

An essay by Yuri Lotman: Reading as translation

The short essay by Yuri Lotman “On the reception of *Poor Liza* by N.M. Karamzin: A case study” (On the structure of mass conscience in the 18th century)”, published in 1966, represented an important contribution, especially in terms of methodology, to the development of the studies on the history of reading in the Soviet Union¹. In this article, Lotman interprets reading as a form of translation from an artistic language, the one used by the author in his work, to the one acquired by the reader before his reading. This way of interpreting reading has helped Soviet scholars to recognise that, historically, the author and the reader hardly ever share the same aesthetic code. It has furthermore encouraged them to consider the work that is being read not only as a message that must be interpreted but also as a new language to be learnt. By comparing reading to a form of translation, Lotman was proposing to enucleate all the factors that come into play in the complex process of reading. The literary critic was putting forward questions such as: how has the artistic language of the reader developed? Through which sorts of texts? How competent is he in the literary genre of the text he is reading? Which elements of the text he is reading can he understand, and which can be misinterpreted, based on the reader’s specific artistic language? Finally, how does the new language of the work contribute to changing the language already acquired by the reader? As the critic underlines at the end of his essay, the work being read, since it is a code as well as a message, could contribute to modifying the reader’s very aesthetic norms, for example by developing, in him, a sensitivity toward the descriptions of natural landscapes that the reader did not before possess. To this aspect, i.e. how reading and art in general can transform their beneficiaries, Lotman would dedicate not a few brilliant works in the following decades².

The article, published fifty years ago, appears today more interesting for how it poses the issues than for the conclusions it draws. To a certain extent, this can be ascribed to the context in which the article appeared. Lotman’s essay tried to create a dialogue between different disciplines, such as social history, book history and semiotics, which, at that time in the Soviet Union, were still rigidly separated. After decades during which even sociology was still unrecognized as an autonomous discipline, starting from the 1960s, the Soviet Union saw the interest in both book history and reception theory slowly but steadily re-awaken³. At the same time, thanks to Lotman’s own and other scholars’ research, the foundations were laid for what would become the all-important Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics. In the field of social history, instead, they kept on resorting to rigid Marxist categories, employing concepts such as “mass conscience” – which Lotman himself used in the title of his essay – that seem today to be positively inadequate. Those categories Lotman, who published his article in an institutional publication of the Academy of Sciences, had to comply with. And some of his conclusions, for

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

² See, for example, Ju. Lotman, “The Decembrist in everyday life: Everyday behavior as a historical-psychological category”. (Pike, C. R., transl.) In: Lotman, Ju. M.; Uspenskij, B. A. *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*. Edited by Ann Shukman. (Michigan Slavic Contributions 11.) Ann Arbor, 1984, University of Michigan, pp. 71-123; “*The poetics of everyday behavior in Russian eighteenth century culture*”. (Owen, N. F. C., trans.) In: Lotman, Ju. M.; Uspenskij, B. A. *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*. Edited by Ann Shukman. (Michigan Slavic Contributions 11.) Ann Arbor, 1984, University of Michigan, pp. 231-256.

³ See Stephen Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution. Print Culture in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Eras*, Macmillan Press, London, pp. 45-50 and D. Rebecchini, R. Vassena, *Reader, Where are you? An Introduction*, in D. Rebecchini, R. Vassena (eds), *Reading in Russia. Practices of Reading and Literary Communication, 1760-1930*, pp. 19-21.

instance on how love was conceived by the working classes, or on the absence of a conscience of the individual's value among artisans, are deeply affected by the ideological conditioning of the Soviet context.

The article focuses on an interesting source: the text of a conversation, transcribed by an aristocratic intellectual, held in 1799 between an artisan and a peasant about a classic of Russian sentimentalism, *Poor Liza* (1792), the short story by Nikolay Karamzin. The famous tale by Karamzin, through the voice of a captivated narrator, tells the tearful love story between an aristocrat, Erast, a good but superficial man, and a young and innocent peasant, Liza, who gives in to her passion for him. Abandoned by Erast and out of desperation, poor Liza drowns herself in the place where the two used to meet, a lake close to the Simonov Monastery, not far from Moscow. Built upon the model of the *Nouvelle Heloise*, Karamzin's tale had generated, besides many literary imitations, significant proselytism among Russian readers, not very different from the one produced by the Genevan writer on the shores of lake Léman. As many sources of the period report, crowds of sentimental Russian readers took to visiting the locations where the moving tale had been set, sighing over their unfortunate romances and carving into the bark of local birch trees verses dedicated to Karamzin's heroine⁴. Therefore, that place consecrated to Saint Simon, who was commonly believed to have healing powers, from that moment onward, and for many more decades to come, was turned into a pilgrimage site for many Russian readers touched by the tale of *Poor Liza*. As the first lines pronounced by the artisan show, the literary myth mixes and overlaps with the ancient religious belief.

In his article, Lotman does not analyse the social position of the witness who transcribed the conversation between the artisan and the peasant, the scholar Aleksey Fedorovich Merzljakov. Hence, the apparent naiveté of the critic's statement that "there's no reason to doubt the accuracy of his tale". Actually, Lotman well knows what he is talking about. He had studied in depth not just Merzljakov's epistolary, which is his source, but also this minor scholar's literary position and attitude towards Karamzin and his work. To him he had in fact already dedicated an extensive critical study⁵. Maybe, more than his conclusions on the working classes' "mass conscience", what is interesting is what Lotman does not say (and maybe cannot say) about his source, but which emerges clearly from the unabridged version of the article. It is striking, for example, how fast a high literature text – aimed at a mainly aristocratic audience and telling a tale not without erotic allusions – had circulated first in a monastic milieu and later among artisans. According to the source, Karamzin's book is given by a Simonov monk to a group of artisans who were working at the monastery's iconostasis. The artisan, despite his misunderstandings, prizes it to the point of buying a copy of it for himself and of recommending it to a peasant during a village festival. The source, therefore, showed that, in spite of what the Soviet critics maintained, texts circulated rather freely among different classes, and even the work of a "reactionary-aristocrat" such as Karamzin could be equally enjoyed by czarist aristocrats, artisans and peasants alike. On the other hand, the 'translation' made by the artisan seems to underline another aspect of the text that maybe Lotman could not draw attention to in a Soviet context, but which clearly emerges from his source. In telling Karamzin's tale, the artisan, completely overlooking the social and psychological conflicts described in the text, pays careful attention, instead, to understanding the economic mechanisms at the basis of the relationship between the two main characters. While he hardly says anything about their feelings and emotions, he fastidiously tells of all the sums and transactions between the two that are mentioned in the book. Thus, in the artisan's narration,

⁴ Cfr. A. Zorine, A. Nemzer, *Les Paradoxes de la sentimentalité*, in Stroeve A. (ed.), *Livre et lecture en Russie*, transl. par M.L. Bonarque, Paris, Éditions de la maison des sciences de l'homme, 1995, pp. 98-100.

⁵ Ju. Lotman, "A.F. Merzliakov" (1958) now in Ju. Lotman, *Izbrannye stat'i*, t. 2, Tallinn, Aleksandra, 1992, pp. 228-264.

Poor Liza seems to be reshaped from a sentimental tale into an account book of the revenues and expenditures of the main characters.

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

In conclusion, Lotman always integrated his theoretical reflection on the semiotic mechanisms of culture with a detailed historical analysis of the texts of the past; it seems to us that this is what, overall, makes him one of the most complete and inspiring Russian scholars of the second half of the 20th century.

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