

Research Notes

Tolstoy Rewriting the Caucasus

In the beginning of the 1870s, Tolstoy was again carried away by his interest in pedagogy. Together with his wife Sof'ia he had started teaching their oldest children, Sergei and Tat'iana, how to read. As Sof'ia witnesses, they were both dissatisfied by the existing primers, and Tolstoy revived the idea of creating a primer himself, "one that would be interesting and not 'false and dull' like most existing readers for children."¹ Good stories were needed to help children learn to read. Since his school experiment in the 1860s, Tolstoy was convinced that his method of introducing the pupils into literacy, based on "sounding syllables," outweighed other methods used in Russia. But even more important in a primer would be the introduction of *stories* as early as the first lesson, stories written in words so simple that the pupils would recognize them immediately.

Tolstoy then embarked on his project—a good Russian primer, *Azbuka*, which would be "universal," interesting to all children from peasants to princes. He collected stories from "all over the world," translated them, and rewrote them. His actual choice of stories seems somewhat arbitrary. His daughter Tat'iana remembered later that her father would read all kind of stories "on astronomy, physics, collections of proverbs, the fables of Aesop, English and American children books" to find useful material for his primer. She likened him to "a bee that sucks honey from all kinds of flowers to bring it to the hive."² Tolstoy was learning classical Greek in these same years and was pleased to include many fables of Aesop in his primer, directly "from the original." His son Sergei remembered his father's critique of La Fontaine and Krylov, who in Aesop's fable of the raven and the fox had the raven drop a cheese to the fox, instead of a piece of meat. "It is not customary for either ravens or for foxes to feed on cheese," Tolstoy had commented,

happy to retain the piece of meat in his prose version.³

Tolstoy was not very explicit about his sources. Aesop is mentioned and so is the Danish author H.C. Andersen whose tale "The Emperor's New Clothes" was included in the primer.⁴ But the English tale of Goldilocks and the three bears appears as Tolstoy's own creation. This has been accepted wholesale by later generations in Russia. To this day, for instance, most Russians think that "Три медведя" ("The Three Bears") is Tolstoy's rewrite of a *Russian* folk tale. When Tolstoy spoke about "the English fairy tale" in *Anna Karenina* in connection with Levin's calling Kitty "tiny bear," it was a mystery for a long time even to Tolstoy scholars what tale he had in mind. Like other Russian readers, they simply thought of "The Three Bears" as Russian.⁵

One anomalous story in *Azbuka* is "The Prisoner of the Caucasus" ("Кавказский пленник"). It is much longer (about thirty pages) than the other stories (generally one to four pages). The description of the Caucasian village is detailed, and the characters are individualized to an extent that we see in no other story. Since Tolstoy had been writing stories "from the Caucasus" since the 1850s, it has been assumed that "The Prisoner" is also his own invention.

The title of the story, "The Prisoner of the Caucasus," has naturally suggested comparisons with Pushkin's poem of the same title, published in 1822. Its republication in 1828 inspired Lermontov to write his "The Prisoner of Caucasus" in the genre of imitations. Lermontov's "Prisoner," although known in his lifetime, was not published until 1860. However, neither poem has much in common with Tolstoy's prose story. Both Pushkin and Lermontov are working within a Byronic tradition. The poems center on the flight of the Russian prisoner, helped by a Circassian woman who has fallen in love with him. The thematic of

conquest—Russia’s “vanquishing” of the Caucasus—is thus symbolized in the relation of man and woman.⁶ In Pushkin’s poem the Russian is saved but the woman drowns herself, while in Lermontov’s version the Russian is shot dead by the woman’s father, after which she takes her life, again by drowning in the border river Terek. By giving his story the same title as the poems, Tolstoy certainly positions himself in relation to the established tradition of how to depict the relations between Russians and the mountaineers of the Caucasus.⁷ Tolstoy’s realistic rendering of life in a Chechen village functions as a contrast and implicit critique of the romanticized picture painted by Pushkin and Lermontov. And in this respect he finds support in an equally *realistic* story about Russian prisoners in the Caucasus. I am thinking of Xavier de Maistre’s “Les prisonniers du Caucase,” a story that could have served as a prototext for Tolstoy. Xavier de Maistre emigrated to Russia in 1803 together with his elder brother Joseph who had taken up the position of the Sardinian chargé d’affaires in Petersburg.⁸ Xavier was enrolled in the Russian army and took part in the early warfare in the Caucasus. He left the army in 1816 and lived with his wife Sophie Zagriatsky, whom he had married in 1812, in a house on the Moika Canal. He took part in Petersburg artistic life both as a painter and a writer for the next ten years. His story “Les prisonniers du Caucase” was apparently written in 1819 and included in his *Œuvres*, first published in 1825 and then over again during the whole century. In 1826 the couple left Russia because of their children’s health problems, but they returned in 1839 (their two children had died by then). Xavier de Maistre died and was buried in Petersburg in 1852. He was widely read in the nineteenth century, his stories were commented upon by the critic Sainte-Beuve, and his *Œuvres* were found in mansion libraries all over Europe, including the library of Yasnaya Polyana.

The similarities between de Maistre’s and Tolstoy’s stories are manifold. In both stories there are *two* prisoners: in Tolstoy’s version,

two Russian officers, Zhilin and Kostylin; in de Maistre’s, an officer, Kascambo (Russian but of Greek origin) and his денщик, the batman Ivan. The plot construction and the delineation of character are also very similar. The prisoners are taken when a party of army people and other travelers are traveling from one Russian fort to another.

In de Maistre:

Deux fois par semaine, un convoi d’infanterie, avec du canon et un parti considérable de Cosaques, escorte les voyageurs et les dépêches du gouvernement. (Twice a week, a convoy of infantry, with a cannon and a large number of Cossacks, escort the travelers and the governmental couriers.) (46)

In Tolstoy:

И было заведено, что два раза в неделю из крепости в крепость ходили провожатые солдаты. Спереди и сзади идут солдаты, а в середине едет народ. (The custom was that twice a week a convoy of soldiers would go from fort to fort. Soldiers marched in the front and in the rear, and in between them went the people.) (591)⁹

The prisoners in each story behave in similar ways. Kostylin and Kascambo are pessimistic, they are ready to give up many times, while their companions, both with the name Ivan (the officer Zhilin’s first name and the only name given to Kascambo’s batman), are clever and full of initiative. Through the cunning and the negotiations of the Ivans, the prisoners are finally able to return to the Russian fort. The explanation of why the prisoners have been taken is important in both plots, and much attention is given to the prisoners’ writing letters to ask for ransom money. Trading with prisoners is an essential part of Chechen and Russian contacts, and the bargaining practice is highlighted.

There are many ethnographic details about life in the mountain villages, especially about

the interior of the houses and the food. There is no love story as in the stories by Pushkin and Lermontov. The prisoners gain the confidence of *children*, in de Maistre a boy Mamet and in Tolstoy a girl Dina. By stealth Mamet brings “bread” (du pain) and “potatoes baked in the ashes” (pommes de terre cuites sous le cendre) to the prisoners, while Dina offers them “goat milk cakes” (лепешки сырные).

Even if there are dissimilarities, the similarities between de Maistre’s story and Tolstoy are too apparent to be dismissed, especially in the context of Tolstoy’s rewriting stories for his Primer. It is easy to understand that Tolstoy excluded the murder of the friendly child that takes place in de Maistre’s story. How could such a thing have been presented to children learning to read? But even with the mitigation of cruelties, “The Prisoner of the Caucasus” remains a strange inclusion in *Azbuka*. What did Tolstoy himself think of it at the time of his writing?

In a letter written on March 22/25, 1872, he says: “All my time and my energy are taken up with the *Azbuka*. I wrote a completely new *Azbuka* piece for [the journal] *Dawn* (*Zaria*)—‘A Prisoner of the Caucasus’—and I am going to send it off in no more than a week” (388).¹⁰ Tolstoy sends the story to *Zaria*, but when it is published he expresses disappointment (see his letter, dated May 19, 1872). The problem is *the style*. He sees the difference in writing for children and for the reading public of a journal. In a letter this same spring (March 3) he says, “If the pieces in the *Azbuka* are going to have any virtue, it will consist in simplicity and clarity of line and stroke, that is, of language; while in a journal this will seem strange and unpleasant, as if unfinished. As in any picture gallery, drawings done with a pencil without shading” (387).

All the same he puts forth his “Prisoner” as an example of how he wants to write for adults as well (March 22/24): “This is a model of those devices and language that I am using for writing now and in the future for adults” (388).

Azbuka abounds in concise expressions and aphoristic sayings in accordance with its pedagogical aim. But such is also the beginning of *Anna Karenina*, the novel that Tolstoy started writing while working on the Primer. Its first sentence—“Happy families are all alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”—sounds much like a proverb out of *Azbuka*.

One could imagine that by using de Maistre’s story, Tolstoy was free to work on the language. The canvas was there, it had just to be filled up with “simple words.”

While de Maistre anchored his story in time and place, Tolstoy emphasized its generality: “Служил на Кавказе офицером один барин. Звали его Жилин” (“A gentleman was serving as an officer in the Caucasus. His name was Zhilin”) (590). The little word “one” (один) brings in a “once upon a time” flavor. This tone is further strengthened in the following: “На Кавказе тогда война была. По дорогам ни днем, ни ночью не было проезда” (“It was a time of war in the Caucasus. The roads were not safe by night or day”) (590).

These few words set the scene for the plot. The names of Tolstoy’s officers have a folkloric ring as well. Zhilin (from Russian “жил” = he lived) is the optimistic survivor, the man who never gives up. Kostylin (from Russian “костыль” = a prop, crutch) is heavy to move, pessimistic, needs constant support. He does not follow Zhilin on his second flight from the Chechen village. But Kostylin is saved all the same, as stated in Tolstoy’s laconic final phrase: “Kostylin was not released until a month later, after paying five thousand rubles ransom. He was barely alive when they brought him back” (622).

Most stories in *Azbuka* end in a sentence of moral direction. Tolstoy has even created stories out of proverbs that serve as explanations of their compressed wisdom. Within this context of fables, parables, and proverbs “The Prisoner of the Caucasus” stands out as a very odd story. What are we to learn? That Chechens take prisoners? That a flight in the mountains of Caucasus is risky? That, as stated in the last

sentence, it is possible to pay ransom and buy one's freedom?

I think that for Tolstoy the project of the Primer might also have served another goal, of which he may not have been totally conscious himself. The writer was clearly on the look-out for *new forms* of telling a story. Through *Azbuka* he is schooling himself, focusing on the "how" to *tell* the story, concentrating on "devices and language." In his pedagogical endeavor he had already tried to get away from literary language, from литературный язык, striving to get closer to the idiom of "the people." In a draft from the 1860s called "About the language in popular books," he contends,

Moreover, there are forms of extending speech that are utterly foreign to the Russian language and have been artificially and uselessly introduced into Russian—participles for instance [...] Official language, a language mostly made up of participles, is the most murky (самый темный), after it comes literary language. (8: 429)

Tolstoy looks for the "exact words" (точность) but says that exactitude is not enough. In writing for the people, one's language should be "exact and striking" (требуется точности и меткости). For some texts in *Azbuka* we have variants, and there we can follow Tolstoy's strivings to simplify, for instance by turning subordinate clauses into main clauses. To rewrite and simplify a "story from the Caucasus" must have presented a special challenge to him, since he had earlier written such stories.¹¹

But even if we take into consideration the situation of Tolstoy's grappling with how to write stories and the enticing project of a Caucasus story, the oddity of the text in a *primer* remains. His letters provide a possible explanation. They reveal that Tolstoy is very keen on getting his primer accepted by the Ministry of Education for usage in the schools. From a letter (May 17, 1875) we gather that the Ministry has been approached on this matter, and Tolstoy concludes, "It would also be a good idea to send the same document to the Ministry of

Defense, to headquarters" (426). In a letter of October 26, 1875 he repeats, "I am very interested whether the military would take it for their soldiers" (429). Since the selling of the first edition of *Azbuka* did not go too well, one can imagine Tolstoy's interest in getting the book into the large military circuit. And for teaching soldiers literacy, a story like "The Prisoner" would be more useful than "The Three Bears."¹² Tolstoy's idea with the primer was, after all, pedagogical—every story should reflect the reality of the pupils and transmit useful teachings for their future lives.

Thus I suggest that de Maistre's "Les prisonniers du Caucase" was among the "flowers," as Tolstoy's daughter put it, from which the author collected "honey" for his "beehive"—the *Azbuka*. By time this "honey" was distributed to millions of Russian youngsters. Metaphorically speaking, it was as if they had all entered the apiary of Levin, as depicted in the last chapter of *Anna Karenina*, where Tolstoy's alter ego is busy handing out honeycombs to his guests.

Barbara Lönnqvist
Åbo Akademi University, Finland

Notes

1. Quoted from *Азбука; Новая азбука* (445).
2. Quoted from *Азбука; Новая азбука* (465).
3. La Fontaine's "cheese" was partly a result of rhyming (plumage–langage–ramage–fromage), partly a result of his anthropomorphizing the animals. Krylov did not look in Aesop but took the fable straight from La Fontaine. He furthermore changed the raven into a crow. Sergei Tolstoy's memoirs (Очерки былого) are quoted from *Азбука; Новая азбука* (462).
4. At the time of Tolstoy's writing, the fable had been translated into German (1839), English (1846), and French (1855); Tolstoy could have used any of these. A Russian translation of H.C. Andersen's stories appeared only in 1894.
5. Even the Tolstoy scholar M. Al'tman could not identify the English tale (141). In 1995 I published an article about the "bear motif" in *Anna Karenina*, in which I discussed how playfully Tolstoy

describes the dresses of the three Shcherbatsky sisters in “size order,” as in the tale of Goldilocks and the three bears: “At certain hours all the three young ladies, with Mademoiselle Linon, drove in the coach to the Tverskoi boulevard, dressed in satin cloaks, Dolly in a long one, Natalia in a half-long one, and Kitty in one so short that her shapeless legs in tightly-drawn red stockings were visible to all beholders” (Part 1, chapter 6).

6. For the cultural and political implications of Russia’s conquering of the Caucasus, as reflected in the literature of the time, see Layton.

7. The title “The Prisoner of the Caucasus” seems to have become emblematic for stories from the Caucasus. In 1838 a prose story was published in the journal *Biblioteka dlia chteniia* (vol. 32, 17-52) anonymously (“N.M.”). It is a Russian officer’s first person narrative about his hardships while a captive of brutal mountain brigands. During captivity he found comfort in praying and, interesting enough, in remembering Pushkin’s poem “The Prisoner of Caucasus”—“such is the power of true poetry.”

8. Joseph de Maistre’s writings are very present in Tolstoy’s work on *War and Peace*, as scholars have pointed out. See Eikhenbaum (189-94) and Feuer (181-82). Joseph de Maistre’s “Les soirées de Saint Petersburg” (1821) made the man himself into a possible prototype (le vicomte) for Mlle Scherer’s salon; see volume forty-eight in the *Jubilee* edition of Tolstoy’s collected works (115, 506).

9. All quotations from Tolstoy’s story are from volume twenty-two. The translations of the quotes from de Maistre and Tolstoy are mine.

10. All Tolstoy’s letters are quoted from *Азбука; Новая азбука*.

11. In his book on Tolstoy “in the 1870s,” Eikhenbaum proposes the same idea of Tolstoy schooling himself by writing *Azбука*. About “The Prisoner of the Caucasus” he says: “For the first time Tolstoy writes a story based solely on events, on the plot line—on the interest of how it all ends.” He goes on to compare the story to “a miniature Odyssey” that opposes itself to all contemporary literature and to Tolstoy’s own

grand “Iliad”—*War and Peace*. Eikhenbaum sees Pushkin’s “Prisoner” as the “contemporary literature” that Tolstoy “demonstratively wrote against.” He does not mention Xavier de Maistre’s “Les prisonniers du Caucase” in his study (65-75).

12. Even today “The Prisoner of the Caucasus” is recommended reading in Russian schools for ages twelve to sixteen (grades five through nine) (*Программно-методические материалы*).

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