Theatrical Metaphor and the Discourse of History: Nikolai Karamzin

Of the various examples provided by dictionaries to illustrate the notion of metaphor, the two that come up most often are both related to theater: the indispensable Shakespeare’s “all the world’s a stage” and the anonymous poeticism “the curtain of night fell upon us.” As observed by R. Tronstad in her small, yet wonderfully rich and subtle article “Could the World Become a Stage? Theatricality and Metaphorical Structures”, theater as a form of art and metaphor as a figure of speech share at least one important feature: they each require both similarity and difference, identity and non-identity at the same time. Neither theater nor metaphor exists without a gap—between the two meanings merged in a third one in the case of metaphor, or between the real and imaginary world in the case of theater.1 This may explain, if only in part, a certain affinity between the two.

Boris Pasternak’s “Remarks on Translations from Shakespeare” (1956) contains one of the best definitions of metaphor ever given:

The use of metaphor is a natural consequence of the shortness of man’s life and the vastness of his tasks planned for a long time ahead. Because of this discrepancy he is obliged to look at things with eagle-eyed keenness and to explain himself in momentary, instantly understandable flashes of illumination. This is what poetry is. The use of metaphor is the stenography of a great personality, the shorthand of the spirit. The tempestuous vitality of Rembrandt’s, Michelangelo’s, Titian’s brush is not the result of deliberate choice. Assailed, each one of them, by a stormy, insatiable thirst to draw the entire universe, they had no time for other kinds of drawing.2

It is no coincidence that Pasternak came up with this definition so late in life, when his own sense of the discrepancy between “the shortness of man’s life and the vastness of his tasks” was particularly acute. It is also no coincidence that this rare, if not unique, theoretical reflection on metaphor in Pasternak’s (thoroughly metaphorical) oeuvre emerged as a “remark on translation” from Shakespeare, namely his reflections on translating Hamlet (1941) and Macbeth (1951).

Shakespeare’s “all the world’s a stage” belongs to the “absolute metaphors”, in H. Blumenberg’s terminology, or to the “metaphors we live by”, in G. Lakoff and M. Johnson’s. It is one of the metaphors that seem “so natural and so persuasive in our thought that they are usually taken as self-evident”. A little less evident and hence less abused, although also nearly embedded in everyday language and thinking, is the metaphor of life as a walking shadow from the fifth act of Macbeth (“Out, out, brief candle! / Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more” [V.5.23–26]). Most likely, this image goes back to the last surviving ode by Pindar, Pythian 8, composed and performed shortly before the poet’s death: “Man’s life is a day. What is he? / What is he not? A shadow in a dream / Is man” (ll. 95–98).

We will return to the distant echoes of both Pindar and Shakespeare, shadows of shadows, soon. For now, the general question that arises concerns the oscillating relevance of theatrical metaphors. The world’s always a stage, yet the acuity and freshness of the perception that it is one varies from one era to the next. When and why do we need theatrical metaphors? Can we trace the logic and rhythm in their entrances and exits (to remain in the same metaphorical field)? Which forms, types, and genres of theater come to the forefront as vehicles for the same (or, possibly different) tenors, to use the terms coined by I. A. Richards in The Philosophy of Rhetoric (1936)? For it is obvious that Aristotelian tragedy, observing the unities of space, time, and place, will not serve the same metaphorical goals as Shakespearean drama, or the various forms of theater based on the aesthetics of tableaux, in which one stage-picture follows another with little attempt to connect them.

“Narration is created by conceptual thought”, wrote O. Freidenberg, Pasternak’s cousin and lifetime correspondent, in her posthumously published book Image and Concept: Mythopoetic Roots of Literature. “Conceptual thought leads to the proposition of goal, cause, condition, which move the plot forward and fill it with connections to real processes, presents dependence and leads to certain results. A ‘picture’ cannot portray the ideas ‘if,’

3 H. Blumenberg, Paradigms for a Metaphorology, tr. R. Savage, Ithaca, NY 2010; G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, Metaphors We Live By, Chicago, IL 1980.
4 Lakoff and Johnson, Metaphors, p. 28.
5 I. A. Richards, Philosophy of Rhetoric, New York, NY 1936.
‘when,’ ‘so that,’ ‘because,’ etc.; speech, however, creates with these expressions a logically developed story.”

I would suggest that the turns of centuries, with their sudden disturbances in the hundreds or the thousand columns, with their distinctive anxieties, from the medieval anticipation of the end of the world to the unforgettable Y2K (the virtual end of the computer world expected in the year 2000, whose failure to materialize links it with other millennial apocalypses) seem to be particularly welcoming circumstances for the use of theatrical metaphors. The turn of the century weakens “conceptual thought”; history moves away from complex and compound sentences to sentences without conjunctions. The sense of discontinuity in time, the tenuous quality of the fabric of life, and the unreliability of the world require a correspondingly fragmented form of expression. For this reason, at the turn of centuries and in times of social upheaval the “metaphoric weight” falls on what in other times are marginal, secondary theatrical genres, such as melodrama, the puppet-theater, or optical shows like the magic lantern or shadow plays.

This is why we are not surprised to find distant echoes of both Pindar’s and Shakespeare’s lines in John O’Keefe’s comic opera The Dead Alive, or the Double Funeral, composed in the momentous year 1789, just across the Channel from Revolutionary France. Looking at his (allegedly) dead mistress, a servant first speaks—and then begins to sing—the following lines:

The world is all nonsense and noise.
    Fantoccini or Ombres Chinoises,
    Mere pantomime mummery;
    Puppet-show flummery:
    A magical lanthorn confounding the sight.—
    Like players or puppets we move,
    On the wires of ambition and love,
    The poets write wittily,
    Maidens look prettily,
    Till death drops the curtain—all’s over—good night.8

7 O. Freidenberg, Image and Concept: Mythopoetic Roots of Literature, tr. K. Moss, ed. N. Braginskaja, Amsterdam 1997, p. 90. An eminent classical philologist, Freidenberg (1890–1955) was persecuted by the Soviet authorities. A great deal of her abundant scholarly heritage, in many ways foreshadowing later developments in Cultural Studies, was discovered, studied, and published by N. Braginskaja. Her theory of mythopoetical thinking largely revolves around the notion of a movement from image to concept, from myth to metaphor.

All the performances catalogued in O’Keefe’s lines—Chinese shadows and magic lanterns, Fantoccini silhouettes and wire-controlled marionettes—seem to share the same principle of discontinuity, the same lack of “if, when, so that, and because”, in Freidenberg’s words. Of course, the succession of pictures in an optical or puppet show may be subject to a certain narrative sequence, but may just as well be completely unmotivated and brought together solely by the “Et voici, et voilà” exclamations of their masters—puppeteers, lanternists, and other itinerant “Savoyards”. At most of these shows, one is unable to predict what will come next.

The unprecedented dissemination of magic lanterns during the French Revolution furthered the wide-ranging scope of the shows and developed their satirical and propagandistic tendencies. These tendencies gave rise to the appearance in France in the early 1790s of works of a particular, para-literary genre, whose roots can be traced to both literary and oral traditions—that is, the “printed lanterns”, political satires, and pamphlets of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary years. Presented in the form of magic lantern libretti, they either told the story of the revolution as a whole or concentrated on its significant episodes and figures—as if they were to be read by magic lantern operators, explaining the content of the show to the audience. The title of each brochure carried the obligatory phrase “magic lantern” in connection with an attributive (La lanterne magique de ...) and almost always the subtitle “pièce curieuse”. Some of these “amusing pieces” may indeed have been coupled with images in an actual magic lantern show, but the majority of the so-called scenarios were actually literary or, to be more precise, journalistic works. In them, the conceit of the “magic lantern” was used to motivate a suspension of the usual principles of literary composition, replacing the expected emphasis on cause and effect or coordination and subordination with the random arrangement of images typical of the optical show.

This association of magic lanterns with the French Revolution was famously canonized by Edmund Burke in his Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790) and developed almost half a century later into the idea of phantasmagoria—one of the key concepts of Thomas Carlyle’s The French Revolution: A History (1837). According to Louis—Sébastien Mercier, we owe the very word fantasmagoria (originally spelled with an “f”), the optical show that it describes, and the philosophical and historical ideas associated with it, to Etienne-Gaspard Robert, better known as E.-G. Robertson.9 A former professor of

9 Mercier writes the following in Néologie, his wonderful dictionary of the “new words of the new century”: “Fantasmagoria is an optical game that presents to our gaze the battle
Optics and Physics from Liège, Robertson conquered the Revolutionary “tout Paris” with his optical shows, an important step in the history of the “pre-cinema”.  

It is precisely at this phantasmagoric moment that Nikolai Karamzin, the future author of the first full-fledged history of Russia, then a twenty-four-year-old traveler, avid learner, and a “young Scythian”, as he liked to call himself, spent four months in Paris. Important as it was for a Russian traveler in general and for Karamzin in particular, the French capital was not supposed to become either the main destination of his Grand Tour or the emotional focus of the Letters of a Russian Traveler, the literary account of the trip, but history altered his plans.

Karamzin’s “active observation” of the French Revolution, his shifting views of it (shared with so many, and consisting of initial enthusiasm, subsequent consternation and despair, and ultimate ambivalence); the significant cuts and changes to the thirty-three letters dedicated to Paris in the Letters of a Russian Traveler between 1791 and 1801—these topics have been thoroughly studied, and we are not going to address them now. What is important for us, though, is how theatrical metaphors, which acquired the status of topoi in the Age of Revolution, shaped Karamzin’s thoughts about history as he was conceiving and composing the texts that preceded, foreshadowed, or accompanied his magnum opus, The History of the Russian State (1803–26).

between life and shadow, at the same time dethroning the old tricks of the priests. [...] These illusions created by masters of phantoms amuse the ignorant and cause the philosopher to fall to thinking [...] O specter! O illusoriness! Who are you? What are you?” (Néologie; ou, Vocabulaire de mots nouveaux, à renouveler, ou pris dans des acceptions nouvelles, Paris 1801, pp. 259–60). On the metaphorical sense of the word and its history, see T. Castle, “Phantasmagoria: Spectral Technology and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie”, in: Critical Inquiry, vol. 15, 1988, pp. 26–61.

10 The striking figure of E.-G. Robertson has become ever better known and studied in recent years. The spectral images of fantasmagoria occupy the chief place among the “turn-of-the-century” theatrical metaphors. I refer the reader to M. Heard, Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern, Hastings 2006, and the chapter on Robertson, his lanterns, and their reception in Russia in my book Three Metaphors for Life: Derzhavin’s Late Poetry, Brighton, MA 2018.

Letters of a Russian Traveler first appeared serially in the Moscow Journal, the periodical Karamzin published for about two years upon his return from Europe, until the burden of serving as its sole editor wore him out. At the point when the Moscow Journal folded, the letters that deal with revolutionary Paris had not yet been published. As a separate edition, the Letters appeared in two “portions”—in 1797 and in 1801. Here is what the final version of letter 98 says about the Revolution:

Do not think, however, that the entire nation has been participating in the tragedy that is now being played out in France. Hardly a hundredth part is active: all the others watch, judge, argue, weep or laugh, clap or whistle, as in the theatre [. . .] This story has not ended yet.

We find another variation on the theatrical theme in Karamzin’s famous (nominally anonymous) note, known as “A Word on Russian Literature” (“Un mot sur la littérature russe”), written in French for the Hamburg émigré periodical Spectateur du Nord, and also published in 1797:

The French Revolution belongs to that type of manifestation which decides the fate of humanity for many centuries to come. A new epoch is beginning. I see this, and Rousseau foresaw it [. . .] One event replaces another, like waves of a stormy sea; and people want to view the Revolution as already completed. No, no. We will see many astonishing phenomena. [. . .] But now I draw the curtain. [“Non! Non! On verra encore bien de choses étonnantes [. . .] Je tire le rideau.”]

“It was there that he met History”, Yu. Lotman wrote about Karamzin’s 1790 sojourn in Paris. In Lotman’s otherwise unembellished writing style, which carefully skirts the loquacious and the pathetic, this phrase stands out as overtly metaphorical, not so different from “all the world’s a stage”. Moreover, these two metaphors could be merged together, for what Karamzin was exposed to in May–June 1790 (according to the Letters’ ambiguous, somewhat distorted chronology) was both the Stage of the World, stirred up by revolutionary turmoil, and the

12 The last letter published in the Moscow Journal was dated 27 March 1790 and “sent” from Paris.
overwhelming *World of the Stage*—the countless Parisian theaters, a detailed account of which the *Russian Traveller* gives in letter 100, one of the longest in the book:

Since my arrival in Paris I had spent every evening without exception at the theater and had yet to observe twilight [...] A whole month spent daily at the theater! And still not to have had my fill either of Thalia's laugh or the Melpomène's tears... And to enjoy these delights with a new sensation every time. Surprising, and yet true [...] the theatres here are perfect, each in its own way, and [...] every aspect of performance forms a lovely harmony, which affects the heart of the viewer in the most pleasant way possible.16

If someone goes to the theater every single night for several months in a row, this cannot help but permeate his language and affect the way he perceives the world. Hence it is no wonder that theatergoing becomes the framework into which the historical events that Karamzin's narrator witnessed were inevitably set. Theater and politics form an “equilateral” metaphor of sorts, continually trading off the roles of tenor and vehicle.17

In his vast panorama of the theatrical life of Paris in *Letter 100*, the Russian Traveler fails to mention one theater, the shows of which, according to Lotman’s comprehensive commentary, Karamzin almost certainly attended: the Theater of Chinese Shadows (*Théâtre des Ombres Chinoises*). Founded and made famous by François Séraphin in the early 1780s, first located in Versailles and then in the Palais-Royal, in 1790 the Theater of Chinese Shadows moved to the Boulevard du Temple. Lotman suggests that Karamzin’s silence on this point may merely confirm the symbolic status of the shadow in his depiction of the world: the author’s experience became so thoroughly internalized that a vivid impression was transformed into a recurrent metaphor, “one of Karamzin’s favorites in both his thinking and language”. We find it, among other places, in the closing lines of the *Letters*’ final version (1801):

> And you, my dears, quickly ready for me a tidy little cottage where I will be free to amuse myself with the Chinese shadows of my imagination, to let my heart grieve and to find comfort in friends! [italics in the original, TS]

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As has been observed and discussed by several scholars, Karamzin’s frequent use of the optical metaphor of the “Chinese Shadows” in the writings of the 1790s was largely inspired by his interest in Socratic and Platonic philosophy and connected with Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, the “hyper image” of European Culture (to use W. T. Mitchell’s expression). Yet it seems that there is another, less evident connection between Plato’s Republic and our present subject.

Let us go back several pages in The Republic, towards the end of book 6. It is here that Plato lays out his theory of sight, where a crucial role is (quite naturally) allotted to sunlight. It is the Sun that makes sight possible and elicits the intelligible from the visible; it is sunlight that lets us approach—perhaps even grasp—the Forms. We find a variation of this theory in Karamzin’s article “Something about the Sciences, Art, and Enlightenment” (1793), devoted to polemics with the postrevolutionary defamation of knowledge (and in particular with certain views of Jean-Jacques Rousseau). Karamzin argues that man

collects endless ideas or notions that are nothing but the immediate reflections of objects and which rush into his soul with no order, but soon a magic force emerges, which we call Reason, and which was only awaiting the sensuous impressions to begin its own action. Like a radiant Sun, it illuminates the chaos of ideas, divides and combines them, finds similarities and differences between them, relationships, the particular and the general, and produces the abstract ideas that comprise Knowledge. 

This reinterpretation of John Locke’s epistemology leads to the main question that confronted Karamzin throughout the last decade of the eighteenth century, as he pondered the chief project of his life (Karamzin declared his intention to consecrate himself to the History in 1793, when the article on Sciences and Art was written, i.e., ten years before Alexander I appointed him court historian). How was he going to organize the tableaux of Russian history, “floating in disarray before his mind’s eye” (as he admitted in one of the letters to his friend and correspondent Ivan Dmitriev)? How to connect these “moving

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20 In a similar way, publishing his prose fragment “Tale” in 1929 (the original title of which was “Revolution” [!]), Pasternak wrote: “Fragments of this story have been flashing before me for ten years, and at the beginning of the Revolution, some of them made it into print. […] [B]etween the
images”? How could he simultaneously observe and avoid chronology? What might take the place of the simple linear sequence of a chronicle?

Even in 1802, just a year before being appointed at court, Karamzin represents Russian history as a defile of isolated images in his note “On Events and Characters in Russian History that are Possible Subjects of Art: A Letter to NN”. Published the same year in the Messenger of Europe, “Events and Characters” was originally addressed to and compiled at the request of Count Alexander Stroganov, the new president of the Academy of Fine Arts.21 In 1801 Stroganov amended the existing Statute of the Academy with a supplement suggesting that the students of the Academy should be offered a number of “patriotic” subjects for their paintings. Karamzin was the first to respond to this initiative.

If a historical character is presented strikingly on canvas or in marble, it makes even the chronicles more interesting for us: we are curious to find out from which source the artist got his inspiration, and with great attention we read the description of the man’s deeds, recalling what a lively impression he has made on us.22

The moments suggested by Karamzin as “lending themselves as subjects of artistic representation” are fully in line with the definition of the “historical statement” that R. Barthes formulated in his highly influential article “The Discourse of History” (“Le Discours de l’histoire” [1967]):

The historical statement must lend itself to a figuration destined to produce units of content, which we can subsequently classify. These units of content represent what history speaks about; as signifiers, they are neither pure referent nor complete discourse: their totality is constituted by the referent discerned, named, already intelligible, but not yet subjected to a syntax.23 [author’s italics]

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22 Ibid., p. 459.
Selecting these units is the first, analytical step, to be followed by various synthetic—and syntactic—operations. It seems that Karamzin responded to Stroganov’s request so enthusiastically because in the early 1800s the proper “discourse of history” and especially its syntax were still to be defined. Before a suitable organizing principle is found, the “pictorial units” are arranged according to the “Magic Lantern principle”—like slides pulled from a wooden box by the skillful hand of the Master of the Show. This very arrangement bears a metaphorical meaning.24

The (partly feigned) randomness of the connections between the “slides” of the “Events and Characters” is somewhat undermined by associations and symbolic equations projecting one epoch onto another (to give just one example, Karamzin calls the Kievan Prince Sviatoslav [942–972], known for his well-planned military campaigns, “the ancient Suvorov”). The same principle of distant echoes, situation rhymes, and other forms of poetic parallelism among the epochs would become one of the unifying tropes of the History. Here is what Karamzin writes in the Foreword, his profession de foi, begun as early as 1803, not published until 1818 (when the first eight volumes of the History were, as Karamzin put it, “served out”), and dated 7 December 1815:

The reader will notice that I do not describe events one at a time, by years and days, but combine them so that they may be more readily imprinted on the memory. The historian is not a chronicler. The latter considers only chronology, whereas the former is concerned with the nature of events and their interrelations; he may make mistakes in the allocation of space, but he should allocate its proper place to everything.25

Needless to say, Karamzin’s choice of the “Events and Characters” is in fact quite consistent. The staginess and intense dramatic quality of all the tableaux fifty years apart, are essentially the same); sometimes their statements coincide almost verbatim: “Like natural history, human history does not tolerate fictions; it presents only what is or was, but not what might have been” (ibid., p.121); “[..] the status of historical discourse is uniformly assertive, constative; historical fact is linguistically linked to a privilege of being: one recounts what has been, not what has not been or what has been questionable” (p. 135).

24 Commenting on the role of the magic lantern in the narrative structure of Marcel Proust’s À la recherche du temps perdu, M. Riffaterre writes, “The magic lantern […] belongs in the grammar [of the narrative]. […] [It] displays no image that appears immediately metaphorical per se. Instead, the magic lantern signifies a function, the projection of the self onto the other. It signifies […] as syntax signifies” (“On Narrative Subtexts: Proust’s Magic Lantern”, in: Style, vol. 22, 1988, pp. 450–466, p. 453).

25 Karamzin, Foreword, pp. 122–123.
stand out: each “performance” is chosen to show a certain historical scene at a moment when the heat of passion is at its highest.26 Nothing irreversible has happened yet, but it is just about to take place. This, for instance, is how he renders one of the most emblematic scenes in Old Russian history—the death of the tenth-century Russian ruler Prince Oleg of Novgorod, from a snakebite:

Oleg, the conqueror of the Greeks, with his historic character, can inspire the imagination of a painter […] I would portray Oleg at the moment he kicks the skull, an expression of scorn on his face; the snake sticks his head out, but has not yet stung him: the expression of pain in a heroic face is unpleasant. Behind him stand soldiers with Greek trophies as a sign of their conquest. At a certain distance one could present the old wizard, who looks at Oleg meaningfully.27

In avoiding “the expression of pain in a heroic face” and choosing open-ended (“not yet”) situations, Karamzin seems to be in keeping with the precepts of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, whose *Laokoon Revisited*, one of the pivotal texts in the history of European aesthetics, appeared in 1766, the year of Karamzin’s birth.

For Lessing, a choice of a single moment that should “metonymically” stand in for the rest of the story is the only way to reconcile the contradiction between verbal and visual mediums:

Since the artist can use but a single moment of ever-changing nature, and the painter must further confine his study of this one moment to a single point of view, while their works are made not simply to be looked at, but to be contemplated long and often, evidently the most fruitful moment (*der prägnanteste Augenblick*) and the most fruitful aspect of that moment must be chosen. Not that only is fruitful which allows free play to the imagination. The more we see the more we must be able to imagine; and the more we imagine, the more we must think we see. But no moment in the whole course of an action is so disadvantageous in this respect as that of its culmination. There is nothing beyond, and to present the uttermost to the eye is to bind the wings of Fancy.28

“Pregnant moments” have the potential of being resolved in many different ways. Karamzin is all the more sensitive to Lessing’s theory that it lets him restore to history, if only in part, the subjunctive mood allegedly so foreign to it.29 The very “expositions” that he chooses for the *Events and Characters* are

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26 The dramatic composition of the scenes described by Karamzin becomes particularly striking when juxtaposed with the static, monumental nature of Mikhail Lomonosov’s selection of “Ideas for Artistic Scenes from Russian History” (1764), a much earlier work pursuing a similar goal.
metaphors of sorts, where the “pregnant moments” serve as vehicles and the tenor is history viewed as an array of both realized and non-realized possibilities, a series of cruxes, of roads taken and not.30

Lessing then proceeds to discuss specific examples from antiquity and focuses on the art of Timomachus, who, among the old painters, “seems to have been the one most fond of choosing extremes for his subject”:

He did not paint Medea at the moment of her actually murdering her children, but just before, when motherly love is still struggling with jealousy. We anticipate the result and tremble at the idea of soon seeing Medea in her unmitigated ferocity, our imagination far outstripping anything the painter could have shown us of that terrible moment. For that reason her prolonged indecision, so far from displeasing us, makes us wish it had been continued in reality. We wish this conflict of passions had never been decided or had lasted at least till time and reflection had weakened her fury and secured the victory to the maternal sentiments.

Even if we have much less pity for Prince Vladimir, about to be killed by Rogneda (also known as Goreslava, 962–1002), the wife he first raped and then abandoned, than for Medea’s poor children, Karamzin’s suggestions on how to tell this famous story and to represent Rogneda’s “prolonged indecision” seem to follow Lessing’s advice quite straightforwardly:

For the last time he visits her and falls asleep in her chamber: Rogneda takes the knife—but delays—and the prince, awaking, tears the deadly weapon from her trembling hands [...]. I see the unfortunate Goreslava inclined by her heart, her night clothing in disarray, and hair disheveled. The room is illuminated by a night lamp, one can see only the plainest decorations and the carved image of Perun standing in a corner. Vladimir has risen from his bed and holds in his hand the knife...31

30 In his very last work, “The Truth as Lie” (known as “On Gogol’s Realism” in Russian), dictated to his colleagues several months before his death, Yu. Lotman discusses the “three-dimensionality” of the literary space in Gogol: “Life never developed in a linear direction for Gogol. It was, as it were, an endless bundle of possible probabilities. The more closely Gogol tried to approach reality (at that time, ‘reality’ [deistivtel’nost’] was a new word that had just come into fashion), the more the potential variety of its unrealized possibilities would unfold before him; each of these possibilities was just as ‘real’ as those that happened in life itself [...]. It is as if Gogol’s thinking is three-dimensional; it always entails the proposition, ‘But what if things happened another way...?’ In general, this ‘what if’ is the basis of what is usually called ‘fantasy’ in Gogol’s work” (“The Truth as Lie”, in: Gogol: Exploring Absence, ed. S. Spieker, Bloomington, IN 2000, pp. 35–36). This thought can be extrapolated to Karamzin—the lifetime “protagonist” of Lotman’s thinking and writing—for his dynamic, “three-dimensional” vision of history, a compressed preview of which is given in the “Events and Characters”, can also be described as an “endless bundle of possible probabilities”.

The Caravaggesque presentation of Rogneda’s room, the very chiaroscuro suggested to potential artists, can be seen as a realization of one of the key metaphors of Karamzin’s “historical emotion” (to use B. Eikhenbaum’s expression).\(^{32}\) Explaining his preference for remote history, Karamzin repeatedly talks about twilight, about the play of light and shadow:

> Not allowing myself any invention, I have sought for expression in my own mind, but for ideas only in the sources [...] I wished to unify what has been handed down to us by centuries into a system clear and coherent in the harmonious correlation of its parts [...] Making an exhaustive study of the materials on the remotest history of Russia, I was cheered by the thought that there is some inexplicable fascination for our imagination in a narrative about distant times—there are the sources of poetry! Contemplating open space, does not our glance usually dart past everything that is near and clear, to the horizon’s end, where the shadows grow thick and dark and the impenetrable begins?\(^{33}\)

In 1815, the same year to which the *Foreword* is dated, Karamzin wrote a letter to Grand Duchess Ekaterina Pavlovna, who had always been one of his main supporters and who suggested that Karamzin should also address and explore recent history: “History, modest and solemn, loves the silence of passions and tombs, remoteness and twilight, and of all the grammatical tenses it is most of all the past perfect that beems it. The rapid movement and noise of the present, the closeness of the subjects and too bright a light tend to embarrass her.”\(^{34}\)

In his book *Spatial History* (2013) M. Iampolsky claims that it was, among other things, the theory of chiaroscuro, developed by Roger de Piles at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, that marked the emancipation of painting from the centuries-old bondage of *Ut Pictura Poesis*, a rejection of the rhetorically constructed argument, and a move towards the self-sufficient rhetoric of the image (and *coloris* as its utmost manifestation). The mastery of chiaroscuro allows the artist (Rubens was de Piles’ favorite example) to transform a multiplicity of objects into a single one, marks the shift from the chronological sequence, unfolding in time, to the whole, unfolding in space. This is somewhat similar to the process of “aestheticization” that

\(^{32}\) B. Eikhenbaum, “Karamzin”, in: B. Eikhenbaum, *Skvoz’ Literaturu*, Leningrad 1924, pp. 37–49. This essay, first published in 1916, written in commemoration of the 150th anniversary of Karamzin’s birth, is one of three major articles by Eikhenbaum (the other two were dedicated to the poets Gavrila Derzhavin and Feodor Tiutchev) that explore the particular kind of *artistic knowledge* possessed by each author.

\(^{33}\) Karamzin, *Foreword*, p. 122.

\(^{34}\) Karamzin, *Neizdannyje Sochinenija i perepiska*, vol. 1, St. Petersbourg 1862, p. 119.
history undergoes in the eighteenth century: it changes from Historie into Geschichtete, from a verbal sequence to a painterly (and, hence, theatrically organized) space.\(^{35}\) In this way we may say that chiaroscuro is not just one of the “stage effects” of Karamzin’s theater of history, but also a necessary condition of his historical vision, moving from continuity to contiguity, from metonymy to metaphor.

It is only this “synthetic” vision that lets a historian reconcile “the ordinary citizen” “to the imperfections of the manifest order of things”. Karamzin sees such “reconciliation” as his mission:

Rulers and legislators act according to what history teaches, and consult its pages as a navigator consults his charts. Human wisdom needs experience, and life is short […] But the ordinary citizen, too, should read history. It reconciles him to the imperfections of the manifest order of things, as something usual in all ages. It consoles him when the state suffers calamities, by bearing witness that in bygone times similar events—and even more terrible ones—occurred […] History feeds moral feelings and by its righteous verdict disposes the soul to a justice which assures our good and the harmony of society. So much for its usefulness. But how many pleasures for the heart and the mind! [italics are mine, TS.]

What Karamzin does in his Foreword can serve as the perfect illustration to Barthes’ observation in “The Discourse of History”:

[The presence, in historical narration, of explicit speech-act signs tends to “de-chronologize” the historical “thread” and to restore, if only as a reminiscence or a nostalgia, a complex, parametric, non-linear time whose deep space recalls the mythic time of the ancient cosmogonies, it too linked by essence to the speech of the poet or the soothsayer.\(^{36}\)]

Karamzin did not think of himself as a soothsayer. But even when consecrating himself to the History (“taking the [monastic] vows of a historian”, as Prince Viazemsky put it), he remained a poet.

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After expressing the idea that metaphor is a shorthand forced upon us by life’s brevity (a remedy of sorts), in his “Remarks on Translations from Shakespeare”, with which we opened these notes, Boris Pasternak moves on to the crucial role played by rhythm in Shakespeare’s poetry:


The fundamental principle of Shakespeare’s poetry is rhythm […] Rhythm is at the basis of his texts, rather than being their final framework […] In his dialogues the driving force of rhythm defines the sequence of questions and answers, the speed of their alternation; in his monologues it defines the length or brevity of sentences […] This is the rhythm of a free historical personality which erects no idol for itself and is thus sincere and sparing of words.

In Pasternak’s understanding, while rhythm lies at the basis of all of Shakespeare’s plays, it is of particular importance in Hamlet. Rhythm may be the only thing that can enable us to come to terms with a time that is “out of joint”—not really “setting it right”, but creating a kind of harmony within cacophony, mitigating the anguish of uncertainty with the anticipation that some expectations will be met, if only in matters of form.

This music consists in a measured alternation of the solemn and the anxious. Through it the work’s atmosphere is condensed and made extremely compact […] The rhythmic principle compacts and makes tangible this general tone of the play. Yet it is not its sole application. The rhythm has a modifying effect on a certain harshness which would be unthinkable without its harmonious effect.

For Karamzin as well, poetic rhythm was a manifestation of theodicy, and he too translated Shakespeare. It is to him that we owe the first translation of Julius Caesar into Russian, published, albeit anonymously, as early as in 1787. Prefacing the publication of Julius Caesar with his own “remarks on translations” and explaining the urge to “lay a foundation in this way for the Russian public’s familiarity with this great poet”, Karamzin wrote:

That Shakespeare did not adhere to the rules of the theater is true. The real reason for this, I think, was his ardent imagination, which would not be bound by any prescriptions. His spirit soared as an eagle and was not able to measure its soaring as the sparrows measure their flights. He did not want to observe the so-called “unities” which our present dramatic authors so meticulously maintain: he did not want to impose limits to his imagination […] His dramas, like the immeasurable theater of nature, are full of variety; taken together, they form a complete whole.

It is common knowledge that the “complete whole” of Shakespeare’s dramas was designed for and could only be realized in the complex space of the Globe Theatre, with its several levels, jutting into audience space, making possible the overlapping scenes of action and corners of intimacy from which he constructed his plays. It is this stage that Shakespeare had in mind when talking about “all the world”—not the arena stage of the ancient theater or the flat, deep box of the proscenium.

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stage of neoclassical tragedy. It has also been observed that it is in the spirit of this Elizabethan “thrust” (or “apron”) stage that Pushkin conceived his Boris Godunov, probably the most important Russian historical drama ever written, dedicated to the memory of Karamzin. What makes this association between Karamzin and Shakespeare’s theater even more curious is F. Yates’ discovery of a link between the art of ancient and medieval mnemonics—the inscribing of “images” into “places”—and the spatial structure of the Globe. Yates suggested that the very distortion of its stage was that of “a memory room”. Karamzin’s art was first and foremost the art of memory, which is why he was particularly passionate about the remote past. Curiously, The Art of Memory, Yates’s groundbreaking study, so fundamental to twentieth century intellectual history, first appeared in 1966, as if to commemorate Karamzin’s bicentennial. He would have appreciated this diachronic rhyme.

38 C. Emerson, “Tragedy, Comedy, and History on Stage”, in: The Uncensored Boris Godunov: The Case for Pushkin’s Original Comedy, ed. Ch. Dunning, Madison, WI 2006, p. 159.