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Myth and fact in Russia-centered discourse: The case of (non-)fictional Shostakovich

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Abstract. The starting point for the research was the observation of an increased attention to the figure of D. Shostakovich, who about the turn of the century appeared to become a milestone of the English-language Russia-centered discourse. This raised the questions of the specific nature of the English-language Russia-centered discourse, as well as the place D. Shostakovich holds in it and the transformation of the composer's image within this discourse' cognitive map. Methodologically, the research relies upon a combination of traditional in-depth stylistic, literary and linguaculturological analyses, on the one hand, and quantitative corpus methods, on the other hand. The research allowed to ascertain that the Russianism "Shostakovich" is usually employed for the sake of characterizing the character as either relating to intellectual elite or to Russians; or of introducing a motif, in particular the motif of Petersburg. The paper posits that applying a language to describing an external culture is, in fact, like translating this culture into the language of description. And translating culture is by necessity always selective — it is based on describing carefully selected milestones. One of such milestones in Russian culture translation is the concept of Petersburg, while Shostakovich is a milestone on which the concept of Petersburg is built. Both concepts are based on an intricate interweaving of fact and myth; the distortion being the result of an attempt at interpreting the external culture in understandable terms.

Keywords: linguaculture, xenonym, interlinguaculturology, cultural translation, Russia-centered discourse

Introduction

"Music is the universal language of nature", said H. W. Longfellow (Longfellow 1835, 4), "but it is spoken with all sorts of accents", continued G. B. Shaw (Shaw 1949, 92). For centuries Russia and the Russian culture have been the source of puzzlement and the object of study, with music often the selected prism, offering a seemingly comprehensible code.

Towards the end of the 20th century a noticeable emphasis appears to be placed on the figure of Dmitry Shostakovich. And this goes somewhat contrary to the established canon of the Russia-centered discourse, where one is much more likely to encounter mention of another distinguished composer — Sergey Prokofiev. Thus, the composition "Russians" (1985) by world famous performer Sting features music from S. Prokofiev's *Lieutenant Kijé,* op. 60; the composition "Party like a Russian" (2016) by R. Williams features music from S. Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, op. 64. The list of cultural realia constituting cultural literacy, suggested by E. D. Hirsch with the subtitle "what every American needs to know" includes the name "Sergei Prokofiev" (Hirsch 1988, 198), making no mention of Dmitry Shostakovich. The list of realia comprising the cultural literacy is expanded by E. D. Hirsch in *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (Hirsch et al. 1988), but no other Russian composers get added.

Yet, the figure of Shostakovich has been in the recent decades promoted to the core of the concept of RUSSIA. One of indicators of this is a more than 6-fold increase in the frequency of Shostakovich'

mention (from 7 in 1990-ies to 43 in 2000-ies) (COHA). There's also a surge in large-scale publications dedicated to the composer, in both non-fiction (e. g. Johnson 2019; Moynahan 2014) and fiction genres (*The Noise of Time* by J. Barnes; *Europe Central* by W. Vollmann, *A Tea with Shostakovich* by F. Tramontano, etc.).

The present paper is an attempt at rationalizing the reasons for this focused attention on Dmitry Shostakovich in the modern Russia-centered discourse. In particular, we shall pose the following research questions:

- What is peculiar of the Russia-centered discourse? What features constitute it? What is its semiotic nature?
- What is the place of the SHOSTAKOVICH slot in the cognitive map of the Russia-centered discourse?
- How is the concept of SHOSTAKOVICH transformed in the Russia-centered discourse?

Theoretical and methodological framework

The research foundation includes a series of theoretical assumptions developed within different branches of linguistics. Without going too deep into theory, lest we stray away from the point of this paper, let us briefly outline the basic principles and approaches underlying our research.

Firstly, in describing the Russia-centered discourse we find ourselves dealing with the language of secondary cultural orientation, the object and domain of *interlinguaculturology* (Kabakchi 2012). The study of language of secondary cultural orientation rests upon the fundamental notion of *functional dualism*, postulating that any language can be applied to any culture, however distant they might be. Yet, this reorientation towards an external culture requires that the language be enriched with specific means to make it adequate to the task —verbalisations of the external culture, *xenonyms* (Beloglazova, Kabakchi 2018, 50).

Secondly, introducing elements of the external linguaculture (*source culture*) to the language of description (*target language*) one employs traditional translation techniques. This leads us to the conclusion that we are dealing with a specific kind (or mode) of translation — *translation of culture*, or *cultural translation*. One might argue that culture is always present in translation, and especially so in literary translation. H. Trivedi observes that literary texts are constituted not of language, but in fact of culture, language being a mere vehicle of the culture (Trivedi 2007). Yet, in cultural translation we are indeed dealing with a particular mode of translation, which is not about recreation of a source text into a target text (Bode 2008), since there is no source text, the source being the culture described. This kind of translation differs from the traditional one in that it lacks the textual constraint — it does not have to follow the structure and style of the original. Thus, of the translation universals listed by S. Laviosa-Braithwaite, we are hardly to expect any serious traces of:

- simplification, on the contrary, the text of the cultural translation will be complicated by xenonymic elements;
- avoidance of repetitions present in the source text, since there is no source text with its repetitions,
- discourse transfer, for the same reason as stated above (Laviosa-Braithwaite 2001).

Thirdly, since translating culture is inevitably selective, it being impossible to translate any culture in its totality, it relies on certain key fields and concepts. One of such key concepts of Russia-centered discourse is PETERSBURG. This is quite consistent with what Vladimir N. Toporov writes about Russia's attempting to perceive its intrinsic essence through the prism of the Petersburg phenomenon, which resulted in a vast corpus of writing, termed by the researcher "the Petersburg text" (Toporov 2003). At that, authoring one of these far from required the status of Petersburg citizen; on the contrary, the main contributors appear to be non-Petersburgians. To this we can now safely add non-Russian authors of Petersburg texts written as part of Russia-centered discourse of secondary cultural orientation.

Petersburg has been seen as the key to understanding Russia due to its contradictory and liminality, a whole network of contrasts and conflicts: (1) "Petersburg is the center of evil and crime, where suffering has exceeded all measure and left an imprint on the popular consciousness; Petersburg is an abyss, the "other" kingdom, the death, but at the same time Petersburg is the very place where the national self-consciousness and self-reflection reached the limit, beyond which opened new horizons of life, where Russian culture celebrated the best of its triumphs irreversibly changing the Russian people" (Toporov 2003, 8); (2) "one pole is recognizing Petersburg as the only true (civilized, cultured, European, exemplary, even ideal) city of Russia; the other pole is acknowledging that nowhere does one feel worse than in Petersburg, the anathematic defamations, appeals to escape and denounce Petersburg" (Toporov 2003, 9). The list can be easily continued as beauty vs. bleakness; freedom of a genius' thought vs. authorities repressions; culture, aesthetism, *intelligentsiya* vs. gory history.

Another conflict, relevant for the present research focusing on intercultural dialogue is framed by A. Skidan: being one of the youngest cities of Russia, from the very beginning Petersburg was founded as a reminiscence — a recollection of different places (sometimes Venice, sometimes Amsterdam, sometimes Paris) and different epochs, all fragmentary, elusive and incohesive (Skidan 2001). So, Petersburg itself is, in a way, a result of cultural translation.

Fourthly, dealing largely with literary texts, we need to resort to theory of literature, establishing a direct connection between characters drawn and themes raised by the author. Thus B. V. Tomashevsky observes that it is common for writers to draw characters personifying the needed motifs (Tomashevsky 1996, 199), which allows us to analyze the figure of Shostakovich in the Russia-centered discourse as a means of introducing certain motifs and not an end in itself.

The research methodology combines several approaches.

The core of it is comprised by the method of interlinguaculturological analysis, developed and implemented by professor V. V. Kabakchi (Kabakchi 2007). It can be described as a variation of the comparative method, based on the following algorithm: 1) selecting authentic representatives of the secondary cultural orientation discourse; 2) textual analysis aimed at identifying elements of external linguacultural context (xenonyms); 3) comparative analysis of the identified xenonyms with their prototypes in the source linguaculture, aimed at identifying the means of introducing the xenonyms into the language of narration, coupled with their semantic and stylistic analysis, aimed at establishing correlations between their form, meaning and function; 4) discursive analysis, aimed at identifying the strategies of secondary cultural orientation discourse.

Analyzing literary texts involves elements of literary analysis aimed at identifying motifs associated with the character of Shostakovich.

Traditional methods of linguistic analysis are complemented with the methods of corpus linguistics, employed as "reliable tools of verifying hypotheses, overcoming the subjectivity of intuition driven qualitative analytical methods" (Ilyinova, Kochetova 2017, 48–49). Apart from statistical data, corpus is invaluable for establishing actual meaning of language units (Golubkova 2012, 96), as well as to identify and analyze constructions and collocations (Golubkova, Bukhanova 2022). Corpus methods have proven efficient in discourse analysis (Ilyinova, Kochetova 2017; Kolokol'nikova 2010), in particular in analyzing Russian-culture-oriented discourse (Beloglazova, Genidze 2022; Beloglazova, Kabakchi 2018).

Within the corpus approach we address large reference corpora of English: the Corpus of Contemporary American English and the Corpus of Historical American English. We also apply the corpus analysis tools to the literary texts under study, extracting wordlist and keywords to complement the literary analysis.

Results and discussion

Russia-centered discourse is comprised by texts aimed at describing various aspects of Russia and the Russians, so, ultimately it is a way of interpreting the concept of RUSSIANNESS, or, in other words, translating the Russian culture. This involves:
- Selecting the aspects and elements fit to serve as representatives of the Russian culture, or slots of the concept RUSSIANNESS. Since, understandably, any description of such a complex object is doomed to be incomplete, it must rest on carefully selected representants;
- Finding or providing in the target language means to adequately render these source culture representants.

It appears that Russian classical music is the domain that has been steadily feeding such representants, one of them being the figure of Dmitry Shostakovich. Shostakovich, a renowned Russian (Soviet) composer, is already part of the world culture, routinely mentioned outside the Russia-centered discourse, which makes it a kind of inter-discursive link. Yet, whenever the name of Shostakovich gets dropped, some aspect of RUSSIANNESS automatically emerges against the cognitive horizon. In order to better understand the rationale behind the growing prominence of the composer we addressed the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), from which eliminated the occurrences of "Shostakovich" in informative genres, and focused on literary texts, the selection comprising 33 out of 422 occurrences. The main reasons for introducing the name are three.

Firstly, to position a character as one of the intellectual elite, a sophisticated and highly cultured person. "Shostakovich" is used to imply difficult and culturally distant, if not to say alien, music. Consider the following occurrence, attributed by the Corpus to E. Mitchell's *Three Marriages*:

> *E. g. 1: I have been to Chicago several times to perform. I used to play the violin in the symphony in Oslo and we went on a number of tours in the United States. […] A few years ago, I left musical performance so that I could develop and run an organic farm. I thought how hard can that be after learning to play Shostakovich?* (COCA)

The character is described as a successful musician, not content with what she does, but eager to develop in other spheres.

The reverse is also true, and a writer can use the image of Shostakovich to portray an unsophisticated character, as in the following occurrence from J. Epstein's *The Philosopher and the Checkout Girl*:

> *E. g. 2: "Are you enjoying the music?" he asked. "I've had worse times at the dentist", she said. […] Salzman decided not to put her through the torture of the final item on the program, a string quartet by Shostakovich"* (COCA).

Having received the girl's answer that the music is not as bad as her experience at the dentist, the character realizes that the entertainment program needs to be revised so as to exclude the daunting "Shostakovich".

Secondly, the mention of "Shostakovich" has the effect of portraying a character as a Russian. Let us consider a highly symptomatic illustration from E. Lerner's *Energized Conclusion*:

> *E. g. 3: "Vodka was not helping his mood any more than the Shostakovich symphony that pounded from the stereo"* (COCA).

It is noteworthy that "Shostakovich" is found in the same context as "vodka".

V. V. Kabakchi (Kabakchi 2009) observes that vodka is part of the stereotype of Russia, and, it appears, so is Shostakovich.

Finally, "Shostakovich" can be introduced in the text as a character in his own right, justified by a motif associated with him. To identify these motifs, we addressed two novels featuring the character of Dmitry Shostakovich — J. Barnes's *The Noise of Time* and, to a lesser degree, W. Vollmann's *Europe Central*, though according to I. Delazari (Delazari 2022) the list can well be expanded owing to a Shostakovich boom in the Anglophone literature.

The first motif to mention is that of Leningrad/Petersburg. Explaining the notion of the Petersburg text, V. N. Toporov states that "Russia has been trying to grasp its own nature in the light of the Petersburg phenomenon" (Toporov 2003, 5). Petersburg is the highlight of Russia, while Shostakovich is the highlight of Petersburg, personification of the most significant conflicts and contradictions that make it the model of Russia. Biography of Shostakovich is a chronicle of the city's history. Thus, J. Barnes writes about Shostakovich in Petersburg, Petrograd, Leningrad, tracing the events that led to renamings and the political changes:

> *E. g. 4: He lived in Petersburg and wrote about love and flowers and other lofty subjects.* ∇ *She returned to Moscow; he and Marusya to Petrograd.* ∇ *They were safe there, and once his mother was out of Leningrad and able to join them he became less anxious.* ∇ *Some thought this the typical buttoned-up formality of a Leningrader…* (Barnes 2016).

Yet, in other instances the reader is led to comprehend that the differences are merely in words, while the essence — the very nature of Petersburg — remains unaffected:

> *E. g. 5: Petersburg became Petrograd, then Leningrad; it starved and rotted all around her.* (*Vollmann 2010*) ∇ *What did a name matter? He had been born in St Petersburg, started growing up in Petrograd, finished growing up in Leningrad. Or St Leninsburg, as he sometimes liked to call it. What did a name matter?* (Barnes 2016)

Apart from the name of the city, the text retraces its key locations: the Big House ∇ Liteiny Prospekt ∇ the Leningrad Maly Theatre ∇ Bolshaya Pushkarskaya Street ∇ the Union of Composers building on Nezhdanova Street ∇ the *Piccadilly* on Nevsky Prospekt, the *Bright Reel* and the *Splendid Palace* ∇ the River Neva…

Yet, names is not the only way of verbalizing the city. V. Toporov's observation that "Petersburg is the center of evil and crime, where suffering has exceeded all measure" (Toporov 2003, 8) permeates the whole novel of J. Barnes and can be seen in the text's keywords, that can be easily correlated with the concepts of:

- END [end, finished, gone, exile, failed, disaster]
- DEATH [died, killed, suicide, blood, murdered, pain, victim]
- GUILT [betrayed, fault, condemned, despised, regret]
- FEAR [terror, threat, afraid, dangerous coward enemies]

The second motif associated with Shostakovich is that of power. Three out of five most frequent words in the novel — "Stalin", "power" and "Soviet" — clearly indicate the importance of the motif in J. Barnes' biofiction (Urusova, Chemodurova 2020). Yet, it is not in keywords only that the motif reveals itself — the author takes great pains to reconstruct the ideological background against which the composer's life is shown, including references to works by Comrade Stalin, such as *Marxism and Questions of Linguistics* and *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*; the newspaper articles that had served as turning points for the life and career of Shostakovich — "Muddle Instead of Music"

(«Сумбур вместо музыки»), "A Soviet Artist's Creative Reply to Just Criticism" («Деловой творческий ответ советского художника на справедливую критику»); the newspaper which was the very mouthpiece of power ("to buy a copy of *Pravda*").

The third motif is that of music. It reveals itself in a number of ways.

Firstly, in the names of the musical works by Shostakovich, and not only: "Song of the Counterplan" (stands for the Russian «Песня о встречном»); "Ah, It Is Not You I Love So Passionately"; "Lezginka — Stalin's favourite dance"; "The Chrysanthemums in the Garden Have Long Since Faded"; "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk", and some other.

Secondly, music is shown as the prism though which the character perceives the world:

> E. g. 6: *Once that nerve was gone, you couldn't replace it like a violin string.* ▽ *It was like expecting to be able to write a symphony because you had once read a handbook of composition.* ▽ *It was as if he was always on the wrong metronome setting.* ▽ *What could be put up against the noise of time? Only that music which is inside ourselves — the music of our being — which is transformed by some into real music. Which, over the decades, if it is strong and true and pure enough to drown out the noise of time, is transformed into the whisper of history* (Barnes 2016).

In Vollman's novel the idea is similar — that of music blurring with reality:

> E. g. 7: *"He rushed after her; he knelt down in the dirty slush and begged. And she took him home with her; she knew he loved her! What was he so afraid of? Between the two of them they'd long since determined the way that the second movement begins, with its haunting Russian* **melody in a minor key, passageways of Rodchenko-like golden scaffolding subsequently connecting it to a merry melody which after a very particular, never to be replicated cello**-*caress becomes buttery-sweet and brief, because he was on his back and she was astride him, teasing him with the succulent inner lips of her cunt and slowly possessing him, taking orgasm after orgasm.* <…> **Returning to the Russian melody, Opus 40 then gives the piano another turn at pleasuring itself,** *so that a second rocking-horse copulation gallops to a happly ejaculation,* **at which point the piano sparkles and glows**...*"* (Vollmann 2010).

Italicized are segments describing the actual events, characters' actions, the narration about which, all of a sudden, in the middle of a sentence shifts towards description of music; even more abrupt is mid-word shift back to reality. Thus, the love scene between Shostakovich and Elena Konstantinovskaya is shown as mirrored in Opus 40.

Thirdly, the whole composition of the novel by J. Barnes reminds one of a work of music: its three parts are graphically isolated, metonymically representing a pause; all three open with a repetition: "All he knew was that this was the worst time", but each time the reiterated sentence is given with some slight graphic modifications as if it were a variation of a theme.

Thus, the character of Shostakovich — the crossing point of three motifs: Petersburg, power and music — is turned into a pillar of textual construct of SOVIET RUSSIA. The pillar is surrounded by very thorough props, including not only the historical and cultural realia (e. g. the Thaw, *Stolichnaya vodka*), but also discursive and cognitive set.

The discursive set is created by means of:
— adages, as in:

E. g. 8: "*he lies like an eyewitness, as the saying goes*" (Barnes 2016) calquing the Russian «врет как очевидец».

E. g. 9: "*'A fisherman sees another fisherman from afar,' as the saying goes*" (Barnes 2016), calquing the Russian «рыбак рыбака видит издалека».

E. g. 10: "So the anonymous analysis by someone who knew as much about music as a pig knows about oranges was decorated with those familiar, vinegar soaked labels" (Barnes 2016) [Russian: «разбираться как свинья в апельсинах»].

E. g. 11: "*'Russia is the homeland of elephants,' as the saying went*" (Barnes 2016) [Russian: «Россия — родина слонов»].

E. g. 12: "*'There is only good vodka and very good vodka — there is no such thing as bad vodka.' This was the wisdom from Moscow to Leningrad, from Arkhangelsk to Kuibyshev*" (Barnes 2016) [Russian: «водка бывает хорошая и очень хорошая»].

— quotations and allusions:

E. g. 13: "*Well, life is not a walk across a field, as the saying goes*". (Barnes 2016) [B. Pasternak's "Hamlet" «Жизнь прожить — не поле перейти»].

E. g. 14: "*Well, 'Nothing but nonsense in the world'*". (Barnes 2016) [N. Gogol's «Чепуха совершеннейшая делается на свете»].

E. g. 15: "*Moreover, pontificated Sollertinsky while he and Mitya stood drunkenly pissing into the Neva, consider M. Tsvetaeva's 'Poem of the End', whose language wheels round and round variations of the word ruchka, hand. It was the wheeling-around which impressed him, not the ruchka*" (Vollman 2010).

E. g. 16: "*Akhmatova, who met her briefly, compared her to a church — specifically, to one of the forty times forty churches in Marina Tsvetaeva's poems*" (Vollman 2010).

The cognitive set is the result of recognizably Russian figures of speech and images, creating a Russian cognitive map:

E. g. 17: "*Also, there were fewer cats sharpening their claws on his soul*" (Barnes 2016). Instead of resorting to English phraseology, the writer introduces the Russian idiom «на душе кошки скребут».

In other instances, the reader gets a glimpse of the Russian mentality through culture-specific metaphors and comparisons:

E. g. 18: "*Even the cows standing motionless in the fields looked like advertisements for <u>condensed milk</u>*" (Barnes 2016).
E. g. 19: "*stuff which sounded, well, like the cawing of rooks*" (Barnes 2016).
E. g. 20: "*Nowadays, people watched football on television. To him, this was <u>like drinking mineral water instead of Stolichnaya vodka</u>, <u>export strength</u>*" (Barnes 2016).

Thus the text seems to offer a very detailed and trustworthy reconstruction of the external culture being described.

Conclusion

In lieu of conclusion I would like to quote some readers' comments from a bookstore forum:
- "*The Soviet atmosphere is rendered very precisely*"
- "*Nice that there's no cranberry, the Stalinist realia are described expertly*"

Both reviewers compliment the quality of the set.
On the other hand, there are less complimentary opinions, e. g.:
- "*Barnes' Shostakovich drinks too much. <…> Think what you might, but as to me, I don't believe…*"

The reviewer is skeptical about the facts narrated in the novel.

However different, the quoted reviews appeal to the same aspect of the texts under discussion: the way they translate the Russian culture, mixing and merging fact and stereotype, history and myth. The props are so good, the translation so precise, that the reader forgets that they are dealing with fiction.

At that, both Barnes and Vollman admit of writing fictional novels, that is setting their creative imagination free, and of using S. Volkov's rather unreliable "Testament" as the source of Shostakovich' biography. That means we read fiction based on fiction — fiction squared, but in the post-truth world it is this fiction that becomes the new reality, how Shostakovich and Russia in general are perceived by the mass audience.

Fictionalized Shostakovich and Petersburg are, largely, stereotypical and even mythical. Yet, this, conceptual distortion is not the result of evil will to misrepresent the alien culture, but rather of a will to comprehend it, relying on familiar and understandable terms and notions.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest, either existing or potential.

Acknowledgements

List of Abbreviations

COCA — Corpus of Contemporary American English
COHA — Corpus of Historical American English

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