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THE LAST WORD IN FICTION:
ON SIGNIFICANT LIES IN BORIS GODUNOV

In her excellent monograph on three transpositions of the Boris theme--in Karamzin, Puskin, and Musorgskij, Caryl Emerson remarks that in Puskin's Boris "events matter less than rumors about events and everyone with a story to tell is aware of the power of storytelling" (140). Far from presenting a final version of the historical facts, the play is a collage of versions, rumors, stories; no appeal can be made to any fixed value. As Emerson says, "Pushkin's plot, like the Boris tale at its base, is itself a samozvanets, a pretender that invites and engenders response without identifying any source of authority within itself" (103). The utterance and the language take center stage in Puskin's play, and the plot is less a drama of action than a dialogue among versions, a struggle between stories, each vying for the status of truth. A close analysis of the language of the play reveals that pretendership (САМОЗВАНСТВО), lies, and fiction percolate even onto the level of word and morpheme.

The opening dialog between Słjskij and Vorotynskij serves to introduce the title character Boris, but not as a hero: the audience hears that he has murdered the Tsarevich Dimitrij and that he is less noble than the speakers themselves. In his very first lines Słjskij claims that Boris will take the throne with a false show of reluctance:

Борис еще поморщится немного
Что пьяница пред чаркою вина,
И наконец по милости своей
Принять венец смиренно согласится (183)

Słjskij introduces the theme of pretending which will be associated in the first four scenes not with Grigorij/Dimitrij, but with Boris. Rassadin calls his chapter on Boris "Два самозванца" with exactly this in mind. The idea

that Boris orchestrated his own installation on the throne was not new with Puskin--he follows Karamzin's account. Not only Boris, but the people play a role in this theatrical spectacle:

1: Заплачем, брат, и мы.
 2: Я силюсь, брат,
 Да не могу.
 1: Я также, нет ли луку?
 Потрем глаза.
 2: Нет, я слюней помажу.
 (190)

This and the mother who throws her child on the ground are taken from Karamzin:

По данному знаку все бесчисленное множество
 людей...упало на колена, с воплем
 неслыханным: все требовали Царя, отца, Бориса!
 Матери кинули на землю своих грудных
 младенцев и не слушали их крика. (Karamzin,
 10:139-40)

A note adds that "некоторые люди, боясь тогда не плакать, но не умея плакать притворно, мазали себе глаза слюною!" (Karamzin, 10:n. 397) Karamzin buries this material in the detailed text and in a footnote, but Puskin makes the theatrical motif the centerpiece of his four introductory scenes.¹

Boris and the people are not the only ones who may be accused of pretending in the introductory scenes. Słjskij too admits that he lied to Tsar Feodor. He tells Vorotynskij that while he knew Boris had murdered the Tsarevich, he failed to inform Feodor of the truth because he was prompted by Boris:

И перед ним я повторил нелепость
 Которую мне сам он нашептал. (185)

In the opening scenes, then, Boris, Šljskij, and the народ are the pretenders.

Here it will be helpful to draw a semantic distinction obligatory in Russian. Russian makes a distinction between pretending or play-acting--ПРИТВОРСТВО--and pretending to the throne--СЪМОЗВАНСТВО. So far we are dealing only with the first kind of pretending: the quotation from Karamzin even uses the same root as ПРИТВОРСТВО. This pretending or play-acting is a kind of lying, and lying is a quintessentially semiotic act. Umberto Eco even goes so far as to define semiotics as "the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie" (7). In the first four scenes of Boris Godunov, then, we have three examples of signification used to lie. Boris signifies that he does not want the throne, when he actually does; Šljskij signifies that Boris did not murder the Tsarevich Dimitrij, when he thinks that he did; the crowd signifies that it wants Boris crowned to the point of tears, when actually it does not. The addressees of these messages need not take them at face value for the truth: it is probably obvious to the people that Boris wants the throne, to Boris that Šljskij is merely mouthing his prompting through expedience, and to all involved that the crowd is merely required to cry by the authorities. How do all these lies function in the play? Perhaps they function to draw attention to the process of signification itself.

At the end of scene four Šljskij again confesses to lying--but this time he refers to an incident within the scope of the play. He claims that his denunciation of Boris in the first scene was nothing but a ploy to test Vorotynskij's loyalty:

Теперь не время помнить,
Советую порой и забывать.
А впрочем, я злословием притворным
Тогда желал тебя лишь испытать,
Верней узнать твой тайный образ мыслей. (192)

This claim has a curious effect. If taken at face value (as a true signification), then he too was pretending--lying (злословием притворным)--in the first scene. But his first lie, unlike the others, is

taken by the audience (and by Vorotynskij) as the truth. A far more logical reaction of the audience in the fourth scene, which has by now been conditioned to expect a lie, is to conclude that it is the later claim that is false: in that case the first would remain true. Vorotynskij's reaction, *Лукавый царедворец!* (192), can be applied in either case: either one statement or the other must be false.

That these two situations are not equal can be shown by the addition of another distinction. The signs discussed above are all directed forward, planned beforehand for the addressee. The script is written in advance, complete with stage directions for the crowd (*cry*) and a prompter (Boris) who tells Słjskij what to say. The creative side of this kind of lying is captured in the word *ПРИТЕВОРСТВО*, the root *tvor-*, as in *ТВОРИТЬ* 'make, create' (and compare 'fiction' from L. *facere* 'make'). But Słjskij's later statement is directed back in time to remake or reinterpret a message already received. This is an instance of reinterpretation of history, which alongside its mirror image, forward directed pretending, is the dominant semiotic structure in *Boris Godunov*.

The truth value of a message can be jeopardized in two ways: it may be compromised by the intention of the addresser, or it may be garbled by the interpretation of the addressee. Both of these structures play an important role in *Boris Godunov*, both are introduced in the opening scene, and both are inherent in Słjskij's claim that he was lying in the first scene to test Vorotynskij's loyalty.

The fifth scene, Pimen's cell in the Cłdovoj monastery, continues the same themes. It is in this scene that the emphasis on the semiotic process is shifted specifically to writing. The scene introduces the faithful monk Pimen, who preserves the tales of the past in his chronicle: he writes "*правдивые сказанья*" (192). Pimen apparently authors the account of the murder of Dimitrij which Puskin eventually uses as his source for the entire play. As Grigorij points out in the ominous speech at the end of the scene,

А между тем отшельник в темной келье
Здесь на тебя донос ужасный пишет:
И не уйдешь ты от суда мирского,
Как не уйдешь от божьего суда(197).

Pimen himself is responsible for the judgment of the world, since posterity will use his account as evidence against Boris. Pimen, then, effectively has the last word in judging Boris. Puskin comments that he used chronicle accounts as well as Karamzin's История государства российскаго, and the ultimate source of Karamzin's work itself must be accounts like Pimen's. The point is that whoever controls the written account of history controls the judgment of men. Puskin himself has the last word insofar as he creates the account in his play. Both he and Pimen, therefore, act as God (Creator -- ТВОРЕЦ) with respect to the judgment of Boris--both have control over the account the audience receives because they are authors, creators of fiction. (We will ignore the problem of intended historical accuracy in both a chronicle and a "historical drama.")²

Because of this parallelism between the roles of chronicler and author, one might be tempted to nominate Pimen as main hero--but then he appears only in one scene. Nevertheless, according to a recent Soviet account, the character of Pimen evoked the greatest approval among Puskin's contemporaries (cited are Venevitinov, Kireevskij, S. Sevyrev); they saw a kind of microcosm of the play in this character, who sets the dominant tone and determines the significance of the work as a whole (Luzjanina, 45-57).³ Ervin Brody goes even further, pointing out the similarity between Pimen's position in the play and Puskin's in life: "Pimen in his cell exposing the gruesome political murder and Puskin in his exile at Mikhailovskoye,...meditating upon the actions of unjust monarchs seem to reflect the same political mentality" (860). Caryl Emerson points out, though, that the Decembrist uprising came five months after Puskin finished Boris (232, n. 23).

Pimen intends to pass on his role as chronicler to Grigorij, whom he instructs to describe everything of which he is witness in life. Grigorij, however, disdains this apparently passive role to become not passive witness, but active character (ДЕЙСТВУЮЩЕЕ ЛИЦО) in the drama of life, which he chooses to write not on paper, but in action. His mistake is that he fails to realize that in the role of chronicler he may have even more active power in affecting the judgment of posterity. That power is connected specifically with writing is shown in the following scene, in

which the Patriarch denounces Grigorij's desire to become Tsar of Moscow as a heresy typical of a literate man: УЖ ЭТИ МНЕ ГРАМОТЕИ! (198). The importance of literacy as a tool for power becomes especially apparent in the scene at the tavern at the Lithuanian border, which follows a brief scene in the Tsar's palace. As the scene is set up, Grigorij acts his first part, that of a lay pilgrim. But even the hostess of the tavern lies by feigning pleasure in greeting the Tsar's men:

—чтоб им издохнуть, окаянным! чтоб им...

Пристав: Здорово, хозяйка!

Хозяйка: Добро пожаловать, гости дорогие,
милости просим. (203)

The guards suspect Misail of being the escaped heretic, and it transpires that neither Misail nor Varlaam can read. When the guards ask who is literate, "Кто здесь грамотный?" it is Grigorij who answers "Я грамотный" (206). The guards are understandably surprised that a lay pilgrim knows letters.

As Grigorij begins reading the order, he begins tampering with the message by deleting a few words:

Г: «И царь повелел изловить его. . .»

П: И повесить.

Г: Тут не сказано повесить.

П: Врешь, не всяко слово в строку пишется.

Читай: изловить и повесить.

Г: «И повесить.» (207)

Not only does Grigorij attempt to distort the message, but the guard also instructs him in how it should be read. Grigorij uses his power as reader

of the text to throw suspicion from Misail, whom the guards first suspected, to Varlaam. Puskin makes his distortion even clearer through his stage directions:

Г: «И повесить. А лет ему вору Гришке от роду . . .
(смотрит на Варлаама) за 50. А росту он среднего, лоб
имеет плешивый, бороду седую, брюхо толстое. . .»

Все глядят на Варлаама⁷

At this point Varlaam, threatened by death as he is, summons up his own reading skills to cast suspicion at last on the real Grigorij, who escapes through the window. Admittedly, this is a stock recognition scene, but its appearance elsewhere does not make it any less effective in drawing attention to lying and the semiotic process here.⁴ Pimen, like Grigorij, can reinterpret the message he receives; but while Pimen gains power by controlling the transmission of the message, Grigorij controls its reception.

Control over the reception of the message is as effective as lying. Indeed, the guard accuses Grigorij of lying in his reading: "ВРЭШЬ", which in Russian covers both unintentional falsification by mistake and intentional lying. (Врѣть is also used for misreading, especially for misreading music or singing off pitch.) According to Vasmer and Chantraine, врѣть is related to Gk. weréo, ero 'I speak' and L. verbum, Goth. waúrd 'word' (Cf. Eng. word).⁵ Tampering with the reception of the message is also therefore a semiotic process, and it is an activity with many echoes in Boris Godunov. In the very first scene Słjskij explains that he could not tell Tsar Feodor about Boris's murder because the latter controlled the former's reception of all messages:

А что мне было делать?
Все объявить Феодору? Но царь
На все глядел очами Годунова,
Все́му внимал ушами Годунова. (186)

Most on Słjskij's mind is linguistic signification: he says he could unmask

Godunov "with a single word" ("ЕДИНЫМ СЛОВОМ"; 185).

The theme of pretending as acting a part permanently--САМОЗВАНСТВО--is obviously central to the character of Grigorij the Pretender. Much dialog in the play is directed at one aspect of the semiotic function of pretending--naming. This is even clearer in the Russian, where 'pretender' is САМОЗВАНЕЦ, which contains the verbal root for 'naming, calling,' z/v-. The escaped monk takes on the name of the dead Tsarevich Dimitrij in his campaign to gain the throne. This involves a certain violence to the code itself. As Jakobson points out in his article on shifters, names are code referring to code:

The circularity is obvious: the name means anyone to whom with name has been assigned. The appellative pup means a young dog, mongrel means a dog of mixed breed, hound is a dog used in hunting, while Fido means nothing more than a dog whose name is Fido. The general meaning of such words as pup, mongrel, our hound, could be indicated by abstractions like puppihood, mongrelness, or houndness, but the general meaning of Fido cannot be qualified in this way. To paraphrase Bertrand Russell, there are many dogs called Fido, but they do not share any property of "Fidoness." (131)

In the case of Grigorij, however, it is not the name Dimitrij that attracts him, but exactly Dimitrijness--he wants to be Tsar.

Since proper names are code about code, Grigorij's assumption of a name that is not his own involves violence to the code itself. Puskin likewise does violence to the code of dramatic writing when he refers to Grigorij in the stage directions to the play by five different names: Grigorij, Griska, Dimitrij, САМОЗВАНЕЦ, and Lzèdimitrij (207, 222, 230, 225, 245). In a later scene Puskin capitalizes on this split in the language to make a humorous point. When Boris arranges for Otrep'ev to be anathematized, one man in the crowd claims that "the Tsarevich has nothing to do with Otrep'ev" ("царевичу дела нет до Отрепьева"; 240) In fact he is correct,

but in the context of the play, the man he understands by "Tsarevich" and "Otrep'ev" are known to be one and the same by the audience. One name cannot occur in the sentence, the meaning of which would then entail "X is not X"--the result is a humorous violence to the language itself. No less violence to the laws of religion is done by the same man, when he learns that they are singing a requiem for the Tsarevich, whom he thinks to be alive.

So far a semiotic analysis seems to suggest the importance of the structures "pretending" (both ПРИТВОРСТВО and САМОЗВАНСТВО) and "reinterpretation" in the play. They are united as mirror images of one another, both involving falsification of the semiotic process, in one case directed forward in time, in the other directed backward. Alternatively, one may view pretending as falsification by the sender of the message, reinterpretation as falsification at the receiving end. Obviously pretending is the central motif for the pretender. Nevertheless, as has been pointed out, it is not restricted to him, but spreads to other characters including Boris. What about reinterpretation?

Not surprisingly, falsification of history too lies at the center of the play, particularly in the actions of Boris. For Puskin's audience, Boris's downfall comes as a direct result of his presumed guilt in the murder of the Tsarevich Dimitrij before the opening of the play. Boris himself conscientiously avoids the topic. The audience presumes he retains his throne by manipulating the opinions of the majority--he is directly accused of such manipulation by Słjskij in the passage already discussed.

But on the other hand, perhaps it is significant that Boris never openly confesses to the crime--even in a monologue when he is on stage alone (scene 7). Here he admits obliquely only to a "single spot" on his conscience, but it is "accidental" (случайно); and the vague reference to "bloody boys" need not imply direct guilt (200). Puskin, unlike Karamzin, in fact avoids committing himself to one version. Słjskij is the first to accuse Boris directly of murder--but the audience knows not to take this clever courtier's statements at face value. Next Pimen calls Boris "царевубийца" (196)--his is often taken as the voice of Puskin. Ervin Brody, for example, remarks that "the fundamental quality that Puskin imparted to Pimen is truthfulness" (869). Puskin himself claims to be a chronicler, a recorder of правдивые сказанья. But the identity may be

reversed: perhaps Pimen, like Puskin, is a writer of fiction? Such conclusions, in fact, must be drawn by more modern historians, who maintain that the evidence for Boris's complicity in Dimitrij's death is unreliable (Vernadsky). In a play where the lie takes center stage, the problem is certainly difficult to resolve.

One further clue to the dominance of the lie in Boris is the shock value what appears to be truth acquires in contrast. Two of the more memorable scenes in the work play on this reversal. In the scene in front of the cathedral in Moscow (scene 17) the jurodivyj risks Boris's ire by suggesting the Tsar kill some children "like you killed the little Tsarevich" (241). Boris saves the man's life, but still he refuses to pray for the "Herod-Tsar" (242). Even more central to the drama is Grigorij's admission to Marina Mnizzek that he is not, in fact, the Tsarevich Dimitrij. The breakdown in pretending takes the form of an actor forgetting his lines:

Но час настал -- и ничего не помню.
Не нахожу затверженных речей (225).

This is exactly the semiotic structure of pretending already described. Here the accent is placed on the verbal sign--specifically the lover's standard Romantic speeches. But Marina wants no speeches:

Я здесь тебе незначила свиданье
Не для того, чтоб слушать нежны речи
Любовника. Слова не нужны (226).

(The theme of love vs. power, which here appears in the form of love overcoming the passion for power, is first introduced by Boris, who compares his cooled relationship to "highest power" to a love affair that has grown cool with time [199]).

Nonverbal forms of signification also play an important role in Boris. In the scene best known for Boris's monologue "Достиг я высшей власти" the Tsar has been consulting wizards to reveal his future:

Кудесники, гадатели, колдуньи.
Все ворожит, что красная невеста (199).

Such people made it their business to interpret all phenomena as signs. But even they lie, as Boris realizes. These supernatural signs falsified by the wizards to Boris's advantage are opposed to another supernatural sign that works against him. In his zeal to help Boris against the pretender, the patriarch tells the story of a blind shepherd who has been cured by the relics of the dead Tsarevich (235-36). He suggests a triumphant transferral of the relics of this new saint to the Archangel Cathedral in Moscow. But Boris's dilemma is that he can signify that the Tsarevich is dead by publicly transferring his relics to Moscow, but only if he acknowledges him as a saint, and the Tsarevich can be a saint only if he has been martyred--that is, murdered by Boris's henchmen.

Not only the wizards, but the people too interpret natural phenomena as if they were signs. Phenomena Boris has nothing to do with--hunger, fire, numerous deaths--all are interpreted as if Boris were their cause:

И тут молва лукаво нарекает
 Виновником дочернего вдовства
 Меня, меня, несчастного отца! . . .
 Кто ни умрет, я всех убийца тайный (200).

In a later scene Sѳjskij plays up to Boris's annoyance with the crowd:

бессмысленная чернь
 . . .
 Для истины глуха и равнодушна,
 А баснями питается она (216).

Almost all the characters participate in composing these басни.

Poets are not above suspicion. Brody writes that "the pretender also voices Puskin's deeply-felt affection for the inspiration of the poet and belief in the latter's prophetic mission" (867). Admittedly, this is Puskin's usual position, but in this work the control the poet has on posterity places him in one class with the other creators Grigorij and Boris. The pretender points out their reciprocal relationship: "Musa gloriam coronat, gloriaque

musam" (223). In his case, surely, both glory and the muse, both Grigorij and the poet are compromised. Indeed, the lie infects everything in the play to the point where no one can be trusted--poet, chronicler, historian, or author. When the semiotic process is undermined to such an extent, there is only one solution--escaping signification altogether--precisely the solution found by the people at the end of the play. Mosal'skij delivers the last speech of the play and the last lie--that Marija Godunova and Feodor took poison. But who has the last word? In a sense, the Soviet critics are right: the народ. But then, it can't really be said to be the last word--rather the contrary: народ безмолвствует.⁶

In performance, the audience perceives an absence, which is represented in the written text by the presence of a stage direction. Given that the stage direction is a kind of metalanguage about the performance, the ending is analogous to a zero ending on a word: at the phonetic level, there is absence, but at a higher morphological level, a linguist might write a symbol for the zero ending which may be significant in contrast to alternative endings (e. g., -Ø on КНИГ-Ø may signify genitive plural). Such is the usual interpretation of the zero ending of Boris: the people by their silence signify their protest and awareness of the circularity of violence in the struggle for the throne. They no longer go along with the process as they had with Boris in the introductory scenes of the play.

Yet on a still higher level--on the level of the artistic function of the semiotic structures in the play as a whole--the zero ending may again function not as a presence, but as an absence--as a refusal to signify, a rejection of verbal signification altogether as inherently dangerous. There is a reversal at this higher level: absence in performance corresponds to presence in stage direction, but at a still higher level, presence points up or marks absence--absence is thus made explicit--and one may argue that today, for any educated spectator of the play, the stage direction is as familiar as the text, if not more so.

The last word again points to the semiotic process itself--specifically to verbal signification. The root molv-, which means roughly 'speak', directs our attention again to the function of speech and language in general in the play, which is constructed of lies: pretending and reinterpretation of history--mirror-image semiotic structures which serve to undermine the semiotic process itself. In a sense the culprit is neither

Boris, as the people believe at the beginning, nor Grigorij/Dimitrij, as they begin to suspect at the end, but signification, the word itself. The real last word in fiction--in Boris Godunov, at any rate, is a rejection of last words as fiction.

 NOTES

¹On the polemical relation between Karamzin's text and his footnotes, see Caryl Emerson's chapter on Karamzin, 30-87.

²The role of Pimen is dealt with at length by Caryl Emerson, who sees the Monastery scene as "the master appropriation of reality that all other characters will follow" (129-30).

³Caryl Emerson points out that the popularity of this scene among Puskin's contemporaries may be ascribed to the fact that it was for many years the only one printed (personal correspondence).

⁴For example, Tomasevskij ("Puskin i ital'janskaja opera") suggests that this plot device is taken from Rossini's La gazza ladra (cited in Lowe).

⁵Similarly, one of the Greek words for 'word', múthos, has come to mean something not necessarily true. Likewise Gk. épos can mean both 'word' and 'epic', and compare Slavic ckj dj, which may be a fictional literary genre as well as a 'word'. The Homeric word for dhfnm was pseúdesthai, which occurs in the Homeric formula, pseúsomai e étumon eréo? ("will I lie or tell the truth?")

in the sense, "I'm not sure." [Il. 10.534, Od. 4.140]). The first word, pseúsomai, means *to lie*, but the last word, semantically opposed in Homeric Greek, is related to it etymologically. This also belies the meaning of etymology itself (as in the third word, étumon) since it certainly does not always reveal the truth about a word.

⁶The textology is complicated on this line, but the consensus seems to be that there is no proof that the line is not Puskin's; see Alekseev.

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