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The Pushkin museum is falling down. Literature, language and civilization after 2022.

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Thank you for organizing this seminar, I'm very happy to be talking today alongside with Ilya Guerasimov, a well-known and very respected figure in our field.

My talk will concentrate on the high politization of language and literature in the context of the war, which I have studied in my book *Faut-il brûler Pouchkine?*, a book which looks back on the strong changes that have occurred since 2022, basically transforming our peaceful life of specialist of Russian classics in a more active interrogation about the way literature interacts, reflects or foreshadows the ideological context in which it is situated. The general context can be summed up by a parody of one of David Lodge's book: The Pushkin museum is falling down. This parody is supposed to convey the idea of shock that has arisen after the full-scale invasion, that a stable and robust building of at the same time habitus of culture and academic knowledge was crumbling down – the most famous examples being the Pushkinopad movement, or statements by Ukrainian intellectuals Volodymyr Yermolenko or Oksana Zabuzhko.

We can identify a threefold movement in this trend: firstly, it tends to highlight the centrality of the discourse of re-examination of Russian culture. Culture is the very focus of the post-2022 investigation and this investigation seems to lead only to two conclusions: a full-scale accusation or a full-scale acquittal. For example, a debate arose about whether the Russian soldiers who had committed war crimes had read Tolstoy and Dostoevsky: some critics like Zabuzhko explained that the soldiers were violent because they had read the classics; other thought that the problem was that Russian soldiers had not read the classics, otherwise they would not be violent: in every case, culture is at the center of attention and it is given an extremely strong agency. Second mouvement, the global dimension this investigation has taken, which has tended to bring to the fore non-Russian Slavic perspectives on the Russian canon – which had previously been rather marginalized – such as those of Ukrainian intellectuals, but also other European critics as the Slovak Adam Bzoch for example. Finally, this

globalization contributes to a polarization – which at first glance quite predictable – between a lot of Russian specialists or intellectuals and non Russian intellectuals. The debate has indeed taken a very agonistic dimension, with the intellectual field severed between pros and contras, especially along a national cleavage (if you're Russian or you're Ukrainian, you will not think the same thing, you will not even use the same words to describe it - “katastrofa” for the Russians against “full-scale war” for the Ukrainian side).

My point is not to say who's right or wrong but to acknowledge the rupture that it has been in the field and the extent of such as cleavage. I'm referring to a real situation at a conference where we did not see the same thing in a picture. There is a new Rorschach test of the Slavist – what do you see in such a picture? Do you see the annihilation of culture and history, the clash of civilizations and nations, or, in a decolonial perspective, the rewriting of history by others, marginalized voices, talking about “their” Pushkin in a very idiosyncratic way?

The question is : why does it have to be either A or B? And why does it have to be a choice between nations? One answer is that it is typical of cultural processes at large: after all, as Tiphaine Samoyault recently wrote, “every culture is a cancel culture” : if you believe that there is a Ukrainian culture, then you must believe that Russian culture should decrease in status and legitimacy – we all know that exceptionality is not something that you share, but neither is simple individuality: this atmosphere of high conflictuality is what happens when everybody wants to be special (it's a very dostoesvian theme, by the way).

But there is also another answer, incorporating a more special approach on the local context and its history. The question is the link between culture (especially literature) and civilisation in the Slavic space (I'm fully aware I'm using a very imprecise geographical and cultural term). The connection established by the Romantics (and especially Johann Gottfried von Herder) in the 19th century between culture and civilisation meant also that the two of them were giving each other legitimacy – civilisation making culture more visible and prevalent in a society because it was the instrument through which the presence of a distinct nation could be evidenced; culture making civilisation more civilized by the contact with art and artworks and placing it, however distinctive it might be, among the concert of the nations on an equal foot with the others. Culture was described, in the early stage of

Romanticism at least, as an instrument of cultural self-affirmation that would potentially prevent conflict.

The problem is that in the case of Russia, this model of self-affirmation of nations through culture has been twisted, and twisted inside the literary sphere. We can think about the monuments to Pushkin, but also why they became popular: through the celebrated speech of Dostoevsky, which reversed the Romantic paradigm of seeking evidence of civilisation in culture. You probably know that one day before Dostoevsky spoke, Turgenev was asked to pronounce a speech and he actually adopted a very traditional post-Herderian perspective, focusing on the affirmation of a nation through culture: to be a nation you have to have a national poet, someone who speaks to everyone inside and outside of your country – for Turgenev, it was not the case with Pushkin, while it was the case with Dante or Shakespeare. Dostoevsky was infuriated with the idea of not recognizing Pushkin as a genius (Dostoevsky's beloved mother died at the same time Pushkin died, and to Dostoevsky there has always been something very intimate in the relationships with Pushkin), but he was also convinced that you could get more than what Turgenev *through* your national poet. In his speech, Dostoevsky went far beyond this rather benign paradigm of evidence of civilisation through culture and tried to show how culture mirrors and anticipates a civilization's fate: he read Pushkin's own literary itinerary, from the Byronic pilgrim Aleko to the true Russian maiden heart Tatiana turning away from the Romantic rogue, as a foreshadowing of Russia's own destiny, going from absorption of European influences towards a model of its own relying mainly on irony of Europe, and then sending back to them their own influences in an unrecognizable form. Herder's idea was that culture in general had a kind of *otzyvchivost'*, it is the repository of civilisation; for Dostoevsky, the responsiveness of Russian culture is a *distinct* civilisational sign, which will put it in a place of domination and not only coexistence among nations. It is a very strong gesture because the focus here is not regaining the sense of being a nation and defining both a cultural space and a set of national borders, it is a gesture that echoes the very basic definition of Empire, a state without borders, which can expand outside its natural or legitimate settings. It is a very different approach: here, you don't want to regain a territory, but to legitimate expansion and absorption of the other (Dostoevsky uses the term "perevoploshchenie", which conveys this idea of going beyond what is yours and making it yours by absorption, without

limits between you and the other). And this goes way beyond what is usually expected of culture: for Dostoevsky, culture does not just reflect, first it anticipates political trajectories (what Pushkin does in Dostoevsky's mind, but you could also think about the fate of the notion of "narodnost" for example, which appeared in a literary context through Orest Somov before becoming one of the terms of Uvarov's famous slogan) and then it consolidates them (what Dostoevsky does by his speech and what the Russian state will do by erecting Pushkin monuments all over the territory). The specific Russian context creates the conditions of a specially agonistic clash where cultural objects consolidates national and imperial antagonisms. And in this context of polarity, it means that if you concentrate your attention towards one sphere, you will look away from the other – you're again in a "A or B" scheme, a *pro or contra* model. One can think of André Markowicz's book *What if Ukraine liberated Russia?* which acts as a defense of the canon, shifting the point of view from Ukraine towards Russian; or of Mikhail Chichkin who defends Pushkin's perception of the Polish insurgents of the 1830's but without taking the Polish point of view in account at all.

This is a very strong methodological pitfall: how do you get the full picture in this context of "A or B" model? This situation is particularly difficult in the French academic context because our conception of nationhood also relies on the idea that we believe in a distinct mission for culture, which makes us less sensitive to the pitfalls of such a strong link between culture and civilization. It is also very perilous because, by contrast with other Academic traditions such as German scholars for example, in France you cannot be a specialist of several Eastern European countries – which means you do not naturally have a fuller view.

How do you come out of this national prism? To me it is very important to normalize the fact that the two dimensions can be integrated without choosing from one of them and I can give two examples of ways out: the contemporary current counterfactual histories of Russian literature and what I call the contestual paradigm of literary history.

The French critic Pierre Bayard has developed a kind of literary history which he call "quantic criticism", which incorporates what might have been: in the quantic theory, something can be there and not there at the same time, dead and alive (Schrödinger's cat) because you have several possible worlds in the same reality, which exists at the same time. It seems very abstract but actually this counterfactual mode has been very prevalent in the post-2022 context.

It is a point of contact between antagonistic national positions, as everyone uses it, and it is also a way of encouraging a larger historical view incorporating alternative versions of history. The counterfactual mode was key to make tangible the epistemic injustice that Ukraine endured by imagining what the Ukrainian canon might have been (O. Khromeychuk : it is not that we don't know Ukrainian artists, it is that they do not exist because they were suppressed at an early stage) – it gives a way out because it conveys the idea that “nation” is not what it is, but what it could have been: it also incorporates an invisible dimension that you have to be attentive too and it forces you to have a more moving and imaginary view of the canon – which is a way of making the idea of Nation more relative, it shows that it is set on representations and not fixed entities. But it was also extremely present on the Russian “side”, especially among defenders of the Russian canon (I just quoted Markowicz and Chichkin, who imagines a “zagovor klassikov” in which all the great names of the Russian classics would have perished by the hand of Stalin or be inactivity in Vladimir Putin's Russia). What interests me here is not the comfort that you might gain by imagining a more liberal Russia or a Russia where Pushkin and Tolstoy would come back to say “milost' k padshim” or “Ne mogu molchat” : it is also a very interesting laboratory to study the contemporary uses of culture and the faith in classical culture. In the theory of possible worlds, it is often noted that when you imagine a possible world, it means that all the figures from the normal world that you displace change entirely. The Pushkin living today in a liberal Russia could not by any means be the same as the Pushkin who existed in imperial Russia (this is a point famously made by Saul Kripke against the theory of possible worlds). But counterfactual histories display a strong permanence of the Russian classics: they are supposed to be what is expected of them, beyond space and time. Russian or Ukrainian possible worlds tell us that it cannot be otherwise, that culture will repeat itself nevertheless, beyond the concrete realization of the “nation”, which is a very interesting field of research.

Another way out is to accept to step away from context a bit, with what I called contestual history. A usual reaction when accusations arise against a deceased and especially a classical writer is to remind readers that times were different then. It is not specific to contemporary Russia, it is also the usual response to protect authors accused of being misogynistic or anti-Semites etc. And it is true: there is a context – but it is not a reason why we shouldn't be shocked now. Besides, presenting literature in its original context or even

literature as context as Andrei Zorin does has methodological limitations in the current state of affairs. First, as I said, the history of Russian literature is not only a history of mirroring a political context, it is also a story of how literature has anticipated political trajectories, in compliance with the Romantic programme of the national author who's supposed to show the way (not only messianic but conscience of the mess). Second, the context we are referring to for the Russian classics is a context of hierarchy and domination and the risk is that the literary history that we construct through a contextual history will replicate and reiterate this state of domination and hence make the marginal voices less audible. On the contrary, incorporating cases of friction, what I call a contestual history, can bring to the fore these relationships of power instead of erasing them. I will take the case of Zabuzhko's article "Reading the Russian classics after Bucha", where she speaks about "dostoevskism" – she can be accused of methodological reduction of the political corpus of Dostoevsky's texts to the literary one, in a breach with the idea of the "two Dostoevskys". But she actually does not refer to the political corpus but to the novels, and mentions that she is actually taking back Milan Kundera's argument against Iossif Brodsky in 1985. The idea is that the genealogy of violence concerning Dostoevsky is in the novels, because they rely on feelings which legitimates every act of unrestrained violence against anyone – by focusing only on the perpetrator, Dostoevsky erases the victims. There is a strong echo of Kundera's own demonstration, a demonstration that actually lost the battle after Brodsky answered that he was wrong. Her reading is not anhistorical, reading Dostoevsky through Bucha, but it is a way of inscribing her own view in a genealogy of dissent which dates back to Kundera and were not fully heard until then.