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TATJANA'S PURLOINED LETTER

For the signifier is a unit in its very uniqueness. Which is why we cannot say of the purloined letter that, like other objects, it must be or not be in a particular place but unlike them it will and will not be where it is, wherever it goes.

Jacques Lacan, *Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"*

Towards the end of the third chapter of Puškin's *Eugene Onegin*, the reader is faced with the letter that Tat'jana writes to the hero. The first words of the letter, "я к вам пишу - чего же боле?" (Puškin, 1986: 115), expose the act of writing as the scene on which the drama itself will be staged. "Я к вам пишу - чего же боле?": the question addresses the very scene of writing it announces and establishes, proclaiming that for the event of seduction that is about to take place, writing itself is sufficient. What would one more? For the start, we may ask ourselves to whom this question in the form of an apostrophe is addressed? The most obvious answer is indicated by the title the narrator gives to the letter, thus directing its performance: *Письмо Татьяны к Онегину*, Tat'jana's letter to Onegin. Thus the event announced by the apostrophe is the performance of seduction aimed at Tat'jana's object of love: "Apostrophe is not the representation of an event; if it works, it produces a fictive, discursive event" (Culler, 1981: 152-153). The fictitious event it produces is the seductive performance of the "lovers' discourse" (Barthes).

And yet, this event is contaminated by the tautological statement which splits the frame of self-referentiality: "I write." (The statement both refers to Tat'jana's writing of the letter and points to the inscription of her letter as being written in another text and by another author, Puškin himself. In that sense, it oscillates between performance and repetition). Writing and seduction are thus indistinguishable from the first line of the letter, changing places in this performative event. But if this apostrophe announces seduction, and we are the readers of the letter, may we not assume that the addressee of the letter is not

Onegin (or, not Onegin **only**), but the reader proper? This assumption splits further the aim of the writing performance and redirects the question to the reader of the letter him/herself. Tat'jana's question would thus establish the scene in which we may distinguish not only a fictional element of the seductive language but the question that writing or the text of the novel poses to its readers: "I write to you - what more would one want?"

If we read the question from the beginning of the letter as aimed at us, then the whole scene of writing becomes even more complex. Tat'jana's letter makes very problematic the addressee of the letter, (Onegin or the reader), and the writer of the letter, (Puškin or Tat'jana), splitting the identity of the communicational, reading/writing, seductive and performative situation that it stages. This epistle reflects the structural assumption of any literary epistolarity, which is "a battle of wits between the author and reader in which they try to outdo each other, parrying, feinting, and setting traps in a sequence of attacks and defenses somewhat like a fencing match, or like a **seduction which is being carried on in the exchange of letters**" (de Man, 1986: 112, my emphasis). Tat'jana's letter thus asks the question about the writing of *Eugene Onegin* itself. The answers we shall try to give to this question will necessarily be addressing the riddle of split identity and the dialogicity of Puškin's writing: writing as seduction, a discursive scene which would include the reader him/herself.

The perspective in which we are trying to read Tat'jana's letter could greatly profit from the discussion about Puškin's novel proposed by Mixail Baxtin in his *Dialogic Imagination*. It stresses the fact that Puškin's writing to a great extent established itself through a set of dialogical relationships between the author, characters and readers of *Eugene Onegin*. "The language of this novel," says Baxtin, "is a **system** of languages that mutually and ideologically interminate each other. It is impossible to describe and analyze it in a single unitary language" (Baxtin, 1981: 47). The context in which Tat'jana's letter is inscribed is a dialogic, "heteroglossic" text of the novel which parodies, puts into question, dislocates and denies the stylistic register established within the text itself: "almost the entire novel breaks down into images of languages that are connected to one another and with the author via their own characteristic dialogical relationship" (Baxtin, 1981: 47). Tat'jana's letter evokes several dialogical contexts or, as Baxtin would say, **zones**, which it translates, confronts, parodies or ironizes.

A highly profound and complex language image is associated with Tat'jana. At the heart of this image is a distinctive internally dialogized combination of the language of a "provincial miss" - dreamy, sentimental, Richardsonian - with the folk language of fairy tales and stories from everyday life told to her by her nurse, together with peasant songs, fortune telling and so forth. What is limited, almost comically, old fashioned in Tat'jana's language is combined

with the boundless, serious and direct truth of the language of the folk. The author not only represents this language but is also in fact speaking in it. Considerable sections in the novel are presented in Tat'jana's voice-zone (this zone, as is the case with zones of all other characters, is not set off from authorial speech in any formally compositional or syntactical way; it is a zone demarcated purely in terms of style) (Baxtin, 1981: 47).

This dialogic context which the letter both establishes and enters is produced by two narrative strategies, very characteristic for this novel in general: one is the text's relationship with the set of intertextual references which the text actualizes, reflects upon, parodies or translates. Tat'jana's writing invokes the folk language, as well as various epistolary novels, most notably Rousseau's *Julie* and Richardson's *Pamela*.¹

The other narrative drive which enhances the dialogical context, is the narrator's statement that Tat'jana's letter is itself only a "translation" from French. This statement poses a problem to many readers and produces a paradox which prevents us from saying clearly "who speaks" in Tat'jana's letter. As Bočarov (Bočarov, 1974: 71) has noted, it exposes the novel's major creative strategy-translation, which forces the reader to engage him/herself in the play of translation, hidden origins and displacements.

What are the consequences of such a perspective for Tat'jana's letter and the novel *Eugene Onegin* in general? What is the effect of doubling, splitting the identity of writing and reading, that the text exercises on itself? What is the effect of the translation process that the text enacts? There are two critical approaches which may be adopted in order to answer these questions. One, taken by Baxtin, Bočarov and Lotman (Lotman: 1975), views the letter and the novel as a dialogical process of translation orchestrated by the unifying authorial view. The dialogical conflicts serve, in this context, as a kind of background for the authorial voice which emerges from their intersection. This point of view would also try to establish origins and originals (like for example the one of Tat'jana's letter), that Puškin's writing ceaselessly avoids, veils and abandons. This critical line leads us directly to the question of language and its identity in Puškin's writing. The second critical perspective starts from similar assumptions but tries to leave open the paradoxes such as those surrounding Tat'jana's letter and demonstrate the irreconcilable opposition between the self and the other in Puškin's writing. This critical perspective is reflected in Gary Saul Morson's claim that "*Onegin*, in effect, includes its own parody, and its essentially open dialogue is designed to exemplify a deep suspicion of all statements about the world—including its own." This "uncertainty the poet deliberately leaves unresolved" (Saul Morson, 1981: 143).²

Bočarov starts his discussion of Tat'jana's letter by pointing to the fact that translation is the major constructive device of the novel in verse. The world of the novel, claims Bočarov, "строится 'переводами', переключениями с одного стилистического языка на другой, а в пределе - со всех и всяких 'субъективных' языков как бы на 'объективный' язык самой жизни. Строению мира романа в целом, таким образом, адекватно понятие 'перевода', в некоторых же местах это слово является как особенно значимое. Читаем строфу III главы, в которых автор нам представляет письмо Татьяны" (Bočarov, 1974: 71). Bočarov goes on to say that the translation process in the novel works not only among different discursive practises, but, ultimately, between the text and the reality or realities transferred into the text. Paradoxically, the translation process within the novel serves to expose the most original aspects of the Russian language: "Этот Пушкинский 'перевод', таким образом, представляет собою как бы прямое воспроизведение как раз наиболее подлинных качеств русского выражения, его нетронутых, благодаря разделению с 'употреблением французского языка' в русском обществе, источников" (Bočarov, 1974: 78). Bočarov goes on in this appropriation of the letter's linguistic origin that the letter explicitly **abandons**, and says that the letter "translates" the hidden origin of Tat'jana's Russian heart. The French text serves to stress its foreignness and in this way produces the differentiating mechanism which would be rooted in pure Russianness: "Разделению этой реальности и реальности эмпирической служит фикция подлинника по-французски: тем самым этот эмпирический 'текст посредник' и его 'иностраные слова' отделены от 'сокровенного подлинника', 'живой картины' русской души Татьяны" (Bočarov, 1974:78). This critical drive recuperates what the original text explicitly tries to abandon: the **origin itself**. The ultimate reality which is of course "Russian", and which Bočarov inscribes as the source of Puškin's writing, reduces the conflicting dialogical and heteroglossic interplay to one ultimate, ideal origin.

This act of recuperation of the Russian identity, of the sameness, of the proper origin of Tat'jana's writing, is a common notion in Puškinian criticism. For example, in his *Jazyk Puškina*, Vinogradov claims that "Ведь язык письма Татьяны, вопреки предварительным извинениям автора - русский, непреводный. Он не предполагает стоящего за ними французского текста" (Vinogradov, 1935: 222). It is interesting to point out that, **contrary to** Vinogradov, Nabokov asserts the translatability of Tat'jana's letter back into French. He claims that "Tat'jana's letter slips beautifully into flat French" (Nabokov, 1975: II, 387). The letter obviously induces a two-fold, double response, which blurs the distinction between the proper, Russian, and the other, French. Bočarov, although seemingly following this path of argumentation, in the last instance reduces the complex play of dialogicity to one source and origin. The

origin of Tat'jana's letter, nevertheless, as indicated by the very fact that it produces diametrically opposed responses such as Vinogradov's and Nabokov's, exposes itself as evading, debasing and deconstructing the opposition *Свой/чужой*. "Пушкин нам предполагает диалогическую конструкцию, один из голосов которой принадлежит автору, а другой является 'чужим' ... Происходит колебание общей ориентировки текста, в результате чего каждый из стрыков, в определенном смысле, может считаться авторской или 'чужой' речью в равной мере (Lotman, 1975: 35).

The Šklovskian and Lotmanian perspective (the consequences of which we would like to maintain) would view the letter as a place of an incessant interplay between writing, seduction, and the undoing of the opposition of the self and the other. Our view of the translation process would start from the assumption made by Bočarov. In Puškin translation is the major narrative strategy, that incessantly shifts the discourse from one stylistic register to another. But we would consider applying the translation metaphor to Puškin's writing, exploring its radical consequences, and claim that in the letter scene and "in [its] translation, the everyday frustrations of writing assume an explicit, externally projected form. If we are impotent, it is because Mother [tongue] is inadequate" (Johnson, 1985b: 144). The translation (or "translation") of Tat'jana's letter inscribes otherness, double-displacement, and split the seductive energy that the letter performs. The desire that the narrator feels for Tat'jana is mediated by the seductive performance of her writing. This energy is translated by the narrator into the letter, and involves the reader in this play of seduction. The subject, as Deleuze and Guattari say, "has sent his fully dressed double in the letter, with the letter. This exchange, or this reversal of the duality of the two subjects, the subject of the statement [Tat'jana] taking on that real movement that is normally the province of the subject of the enunciation, [author, narrator], produces a doubling" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 31). The reader of Tat'jana's letter is caught in the play of undecidability, and we can never tell what exactly we are reading.

The bridge of translation, which paradoxically releases within each text the subversive forces of its own foreignness, thus reinscribes those forces in the tensile strength of a new neighbourhood of otherness ... The more a text is worked out through by the problem of translation, the more untranslatable it becomes ... It is thus precisely the way in which the original text is always already an impossible translation that renders translation impossible" (Johnson, 1985b: 146,148).

The effect of the displaced or divided identity of the text of Tat'jana's letter that the opening line suggests, ("Я к вам пишу ..."), is prepared, enhanced and contextualized by the narrator's previous explicit claim that the letter we are

reading is only a translation of another text. This statement produces a paradox that is worth examining in detail. The immediate context for reading Tat'jana's letter is prepared and established in the lines preceding it:

Письмо Татьяны предо мною;
 Его я свято берегу,
 читаю с тайною тоскою,
 И начитаться не могу.
 Кто ей внушил и эту нежность,
 И слов любезную небрежность?
 Кто ей внушил умилый вздор,
 Безумный сердца разговор,
 И увлекательный и вредный?
 Я не могу понять. И вот
 Неполный, слабый перевод,
 С живой картины список бледный;
 Или разигранный Фрейшиц,
 Перстами робких учениц (Puškin, 1986: 115).

This stanza establishes a very interesting view of Tat'jana's letter. It is presented to us a desirable, fascinating, brilliant piece of writing. In the whole book this is the only reference to anyone's text that earns such high praise. And yet, this letter that the narrator never ceases to read ("начитаться не могу" is translated by Nabokov by "I cannot get my fill of reading it," which is in its turn "список бледный", "a pallid copy" of the original statement), is not the same letter that the reader gets to read. The letter is actually **absent** from the text, and the reader reads only the translation, or, should we say the "translation" of it. Tat'jana, as we are reminded by the narrator, "по-русски плохо знала":

Еще предвижу затрудненья:
 Родной земли спасая честь,
 Я должен буду, без сомненья
 Письмо Татьяны перевесть.
 Она по-русски плохо знала,
 Журналов наших не читала
 И выражалась с трудом
 На языке своем родном.
 Итак, писала по-французски ... (Puškin, 1986: 112).

This double reading explicitly suggested by the text, this folding of the text which quotes, translates itself, inserts in the text a division or a cleavage which induces in the reader an uncertain response: who wrote the letter that we are reading, the narrator or Tat'jana? Who speaks in the letter? The narrator's debasing strategy that underestimates its own translation aims to prove to the reader that Tat'jana's original is a much better piece of writing. Yet this

compliment is dubious, since she is at the same time scolded by the narrator for not knowing her own language.³ The narrator, nevertheless, praises her letter. But, all the same, he offers a translation which is put into question beforehand by the narrator himself. This situation produces a tension, Baxtin's "heteroglossia", in which it is impossible to decide the final status of the text that we are about to read. We cannot decide which is the author's or narrator's voice and which is Tat'jana's. In this sense the letter seems even to exceed dialogicity and the confrontation of two discourses, and places itself in the realm of **otherness**, a realm in which discourse is in constant need of translation. The text is pointing to its own insufficiency, and mirrors its own supplementarity. We could say, in the words of Paul de Man, writing about Baxtin and the epistolary novel, that such a "self-reflexive, autotelic, narcissistic structure of form, ... is hereby replaced by an assertion of the otherness of the other, preliminary to even the possibility of recognition of his otherness" (de Man, 1986: 109). The letter establishes itself as a conflicting ground of discourses which are trying to appropriate each other's identity. This holds true for **both** Puškin's text, which appropriates other epistolary novels as its intertextual background (*Pamela*, *Dangerous Liaisons*), and for the text of Tat'jana's letter, which is caught in the net of similar textual appropriations. Intertext works here, in the words of Barabara Johnson, as a "violation of property", since "'intertextuality' designates the multitude ways a text has of not being **self-contained**, of being **traversed by otherness**." The undecisive course of the trajectory of Tat'jana's letter "puts in question [...] concepts of originality and derivativeness, since the very notion of a self-contained literary 'property' is shown to be an illusion" (Johnson, 1987: 116, my emphasis).

This appropriation is executed or performed through the conflict with its own statements about the letter's identity. Tat'jana's statement "I write to you" is exposed as a translation of the narrator. The narrator's statement "I will be obliged to translate", however, is put into question by the very first line of the letter, the apostrophe, the performance of writing. The translation, indeed, exposes the incongruence between the love letter and its object, and introduces or stresses the difference or absence of the object of love. The translation also exposes the openness of the 'scene of seduction', in which the addressee is far from identified. As a matter of fact, like in Lacan's interpretation of Poe's "Purloined Letter", the reader is "**in the possession of the letter**", thus **both** possessing and being possessed by it. (In English, the object of the phrase "being in possession of the letter" is undecidable).⁴ In the course of the translation the letter is somehow **stolen** from Tat'jana, and the desire for the absent love object that the translations produces is aimed at the reader. This is a case where "paradoxically, amorous discourse may arouse the writer and seduce subsequent readers, but the lover to whom it is addressed is never persuaded to return" (Kauffman, 1986: 302). The scene of writing is reproduced in the scene of reading: just as we do not know

who wrote the letter, we are not able to decipher "whom it may concern." The text doubles itself and, in a kind of discursive transvestism, tries to appropriate the power of seduction from the effects of discourse that it produces. The lovers' discourse is exposed as always being in need of translation, since it is never self-sufficient or identical to itself. The nature of the erotic epistle is "fluid, decentered, multiple", and "forgeries, thefts, disguised names, false attributions, and illegitimate copies [or the narrator's pallid copy!!] abound in discourses of desire" (Kauffman, 1986: 32). The translation/writing scene of Tat'jana's letter indeed explicitly exposes the nature of erotic epistolarity:

Amorous discourse is a hybrid of languages, of astonishing diversity and simultaneity. The bilingualism (sometimes trilingualism) of the text mediates against certainty and centrality; each letter writer grapples with the intractability of language and expresses profound scepticism about the connection of words to deeds, to reality, to representation (Kauffman, 1986: 32).

The seduction scene induced by Tat'jana's letter, both aimed at the reader and at Onegin, thus both fictionalizes a bodily, erotic need and a desire for language itself⁵, and exposes a kind of "plaisir du texte" (Barthes), in which we can never tell the body from language, the seduction of Onegin from the seduction of the reader. The fact that the letter is "translated", nevertheless, exposes the inability of the language to recapture the lost object. Lovers' discourse is always in pain, needing to gain the object of its desire, and aware that this loss can never be replaced by language.

What makes the language of amorous discourse distinctive, however, is that in every discourse of desire a lament ... is inscribed; every single heroine is engaged in the act of writing, but paradoxically, what she writes, in one disguise or another, is, "Words fail me." Because desire lies between the needs to which the body responds and the demands that speech articulates, it is always a gap in language that cannot be filled, and consequently, every discourse of desire is a critique of language: it cannot encapsulate, enclose, sum up desire - much less satisfy it. Nostalgia and revenge ... reveal the heroine's longing and frustration not just toward the absent lover but toward language ... This paradox illuminates the profound ambivalence toward language in every discourse of desire, an ambivalence that is decentered ideologically as it is emotionally. Since dialogism implies a radical decentering of the belief systems language institutionalizes, the result is a decentering that is simultaneously political and physic. Dialogism gives amorous discourses their characteristic duplicity, dubiousness, and despair about the efficacy of language. (Kauffman, 1986: 301, my emphasis).

Tat'jana's language is a language of the neurosis of writing, a language of desire for the lover **and** language. It is both erotic and seductive, desperate and insatiable. This is what the narrator refers to as Tat'jana's: "воспаленный язык". Tat'jana's writing enacts the fever of the text and the language (язык) produced and sealed by the same feverish tongue (язык) longing for the lover:

Татьяна то вздохнет, то охнет;
Письмо дрожит в ее руке;
Облатка розовая сохнет
На воспаленном языке. (Puškin, 1986: 117).

What her tongue (язык) seals, is the letter written in a language (язык) of love and seduction.

There is another aspect of the letter that needs to be mentioned in relation to its status as translation. It is generally assumed that the position of the letter in *Eugene Onegin* should be discussed in relation to another letter in the text, the one written by Eugene himself.⁶ There is, nevertheless, a very important difference between the two letters. Whereas Tat'jana's letter is a *translation*, Onegin's letter is reproduced literally: "Вот вам письмо его точь-в-точь" (Puškin, 1986: 218). The narrator in the case of Tat'jana's letter participates in the reproduction of the letter by inscribing his position in her seduction scene, in her femininity. Onegin's letter can be given only literally: "word for word". It is exactly because the feminine is in need of translation that "The problem of understanding the woman is here a problem of translation" (Johnson, 1985a: 108). The split produced by translating Tat'jana's text, its folding in itself which Derrida elsewhere calls "invagination", (Derrida, 1981: 66), produces an extremely feminine, radically female seduction effect. This is exactly the rhetorical power that Puškin steals from Tat'jana's letter, in order to make his writing extremely feminine: "Puškin's voice is, almost by definition, *écriture féminine*" (Clayton, 1987: 262). As we have seen, this seductive energy is developed and released by producing a cleavage in the text, inducing a split through which the "plaisir du texte" flows. This energy leaves neither the narrator, nor the reader, intact. If there is charm in Tat'jana's letter, noticed by so many critics and readers, it is in its pure femininity that is hiding, veiling and unveiling the most erotic place in the whole novel, **язык Татьяны**, the language and the tongue of the seventeen year old girl in love. This erotic energy the narrator could not help noticing, and partakes in Tat'jana's seductive scene.

Hence the ultimate purveyor of Tat'jana's letter, the subject in possession of her letter, is no one else but Puškin himself.

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Примечания

- 1 Štil'man, for example, notes: "Роман в стихах Пушкина связан, таким образом, с эпистолярным романом хотя бы уже тем, что в текст включены письма героя и героини, причем эти письма, объяснения в любви, являются опорными пунктами в развертывании сюжета" (Štil'man, 1958, 352). On the novel's relation to the epistolary tradition see also Nabokov, (1975: II, 389).
- 2 Morson here repeats arguments from Šklovskij, 1923: 197-220.
- 3 Cf.: "Tat'jana's soul may be 'Russian' (5:4), but she expresses its longings to Eugene in French, to the narrator's mock dismay (3:26)" (Todd, 1986: 117).
- 4 With the letter, as Lacan has it, we are not far away from the phallus, the materiality of the signifier. And indeed, commenting upon the linguistic ability of Russian ladies in Chapter Three, XXVII, Puškin sets up the following scene of reading:

Я знаю: дам хотят заставить
Читать по-русски. Право, страх!
Могу ли их себе представить
С "Благонамеренным" в руках! (Puškin; 1986; 113).

Commenting upon these lines, Nabokov points out that they were "given an obscene twist (*blagonamerennyj fallos*) by its author and his friends in their private correspondence. (The joke was started by Vyazemskij in a letter to Puškin of July, 26, 1828.)" (Nabokov, 1975, II, 375-6). Thus, the whole letter is situated within an explicitly erotic frame in which the scene of reading, the possession of the letter (or a book), entails the pleasure of the text and explicit sexual connotations.

For the relationship between letter writing and the writing subject, see, also, Lacan, in John P. Müller and William J. Richardson, 1988: 28-55.

- 5 For the sexual and erotic aspects of the love-letters, see Peter V. Conroy, 1987: 11-49.
- 6 For the structural similarities and "the mirror reflection symmetry" of the two letters, cf. Tatiana Cosman, 1973.