

WORKS OF RUSSIAN LITERATURE AS COMMENTARY ON JAAN KROSS'S NOVELLA "MICHELSON'S MATRICULATION"*

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Jaan Kross's novella "Michelson's Matriculation" was written in 1970 and included in the collection "Under Clio's Gaze" ("Klio silma all"), published in 1972. With the exception of the novella "Two Lost Sheets of Paper", the collection presents a unified conceptual field; in each of the collection's remaining three works the author constructs and analyzes a conflict in the life of a successful person representative of the Estonian people.

Kross delves into the relationship between idealism and practicality, the limits of internal compromise with power, compromise between honor and duty, and the impossibility of adhering to a single, immutable moral code. This central ethical conflict is reinterpreted in each novella. Kross reveals a variety of concepts by placing different characters from different times in various ethically ambiguous situations while simultaneously creating a polyphonic composition from the characters' monologues.

This article discusses the ideological structure of "Michelson's Matriculation" from a new, intertextual point of view¹, via the detection and interpretation in Kross's novella of the "code" of Russian literature.

The novella's protagonist is Johannes/Juhann von Michelson, or Ivan Ivanovich Michelson, a Major General from, per Kross's conceptualization, an

* The article was written under the research theme TFLGR 0469 "Reception of Russian Literature in Estonia in the 20th Century: from the Interpretation to Translation". First version was published in Russian: Блоковский сборник, XVIII. Тарту, 2010. С. 217–228.

¹ Regarding "Michelson's Matriculation", critics focus on the overall conceptual layers of the text, problems, and fundamental plot moves (see, for example, the following articles: *Kaplinski, J.* "Jaan Krossi teine tulemine"; *Ivask, I.* "Jaan Kross: Eesti kultuuriruumi kroonik ehk Mitmepõllupidaja Klio silma all" [Metamorfiline Kross]). The novella appears never to have been analyzed from a literary perspective.

Estonian peasant family, who has achieved a brilliant military career that began with the suppression of the Pugachev rebellion. Michelson, former valet to the Baltic German Baron Joachim von Rosen, is travelling to Revel with his Estonian orderly and his parents, Estonian peasants, on the occasion of his personal matriculation; that is, the inclusion of his name in the book of lineage of Estland hereditary nobility. The characters' reflections on this event and on the identity and actions of Michelson form the texture of the story.

The main moral conflict of the novella is expressed via maternal questions:

<...> how was it after all with my Juhan's great victory over that very cursed Robber? <...> Did not my Juhan, who won victory for the gentlemen in that war, did not he stand in that war on the wrong side? <...> what would happen if it really came to it, and if the Empress really sent our Juhan here to put down an uprising of the people? <...> But answer me in all honesty: are your hands clean in your life and your affairs, is everything in order? [Имматрикуляция: 132–134].

The ideological structure of the novella is comprised of the dichotomy between moral duty and military honor, and reflections on how (and whether it's possible) to fulfill one's duty while maintaining personal dignity and respect in one's own eyes and the eyes of others, all without denying one's roots.

In his introduction to the novella, Kross indicates that his source of information about the matriculation of Michelson was the notes of Friedrich Russov in the feuilleton section of "Revalsche Zeitung". Kross adds his own conflict-producing detail to the information — that Michelson brings his parents, Estonian peasants, to the matriculation ceremony in Revel. The narrative ends with a section entitled "Explanations for those for whom commentary gives particular pleasure".

The first part of the commentary provides translations of foreign language phrases, explains historical facts and local place names characterized by historical figures. The second part contains a short reference to Pushkin's "The History of the Pugachev Rebellion", information about Count Karl Friedrich Toll and his letter to Pushkin, and concludes with a letter from Pushkin to Toll written just before his fatal duel, dated January 26, 1837. These sources form a historical and literary "code", a lens through which the reader is invited to comprehend the novella's story and issues.

Kross has used Russian literature in other compositions as a code to indicate additional overtones of meaning. Here are two examples. The first is from the novel "Professor Martens' Departure". Martens, a renowned attorney and specialist in international law, while sitting in the waiting room of Chancellor Alexander Mikhailovich Gorchakov, recalls an epistle from Pushkin to Gorcha-

kov. Later, Kross quotes verses from Pushkin that shape Martens' opinion (and the reader's) about the Chancellor's character. The second example is from the novella "Two Lost Sheets of Paper", in which a student arrives in St. Petersburg and places his notes in a basket that disappears during the flood of November 6, 1824. Not historical documents, but passages from "The Bronze Horseman", illustrate the well-known disaster. For Kross, Pushkin's text is a historical source, and Pushkin's point of view becomes an authoritative prism through which historical facts and figures are evaluated.

In "Explanations for those for whom commentary gives particular pleasure", Kross indicates one source for "Michelson's Matriculation": "Here, I think, is the most appropriate place to introduce the reader to one document not previously referred to concerning the protagonist. As you know, A. S. Pushkin's 'The History of the Pugachev Rebellion' was released in 1834". Thus the author provokes the curious reader to look up the work by Pushkin and explore the correlation of these two texts in their views about Michelson's character. "The History of the Pugachev Rebellion" and Friedrich Russov's notes in the feuilleton section of "Revalsche Zeitung" are equally historical sources; however, it is Pushkin's text that is included in the novella. Kross presents a series of facts that refer the reader to "The History of the Pugachev Rebellion". The novel mentions General Alexander Ilyich Bibikov and Count Pyotr Ivanovich Panin, reflects on military tactics, and recalls military maneuvers and events (such as the submission of Michelson's corps to Generalissimo Alexander Vasilyevich Suvorov). From a conceptual point of view, the novella's setting is important, as it is a creative retelling (in the form of the protagonist's monologue) of Pushkin's apology of Michelson:

Kross's Text:

Clouds like the thick, swirling smoke of artillery fire <...> Exactly like the fire in Kazan. Like that time, when they said that I purposefully gave Pugachev time to rob the city fully, so that there would be more booty to steal from him. The mindset of sycophants... [Имматрикуляция: 80].

Pushkin's Text:

History must refute the slander which has been frivolously repeated by Society: they affirm that Michelson could have predicted the taking of Kazan, but that he deliberately gave the rebels time to rob the city, so that he could, in turn, profit richly from the booty, preferred over any kind of glory, honors or imperial rewards that awaited the savior of Kazan and the suppressor of the uprising! [Пушкин: IX (1), 67].

The reference to Pushkin's work is not dictated by the author's need to establish an authentic and convincing historical backdrop for the novella. In Pushkin's mind, the main role of the historian is to restore the reputation and honor of the protagonist. This explains one of the peculiarities of the composition

of Kross's commentary: the reason that Pushkin's pre-duel letter to Toll is reproduced at the end of the novella. Pushkin is the undeniable authority in the laws of honor, who spoke against slander and insults coming from a foreigner. In the passage cited above, Pushkin introduces the key theme for Kross: the standing of one man against society as affirmation and defense of personal dignity against "foreign" injustice.

The compositions of literary Russians, predominantly by Pushkin, but also by Gavriila Romanovich Derzhavin, reveal underlying meanings in one of the central scenes of the novella: Michelson's meeting with Pugachev. The fact of this meeting is not mentioned in "The History of the Pugachev Rebellion". In his text, Pushkin relates with regret that there was one source unavailable to him, of which Kross could take advantage — "Derzhavin's Notes". In his letter to Pushkin (not one presented in the novella by Kross), Count Toll quotes Derzhavin from the poem "My Idol": "Achievements ripen in the coffin". This indicates that Derzhavin's texts were probably in Kross's field of vision as he worked on "Michelson's Matriculation". "Derzhavin's Notes" in particular confirm the fact of the possible meeting between Michelson and Pugachev:

Count <Panin>, saying nothing, asked proudly, "Did he see Pugachev?" Derzhavin answered respectfully, "He saw him on horseback under Petrovsky Bridge". The Count, turning to Michelson, said: "Order Emelka to be brought in". After a few minutes the Imposter was presented, with heavy chains around his hands and feet, in a greasy, shabby, wretched wide coat. Upon arriving, he fell to his knees before the Count <...> The Count asked, "Are you healthy, Emelka?" "I don't sleep at night, I cry all the time, Your Excellency the Count". "Trust in the mercy of the Empress". And with that word he ordered that he <Pugachev> be taken back to where he was held [Державин: 67–68].

Kross departs from documented facts in constructing key scenes of "Michelson's Matriculation". However, it is not Derzhavin's text, but "The History of the Pugachev Rebellion" that is pertinent in the fictional Michelson's recollection of the meeting between Panin and Pugachev, since the references to Pushkin's composition and the underscoring in the "Explanations" of his status as a source of information shape and direct the reader's perception. From Pushkin:

Pugachev was brought directly to Count Panin in the courtyard <...> "How did you, thief, dare to call yourself Emperor?" continued Panin. "I am not a raven <ворон>", protested Pugachev, playing with words and speaking metaphorically, as was his habit. "I am but a little crow <вороненок>, for a raven can also fly" <...> Panin, noticing that Pugachev's audacity impressed the people crowding near the courtyard, struck the imposter on the face, drawing blood, and tore out a tuft of his beard [Пушкин: IX (1), 78].

The fundamental characteristics of the meeting between the Count and the imposter are mutual lack of understanding and respect for each other and Panin's aggressive behavior aimed at humiliating Pugachev's personal dignity. The rhetorical aspect of their dialogue is particularly significant from both the ideological and the historical and literary perspectives. Panin expresses resentment; Pugachev either loses courage (in Derzhavin's version) or defends himself by responding impertinently (in Pushkin's version) [Гузаиров 2010: 142–145]. On the road to Revel in Kross's novella, Michelson recalls the dialogue he had with the robber:

I asked him, "Emelyan, do you know me?" "No. Who are you, Your Excellency?" "I am Michelson". He started. Paled. Lowered his gaze. He didn't say a word. Then he looked up. For a minute we looked at each other. He didn't praise my military wisdom. Not right to my face, not like he praised Panin's wisdom to him. Because he was honest with me. Out of respect. He didn't say anything. And I was silent [Имматрикуляция: 106].

An absence of insults, mutual understanding, and acknowledgement of one another — these are the inherent features of the characters' meeting in the novella. Kross, by combining Pushkin's text with his own scene, contrasts Panin and Michelson as representatives of two kinds of behavior: that based on humiliation and that based on respect of moral dignity. Pushkin's Panin fulfills his prescribed duty to the Empress, and his actions are motivated by desire for glory. He seeks self-respect through the suppression and humiliation of another. Kross's Michelson, though a brutal warrior who honestly fulfills the duty given to him, nonetheless needs internal self-respect, and this dictates the logic of his behavior, both in his meeting with Pugachev, and in the midst of a military confrontation:

But (whatever anyone might say), while fighting against Pugachev, I desired that even he — hahaha — that even he would feel respect for me. And I not only won victory over him, but also gained his respect. That I know. (I admit, galloping at full speed in the dark, in one elusive moment, I suddenly felt that my self-respect was still not the way I would have liked it...). The respect of Pugachev. Yes. That I know <...> If anyone, anyone in the whole empire has business with him, then that person is me! And he <Pugachev> looked at me <...> **But his face looked nothing like my father's.** Thank God... [Ibid: 105–106].

The second to last sentence, regarding Pugachev and Michelson's father, is an allusion to Pushkin's "The Captain's Daughter" (a donated fur coat and a snowstorm appear later in the novella, obvious markers of Pugachev's first meeting with Grinyov). The reference to "The Captain's Daughter" allows one to delve

deeper into the question of why Michelson seeks Pugachev's respect. Pushkin's scene, which depicts the presenting of the rabbit skin jacket, precedes Grinyov's dream:

Instead of my father, I see that a man with a black beard lies in the bed, looking at me merrily. At a loss, I turned to my mother, saying to her, "What does this mean? This isn't Father. And why on earth should I ask a blessing of this fellow?" [Пушкин: VIII, 289].

Grinyov's gratitude toward the coachman-Pugachev and honorable behavior with the imposter² rescue first Grinyov himself, and then his fiancé. Grinyov's understanding of duty and honor arouse respect in Pugachev toward him. Each understands the impossibility for the other to follow any other moral standard.

The conflict in the novella is increased due to the fact that both Pugachev and Michelson (as Kross presents him) come from the peasant class. Michelson (in contrast to Grinyov) himself seeks respect from Pugachev, not to gain admission of defeat by his military achievements, but for his own self-respect, to make heartfelt peace with himself, and to find the answer to the haunting question posed by his mother: is he fighting on the right side? Duty (his oath to the Empress) determined his choice, but Michelson needs Pugachev's respect as evidence of understanding of his "honor" and the conditionality of his actions (for which the hereditary nobleman Grinyov feels no need).

Turning now to the final occurrence in Michelson and Pugachev's meeting:

The two "bastards" looked one another in the eye. For a long time. For so long that Runich coughed. Runich was a hereditary nobleman and in the near future would be a senator. I turned away. I stepped away and began to study the rivet studded iron doors. I heard how Emelka said to the guard in an undertone, "I should have asked him for his fur coat. After all, he took more of them than he can wear". Had he asked me directly, I would have sent him a **fur coat**. Brrrr! The **snowstorm had blown up** again [Имматрикуляция: 106–107].

This passage is built on the ideological pairing and creative reinterpretation of the following situation from Pushkin's "The Captain's Daughter": "I was, however, vexed that I could not thank the man who helped me out of, if not serious trouble, then at least a very unpleasant situation <... > 'Give him my rabbit skin jacket'" [Пушкин: VIII, 291].

² Grinyov declares to Pugachev: "I am a nobleman by nature, I am sworn to the reigning Empress: I cannot serve you <... > You yourself know that this isn't my will: they ordered me to go against you. I'll go, there's nothing else to be done' <... > My honesty amazed Pugachev" [Пушкин: VIII, 332–333].

It is known that Grinyov and Pugachev's relationship in "The Captain's Daughter" is built upon universal Christian laws, and Pushkin's characters are capable of following this behavioral model because, in part, each occupies from the very beginning his own "right" (and only possible) side. Kross underscores the impossibility for Michelson and Pugachev of achieving Pushkin's moral principles, (the fur coat remains ungifted). Michelson's submission, though he is of peasant roots, to the hereditary nobleman Runich, his choice of the "alien", incorrect side — this is what causes the breakdown of contact based on trust, gratitude, and mutual understanding.

The scene of the meeting with Pugachev is contrasted with the events at Michelson's matriculation ceremony, which has become, in the words of the protagonist, "a dubious triumph". The appearance of Michelson's peasant-class parents and Michelson's demand that respect be shown to him and his mother and father by the hereditary Baltic German nobility is the former servant's revenge. Michelson's actions in Kross's novella are motivated by ideas of what makes up a true gentleman's honor.

Recall that the end of the last chapter is from Pushkin's unfinished work, "The Guests Went to the Dacha", from the discussion of a Russian representative of the "noble blacks" with a Spanish hereditary nobleman:

We are so practical-minded that we stand on our knees before the accident of the moment, before success and before... well, in any case, no fascination with antiquity, no gratitude for past accomplishments, no respect for moral virtues exists among us <...> Mark my word, a lack of respect for one's forefathers is a fundamental indication of barbarity and immorality [Пушкин: VIII, 42].

This codex of Pushkin explains Kross's insertion of the historically impossible fact of the presence of Michelson's lower-class parents at the matriculation. In describing the historically impossible situation and thereby emphasizing the key theme of respect for one's roots, the author underscores the fact that Michelson, having suffered internal conflict and compromise with himself, is guided throughout the novella by his understanding of the laws of "honor" (although his actions may be utterly unacceptable to others).

Here arises the question of the purpose of Kross's inclusion of Pushkin's pre-duel letter to Toll. The figure of Count Toll appears once in the novel, at the reception for Michelson's matriculation:

Jakob walks ahead. Father and Mother follow behind him. I come last. An adjutant, Lieutenant von Toll, joins us in the corridor [Имматрикуляция: 110].

From Toll's letter to Pushkin, which is not cited by Kross, but which he retells in part in a footnote, it is clear that the Count

had the personal trust of General Michelson <...> He <Michelson> in conversations with me often told of his actions against Pugachev, and bitterly complained about the intrigues with which they wanted to overshadow his service [Пушкин: VIII, 219].

The absence of Toll's letter to Pushkin in the novella is marked; it provides for a different perspective on Pushkin's reply: not a documentary reading, but an artistic one, conceptually linked to Kross's novella. From Pushkin's letter:

I was no less pleased to hear your Excellency's opinion of Michelson, too much forgotten by us. His services were eclipsed by slander <...> I regret that I was unable to include a few lines of your letter in my book for the complete justification of the honored soldier [Ibid: 224].

In Kross's text, Pushkin's answer sounds like an ethical assessment interwoven in a complete, ideal "History". Pushkin, on the eve of a duel (to settle a matter of honor), becomes the moral authority Kross uses to voice two essential ideas: first, that any deed based on the idea of "honor" is worthy of respect (regardless of which side is chosen — thus the moral conflict of Kross's Michelson resolves itself); and second, that the writer's task is to depict the conflict between "one's own" and "others'" worlds, and to restore the reputation and historical memory of a figure worthy of respect.

Russian literature, and Pushkin's writings in particular, are relevant and important to Jaan Kross from both a creative and an ideological point of view, and serve as a historical and literary code and as commentary to his text. The intertextual analysis of the novella "Michelson's Matriculation" presented here allows conclusions to be drawn regarding the compositional and conceptual structure of the text. The author's "Explanations" are an integral part of the text as a whole, and interact in complex ways with the main narrative text: they introduce another perspective, reveal the hidden meaning of various scenes, introduce additional, new historical and cultural stories (such as Pushkin's duel) — all of which is inherent in Pushkin's notes to "The History of the Pugachev Rebellion" [Гузайров].

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