

BAKHTIN AND INTERGENERIC SHIFT: THE CASE OF BORIS GODUNOV

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Bakhtin, master of the exhaustively-pursued thought, is sometimes at his most suggestive in a footnote or a passing comment. One such big thought is tucked into the concluding paragraphs of his 1935 essay, "Discourse in the Novel" (417-20). Bakhtin is discussing two transformational processes to which all products of language are subject: *canonization* and *re-accentuation*. The first, he warns, we should be wary of, for canonization hardens literary images in place and prevents free growth. The second, however, we should welcome; re-accentuation loosens up literary images and guarantees them a long life by embedding them in new contexts. Near the end of this discussion, Bakhtin adds the afterthought: "Of great importance as well is the re-accentuation of images during their translation out of literature and into other art forms—into drama, opera, painting" (421). The example he gives is Tchaikovsky's "rather considerable re-accentuation" of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. A footnote then directs us to the "extremely interesting problem" of double-voiced parodic and ironic discourse in opera, music, and choreography, but on that the essay ends.

Tchaikovsky's musical *Onegin* crosses the generic boundary from novel to opera. Bakhtin also mentions the reverse operation—the expression of a musical idea in words—in his discussion of Trishatov's opera from *The Adolescent* (*Estetika* 308). There he gives the crossing-over process a name, transposition (*transponirovka*).¹ Bakhtin's interest in such transpositions (what we might also call "intergeneric shift") should come as no surprise. Throughout his work there is a general enthusiasm for the crossing of boundaries, for liminal situations, for the passing of a single message through

different voices.² In Bakhtin's world, one voice does not supersede another; all voices coexist and interact. This interaction does take place in time, however, and here Bakhtin envisages a vast dialogue taking place between works of art in history:

A work of art is a link in the chain of speech communion; like a rejoinder in a dialogue it is linked with other word-utterances, with those whom it answers and with those who answer it . . .
(*Eстетика* 254)

How might we study these "word-utterances" that follow one another in dialogue, differing perhaps in genre but linked by a common theme? Bakhtin makes only the preliminary move toward such a poetics of transposed themes. One place to start, perhaps, is with the most familiar instance of shifting a single theme (or text) across a boundary: translation from one national language to another. All translations exist on a continuum with interpretation. In the world of translation this is a familiar continuum: at one pole (what we might call, borrowing from Bakhtin, the "single-voiced" extreme) we have those translations that approximate successful forgeries; the translator strives to eliminate all traces of cultural space or time elapsed between the original and his version of it. At the other, double-voiced extreme we have "free imitation"—Pope's Homer, Zhukovsky's Schiller, Pasternak's Shakespeare—works we value precisely because we are asked to be conscious of *co*-authorship.

What applies to translation proper has its parallel in transposition as well. Consider, for example, Bakhtin's instance, the move from literary text to opera libretto. At one pole we find word-for-word settings (such as Dargomyzhsky's setting of Pushkin's *Stone Guest*); at the other pole, there is the loosest possible relationship between source-text and its musical counterpart—say, Borodin's romantic reworking of *The Lay of Igor's Campaign* into his opera *Prince Igor*. In between those two extremes are operas based on the principle of "scenes from classic works." These are perhaps the most interesting transformations. As with the audience presumed for epic performances, in "scenes from" operas one is expected to know the *from*. The opera is no more responsible for telling the whole story than are illustrations to a novel meant to be read separate from the verbal text.³ Plot is not at issue, and the appeal is precisely the variation of a known text under new conditions. Take Prokofiev's *War and Peace* as a case in point. In one sense Prokofiev violates Tolstoy's aesthetic, which is

so militantly opposed to opera as an artform. On the other hand, Prokofiev sets whole segments, even whole paragraphs of Tolstoyan prose unaltered. He keeps the *language* of a Tolstoyan novel intact inside an opera, which is to say, his heroes sing but they sing prose, and this is both violence to and collusion with Tolstoy. Although Prokofiev selects for his opera the scenes surrounding Natasha at the Opera, he does not set *that* scene. It is the unspoken subtext: how opera can beguile, distil, create new realities. The work is dependent for much of its richness on precisely that dialogue between the two authors, one quoting the other in a new context.

Transposing a theme might in fact be the most vigorous and autonomous commentary possible on another's work of art. It is the one category of "translation" which does not hide co-authorship, but rather emphasizes it. The independence of the new work is guaranteed by its new medium, and thus the perceiver must come to grips with more than the old theme in new dress; the dress itself, the shaping force of a genre, is inevitably central to appreciation. "Fidelity" is not the major issue when generic boundaries are crossed. More important than that single-voiced category is the status of the transposed work as a hybrid. Both sides of the boundary must be kept simultaneously in view: two languages, two media, two genres and two voices.

With this brief introduction, the remainder of this essay is devoted to one famous transposed theme in Russian cultural history, that of Boris Godunov. It is a prototype of the sorts of issues transpositions raise, and how they might be profitably approached. The Boris theme has proved enormously productive over the last 300 years, inspiring various histories, several operas, and dozens of dramas in Russia and the West.⁴ But first, a word about the historical Boris.

A bare chronology of events can be quickly given. In 1580 Ivan the Terrible celebrated a double wedding: his own to a seventh wife Maria Nagaia, and his younger son Fyodor's to Irina Godunova. A year later Ivan killed his elder son and heir in a fit of rage; the following year, Maria gave birth to a son, Dmitry. When Tsar Ivan died in 1584 there were thus two claimants to the throne: Fyodor, who was feeble-minded, and a two-year-old infant. Fyodor assumed the throne with the understanding that his competent and ambitious brother-in-law Boris would rule. For fourteen years, Boris filled this role with intelligence and foresight. Halfway through Fyodor's reign, in 1591, the Tsar's nine-year-old half-brother Dmitry (in royal exile in Uglich) was found with his throat slit in the palace courtyard. The boy was an epileptic; an official commission investigated, and attributed his death

to self-inflicted wounds during a fit which came upon the child while he was playing with knives.

Irina Godunova bore Tsar Fyodor only one child, who did not survive her first year. When Fyodor died in 1598, the Riurikovich dynasty therefore came to an end. Boris was elected Tsar. For three years his reign was relatively peaceful, but in 1601 a series of natural disasters ruined the harvests throughout Russia and brought on a calamitous famine. The peasants, recently enfranchised, could not legally leave their masters in search of better land, and popular discontent rose. Fearful of civil unrest, Boris opened state coffers to feed the starving. He simultaneously took measures against the scheming noble families—the Shuiskys, Mstislavskys, and Romanovs—many of whom resented an untitled boyar on the throne. But the famine and disaffection deepened. Some time between 1602 and 1604 a young man turned up in Poland claiming to be the Tsarevich Dmitry, miraculously saved from the attempt on his life at Uglich in 1591. This Pretender gained the sympathy of a portion of the Polish Diet. In 1604, with a Polish fiancée and newly converted to Catholicism, he invaded Muscovy with a motley crew of Polish volunteers, Cossacks and disgruntled peasants. The forces of Tsar Boris—vastly superior in arms and men—unaccountably delayed, key leaders defected to Dmitry, and as the Pretender was marching on Moscow (April 1605), Boris suddenly and mysteriously died. The False Dmitry reigned for scarcely a year, when he was put to death and Prince Shuisky crowned. The *Smuta*, too palely rendered in English as a “Time of Troubles,” did not come to an end until the election of Michael Romanov in 1613. This Romanov dynasty, founded on the ashes of a decade of pretenders, invasion, peasant revolt and famine, survived until 1917.

Historical evidence suggests (Vernadsky 1-19) that Boris was innocent of the death of the young tsarevich. But powerful political and religious forces conspired early in the 17th century to “confirm” Boris’ guilt: Dmitry was canonized in 1606 (to put an end to all future pretenders to his name) and Boris thereby became both tsareicide and *sviatoubiitsa*, murderer of a saint. The Romanovs, persecuted by Boris, lost no time in proscribing the Godunov name once one of their own was on the throne. It is no surprise that Karamzin, working with two centuries of chronicles and state documents for his well-annotated *History*, ended his chapter on the Fall of Boris with the words:

Thus was God's punishment brought to bear on the murderer of the true Dimitry, and a new punishment began for Russia under the sceptre of a False Tsar! (XI 123)

Even outside this partisan heritage, the image of the historical Boris is something of an anomaly in Russian historiography. He is a borderline phenomenon, caught between the two great mythic images of Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great, oriental despot and westernizing monarch. In that period, while Russia shifted slowly from governing by the family to governing by the state, Boris held the dubious distinction of being Russia's first elected tsar. He reigned without traditional dynastic legitimacy; the Godunov clan, newly ennobled, was shunned by families of princely lineage. The image of Boris is that of an isolated monarch, superstitious, ambitious, desperate, and thus easily psychologized. His biography, unsure at vital moments, encourages speculation. How did Dmitry die at Uglich? Why did Boris fail to press his troops to victory over the Pretender? How did Boris himself die, and why at the worst possible moment? The more numerous the unknowns, the more attractive his tale becomes to those who would transpose it.

Indeed, this tragic watershed in Russian history has appealed powerfully to the aesthetic imagination. The first drama on the theme was written by Lope de Vega (*El Gran Duque de Moscovia*, 1607-13) while news of Tsar Dmitry's fate was still wending its way to Spain. Ever since Schiller's fragment *Demetrius* (1805), the Germans have been fascinated with the figure of the Pretender, who tends to become for them the hero of the tale. He is seen less as the Russian pretender than as the universalized Romantic rebel, an incarnation of Faust. Pretense is read as a positive heroism, for man is free to *assume* (not merely passively accept) his identity.⁵

The Russians, on the other hand, have preferred Boris as hero. While Russian *Demetrius*-dramas do exist (Khomiakov, Ostrovsky and Suvorin wrote excellent ones), their Dmitrys are not heroic pretenders in the German sense. They are trapped and tormented tsars, as is Boris. Representative of this overlap are Ryleev's two character-sketches of Boris and the Pretender (#60 and #61) in his *Dumy*, or *Reflections* (Ryleev 146-52). The two portraits are almost identical, two conscience-stricken monarchs kept awake nights by dreams of shed blood. Thus Russians politicize a popular Romantic plot: the tragic hero or hero-villain, his conscience tormented by a

terrible crime, is pursued by the avenging image of his innocent victim. More central to the Slavic aesthetic, it seems, is a suffering tsar caught between personal guilt and an enlightened rule which cannot cancel out that guilt.

That theme did in fact figure prominently in nineteenth-century Slavophile theories of autocracy. The tsar was perceived as a secular Christ who had assumed the guilt of the world, and thus removed from the people the compromising responsibilities of power. From here it is a short step to that larger category which was to prove so congenial to Russian literature, the theme of the ruler who commits a crime for a Christian purpose—thus linking Boris Godunov with Napoleon (another “false tsar” and destroyer of dynasties) and with those later distinguished protagonists of ends justifying means, Raskolnikov and the Grand Inquisitor. This rich blend of traditional and contemporary motifs—the suffering tsar as Christ, and the theme of romantic guilt—might explain why the story of Boris is so often rewritten, an ongoing polemic with a troublesome moral dilemma.

Russia of the nineteenth century was particularly well served by the Boris Tale. It inspired her first great popular historian, her greatest poet, and one of her greatest composers. Nikolai Karamzin’s *History of the Russian State* (1816-29) ended with the Time of Troubles, and Karamzin’s treatment of Boris Godunov became a model for biography in this new “romantic-national” type of history. Out of Karamzin’s portrait Alexander Pushkin created his “romantic tragedy” *Boris Godunov* (1825)—a work which he considered his masterpiece, and which he intended as a specifically national, Russian response to imported neoclassical norms in drama. Modest Mussorgsky adapted both Pushkin’s and Karamzin’s texts for the libretto to his greatest opera *Boris Godunov* (1869-74), which he offered as a national alternative to western operatic models, the first step toward a Russian “people’s musical drama.”

In its three greatest expressions, the Boris Tale was thus a vehicle for generic innovation. Each treatment asserted a specifically *Russian* concept of genre in opposition to the European models then reigning in the three disciplines: German historiography, French drama, and Italian opera. Each work was met with excitement, but also with bewilderment—what was its genre, where was the hero? Such questions are significant quite apart from the Boris theme which served as their pretext. New forms are always marked by a debate on boundaries, and the works have in fact been kept alive in part by their

puzzling resistance to classification. Their three creators had consciously attempted to found a tradition in their respective disciplines. It cannot be said that they succeeded. Most Russians who could read were familiar with Karamzin's *History*, and it was a factor in all later historical research on Russian themes, but there is no "Karamzin School" in Russian historiography. Pushkin's *Boris* went essentially without imitators, or, for that matter, performances. And Musorgsky's *Boris* reached the larger world only through Rimsky-Korsakov's later and more conservative re-workings of both score and libretto. The attempt to lay the foundation for a new Russian tradition resulted in each case in a brilliant cul-de-sac, a curiosity.

How might we understand these three works in relation to one another? And why was the controversy surrounding them so vehement? Part of the answer seems to lie with the inherent difficulty in reading transpositions. We know, for example, that the historian Mikhail Pogodin accused Karamzin,⁶ and later Nikolai Polevoi accused Pushkin,⁷ of misreading the sources to construct their versions of the Boris Tale; still later, Strakhov lambasted Mussorgsky for the violence he did to Pushkin.⁸ These debates in fact resemble the sort of criticism one often hears leveled against translators, the charge of infidelity to an earlier and more authoritative text. Criteria for evaluating transpositions are as ill-defined as those for evaluating translations, and this is complicated by the prejudices we bring to quasi-fictional genres like sentimental history and quasi-literary genres like the libretto. In influence studies where the authors in question are working in closely kindred or identical genres—say, Gogol and Dostoevsky in the short story—techniques for criticism are considerably more sophisticated.⁹ We now readily admit in those instances that to "copy" another's plot is not necessarily to endorse it; quotation is not identification, but more often stylization or parody. With the rise of reception theory and reader-response criticism, typologies have begun to be suggested for mapping an audience's perception of literary borrowing (Rabinowitz 246-48). But transposition across genre and medium boundaries complicates this question of "quotation." Neither voice frames the other (because voice is often embedded in an entirely different vehicle), and neither has priority. Transposition is, for its audiences, *inevitably* dialogic; translation and simple quotation are only potentially so. A deep suspicion of the other often pervades our perception of authentically co-authored works. As consumers we become uneasy: is it plagiarism,

parody, homage? A certain embarrassment seems to accompany aesthetic processes that celebrate their debt, but not necessarily their fidelity, to earlier texts.

A study of the Boris transpositions suggests that the changes each artist wrought on his predecessors, and on his unwary audience, were indeed complex and calculated. All three worked within the traditional plot: an ambitious Boris had Dmitry murdered in Uglich, and for this he felt a crippling, ultimately a killing, guilt. Karamzin assumes Boris' guilt, as did the chronicles before him, but chronicles alone would not have convinced a sophisticated nineteenth-century audience. Karamzin thus weaves together two traditions to tell the tale: the *Zhitie* or Life of a Saint, and romantic psychology. The Uglich murder is told in a style recalling the deaths of Russia's first native saints, Boris and Gleb (also political murders against children); Karamzin's account in fact appears to be a paraphrase of "The Life of St. Dimitry," dating from some time after 1606.¹⁰ Surrounding this *Zhitie*, however, are the more secular languages and motivations familiar to readers of romantic fiction: there, the real causes for events are not in heaven, but in the psyche.¹¹ In his monumental *History* Karamzin invokes both a romantic and a divine determinism to condemn Boris.

Why was a guilty Boris necessary to Karamzin? In part because it fit his larger explanation for the Time of Troubles; Karamzin was official historian to the Romanov court and Russian empire, and even tragic periods of history must be shown to have shape and purpose. When he writes that "the ruins of Uglich howl to Heaven for vengeance" (XI 85), clearly the Romanovs (to whose reigning monarch, Alexander I, the *History* is dedicated) emerge as the saviors leading Russia to glory. But there are other possible reasons. Fifteen years before the first volumes of the *History* appeared, Karamzin wrote a brief essay on Boris entitled "Reminiscences on the Road to Troitse." In it he condemned the chroniclers for their harsh judgment of the Godunovs. Boris was such a progressive tsar, Karamzin insists, that we would like to doubt his crime; "God will judge secret villainies, but we must praise tsars for everything they do for the glory of the Fatherland" (374).

The important dialogue here is between Karamzin and his own time. The essay was written in 1803, two years after Alexander I had assisted in the deposing (and perhaps in the murder) of his own father, Paul I. Thus Alexander had also come to the throne "irregularly," with tsarecide (and perhaps parricide) paving the way for a competent

ruler to assume power. Paul I had been as disastrous for Russia at the end of the eighteenth century as Fyodor would have been, were it not for Boris, at the end of the sixteenth; the death of Paul I in Petersburg could easily be the unspoken subtext in any re-telling of the death of Dmitry in Uglich. But then that subtext changed. The immense experience of Napoleon's invasion and Tsar Alexander's own drift to the right foregrounded another aspect of the Boris Tale: not Boris' wisdom and good deeds, but his illegitimacy and lack of royal blood. The lesson for the conservative regimes in the Age of Napoleon was that the low-born cannot achieve political greatness except through crime. Both Boris and Napoleon, in the early years of their reigns, had been successful and seductive rulers. Thus Karamzin's emphasis in the *History* on Godunov's hypocrisy, his only *apparent* virtue, despite all the energy and talent.¹² And perhaps thus also the appeal to a deeply-engrained religious genre, the Saint's Life, at the center of the tale.

Karamzin, official historian and storyteller to the nation, used the Fall of Boris to stress a moral and draw edifying parallels between Russia's past and her present. When a more critical and philosophical history began to be practiced, this account of the Boris Tale as history was discredited by historians. Kostomarov, Soloviev, Kliuchevsky kept the presumption of guilt but trimmed it of its moral significance; later, Sergei Platonov challenged the guilt as well. He marshalled impressive evidence to clear Boris' name. But even if Boris *were* guilty of the murder, Platonov argued, a connection cannot be assumed—as it usually is—between the death of Dmitry at Uglich and the death of Boris “from a guilty conscience.” That sort of guilt is a much later romantic cliché: “Boris died exhausted by the grave imponderables of his reign. He did not die exhausted by a struggle with his sin-filled conscience. By the standards of his time he was guilty neither of sin or crime” (*Boris Godunov* 205).

A different evolution was experienced in literature. Boris' guilt became canonical there also. But this guilt, and the divine vengeance it brought in its wake, was not used as Karamzin had used it, as a cohesive factor helping history make sense. On the contrary, Pushkin, and later Mussorgsky, achieved their new generic statements by stressing the opposite, the *disharmony* and the incompatibility of part to whole. What Pushkin wanted to say about history was that it did *not* cohere, not in general and not in the minds of its heroes. A desire to highlight this brute contrast could be one reason why Pushkin copied Karamzin's portrait of Boris so closely. All the events, and many of

the same words and epithets, are there in the play. But there is none of Karamzin's larger framework, none of the references to divine providence, and the quoting thus becomes parodically double-voiced. Karamzin ends his tale on God's Vengeance, which answers all questions; Pushkin ends his on "*narod bezmolvstvuet*," "the people are silent."¹³

What Karamzin had done to history—making it a well-molded, sentimental whole—was what Pushkin found distasteful in Romanticism in general.¹⁴ He used the borderline figure of Boris for a new sort of hybrid drama, what he called "romantic tragedy." If Karamzin was a model of cohesion, Pushkin's *Boris* is a model of fragmentation, both spatial and temporal. Its actors are caught utterly without perspective; there are no artificial closures, and no references (as in ceremonial drama) to future events. The three classical unities are disregarded with a vengeance: twenty-three scenes stretch out over seven years and move from Moscow to Poland. But even more important than the scattering of space and time is the breakdown of causality. Events in one scene do not seem to depend on events in the scenes preceding. Colorful personalities—Pimen, Misail, Varlaam—emerge and are never heard from again. The important connections seem to occur in a time and space we do not see; the False Dmitry is last seen on stage sobbing next to his dying horse, his troops in disarray, and the next we hear of him he is triumphantly on the way to Moscow. For this reason, perhaps, Pushkin neither labeled nor numbered his scenes. Mere sequence is never allowed to equal an explanation for events.

This breakdown in causality is, in its way, an identity crisis for the play as a whole. In Karamzin's linear, finite, Providential history, Dmitry's story is not highlighted; it is an aberration, its obscurities are irrelevant. Pushkin, however, gives more scenes to the Pretender than to Tsar Boris himself. *Samozvanstvo*, pretendership, is in fact the perfect container for the disjointed times and spaces in his play. No character is permitted to build a coherent personality and sustain it; the Pretender himself assumes a different personality in every scene. In a significant detail, Pushkin did not preface his play with a list of *dramatis personae*, as if it could not be known in advance who would play which role.

This is at the center of the complaint (very common in Pushkin's day) that the play had no heroes. "Romantic tragedy" does not really permit of heroes, because heroes are always products of a history, results of historical events. Pushkin's characters—with the possible

exception of Pimen, who can be seen as a sort of shade of Karamzin—do not have that retroactive historical self-confidence. They might dream of making history, but they lack that control over their own significance. This lack of control is reflected in their very diction. Like Shakespeare, Pushkin “mixed styles,” but Pushkin’s mixing was much more radical. Parts that are traditionally poetry—the lofty utterance of a Patriarch, or a lament by Boris’ daughter for her dead bridegroom—appear in prose. And Boris himself slips from one mode of utterance to another in the course of a single monologue. At one point in his famous dramatic confession “I have achieved supreme power,” Boris compares his disillusionment as tsar with the disillusionments of love, conflating the responsibilities of statehood with carnal pleasures. Even worse, Boris speaks of these pleasures in high archaic diction. His language is thus doubly inappropriate—the words to their subject matter, the subject matter to a tsar. This is what makes his lines so scandalous and difficult to pronounce (indeed, to perform at all); there is no *single* voice behind it. His is a disorienting, double-voiced, double-accented discourse—which, as Bakhtin reminds us, is “difficult to speak aloud, for loud and living intonation excessively monologizes discourse and cannot do justice to the other person’s voice present in it” (*PDP* 198). Pushkin, I suggest, wrote his *Boris* in part as a response to Karamzin’s monologization of history. And his counter-impulse, fragmentation and dialogization, penetrates inside the very words his heroes speak.

Karamzin and Pushkin display very different senses of history in their versions of the Boris Tale, and very different ideas about the impact of individuals on history.¹⁵ For Karamzin, Providence takes over, and personalities, thus guided, remain sharp and coherent. For Pushkin, Fate takes over, and stable personalities disappear. His identity crises are for real. He copied Karamzin’s plot and plan,¹⁶ but not his purpose—and to quote extensively in a radically new context is perhaps the most effective way to disappoint generic expectations and thus to bring about that authentic “new word” which was, for Pushkin, the prerequisite for *true* romanticism. Pushkin’s Boris knows less about his role the longer he lives it. He is, in this sense, a realistic hero trapped in a sentimental plot.

In September 1825, near the end of his life, Karamzin suggested in a letter to Viazemsky that Pushkin give his Boris a “wilder mixture” of emotions—more piety, and more criminal passion. “He was forever re-reading the Bible, seeking there some justification for himself,” wrote Karamzin. “There’s dramatic contrast for you!” To

this advice Pushkin wryly responded that he thanked the historian, and would make haste to “sit his Boris down with the Gospel, make him read the story of Herod, etc. . . .”¹⁷ This could well be a reference to the opening sentence in Karamzin’s Foreword to his *History*: “History is, in a certain sense, the sacred book of a people” (I, vii). History was *not* that for Pushkin, and his Boris, forced to secularize his role, forced to make sense out of his fate in everyday language and with no more than that limited perspective which individuals can have on events, clashes with every sentimental moral that had been canonic for the Boris Tale since the time of the early chronicles. A new dramatic contrast is indeed born—although not the one Karamzin probably had in mind—as we watch Pushkin’s Boris strain against Karamzin’s plot.

Consider now our final transposition, Mussorgsky’s version of the theme. Here too there is a polemic, and the desire to create a new generic model. Mussorgsky lavished a careful, even obsessive attention on the *Boris* libretto,¹⁸ intending it to be as different from Italian operatic prototypes as Pushkin’s text had been different from French prototypes in tragedy. Pushkin, in a bold gesture, had replaced the Alexandrine line with blank verse; Mussorgsky replaced Pushkin’s blank verse with prose. For nineteenth-century opera this was a revolutionary innovation. For Mussorgsky it was an integral part of his musical aesthetic, which had always begun with the spoken word. His libretto, perceived by many at the time as a mockery of Pushkin’s verse, is in fact a subtle and precise adjustment to the intonation patterns of colloquial Russian speech, amplified into declamation.¹⁹

The transposition from spoken to sung text does introduce some important new aesthetic variables, however, and here Mussorgsky skillfully combines elements of both his predecessors. Following Pushkin, Mussorgsky’s Boris also dies before the opera is over; neither is granted the power to end the work, to “take the work with him” when he goes.²⁰ This perhaps suggests that Mussorgsky too intended some force or personality other than Boris as the central hero. And in fact his later unfinished or projected operas—*Khovanshchina* and *Pugachovshchina*—do, as their very suffixes suggest, give an increasingly large role to collective, almost impersonal forces. In *Boris*, however, the tsar is still the title role. Moreover the very fact of singing tends to heroicize that role. To achieve Pushkin’s effect of isolating and minimalizing heroic self-confidence, Mussorgsky works with another stage convention, the popular chorus.

Masses of people on the Russian opera stage were not new. Mikhail Glinka had used big choruses for his *Ivan Susanin* in the mid-1830s. But Glinka's was the traditional antiphon chorus, a sort of ornamental vocal backdrop that glorified the heroes and literally repeated their words. The choruses in Mussorgsky's *Boris* are, on the contrary, parodically double-voiced.²¹ They quarrel, beg, torture, and sing constantly (and indifferently) of violence; they do not reinforce the heroes but rather distort, threaten and ridicule the leading roles.²² The first word of the opera is spoken by a police officer who threatens the crowd with a club. All those *slava*-choruses—Glory to Boris!—are extracted under the whip. In Karamzin, the mob might be sullen, dangerous and fickle, but it is destined ultimately for greatness; in Pushkin, the reluctance and cynicism of the people serve largely as comic relief. Mussorgsky uses the people to undo greatness, and they are as terrible as they are farcical. Bakhtin, not surprisingly, noted this deeper potential of the people's voice, posited by Karamzin and Pushkin and developed to the full by Mussorgsky. Bakhtin ends his Rabelais book with a reference to the Pretender's nightmare. The scene is Pimen's cell in Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*. The novice Grigory has awoken in terror; he dreamed that he had climbed a winding staircase to a tower, and Moscow appeared to be an anthill at his feet:

. . . in the marketplace
The people stared and pointed at me laughing;
I felt ashamed, a trembling overcame me,
I fell headfirst, and in that fall I woke.²³

"We repeat," Bakhtin concludes after this quote (474), "every act of world history was accompanied by a laughing chorus."

The popular chorus as protagonist is only one innovation. Mussorgsky's opera contains other ingenious splicings of Pushkin and Karamzin (Orlova 249-55). The work as a whole overflows with musical and theatrical daring: bells, drunken monks, ragged masses, a live horse, crowds of children and a holy fool on stage. Amid all this, Boris plays the part of the hero who sees only himself and his own internal torment. His huge and immobilized presence dominates the work. His arias are straight out of the romantic cliché which Pushkin had so downplayed: the murderer pursued noisily by the ghost of his avenging victim. Mussorgsky's *Boris* is good theater precisely because this is Karamzin's Boris back again, re-psychologized, with

crimes and passions larger than life. If Pushkin's Boris muttered one line about "bloodstained boys forever before one's eyes," Mussorgsky creates an elaborate hallucination to bring them to life.

We are reminded, in considering the influences on Mussorgsky's *Boris*, that transposition is not merely a matter of adjusting to the new prerequisites of a different medium. The famous nineteenth-century transpositions of the Boris Tale did, of course, involve replacing scholarly footnotes with stage directions and the pages of a book with the performance of musical spectacle. Singing a line is very different than reading it aloud, or to oneself. But the dialogue of quotations goes deeper than genre or medium. Karamzin's concept of the hero overlaps with Mussorgsky's; his Boris *can* be sung, while Pushkin's cannot. On the other hand, the sense of history that informs Mussorgsky's opera takes its cue from Pushkin and not from Karamzin. This romantic drama of a doomed tsar is buried inside cynical and opportunistic choruses of Russian folk, who sing of indifference to politics and disaster to Russia. The Lament of the Holy Fool ending the opera is a bleak and hopeless distillation of the people's voice in the opening scene—and a true prelude, not to the glory of the Romanovs, but to the *Smuta*. The peculiar frame of this opera might be seen as an attempt, like Pushkin's *narod bezmolvstvuet*, to approximate, through unconventional closure, the fate of heroes and the reality of historical processes.

Both the drama and the opera are generic hybrids. If Pushkin's Boris is a realistic hero trapped in a sentimental plot, then Mussorgsky's Boris suffers in another way, as a sentimental hero trapped inside a realistic opera. This misfitting of part to whole accounts for a good deal of the power of these works, and, one might add, is very much in the Russian tradition.

That tradition has always distrusted narrative as such, its neat openings and closures and its claim to transmit truth in conventionally acceptable forms. Thus the mystifying subtitles and polemical forewords to so many nineteenth-century masterpieces: *Dead Souls* is a poem, the formally-perfect cantos of *Eugene Onegin* are a novel, *War and Peace* is not. The Boris Tales of Karamzin, Pushkin and Mussorgsky seem to represent a variant on this iconoclastic tradition, an expression of the same impulse to undo narrative and discredit secure genres. Bakhtin would call them "novelized." And Bakhtin's own work, the inspiration for so much in this essay, is that same impulse writ large.

To conclude, then, we note an interesting paradox. All three

major statements work within the same traditional biography of a guilty Boris. The *content* of the Boris Tale from one transposition to the next is quite conservative. But its generic expression is complex and even contradictory. Karamzin wrote a sentimental history, but with an apparatus of footnotes and references that Schlözer and his school would, and indeed did, admire. Pushkin wrote a “romantic tragedy” that by consensus of a baffled public was neither romantic nor feasible on the tragic stage. Mussorgsky wrote a musical drama that challenged many of the operatic conventions of his time, and which is to this day rarely performed as he wrote it. Something in these works did not fit; it was unclear how they should be experienced. And the valuable experience for their audiences might be precisely that estrangement and occasional disorientation.

We cannot of course speak here for creative genius, nor presume to have decoded Pushkin’s or Mussorgsky’s *intent*. Intent is not so easily extracted. But we can speak to effect, to methods of innovation which consciously or unconsciously create generic confusion, and break new ground. Incompatible elements are combined within the work itself. A character is set against the canons of the genre in which his story is embedded, or is confronted with an earlier “authoritative” version of his own story. One or the other is exposed as inadequate, ludicrous, artificial—and the story, as it were, bursts apart from within. We are forced to see the relationship of part to whole, of individual to history, in a new way.

Generic distinctions have traditionally served to invoke, in a given text, the appropriate conventions for arriving at meaning. In studying transpositions, more than one genre must be kept in mind; the conventions invoked are multiple and their interaction complex. As transpositions of a theme accumulate over time, important questions are raised about the nature of a cultural tradition. On what grounds does a work enter a “tradition,” and why are certain themes so resonant and so often reworked? What an audience is presumed to know can profoundly change the nature of the tradition in which a work is perceived. Take, for example, Sumarokov’s 1771 drama *Dmitrii Samozvanets*. It bears a startling resemblance to his 1748 drama *Hamlet*—but the former play bears little resemblance to the facts of the Time of Troubles, and the latter even less to Shakespeare’s text. They share, rather, a tradition familiar and readily available to audiences of the 18th century.²⁴ Fifty years later, with the vast movement of Shakespeare into French and German and with the advent of Karamzin’s and Pushkin’s images of Boris, both dramas enter new

traditions. Sumarokov's *Dmitrii* becomes the first in a list of Russian Boris/Dmitry dramas; it is retroactively reclassified, almost re-authored, and invariably discredited.

Within a changing tradition, different versions of the same story emerge in various decades with different aspects of its ideology emphasized. Khomiakov's 1833 Dmitry-play, conceived in the heat of the Polish Uprising, is a Slavophile version full of hostile and conniving Polish Catholics. Lobanov's 1835 *Boris Godunov* is a monarchist version written in angry answer to Pushkin, with the Romanovs as the hero and a holy fool who delivers long rhetorical speeches on Russia's glorious destiny. Alexei Tolstoy's *Dramatic Trilogy* of the 1860s—and especially its final play, *Tsar Boris*—is a Westernizer's Boris, a product of the Emancipation decade. Fedotov's little-known 1884 play, *The Godunovs*, is a mystical-Christian Boris play for a more reactionary era; in its final scene, the Tsarevna Ksenia witnesses the death of her family and awaits her own awful fate with a prayer on her lips: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do" (164).

We might sum up, then, with a return to Bakhtin's footnote. Bakhtin encourages a respect for Tchaikovsky's "lyrical re-accentuation" of *Eugene Onegin* on the grounds that derived texts should be taken seriously, not as threats or distortions of an original but as proof of the continued life of literary images. Pushkin is put in no danger by the existence of a libretto drawing on his characters. It could be argued that Tchaikovsky, far from "misreading Pushkin," in fact intended his piece to say something about the incompatibility of opera and novel; he subtitled his work "lyrical scenes," and they are just that, portions of Pushkin's novel reworked in the lyric mode.

Such dialogues can be assumed to exist among all transpositions that together comprise one strand of a cultural tradition. They do not supplant but interact with one another. It is precisely the continual fitting and misfitting of one work to its predecessors that creates an awareness of the boundaries separating them, and along this boundary the culture becomes aware of itself.²⁵ This is surely one of the implications of Bakhtin's statement in an early essay, "The Problem of Content, Material and Form in Verbal Art" (25):

One must not imagine the realm of culture as some sort of spatial whole, with boundaries but also with internal territory. The realm of culture has no internal territory: it is distributed entirely along the boundaries, boundaries pass everywhere, through its

every aspect; the systematic unity of a culture extends into the very atoms of cultural life, it reflects like the sun in each drop of that life. Every cultural act lives essentially on the boundaries: in this is its seriousness and its significance; abstracted from boundaries, it loses its native soil, it becomes empty, arrogant, it degenerates and dies.

NOTES

¹ “Retellings (verbal transpositions) of musical works: in *Netochka Nezvanova*, but especially in the retelling of Trishatov’s opera (here there is a literal coincidence of texts about the devil’s voice); finally, retellings of Ivan Karamazov’s poems” (*Estetika* 308). These comments occur near the beginning of Bakhtin’s notes “Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book” (1961); a translation of the notes is appended to the new edition of Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

² This was where Bakhtin saw Dostoevsky’s great contribution as a novelist: his novels, Bakhtin claimed, were structured not on object-meanings but on multi-voicedness and point of view. Near the end of *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* Bakhtin sums up this constructional principle: “. . . a specific sum total of ideas, thoughts and words is passed through several unmerged voices, sounding differently in each. The object of authorial aspirations is certainly not this sum total of ideas in itself, as something neutral and identical with itself. No, the object is precisely *the passing of a theme through many and various voices*, its rigorous and, so to speak, irrevocable *multi-voicedness* and *vari-voicedness*. The very distribution of voices and their interaction is what matters to Dostoevsky” (*PDP* 265).

³ This is not to suggest, of course, that illustrating a text is an innocent process. For a good polemic against illustrated texts, see Yuri Tynianov, “Illiustratsii” [“Illustrations”] (1923). Tynianov argues that illustrations do not illustrate but inevitably *interpret*. The urge to illustrate, to “enflesh” the word, is both natural and powerful, but precisely for that reason one must be on guard against it. What makes verbal art concrete is quite different, and often inimical, to the concreteness of visual art. All illustrations are thus more or less caricatures, Tynianov claims. “Every work pretending to be an illustration of another work will be a distortion and narrowing of it” (510). At the end of his brief essay Tynianov argues that only the *fabula* (storyline) and not the *sjuzhet* (plot) of a literary work can be subject to illustration. Illustration “encumbers plot with storyline,” he concludes.

Mention is also made (506) of another type of illustration, the attempt to express music through the word (so-called "program music"). Citing Tchaikovsky on his own Fourth Symphony, here too Tynianov finds something inevitably "comical" in the translation.

⁴The first opera on the theme [*Boris Goudenow, oder Der durch Verschlagenheit Erlangte Trohn*] was written by the Hamburg composer Johann Mattheson in 1710; in addition to Mussorgsky's famous version in the 19th century, there is Dvorak's 1883 opera *Dmitrij* (with the Pretender as hero). For a survey of literary and dramatic works on the Boris theme, see Alekseev, Brody, and Salgaller.

⁵ From this perspective, how firmly in the classic German tradition is Rilke's use of Dmitry the Pretender in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Dmitry would have survived, Rilke writes, if he had refused to recognize Marfa as his mother, if he had possessed the strength to be "no one's son": "... his mother's declaration, even though a conscious deception, still had the power to belittle him; it lifted him out of the fullness of his inventions; it limited him to a weary imitation; it reduced him to the individual he was not, it made him an imposter" (162-63).

⁶ Mikhail Pogodin's 1829 essay "On Godunov's Participation in the Murder of the Tsarevich Dimitry" was one of the first position-papers against Karamzin's assumption of Boris' guilt. A criminal court run by today's laws would have a very weak case against Boris, Pogodin concludes; history should show more gratitude toward such a progressive tsar. To this Pushkin made a revealing marginal comment: "This is stupidity. A criminal court does not pass judgment on dead tsars by today's laws. History judges them, for there is no other judgment on tsars and on the dead" (P, VII, 389). Pushkin seems alert precisely to the power of artistic transpositions of the theme in history, of which the chronicles were perhaps the first.

⁷ When in 1829 Nikolai Polevoi published his *History of the Russian People* as a direct challenge to Karamzin, Pushkin reviewed it with barely disguised contempt in *Literaturnaia gazeta* (P, VII, 92-100). Four years later, in *Moskovskii telegraf*, Polevoi reviewed Pushkin's drama *Boris Godunov* in equally uncharitable terms (#49 [1833]: 117-47). The play is bad, Polevoi wrote, but so is Karamzin; there was a much better play to be had out of the Boris Tale than the one Pushkin constructed.

⁸ In a 1874 review of *Boris Godunov* in *Grazhdanin* ("Boris Godunov on the Stage"), Nikolai Strakhov complained that Mussorgsky "redid Pushkin's drama: he changed scenes, the speech of the characters, he remade the verses and added many of his own. And it became clear that he had no idea not only of dramatic art, but also of a good line of verse; in fact, he has no idea what verse is in general, and what is meant by poetic meter" (81).

⁹ See Tynyanov, "Dostoevsky and Gogol," and Bakhtin's discussion of double-voiced discourse in Chapter Five of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Devushkin is now seen as a comment upon (and not a copy of) Akaky Akakievich, but to this day Tchaikovsky is accused of "destroying" Pushkin with his musical Onegin and Prokofiev of "insulting" Tolstoy with his operatic *War and Peace*.

¹⁰ See Karamzin, X, 79: "Then the murderer's knife glittered above him; it barely touched his throat, then fell from the murderer's hands. Screaming with horror, the wetnurse embraced her Sovereign nursling. . . . the nine-year-old Saint-Martyr lay bloody in the arms of the woman who had raised him . . . he trembled like a dove, expiring, he died." For an account of the martyrdom of Boris and Gleb that stresses its political and patriotic significance, see de Grunwald, 31-38. The transformation of Dmitry's death into a church-sanctioned Life of a Saint is persuasively argued by Skrynnikov, 51-52.

¹¹ Karamzin is always at great pains to demonstrate the inner naturalness, the psychological imperative, of Boris' behavior. While he condemns Godunov he also appears to understand him, and, as it were, from within. Consider X, 76: "Convinced that the scepter would be handed to him who had so long and so gloriously ruled without the name of tsar, this greedy and ambitious man saw, between himself and the throne, only one helpless infant, just as a greedy lion sees a lamb. . . . The death of Dmitry was inevitable!"

¹² See Karamzin, X, 7: "If he had been born to the throne, he would have deserved the name of one of the best monarchs in the world; but born a subject, with an unbridled passion to rule, he could not resist the temptation when evil seemed to his advantage—thus the curse of centuries muffles Boris' positive reputation in history."

¹³ The phrase *bez molvstvie naroda* [the silence of the people] occurs frequently in Karamzin; when news of the Pretender's victory is announced, for instance, "some people cheer, and some are silent" (XI 115). Neither response has any particular effect on historical events. Pushkin, however, takes this formulaic phrase and ends his drama on it. The empty, open ending that results is a comment on both history and drama. "Romantic tragedy" has few options for honest closure. If true romanticism is an eternally new and unpredictable form, the standard summing-up devices would not suffice. One possibility would be the ironic mode, and Pushkin considered it; an early draft indicates a mock-chronicle ending on "Amen" (*P:Ps* VII, 302). Another option would be non-closure, non-response, a parodic comment on endings. This could be one meaning of the people's silence. They have the final word, but they have not yet chosen to exercise it.

¹⁴ See Pushkin, "On Classical and Romantic Poetry" [1825], *PV* VII, 24-6; Proffer, 35-38. Pushkin defines the truly romantic as all genres not known to the ancients, and all forms that had changed or were still in the process of changing. The unexpected was the romantic, and thus by definition there could be no such thing as a "romantic cliché."

¹⁵ For an excellent discussion of *Boris Godunov* and Pushkin's sense of history (with excursions into Karamzin), see Striedter, 295-300.

¹⁶ "You want a plan?" Pushkin wrote to Viazemsky on 13 September 1825. "Take the end of the tenth and all of the eleventh volume of Karamzin, and there's your plan" (*PX*, 141, Shaw, ed., 255). In my reading of this letter—which is permeated with irony throughout—Pushkin is inviting a critical contrast between the two texts. "Plan" is not artistic intent.

¹⁷ Viazemsky passed this advice on in a letter to Pushkin dated September 6, 1825; Pushkin responded obliquely in a letter to Viazemsky dated September 13, when, by his own admission, half of *Boris* was completed. *P-Pss* XIII, 224 (Viazemsky's letter) and *P X*, 141/Shaw, 254-55 (Pushkin's response).

¹⁸ In his *Reminiscences of Mussorgsky* Golenishchev-Kutuzov writes that the composer "could endure no comments concerning any text which he had composed. About the music he would speak very willingly, without irritation, and often agreed with the comments, but any criticism of a text written by him would irritate him extremely, and he always stayed with his own opinion" (22).

¹⁹ Mussorgsky disrupted the pulse of Pushkin's lines with painstaking care, inverting word order, altering punctuation, replacing *zhe* with *zh*. For a sampling of these subtle adjustments, see Shirinian, 80.

²⁰ When Rimsky-Korsakov revised *Boris Godunov* for the Western stage, he reversed the order of the final scenes, thus ending the opera (to its misfortune) on the death of Boris. Mussorgsky had in an early version considered such traditional closure, but when the historian Nikolsky suggested that the death occur more internally and be followed by mass scenes, Mussorgsky enthusiastically concurred.

²¹ Mussorgsky's desire to "re-create the common people" in vocal ensembles through the use of folk and chant motifs was bold and innovative for Russian opera of his time. For an excellent discussion of Mussorgsky's concept of a collective vocal hero, and the paucity of appropriate choral models in pre-Reform Russia, see Morosan, 95-105, 114-17.

²² Not only the opening mass scenes, but even the elegant Poles, the boyars in Godunov's chambers, and the monks chanting during Boris' death scene sing of torture and dismemberment: of the Pretender, of Dmitry, of Boris' son and of Russia.

²³ Translation by Paul Schmidt in his *Meyerhold at Work*, 85. Schmidt's rendering of scenes 5 and 6, which preface the absorbing chapter on Meyerhold's staging of Pushkin's play, is a triumph of poetic re-creation. The whole of *Boris Godunov* does not yet exist in adequate English translation.

²⁴ For a fine discussion of Sumarokov's *Hamlet* in its role as a Russian carrier for Shakespeare, see Toomre, 6-7. Her approach to the play is precisely the one I recommend for studying transpositions: "... a translation, with rare exceptions, barely survives its own generation," she writes. "Fixed in time, it functions as a photograph, capturing and revealing many details of that society's aesthetic, political and moral values. Seen in succession, a series of translations traces the change in those values and thus can serve as a cultural history in miniature" (6). She points out that what the eighteenth century called "translation" in the twentieth century we would call adaptation; strict word-for-word equivalency was uncommon. The translator had a moral duty to transmit, via received texts, values appropriate to his society. Sumarokov was proud of the fact that his text did not resemble Shakespeare's.

²⁵ Bakhtin applies to cultural consciousness the same dynamics at work in inter-

personal life. One cannot know oneself, Bakhtin says, by looking in the mirror or by painting a self-portrait. When the other is excluded, the self disintegrates. See the extended discussion in "Avtor," 26-34.

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