oh, brother, that sends shivers down my spine!

Journeyman: That’s love for you, brother!

Peasant: Love! (They fall silent awhile.) So, anyway, brother, is that all a story someone wrote down, or what?

Journeyman: Wrote down, of course. You can buy a book about it, it’s called something like “My Travels.” I don’t exactly recall, to tell the truth. It’s a fair piece of work, that book, brother. The descriptions of the meadows and lakes and that! I don’t know what could be sweeter. You know, we’re gilding the iconostasis in the monastery, and one of the monks gave us this book to have a look at. I even went and bought it myself, and it was money well spent, brother!

What could be sweeter to the ear of Mr. Karamzin? What could be better than this panegyric: peasants, journeymen, monks, and soldiers – they all know about him, they all love him. Frankly, I’m envious, brother.¹

Merzliakov’s retelling followed swiftly on from the events it describes, and there are seemingly no

¹ TsGIAM [Central State Historical Archive in Moscow]. F. 1094 (The Turgenev Family Archives). Op. 1. Ed. chr. 124. l. 2 ob.–3 ob.
grounds for doubting its accuracy. It presents to us the exceedingly curious case of a well-known work by Karamzin being transformed into a readerly conception that differs sharply from the author's.

The literary mindset of the “journeyman” who re-tells “Poor Liza” is, first and foremost, oriented around the plot: the work, for him, is a sequence of events, and it is precisely the plot that he takes to be the dominant element of the narrative. This principle is set out with striking consistency. The oppositions that assume such weight in Karamzin’s tale, both social (the nobleman vs. the peasant girl) and psychological (the kindly but weak and corrupted young man vs. the love of the pure young woman), do not fit comfortably into the literary preconceptions of the “journeyman” and so he simply fails to notice them. In contrast, the plot-line is preserved in his memory with great accuracy. However, the story has also undergone a significant reconceptualization. In Karamzin’s system, the “events,” the key moments in the plot, are milestones that mark developments in the inner lives of the main characters, and it is precisely for this reason that they are significant. The fundamental life in his system is the life of the heart, and “external” deeds are important insofar as they are reflections, signposts, of this life, which allow us to delve deep into its essence. In the re-telling, all the action is assessed differently: the tale is scary and engrossing (“it sends shivers down my spine”); scariness is, of course, one of the main ways of being engrossing, while being engrossing is the main quality that distinguishes a literary endeavor from a more mundane communication.

The plot elements of “Poor Liza” undergo reconceptualization as they are recombined into this different system. Let us focus on just one such element: the death of the heroine. In Karamzin’s system, this episode is tragic; it serves to indicate that the prospect of a somewhat more equitable state of affairs has been scorned. This tragic denouement is the alternative to the positive outcome that could have come about if the hero had behaved differently. The positive outcome in question is the product of the reader’s unrealized wishes and expectations; against this backdrop the death of the heroine is seen as wicked, a tragic rupture in the course of events, an injustice, while Erast is seen as the party to blame for this wickedness.

The artistic structure of this “re-telling” obeys different laws. In this aesthetic system, a love story (“That’s love for you, brother!”) can only end in death. Death is an attribute of love, and an emotion that is not consummated by death cannot be understood as love. And so a plot-line concerning love can have only one ending, with no possible alternatives. The actual fact of the heroine’s death assumes a different significance: it is inevitable. The only things that might vary, and as a
consequence become laden with meaning, are the particular circumstances of her death. A fatal outcome is not understood as wrong since, on the one hand, any concept of the value of an individual life is alien to the worldview of the “journeyman,” while on the other, death is an indication of the strength of feeling, a testimony to the fact that before us we see “love”; and “love” is identified as one of the positive values. And so the “awful” and “pitiful” death of the heroine (or of the hero) is not perceived by readers as something that must be avoided if the narrative is to be judged as having a happy ending. Indeed, the categories of happy and tragic ending have no relevance in this system, since it does not allow for any such differentiating features. At the same time, any notion of “guilt” is lifted from the hero (and the socio-psychological didacticism is discarded). It is significant that the “journeyman,” who has hitherto recounted the plot with great accuracy, commits an error at this point. This indicates that the details that are so crucial for Karamzin are bereft of meaning for him. In Karamzin’s hands, Erast’s character is corrupted after he joins the army (as, later, is that of Nekhliudov in Tolstoy’s Resurrection) and loses large sums at the card table; to set his affairs in order he determines to marry a rich woman, spurning the poor girl’s pure love for him. The whole narrative unfurls in such a way as to condemn the main male protagonist. But an approach like this is alien to the “journeyman,” and so he changes the plot into a more “natural” (as he sees it) series of events, which is entirely stripped of any didactic tinge: “then he, like, takes a great deal from her [Liza], like, and then he takes it into his head to get married!”

This unsophisticated reader of “Poor Liza,” who had not assimilated the genre system of Karamzin’s story, was faced with the necessity of reconceptualizing the text within the parameters of his own adherence to a specific tradition. There was no option other than to recode the story at the generic level.

The first thing to note is that the “journeyman” and the “peasant” both understand Karamzin’s story to be true, something that really happened. The urge to divide instances of written art into two major classes in terms of the opposed poles of “invented” and “not invented” is typical of folkloric thinking, and each of the resultant classes is marked by a particular intrinsic aesthetic experience. This classification can even be applied to folkloric material (as the old saying has it, “A fairy tale is made up, while a song actually happened”), and it is very tenaciously applied to texts that enter the world of folkloric aesthetics “through the side door.” The parameters of this note do not allow us to linger long over the idiosyncrasies of the artistic experiences inherent in each class. I will merely mention the fact that “invented” narratives connote a fantastical plot and an otherworldly prettiness in the backdrop, while the “not invented” imply a rejection of fantasy elements and the presence of brutality in episodes of blood-letting (compare Chulkov’s “A Bitter Fate”). In this particular case,
an important role in the reconceptualization of Karamzin’s work into one of these categories was played by the fact that Karamzin himself, drawing on utterly different aesthetic notions and in a struggle against an utterly different tradition, sought to underline the psychological truth of his story by insistently emphasizing that his story had actually happened. The precision of the geographical confines of the action even compelled those retelling it to accept the story as a local legend about the lake by the Simonov Monastery, and the whole narrative as a definition of the lake’s properties: “Women drown here, every last one of them.”

A curious testimony to the urge to “translate” Karamzin’s tale into the language of a different, more comprehensible aesthetic system can be seen in the substitution of the phrase “Fair Liza” for the original “Poor Liza.” The title “Poor Liza” conveys the substance of Karamzin’s narrative. It combines the heroine’s name with an epithet that characterizes the narrator’s attitude towards her. In this way, it would appear, the title introduces not only the world of the narrative’s subject, but also the world of the narrator, and establishes a sympathetic attitude between the two. This is, as it happens, the model for all of Karamzin’s tales. In the eighteenth century, the epithet “fair” in conjunction with a female name in the title of a work did not signify any particular attitude towards the heroine. It was a constant epithet, which came to form an indivisible collocation. However, titles like this are only to be encountered in a specific group of narrative prose works. By calling the heroine of Karamzin’s tale “Fair Liza,” the “journeyman” was imagining her as one of those literary characters familiar to him, using this literary stamp as a mould into which he could cram Karamzin’s story.

Thus, Karamzin’s tale was reconceptualized as a bookish endeavor (“So, anyway, brother, is that all a story someone wrote down, or what?”), at the root of which there was a true story or a local oral tradition, retold in accordance with the norms of a popular literary tradition of the eighteenth century, that is to say narratives about the sufferings and death of a beautiful heroine. The “journeyman,” evidently, was also inclined to discern picaresque elements in the tale. At any rate, that is precisely how his unsophisticated understanding of the title of Karamzin’s anthology My

Trifles might be explained: “You can buy a book about it, it’s called something like ‘My Travels’.”\(^3\) Once we have established how the genre of “Poor Liza” appeared to a low-brow reader, we can go on to name it: the features listed above are typical of a peculiar variety of roman à clef that emerged in eighteenth-century Russian literature and became known as the *poluspravedlivaia povest’*, a trend that P. N. Berkov was the first to recognize as being worthy of critical attention.

However, “Poor Liza” did not only undergo changes as it entered the consciousness of the low-brow reader, influenced by the aesthetic norms inherent in that mindset; it also actively changed those norms. This is particularly noticeable in the way the “journeyman” assesses Karamzin’s landscape.

Finally, it should be noted that such a reconceptualization characterizes not only the mental framework of the reader who assimilates it, but also the nature of the object being assimilated. One of the most important facets of Karamzin’s gift was his talent as a popularizer. Karamzin had mastered the art of presenting the foremost achievements of contemporary culture in such a way that they were easily recoded into the language of the low-brow reader, uninitiated into such cultural issues. This did run the risk of vulgarization – it is no accident that the speech of Khlestiakov, and others among Gogol’s characters, consists of citations from Karamzin – but it nonetheless allowed these cultural achievements to become widely known among unsophisticated readers, who gained the opportunity, depending on their level of education, to read into Karamzin’s works various levels of complexity, ranging from the most primitive to those that prefigured the ideological debates of the eras to come.

\(^3\) Interestingly, A. Kliucharev’s translation of a book by Alain-René Lesage was published in 1804 under the title *Guzman De Alfarache, a True Spanish Tale*, Parts 1–4 (Moscow, 1804). In 1813, with an eye to the low-brow market, Kliucharev changed the title to *The Antics of the Fantastical Guzman* (Moscow, 1813). The Russian words *shalosti* (antics) and *shal’* (whim) had, in the eighteenth century, significantly more vulgar connotations.