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Reply to Barbara Lonnqvist’s Research Note, “Tolstoy Rewriting the Caucasus” (*Tolstoy Studies Journal, Volume XIX*)

Although the 1934 *Литературная энциклопедия* goes so far as to assert, somewhat cryptically, that Tolstoy’s “Prisoner of the Caucasus” shows traces of his reading Xavier de Maistre’s “Les Prisonniers du Caucase” and that these traces may be seen in the nearly homonymic story by Tolstoy, it is not possible to prove a direct influence of de Maistre on Tolstoy’s “Prisoner of the Caucasus.” For one thing, the copy of de Maistre’s book in the Yasnaya Polyana library is an 1880 edition, far too late to be the one in which Tolstoy read de Maistre, if indeed he did. Still, there is much internal evidence that Barbara Lonnqvist is right when she argues for a connection between de Maistre’s “Les Prisonniers du Caucase” and Tolstoy’s “Prisoner of the Caucasus.” Unfortunately, neither she nor Tolstoy gives de Maistre and his work enough credit.

Xavier is not merely Joseph’s kid brother, and his story is no generic “Three Little Bears” that one may legitimately appropriate without acknowledgement. In many ways, “Les Prisonniers

du Caucase" is a ground-breaking work in its own right, and, although it may seem slightly sacrilegious to say so in *Tolstoy Studies Journal*, it is more successful than Tolstoy's own story in achieving the clarity of style and wide accessibility that Tolstoy was seeking in his "Prisoner of the Caucasus" almost fifty years after de Maistre wrote his.

Xavier de Maistre was born in Chambéry in 1763. His eldest brother, Joseph, was his godfather. As can be seen through their voluminous correspondence, the ties between the brothers remained close, and each supported the other in different ways. For example, while Xavier was still in military service, Joseph saw to the publication of several of Xavier's most influential works. Xavier collaborated in the writing of Joseph's *Soirées de St. Petersburg* and was in fact responsible for the much-appreciated opening description of the boat trip on the Neva.

In 1781, when he was eighteen, Xavier joined the Sardinian army, a career choice that was initially not very taxing. In 1784, he was able to participate in one of the world's first balloon ascensions,¹ both for the adventure and because of what was to become a lifelong interest in physics and chemistry.² He read widely during some rather dull provincial garrison years and was involved in at least one duel over political matters in early 1790, which resulted in his being confined to quarters for forty-two days. De Maistre's first and most famous work, the "Voyage autour de ma chambre," although partly conceived before this house arrest, took shape during this period (particularly the "rose" and "white" chapters) and was completed in far more serious circumstances well after his return to liberty.

Xavier continued to serve as an officer of the Sardinian army and saw combat before the armistice signed by King Victor Amédée III in April 1796 and the abdication of his son, Charles Emmanuel IV, in December 1796. Charles Emmanuel was restored to the throne by Suvorov, but

when Paul I withdrew Russian support from the Sardinians and recognized Austria's claim to Piedmont, Xavier preferred to serve the Russians rather than the Austrians and joined the Russian forces in their Swiss campaign.³ He was initially in the suite of Prince Bagration (whose portrait he painted) and then with his protector Suvorov, whom he accompanied back to Russia. There, Suvorov soon died, reputedly in Xavier's arms, on May 18, 1800.⁴

Already recognized by Bagration and Suvorov and their circles as a talented artist, and blocked in his military ambitions by the fall of Suvorov, Xavier turned to portrait painting to earn a living during his first years in Russia. Princess Shakhovskaiia helped him find clients. Despite the dubious social status of painters, Xavier—who was by Russian reckoning a count—was received in Russian Society and frequented the Pushkins' house as a welcome guest.⁵

His brother Joseph arrived in St. Petersburg in 1803 as the envoy of the new king of Sardinia, Victor Emmanuel I. Several years later, Joseph obtained for Xavier the position of director of the new Admiralty Library, a post that he held from 1805 to 1810. In 1810, however, Xavier returned to active duty in the Russian army in the Caucasus. There were several reasons for this decision: fears about the somewhat precarious status of the library, the jealousy of other Sardinians in Russian service, and the problematic status of his courtship of a much younger princess, a lady in waiting to the Empress, which was considered inappropriate in high circles. He remained on active service as a Russian officer until after the fall of Napoleon.⁶

During his convalescence from a wound received in a battle with the Turks in the Caucasus, Xavier recorded ethnographic data and statistics on Georgia.⁷ While subsequently accompanying his commanding general in his travels through Georgia, he continued to observe customs, religious observances, costumes, and landscapes,

some of which he recorded in drawings as well as in words. He also heard his compatriot, General Delpozzo, commandant of Vladikavkaz, recount his experiences as a captive of the Chechens. Delpozzo's ordeal and Xavier's own experience of the Caucasus provide the basic background and plot of Xavier's "Les Prisonniers du Caucase," one of the two Russian stories that he published in 1824-25. In 1813, during a brief leave, he was finally able to marry Princess Sophia Zagriatskaia. Rather unexpectedly for them both, she then came into a comfortable fortune on the sudden death of her brother.

The Russian tradition of Caucasian prisoners begins of course with Pushkin's "Prisoner of the Caucasus." Far too much has been made of Xavier de Maistre's possible influence on Pushkin's verse tale. A number of critics, both Russian and Western, have speculated not only that Pushkin must have read de Maistre's "Les Prisonniers du Caucase" before writing his own "Prisoner of the Caucasus," but also that Pushkin had been directly influenced by de Maistre's work. For example, in a 1934 article published in a *Festschrift* in honor of the 40-year jubilee of academician A. S. Orlov, A. I. Nekrasov states that "It is probable that Pushkin had read this work by Xavier de Maistre, which served as a stimulus for the creation of his own work" (Некрасов 163). Nekrasov goes on to declare: "Pushkin could certainly have known this work in 1820, or even earlier. Xavier de Maistre's popularity in Russian society was so great that Pushkin positively could not have not known his works." Nekrasov also notes both that Xavier de Maistre was acquainted with the Pushkins⁸ and that he had painted a portrait miniature of the poet's mother (163).

Although Pushkin was about six when that portrait was done, it is certainly probable that the adult poet did know both de Maistre's "Voyage autour de ma chambre" and "Le Lépreux de la Cité d'Aoste" (the latter being one of the texts published first in St. Petersburg in 1811 by Joseph

de Maistre while his brother was still serving in the Russian army).⁹ But, it is nevertheless not possible for Pushkin to have read de Maistre's "Les Prisonniers du Caucase," even in manuscript, before he wrote his own "Prisoner."

Though a number of sources give 1815 as the first publication of "Les Prisonniers du Caucase" and its companion piece, "La Jeune Sibérienne,"¹⁰ which would have made the influence possible, this date is contradicted by the letter written by Xavier de Maistre to his sister Eulalie on January 11, 1819, wherein he describes the current status of the then far from finished "Les Prisonniers du Caucase" and "La Jeune Sibérienne."¹¹

I have several things already started that I can finish in a few months.¹² I have three little pieces sketched out. The first one is the story of an officer who is a prisoner of Caucasian bandits. It is an unusual and terrible subject, without women and without love (finally!). . . . The second is the story of a young woman who journeyed a thousand leagues on foot from the depths of Siberia to ask for a pardon for her father—and she got it; also no love. Madame Cottin wrote a false and rather bad novel on this subject, that calumniates the sublime character of the heroine...¹³ All three subjects are true, and I have added almost nothing. (*Lettres inédites* 1106)

Another problem sometimes raised regarding the dating of "Les Prisonniers du Caucase" has to do with de Maistre's status as Pushkin's "uncle-in-law." When he married Sofia Zagriatskaia in February 1813, he was fifty. Though much younger than de Maistre, Sofia was the aunt of Natalia Nikolaievna Goncharova (1812-63), Pushkin's future wife. But Natalia Goncharova and Pushkin were wed only in 1831. At the time of Pushkin's composition of his "Prisoner of the Caucasus," Natalia was about eight and nowhere in the picture.¹⁴

If de Maistre's "Les Prisonniers du Caucase" had any influence on Pushkin, it would not have been through "Prisoner of the Caucasus" but rather as a stylistic influence on the lucid prose works to which Pushkin turned much later. Unlike de Maistre's "Voyage autour de ma chambre"—which is charming and marked by *sentiment*—"Les Prisonniers du Caucase" is not an agreeable armchair voyage.¹⁵ There is not the slightest trace of Byronism. The plot is quite harsh with occasional comic moments and a sense of irony. De Maistre's claim to "truth" and authenticity is justified not only because the tale is based on actual occurrences,¹⁶ but also because of the limpidity of the language, the limiting of description to elements that play a direct role in the events of the plot, the refusal of heightening and embellishment, and the rejection of all the devices and clichés of Romanticism that were to dominate Russian visions of the Caucasus for more than another decade. "Les Prisonniers du Caucase," with its clarity of language, directness of depiction, and focus on a youth who is one of "the people," successfully realized many of the goals which Tolstoy set himself forty-seven years later, but which Tolstoy failed to achieve, paradoxically because of his ideological commitment to a style which was in fact less "direct" and "immediately accessible" than de Maistre's.¹⁷

Both authors concentrate on the movement of their stories and subordinate description to it. Tolstoy, however, indulges in more description of clothing, which has the effect of emphasizing the exoticism of the mountaineers,¹⁸ although he does try to "familiarize" the language he uses to describe these unusual items of attire. He also uses similes and metaphors, some quite clichéd, such as the wolfish grin displayed by a number of the tribesmen, whereas there is only one simile and there are no metaphors at all in "Les Prisonniers du Caucase."¹⁹

In de Maistre's story there is a bare minimum of detailed description of surroundings, except

when such details are necessary to the action. During the prisoners' trip to the *aul* and during the escape, there is specific and precise description of elements directly relevant to their journeys. For example, after their escape, they are hampered by snow in the high valleys: "The ground on these heights and especially in the forest was still covered with hardened snow that supported their weight during the night and a part of the morning; but towards noon, when the surface of the snow had been melted by the sun, they sank in at every step, which slowed them down a great deal" (240). This passage is typical of de Maistre's description: full of practical detail, but without the use of imagery.

In *What Is Art* Tolstoy lists "Prisoner of the Caucasus" as one of only two of his works that are not "bad art" (PSS 30: 163). He therefore continues to believe that it is a model for what literature should be. Good art must be universally accessible, promote brotherhood, and transmit the highest and best feelings to which humankind has risen (PSS 30: 80). Such a work must be written in a universally accessible language and style. But unlike de Maistre, Tolstoy erroneously assumes the identity of popular speech patterns with this desirable simplicity, clarity, and universal accessibility.

De Maistre's story is characterized by simplicity of vocabulary and clarity of syntax. His French is unmarked, and could (and did) provide an excellent text for several generations of young readers, although it was not specifically written with them in mind.

In contrast, the language of Tolstoy's "Prisoner of the Caucasus" is strongly marked.²⁰ These patterns include a clear preference for several kinds of inversions, most frequently the inversion of standard subject/verb order (Jahn 49, Eros 11),²¹ including a very high percentage of sentences that begin with verbs, in many of which the subject is dropped altogether. The "Prisoner of the Caucasus" also tends to place adjectives after

the substantives that they modify and to describe exotic practices and objects in words that would be familiar to children (Виноградов 189).²² F. M. Shchelgunova has noted that the frequency of «и» as an intensifier as well as a coordinator is much higher in “Prisoner of the Caucasus” than in Tolstoy’s other works (even post-1880), where it usually indicates cause and effect.²³ Other scholars have noted Tolstoy’s drastically shortened sentences and his almost total avoidance of dependent and relative clauses. Carol Carbone Eros in particular has commented that there is *no* instance of the use of *который* in “Prisoner of the Caucasus” (Eros 11). A considerable number of folkish words and a striking preference for diminutives and augmentatives are also evident throughout the story.

All of these practices create in Tolstoy’s “Prisoner of the Caucasus” a language that is a form of *skaz*, which, like any stylization, impedes transparency, and would restrict newly literate adults, rather than opening to them the broader expressive and intellectual possibilities of standard Russian.²⁴ The resulting text is therefore not “simple” and “direct,” and, despite its popularity as a text for children and the “good feelings” of charity and brotherhood it is said to promote, on balance, “Prisoner of the Caucasus” does not provide a good model for “writing for adults.” Viktor Shklovsky has it right here: “Tolstoy’s mistake was to believe that Homer was not for the people, but only for Tolstoy, and that Tolstoy himself was not for the people, with the exception of the popular stories (народные рассказы), his ‘Prisoner of the Caucasus’ and the *Азбука* (*Primer*)” (Шкловский 618).²⁵

However, despite these stylistic differences, it is evident that Tolstoy and de Maistre share a common anti-romantic stance and a similar fidelity to the realistic observation of the same milieus and characters.²⁶ The basic narrative patterns of de Maistre’s and Tolstoy’s Caucasian prisoner stories are also strikingly similar, but Tolstoy has not adopted the stylistic clarity of the Savoyard uncle

of Russian realism. And although it would be folly to set “Les Prisonniers du Caucase” against such Caucasian works of Tolstoy as “The Cossacks” or *Hadzhi Murat*, it is fair to conclude that in “Les Prisonniers du Caucase” de Maistre had achieved before 1825 what Tolstoy declared to be his goal, aimed at, and missed in 1872. Furthermore, as Shklovsky and others have shown, the ways of influence may be extremely crooked. De Maistre was recognized as a master by both Mérimée and Stendhal.²⁷ Tolstoy’s indebtedness to the latter and Turgenev’s to the former were freely recognized by these writers themselves. Thus the Savoyard uncle’s more oblique contributions to Tolstoy and to Russian literature in general come in through the windows, if not by the front door.²⁸

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Notes

1. The first ascension of the Montgolfier brothers’ balloon was earlier that year.
2. “Le Prospectus de l’expérience aérostatique de Chambéry,” written before the ascension, as well as the more personal “Lettre de M. de S... a M. le Comte de C...contenant une relation de l’Experience Aérostatique de Chambéry,” written after the successful flight on May sixth, were published anonymously in 1784 in Chambéry. The “Prospectus,” as well as most of de Maistre’s literary efforts and the rest of his scientific work, was to a large extent based on personal experience. It was his work on scientific memoirs, the result of his chemical experiments, that delayed his work on “Les Prisonniers du Caucase” in 1819.
3. Because he left the Sardinian army before formally being released from it, enemies later accused Xavier of being a deserter. This caused a variety of problems for him over the years.
4. Berthier, *Xavier de Maistre: étude biographique et littéraire*, 74 ff. Lombard. *Xavier de Maistre*), 16-17. Lombard is one of the critics who has specu-

lated that “Les Prisonniers du Caucase” may have influenced Pushkin. It is not impossible that the two discussed the Caucasus before Pushkin’s departure for the south, especially if Xavier is in fact the author of an informal portrait of Pushkin, dated 1819 and found in the poet’s effects after his death. See Eva Lundquist, “Xavier de Maistre: du ‘Voyage autour de ma chambre’ aux ‘Prisonniers du Caucase,’” 384. If they did have such a discussion, it would, however, have been before the fact for Pushkin, who had not yet seen the Caucasus.

5. Tomashevsky, in his *Пушкин и Франция* quotes Pushkin’s sister: “Our parents gathered cultivated people in their house, the majority of whom were French émigrés. Among these émigrés the most remarkable was Count [Xavier] de Maistre, who at that period was supporting himself by painting portraits, and who had established himself with his “Voyage autour de ma chambre” (Томашевский 66).
6. It is important to note that, unlike many other foreign officers in the service of Russia at this period, Xavier took the trouble to learn Russian, already starting in Switzerland before his arrival in Russia in 1800. His Russian became good enough for him to translate some of Krylov’s fables into French. He gave up on translating Pushkin, however.
7. Letter to his brother Joseph, January 11, 1811. It should be noted that Xavier was very involved in projects to send Jesuits to Georgia and wrote a circumstantial report about the implantation of Catholicism in the Caucasus.
8. Tomashevsky also cites Nekrasov, but in a note adds prudently, “It must be said that the article somewhat exaggerates the role of de Maistre in the creation of Pushkin’s “Prisoner” (роль ... несколько преувеличена) (Томашевский 449). That “somewhat” is good.
9. Many critics have speculated that Turgenev’s “Живые монстры” (“Living Relics,” published in lat-

er editions of *A Sportsman’s Sketches*) owes much to this text. Melchior de Vogue, for example, says that “Le Lepreux” is “Ce prototype des ‘Reliques vivants’ de Turgenjev, si conforme au gout russe” (*Le Roman russe* 179).

10. The *Большая литературная энциклопедия* of 1934 gives 1815 as the date of publication of “La Jeune Sibérienne” and 1875 (a typo?) for “Les Prisonniers du Caucase.” The 1967 *Краткая литературная энциклопедия* gives 1815 as the publication date for both stories.
11. De Maistre also speaks of a third story, which he subsequently never published. Berthier thinks the third story was either “l’Histoire d’un prisonnier français” or “Catherine Fréminsky.” De Maistre informed M. de Maresté, who was taking care of the publication, that he would not send the third story because “il rentrait trop exactement dans le commun des romans.” Letter of May 11, 1824. Cited in Berthier, 131.
12. Work on the stories was delayed because for some months de Maistre had been doing chemical experiments (He published a number of articles in the *Mémoires de l’Académie des Sciences de Turin* and later in the scientific part of *La Bibliothèque universelle de Genève*), and wanted to write up his discovery and send it off before he completed the stories. The mémoire in question may well have been the one on the creation of a purple color for oil paint through a process involving the use of gold oxide. For the letter to Eulalie, see Klein 1106.
13. De Maistre is referring to Sophie Cottin’s *Elisabeth: ou les exilés de Sibérie*. Cottin adds romantic attachments and admits, “The real heroine is much more meritorious than mine. She suffered much more. By having someone help Elisabeth and by terminating her journey at Moscow, I minimized the dangers she endured, and therefore her merit.” (Preface to *Elisabeth*). De Maistre had met the real woman and he was incensed at Cottin’s romanticization and trivialization of the story. He wrote “La Jeune Sibérienne,” originally

- titled “L’Histoire véridique de Prascovie Lopouloff,” to set the record straight. The real heroine entered holy orders after her ordeal, where she died of pulmonary disease contracted during her winter journey.
14. Xavier de Maistre thought highly of Pushkin, whom he called “the great poet,” but he supported Natalia after the duel. “One cannot reproach the poor widow, all of whose misfortune came from being too beautiful and too sought after. The husband was a *hot head*, his adversary a *bad character*; no one was really in love; vanity wounded everyone.” *Oeuvres inédites de Xavier de Maistre*. Vol. 2, 103. The translation is Lombard’s (*Xavier de Maistre* 20). Natalia and her four children lived for a while with the de Maistres before she remarried (Berthier 123-24).
 15. As Layton observes, “Firmly rooted in the sentimental era prior to the conquest of the Caucasus, the zest for actual and armchair traveling was enormously intensified by Byronism in young Pushkin’s time [...]. The poetry of Byron both prompted Russians to go on journeys and served as a substitute for those who could not leave home” (*Russian Literature and Empire* 241). One must be careful to distinguish between captivity tales and imprisonment tales. Captivity tales, even the romantic ones, do not provide the kind of spiritual liberation achieved by some romantic prisoners who are depicted actually incarcerated behind walls, such as those described by Victor Brombert in his classic, *The Romantic Prison*. “Voyage autour de ma chambre” is gently related to the latter tradition.
 16. The “veracity” of “Les Prisonniers du Caucase” comes from de Maistre’s own military experience in the area and also from General Delpozzo (de Maistre, letter to his brother Joseph, written February 4, 1811. Published by Klein in the *Correspondant* of December 10, 1902, 925).
 17. The tradition of Caucasian imprisonment does not stop with Tolstoy, of course. The most recent variant, Vladimir Makanin’s “Кавказский пленный,” reverses the traditional pattern by having a young Chechen held for ransom by two Russian soldiers. Many other examples exist (e.g., Ергушов). The only interesting aspect of this one is that he picks up character names from earlier well-known Caucasian stories.
 18. Neither author mentions the mountaineers’ practice of cutting off heads, hands, or ears as trophies, or the fact that some of the Cossack troops and “pacified” mountaineers did the same. The practice may, however, be the source of the oneiric bloody head in N. M’s tale.
 19. There is only one comparison in the whole story. When the escapees finally spy the plain beyond the last lower range of hills, there is a simple simile: “...ils découvrirent, au delà des montagnes plus basses qui se croisaient devant eux, l’immense horizon de la Russie semblable à une mer éloignée” (241).
 20. Numerous studies have examined the characteristic patterns of usage in the story: Jahn 49; Щелгунова 87-93; Илина 75-80; Николаева 59-63.
 21. Tolstoy’s insistence on verbs, especially verbs of motion and verbs in the perfective mode as expressive of rapid action, as well as his occasional use of imperfective forms in intervals where the action slows, has also been frequently remarked upon (Николаева 60), as has his use of verbs in somewhat archaic or idiosyncratic forms that privilege concrete meanings.
 22. Vinogradov cites M. A. Ribnikova, “Рассказы Толстого для детей,” 28. According to Rybnikova, this inversion stresses and transmits the unusualness of what the protagonist, Zhilin, is seeing. Vinogradov adds that this word order is also a characteristic of a child’s speech when he is paying attention to the quality of the occurrence (189).
 23. This combination of coordinating and intensifying functions was, she says, characteristic of popular

- spoken language. She notes that Tolstoy's use of this pattern is striking and in many positions: before particles, before verbs in general, and, above all, before verbs of speaking and thinking and in dialogues.
24. It may be unfair to remind the reader of the lack of success of Tolstoy's *Power of Darkness* [Власть тьмы] among the popular audiences for which it had been written. It is probable that the problem was as much the inability of the actors to catch peasant rhythms and body language, as it was Tolstoy's "peasant" language (Stanislavsky 400-03).
 25. Without necessarily adopting his conclusion as to how to bring it about, one may also agree with Lenin that Tolstoy should be part of the patrimony of the people: "So that Tolstoy's great works can be accessible to *everyone*, one must fight, and continue to fight, against the social order that has condemned millions and tens of millions of men to ignorance, intellectual stupor, a life sentence of hard labor and misery; for this, socialist revolution is necessary" (Lenin, cited in Шкловский 618).
 26. Popov opines that Tolstoy must have read N. M.'s «Кавказский пленник» and said to himself "Not right, not right" ("Не так, не так") and that he therefore wrote his own "Кавказский пленник" in answer to it (Попов 190-92; quoted in Виноградов 184) N. M. was the author of a "Кавказский пленник" which was published in 1838 in *Библиотека для чтения*. Although there is speculation that N. M. was N. Murv'ev and this story was a prose adaptation of his "Кавказский пленник" poem of 1828, N. M. remains unidentified. The scenario in which Tolstoy would have said "Не так, не так" is anyhow rather unlikely, since Tolstoy was ten when N. M.'s story appeared, and there was no reason for it to have ever been reprinted. Tolstoy did say that Marlinsky provided his introduction to the Caucasus, and it therefore makes more sense to assert, as some critics do,

that Tolstoy's Caucasian stories are an attempt to answer Marlinsky's manner.

27. Sainte-Beuve has observed that there was "dans ce talent d'ordinaire tout gracieux et doux, une faculté d'audace qui ne recule au besoin devant aucun trait de la réalité et de la nature, même la plus sauvage. M. Mérimée pourrait envier ce personnage d'Ivan (on sait que Mérimé et Stendhal, avant de composer leurs œuvres, ont lu les contes de Xavier), de ce brave domestique de major à la fois fidèle et si féroce, et qui donne si lestement son coup de hache à qui le gêne." (Quoted in Berthier 297).
28. It would also be interesting to follow the development of Dumas, père (1803-70), who had read de Maistre well before writing many of his own escape stories and before his own trip to the Caucasus about which he wrote some extraordinary travel notes. Dumas, as might have been expected, preferred Marlinsky, whom he translated and "adapted" and whose stories are until this day published in France under Dumas' name (see Dumas).

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