Race, Ethnicity, and Narrative in the Russian/Soviet Empire

This is the course blog for "Race, Ethnicity, and Narrative."

The Railway, continued.…

Posted on March 4, 2012 by Rebecca Stanton

We had a really productive discussion of this delightful novel on Thursday. Keep thinking about the following themes/issues in particular:

Translation. Like Sadulaev (*I Am A Chechen!*) and Iskander (*Sandro of Chegem*), Ismailov is writing in Russian for a Russian audience. How does this shape the (implied/imagined) reception of his novel? Take note of places in the narrative where language is an issue (we mentioned several of these on Thursday). How do these episodes play out? What role does language play in the text?

The two narrative strands. How does the relationship between the story of "the boy" (italicized text) and the tales of the named characters (roman text) work? What does the italicized narrative add to the novel? What characterizes each of these narrative strands?

Magical realism? In her book on Aitmatov and Iskander, Erika Haber describes "magical realism" as "a trend or mode" in literature that "contains an element of magic that cannot be explained away rationally or dismissed as a dream or hallucination. Furthermore, the magic exists within reality as we know or recognize it . . . . Most importantly, the blend of the magic and the real occurs in such a way that neither dominates nor subordinates the other. Instead, there exists a constant dialectical struggle between the two opposing ontologies, which subverts the possibility of universal truth or any kind of absolute reality." She notes that the project of a magical realist text usually involves "delineating, examining, and transgressing" "political, cultural, geographical, and generic boundaries," and that among its favorite techniques are "defamiliarization" (*ostranenie*) and "metafiction" ("by flaunting the fictionality of their texts, magical realists reject 'the discourse of realism as the only way of depicting the world'"). Finally, she suggests that "the manipulation of history and historical events

represents a favorite domain for magical realism because of its ability to present history from different, noncentrist perspectives and voices. In this way, magical realism gives a voice to minority, nonprivileged, or nonruling cultures or nations." This last point is the reason the recognition and study of magical realism is so closely linked to the postcolonial strand of critical theory, and why the genre is so frequently identified with Latin America.

Does this definition of magical realism fit Ismailov's text? What further insights might we gain from including or excluding *The Railway* from the category of "magical realism," as described by Haber?

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5 Responses to *The Railway, continued….*

Emily T[redacted] *says:*
March 5, 2012 at 11:22 pm

This doesn't actually speak to any of the questions Professor Stanton raises, but, in this section, I noticed a first-person narrator who slips in and out. Is this out of the Russian tradition of the "chatty" or "unreliable narrator" (see: Eugene/Evgeny Onegin, Demons, The Master and Margarita, etc.)? Why does this narrator appear so infrequently, and why does he (she?) show up when he does? Who is this person, and where is he in relation to the text? What benefit to we gain by having this narrator when we do?

Reply

Leah[redacted] *says:*
March 6, 2012 at 12:39 am

1. As we have discussed in class, Ismailov is concerned with the power of language. In the beginning of the reading for today, Oyimcha reflects on her life: "Yes, life turned out this way and how else could it have turned? Words can turn out other ways, words can be replayed and replied, relayed and re-lied, rehearsed and re-versed…" (94). That is to say, words have a malleable, elastic quality, that creates more possibilities than can exist in life. However, "life happens in words… what is this 'right' or 'wrong' outside of words?" (94). Ismailov suggests, through the consciousness of this narrator, that life—the motives and actions of all people—are entirely grounded in these elusive, shifting words. This connection between life and the spoken or written word persists—for example, in the Boy's memory of his grandmother reading One Thousand and One Arabian Nights, the "book was as endless as life itself" (132).

2. In terms of the weaving narrative strands of the novel (that is, the standard type and the italicized sections): like the stories of Sevinch and Soginch, whose lives "had been like the two rails of a single track, tied inseparably together and running in close parallel" (187), so do these strands seem to fit into one another. They do seem to run closer together as the narrative progresses—the "boy" section on pages 164-165 fits exactly into the chronology of the outer frame, and does not merit its own chapter heading. Moreover, sentences or words in italics have begun to creep into the non-italicized sections, for instance, "Ezrael still didn't understand her" (178), a sentence which seems strange, given italics for emphasis. Is this an editorial mistake, intentional authorial choice, or the boy's narrative peeking through?

Reply

Holly [redacted] *says:*
March 6, 2012 at 9:52 am

"Gilas had no quarrel with the first – European – breed of gypsy, especially after it emerged that, in spite of their centuries of wandering, these gypsies had the same words as Uzbeks to designate the fundamentals of life: dushman and nomus: 'enemy' and 'conscience'" (136).

This emphasizes the importance of language, and the importance of shared language in forging bonds or achieving some understanding between different peoples. I think that this point is made in a particularly subtle way here, since you're more likely to be distracted by the intriguing idea that 'enemy' and 'conscience' could be "the fundamentals of life" for a group of people. (Actually, it's a little unclear for whom these terms designate the fundamentals of life.) In terms of Prof. Stanton's question about translation, though, this flash of detail suggests that words — untranslated — play an important role in the identity, or the value-system, of Gilas' population. Shared words become equally important as shared concepts.

Reply

Emily K[redacted] *says:*
March 7, 2012 at 9:10 pm

As I finished the book I couldn't help but notice how many of the characters in the novel are either blind, deaf, mute or in some way physically incapacitated. In the very first chapter of the novel we are introduced to four characters. Umarali who is "so fat he had been pronounced unfit to fight", Tolib-Butcher who is "so thin that…he had been entrusted with…the meat rations", Boikush who is "half-blind" and Kuchkar-Cheka who is "deaf in one ear". Through the course of the novel we met a colorful cast of characters, most of whom are "blind", "half blind", "one-eyed", "wall-eyed", "one-armed", "deaf" , "pock-marked", "albino", etc. The list of crippled epithets seems endless. In many cases, as in the story of Sevinch and Soginch, the musicians who are each deaf in one ear, these physical defects service the novel's particular brand of ironic, magical humor. In Hoomer's case, it harkens

back to the literary trope of blindness as a marker of wisdom or creative genius. Considering Haber's argument that magical realist texts "subvert the possibility of a universal truth", one might suppose that the various physical incapacities of the Gilas ensemble are meant to mirror the narrative form itself. That is to say, the characters' physicalities are as incomplete and fragmented as Hoomer's text of "The Railway". Only by threading together the disparate stories and voices of this large cast of people do we arrive at a complete novel.

Reply

Leah [redacted] *says:*
March 7, 2012 at 10:53 pm

How can we connect the various threads of the narrative, especially given the knowledge of Hoomer's notebooks, and the narrator's increasingly self-conscious presence in the final chapters of the novel? What should we make of the profusion of chroniclers? These chroniclers appear not only after the revelation of Hoomer's works, but throughout the narrative—for instance, Zangi-Bobo, who "devoted his life not so much as to trading nasvoy as to gathering words" (205). The same Zangi-Bobo listens to Persian, with its "chains of trailing adjectives that twirled into infinity like the motifs on a carpet" (208); that is, he is attracted to a profusion of words. It seems that the desire to tell plays a central role in the novel. Our narrator prefaces his account of Hoomer with the claim, "I have no choice but to tell you. Otherwise, none of this makes any sense at all" (221). What is so urgent about this element of the story? The narrator appears to fumble in his recounting: "I have lost track of my thought. Let me start again" (247). The narrative becomes increasingly fragmented; here, incomplete snatches of stories, pieces salvaged from the fire (245), drift in and out. Hoomer's forgotten bag of calico papers failing to catch the flame (264) recalls Bulgakov's famous statement that manuscripts don't burn. The final scenes, which take place at the boy's circumcision, can be read as as ones of convergence—what implications does this have for the narrative? If "the story of Hoomer and the railway line…turned out to be the purest invention" (243), then which, if any sources, are credible? At the end of the novel, what separates Hoomer from the Boy from the narrator of The Railway?

P.S. Emily K, I really like your comment!!

Reply