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Strangers on the Train, or "The Black Student"

For many Russian readers the encounter with a Black American student described in Vladimir Bogoraz-Tan's story must have been a truly surprising, revelatory event. Despite the comparatively close attention given to black Americans in the Russian press during the second half of the nineteenth century, there are actually very few instances of travel writing that describe the life and achievements of members of the so-called Black intelligentsia. For that reason alone, Bogoraz-Tan's depiction of a highly intelligent, well-educated African-American deserves special attention.

Born to a poor Jewish family in a small town on the Azov Sea, Vladimir Bogaraz, best known under the literary pseudonym Tan (1865-1936), grew up reading the radical literature of his time and joined the infamous secret terrorist organization "Narodnaia volia" before even finishing high school. In an already familiar scenario, the sixteen-year-old Bogoraz was arrested and sent to Siberia in 1881, where he began to write fiction.[1] It was also in Siberia that he became interested in the language and customs of the Chukchi tribes. His ethnographic work accrued for him so much fame and interest both at home and abroad that when the American Museum of Natural History asked that he be allowed to visit America in 1899 in order to do research on the indigenous peoples of Kamchatka, Anadyr' and Chukotka, the Russian government actually allowed him to receive a foreign passport and leave Russia for a while. The two years he spent in the United States were extremely productive for Bogoraz-Tan. Not only did he gather abundant data from his ethnographic expeditions, but he also wrote a series of stories -- later collected in Vol. 5 of his *Sobranie sochinenii* [Collected Works][2] -- known as his "Amerikanskie rasskazy"

[American Tales]. He returned to Russia in 1901, but almost immediately had to flee for political reasons. This time Bogoraz-Tan settled in New York City, where he became curator for the American Museum, and produced his great works *The Chukchee* (1904–09) and *Chukchee Mythology* (1910). He also edited and published (in English) his materials from the expedition for the American Museum of Natural History. The next time Bogoraz-Tan was to go back to Russia (in 1904), it was for good. He spent the rest of his life there working as a professor of ethnology at the Petrograd University.

Much closer to Ogorodnikov's than to Machtet's narrating "I", the secondary author of the *American Tales* presents a late-nineteenth-century Russian example of the social-quotidian autobiographical self. Confident in his position of (national) *vnenakhodimost'* [outsidedness] to the collected material, this benevolent yet critical observer continues the tradition of representing the American other as a sequence of *types*, going down the "approved" list of topics of interest locked into place by the previous generation of Russian travelers to the United States. Once again, we witness the usual suspects -- American-Indians, African-Americans, women -- enter the Russian horizon of seeing and, as in the past, provoke strong emotions in the visiting self. What has changed, however, is the self-assurance with which the viewer "reads" these others "properly" and, therefore, without any fear. [3] Yet sitting comfortably in the close proximity of such *chuzhie* [strangers] does not necessarily imply respect for the other as an equal, as Bogoraz-Tan's tale "The Black Student"[4] demonstrates well.

The story begins innocently enough. On route to San Francisco, the narrator decides to get personally acquainted with one of the train porters: "I wanted to initiate a conversation with one of these peculiar [*originalnyi*] descendents of the African

wilderness whom Anglo-Saxon civilization had adapted to its own needs as house and field slaves ("The Black Student", p. 115). The stage for this forced encounter is quite familiar. As a chronotopic place (what Bakhtin also calls a "chronotopic motif"[5]), the train car provides the necessary condensed reminder of the sort of time and space, within which Russian travelers from different generations often choose to delineate their stories of inter-racial (mis)communication. It presents a safe site that the stranger can inhabit as comfortably and "naturally" as possible -- a home away from home that brings extremes of every kind together: movement and stasis; inside and outside; recognizable domesticity and adventurous foray into the unknown. The temporary excitement of such liminal existence is enhanced even further by the possibility of meeting face-to-face members of foreign communities the observing self has few other opportunities to "investigate" at some length. In that respect Bogoraz-Tan's story does not offer any surprises. Not only does the narrator proclaim right away his interest in the black "subject", but he also quite openly recycles the conclusions and language of earlier accounts of similar travel encounters. Let us recall, for example, that Ogorodnikov also referred to the porter he brushed up against under identical circumstances as "*originalnyi*" [original], and underscored what he perceived to be the black man's still very close connection to a life of savagery, while ostensibly focusing on the African-American's recent social advancement and promise for a successful future self-realization.

Vladimir Bogoraz-Tan's autobiographical narrator goes even further in his initial attempts to delineate this particular racial other as a positive hero: on the night of their first serious conversation, the Russian enters the small compartment where the porter

cleans the passengers' boots and discovers him engaged in the rather unexpected act of reading a book. The exchange of questions that opens up the ensuing dialogue is indicative of the two participants' interests in and expectations of the other: "'What are you reading?' I asked, not without curiosity, indicating the book.' What would you guess that I am?' He responded to my question with a question. I had difficulty finding a reply" ("The Black Student", p. 117).

The Russian's wonder and even disbelief at the sight of the other as a literate, intelligent human being are perceived for what they are (i.e. ignorance and wrong pre-conceptions) by the black porter who will try – unsuccessfully -- to change them to his advantage in the remainder of the story. An extended effort at a reply to the question "Who is he?" the tale as a whole records the struggle between the African-American hero's need to establish his unfinalizable uniqueness, and the Russian narrator's endeavors to impose a pre-given form on him. (All he can think of in response to the porter's query is "the little Dahomian prince in Daudet's celebrated novel *Jack*" ["The Black Student", p. 117]). To put it differently, the black *character* is forced into a *type* by the social-quotidian authorial self in this travel tale. Let us turn now briefly to the possible meaning and effects of such author-hero struggles in the text in order to expand on our previous use of Bakhtinean terminology as a way of further illuminating culturally charged inter-national relationships.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, different author-hero relationships give birth to two very different kinds of heroes, which he calls *characters* and *types*. *Character* is the name he gives to "that form of the author-hero interrelationship which actualizes the task of producing the *whole* of a hero as a determinate personality. … Everything is perceived

here as a constituent in the characterization of the hero . . . everything reduces to and serves the answer to the question: *who* is he?"[6] The hero as character, therefore, is quite capable of setting something axiologically weighty over against the author. *Type*, on the other hand, "presupposes the author's superiority to the hero and the author's complete aloofness, with respect to value, from the world of the hero"[7]. The cognitive element in the author's position of *outsidedness* acquires great power here, "to the point where the author can disclose the factors which determine the hero's acts (his thoughts, feelings, etc.) causally: economic, social, psychological factors, and even physiological factors (*the artist is a physician, and the human being who is the hero—is a sick animal*)".[8]

Bakhtin's famously problematic understanding of the "firmness and authoritativeness of the type-creating author"[9] undermines the otherwise pronouncedly egalitarian basis of his early philosophical vision of the relationship between self and Other, bringing to the fore practices of authorial overpowering of the foreign hero (what we might call "narrative colonization") usually noticed and theorized by scholars of the colonial encounter in literature. As I had a chance to note before, such moments of an unexpected intersection between two otherwise very different ways of postulating interpersonal communication are especially interesting and valuable for us here because they underscore the important role that race and ethnicity play in the aesthetic formalization of even the most mutually benevolent textual encounters. In the instance under discussion at present, the artistic reification of the African-American other as *type* rather than *character* by the authorial Russian self suggests a racial (and at times even racist) delineation of difference at odds with the message of universal brotherhood and love officially transmitted on the surface.

Accordingly, nothing that the black porter says or does can make the type-creating author see him as a "bearer of the cognitive-ethical unity of a lived life"[10] that is unrepeatable, unanticipated. For instance, the particular, private pain behind the black man's family story is reported as quite common among his brethren, and hence unworthy of special attention. Even his exceptional knowledge of the geographical position and recent history of such a distant country as Russia is dismissed as an a-typical and therefore insignificant oddity:

> "Yes, I know," the Negro answered. "You had slavery, too," he reminded me, to demonstrate that the position of Russia in the civilized world was known to him.
>
> "But we abolished it," I reported.
>
> "When we did," the Negro continued,
>
> We, of course, referred not to the Negroes but to the United States in general. But surely the level of geographical knowledge of this black student was higher[11] that that of the average American man in the street ("The Black Student", p. 119).

The passage above registers well the Russian visitor's conflicted perception of the place that his interlocutor occupies in society: on the one hand, the Black student is an American, whose knowledge of the world goes beyond that "of the average American man in the street"; on the other, he is a "Negro" whose usage of the personal pronoun "we" to refer to "the United States in general" demands close attention and special explication for the projected Russian audience. Very sympathetic to the lot of the ex-

slaves in America in general, in this particular instance the narrator hastens to separate Black from White right away. The grammatical segregation (the Blacks are "they," a completely separate entity within the "we" of the American people) here soon proves to be a symptom of the very real and very serious problem of racial intolerance that implicates White Americans and Russians alike.[12]

The topic of inter-racial relations is launched by a discussion of a literary masterpiece -- Shakespeare's *Othello*. The narrator, always feeling at his most secure when given the chance to apply fossilized discursive knowledge to real-life situations, brings up the name of Desdemona with an ulterior motive in mind:

> "Which character in Shakespeare do you like best? Of the women, of course?"
>
> "Desdemona," I answered, not without a hidden motive.
>
> "So do I!" the Negro took up with enthusiasm. "Could anything be gentler and loftier?" ("The Black Student", p. 120)

The narrator's insistence on "reading" and depicting his interlocutor as a literary figure (a version of Othello) rather than a real-life human being strikes to the heart of the ethical problem behind their troubled inter-racial relationship. Bakhtin cautions against such artistic pitfalls, which turn the author into a "pretender", living and creating within a world he irresponsibly aestheticizes. The key concept here -- as it is in Bakhtin's early philosophical essays in general -- is "responsibility". By turning "subjects into mere "pretender-doubles", Bakhtin insists, the authoring self produces nothing more than a "document without signature, obligating no one and obliged to nothing". Signing one's

acts, as Morson and Emerson also point out, is "the first step toward the truth of any situation"[13], a crucial prerequisite for an ethical representation of a character. By letting himself be taken over by the abstract literariness of an existing type, the Russian visitor fails completely in his attempt to respond morally (in life and in writing) to the African-American hero.

Confident in his powers to "read" the other's emotions correctly (after all the porter is a *type*, which the narrator knows well, having encountered it in both literature and through other eyewitnesses' accounts), the Russian immediately "understands" the Black man's unspoken desires, and proceeds to identify them as an "insoluble problem", facing white people around the world:

> I recalled some stories that American acquaintances of mine had told me about intelligent Negroes and all at once I understood that this strange intellectual, the likes of whom I had never seen before, with skin as black as bootblacking, had adopted the feminine ideal of the white race no less than had poor Othello. …
>
> I looked at the Negro once more and found myself face to face with an insoluble problem. Of course he had a perfect right to dream of anyone and anything he wanted to, but I didn't believe a white woman would have been very pleased with such an aspirer! ("The Black Student", p. 120)

The Russian's articulation of the African-American not as a real human being but as an abstract "problem" openly acknowledges the narrator's self-identification with the White American Other (man or woman), making "sameness" of race the most crucial prerequisite for a potentially close communication between different peoples. The significance that this Russian observer attributes to race (rather than class) is all the more

evident when he is forced to compare the fate of the underprivileged in his native country to that of their African-American brethren. As poor as the Russian peasants are, the narrator exclaims, they are still "of the same race"[14] which makes them, among other things, much more acceptable as potential marriage partners to members of the higher classes. The Black student's reaction -- he is visibly struck by this remark -- necessitates the visitor's further explication of the reviewed scene for the benefit of his fellow Russian readers. Consistently with Bakhtin's vision of the esthetic formalization of the *type*, the hero's emotions and their causes are presented as simple and fully comprehensible, thus quite literally rendering the author a knowledgeable "physician", and the hero a "sick animal" (a dog that needs to be treated, disciplined, for its own good):

> "And what's it like for them in Russia?" the Negro asked.
>
> I was following his train of thought and understood he was asking about descendents of our serfs and their prospects of marriage into other strata of society.
>
> "But they are of the same race!" I blurted out imprudently.
>
> The Negro paled, that is, his face took on a dirtyish cast and in his large eyes flashed a resigned, yet at the same time angry expression. This is how a dog looks when shown the too familiar whip. This is, apropos, how some friends of mine at school looked when their classmates shouted after them, "Jew!" ("The Black Student", pp.120-21).

Disregarding for the time being the last comment -- which further complicates the subtext of the story by introducing yet another layer of reference, this time to inter-ethnic,

rather than inter-racial contact -- I will conclude my brief exploration of the Russian totalization of the African-American Other in Bogoraz-Tan's tale with the following embedded story of lynching. The authorial summation of its contents, as well as his account of the black student's reaction to it will present us with one last example of the persistent and often very troubling subplot of inter-racial (mis)communication we encounter in this and many other similarly stacked Russian travel sketches from the turn of the 19th century.

At the next train station, a newspaper boy invades the privacy of the Russian tourist's conversation with the Black porter and imposes on them the gruesome news of a local case of lynching. In an already familiar narrative gesture, the author quickly absorbs the information of the specific incident in order to regurgitate it anew as a typical event that gives him the chance to show off his superior knowledge:

> A tragedy like this is played out with amazing regularity almost daily some place or another in the southern states. A young Negro pays court to a white woman and, when she rejects him, attempts to impose his love upon her crudely and by force, like an irritated peacock. Yet typically these attempts do not succeed because southern women are on guard against such maneuvers. At their first sound of alarm, a crowd of whites converges and, following his fresh tail, tracks down and seizes the culprit and then hangs him from the nearest tree. The whole time I lived in New York I do not remember two days going by without the papers reporting something along those lines from Kentucky or Tennessee. ("The Black Student", p. 121)

There is no question as to where the Russian visitor stands in relation to the narrated events. Having completely bought into the White man's version of the story, he passes it on to his audience wholesale, as he continues to imagine the African-American Other as a dangerous, uncontrollable being, much closer to animals (be they dogs or peacocks) than to himself or other representatives of his own (i.e. the White) race. This is why ultimately the Russian feels confident that no amount of education would ever change the situation Black intellectuals find themselves in. As far as he is concerned, they should not even hope for a miracle:

> "I recently read in a medical journal", the Negro said slowly, "that a professor of esthetic chemistry in Basel had prepared a remedy … He made a cleanser that was a remedy for tans and birthmarks. … After you wash with it just once, even the darkest people come out whiter. …
>
> I looked into his eyes. No, apparently there wasn't a trace of madness in him. Yet his soul harbored a mad dream to become fair of skin and look like a white man with the help of some magical potion, and now, face to face with the cruel real-life tragedy gleaned from the lines of newsprint, this dream of his had suddenly forced its way to the surface.
>
> "What do you think? The Negro continued thoughtfully. "Is it possible?"
>
> I looked again at the thick lips and kinky hair. Even white skin would not do much for them.
>
> "Absolutely impossible!" I said with an air of certainty. "It's best you don't even think about it". ("The Black Student", p.125)

As at the beginning of the story, at its end the visitor profoundly misinterprets the Black student's question and the implications behind it. The "crazy" desire to be White does not necessarily reflect dissatisfaction with one's own race, but a longing to be treated as White -- that is, as a full-fledged human being, a fellow character instead of a simplistic type. The social-quotidian Russian narrator of this tale of strange encounters cannot offer such an alternative way of seeing the Black American other as *drug* [other and/as friend]. His failure to play his role of a benevolent cocreator of a human life is all the more evident when we contrast it with the sketchy, yet much more character-driven, portrayal of the other main representative of the American people in this story -- the newspaper boy.

The son of immigrants from Russia, whom the narrator almost immediately recognizes as "one of his own", the boy comes across as a strong, confident young member of his adoptive society. Although ethnically a Jew, he insists on being called "American" and appears to have no memory of or desire to reconnect with his cultural roots. This is a problem the narrator, of Jewish descent himself, can easily identify with[15] and therefore try to if not resolve it one way or another, then at least pose it with a clarity and sensitivity completely lacking from his reification of the African-American porter:

> I looked at him more closely. Indeed there was nothing American in this face. A nose like this and such a sour expression at the corners of the mouth could only originate in Grodno or Vilnius.
>
> "Where are you from?" I asked in turn.
>
> "Kovno", the paper boy answered.

"Are you Jewish?" I posed a ticklish question.

"No! Russian!" the boy replied, offended.

"What is your name?"

"Hyman".

"Well, what is your nationality?" I insisted.

"I told you. I was Russian, now I am American."

… This young lad, the son of Russian immigrants, had already succeeded in merging into the American masses so completely he had lost any clear memory of his former nationality and it was not in my power to revive his memory. ("The Black Student", p. 122-23).

For the Russian visitor, such a complete immersion into the sight of the Other suggests the very real possibility of a profound identity crisis. Ultimately, it is the threat of this irreversible journey into the site of the collective (White) American Other represented as a cautionary tale for the readers back home that Bogoraz-Tan's story dramatizes so well. For the narrator himself, it amounts to the further fossilization of harmful racial stereotypes that undermine the possibility for real interpersonal communication. For the African-American student, it means constant frustration and emotional instability. For the Jewish immigrant, it suggests an irreparable memory loss and mental confusion, which jeopardize the (ethnic) self's healthy relationships with his fellow countrymen of various (racial, class) backgrounds. In all cases, then, passing -- into or as -- an Other comes at a high price. Who pays it, and what it can purchase, will

be two of the main questions I will address in the following chapter about travel stories of immigrant transformations.

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[1] By an interesting coincidence, Bogoraz-Tan's first story happened to be published in Vladimir Korolenko's *Russkoe bogatstvo* [*Russian Wealth*]. Bringing together the two men's travel impressions of American life in this book, then, represents only one side of their real-life relationship. Similarly, Bogoraz provides an intriguing link to another writer I will discuss later -- Abraham Cahan. The two met during Bogoraz-Tan's trip to the U.S. in 1899, and were extremely impressed with each other -- so much so that Bogoraz-Tan offered to help his American colleague publish translations of his stories in the Russian press (as we shall see in the next chapter, Cahan followed up on this suggestion), while Cahan responded by encoding some of his new friend's memories and revolutionary experiences in his first major English language novel *The White Terror and the Red The White Terror and the Red. A Novel Of Revolutionary Russia* (NY: Arno Press, 1975).

[2]Vladimir Bogoraz-Tan, *Sobranie sochinenii. T. 5. Amerikanskie rasskazy* (St. Peterburg: Prosveshtenie, 1911).

[3] The racial or gender Other appears to be "neopasnyi" [not dangerous] to this narrator much in the way White American crooks seemed completely transparent, like children, to Ogorodnikov.

[4] All quotes from the text in English are taken from Olga Hasty and Susanne Fusso's translation, included in *America Through Russian Eyes* (New Haven: Yale University

Press, 1988): p. 111-128. Page references will be given parenthetically following the title of the work.

[5] See Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Tr. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press), 1981, pp. 84-258. Bakhtin defines "chronotope" as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (p. 84).

[6]M. Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability. Early Philosophical Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*. Ed. By M. Holquist, and V. Liapunov, Eds., (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 174.

[7] Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, p. 184.

[8] Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, p. 184, emphasis added.

[9] Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, p. 183.

[10] Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, p. 184.

[11] As an interesting aside, we might note that "the high level of geographical knowledge" of the Black student that impresses the Russian so much, as well as his "obvious curiosity" about life in distant lands were certainly not that unusual. Russia and the history of its disenfranchised were topics regularly covered in the African-American press of the time. In fact, an investigation of the various constructed images of Tsarist Russia in the 19th c. Black press shows that African-Americans exhibited more than mere "interest" in the life of the Russian people. Outraged by the situation of their foreign counterparts (serfs, peasants, or political prisoners) Black journalists often raised their voice in defense of the oppressed. African-American leaders were also among the first to recognize the potential of certain parts of Russia (i.e. Siberia) for the economic

advancement of their own people. Immigration to distant lands was seen as a possible solution to the numerous problems that black American citizens faced at home. In that respect Russia seemed to provide an acceptable alternative to the race-conscious U.S., as the writings of men such as Ira Aldridge, T. Morris Chester, and especially Richard T. Greener testify to.

[12] Hasty and Fusso completely disregard the complexity of the presented inter-ethnic dialogue here. Their only comment on "The Black Student" is that "from his conversation with a black porter . . . Bogoraz learns of the social progress made by the American black since his emancipation and of the white prejudices still confronting him (p. 111)."

[13]Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, Eds, *Rethinking Bakhtin. Extensions and Challenges* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989), p.69.

[14] The Russian phrase -- "Oni nashi soplemenniki" -- is even more indicative of the narrator's position on this issue and clearly aligns him with 1) ethnic Russians and 2) the higher classes. It is precisely from that vantage point that the secondary author surveys and delineates the heroes and events in the story as a whole.

[15] While in the United States, Bogoraz-Tan met many Russian Jews and familiarized himself with the problems of their life in immigration. Much like his fellow writer and friend Abraham Cahan, then, he could travel into their horizon of seeing much more easily than he could "see" the world from the position of a Black American man.