ORIENTALISM REVERSED: RUSSIAN LITERATURE IN THE TIMES OF EMPIRES

ALEXANDER ETKIND
Department of Russian Studies, University of Cambridge


Harsha Ram, The Imperial Sublime: A Russian Poetics of Empire (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003)

In the last decades of the Russian Empire, Edward Gibbon’s Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire made for favorite reading among the intelligentsia. Today imperial themes have become increasingly important in American academia; historians and literary scholars who study Russia are no exception. The two studies under review explore the spirit and the letter of the Russian Empire in the moment of boom and glory preceding its collapse. Published in 1994, Susan Layton’s Russian Literature and Empire was the pioneering study of the subject. Published in 2003, Harsha Ram’s The Imperial Sublime is so different from Layton’s book that the differences, rooted in the American rather than the Russian imperial experience, deserve reflection in their own right. While Layton looked at the world through the emancipatory optic of postcolonialist and feminist movements, Ram manifests a different kind of sensibility, one which is alert to the scale and beauty of the victorious power. In a sad but understandable way, Susan Layton’s ethical concerns give way to Harsha Ram’s aesthetic ones.

A late development among great European empires, the Russian Empire survived and outdid most of them, after its collapse having been transfigured into its new Soviet reincarnation. Established in the early eighteenth century by a series of foundational acts which ignored the previous state order, the empire quickly absorbed the lands at its center and on its periphery. In the heartlands as well as in the newly annexed territories, the imperial order replaced barbarity and wilderness. Orthodox and non-Orthodox Russians, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and “heathens” who inhabited the annexed lands were to various extents subjected to Russian statehood. The major instrument of this imperial expansion was not the high-tech Navy but regular and irregular multi-ethnic
troops who moved by foot or on horse across the continents. Larger than the Soviet Union and much larger than the current Russian Federation, the empire of the tsars stretched from Poland and Finland to Alaska and Manchuria. Administrative models were taken from European teachings and practices, but the local resistance and organized corruption made them recognizably different and, in addition, variable within the empire. In 1815, when Russian troops occupied Paris, the empire had its highest moment. Alexander I defined laws and borders for Europe and initiated the first viable project of European unification, known as the Holy Alliance. After the Napoleonic wars, nationalist revivals spread over Europe, infected Russia, and buried this premature order. In the imperial contest, Russia lost grossly to its major rival, Great Britain. Russian emperors and their governments tended to observe treaties because they knew their own weaknesses. They would have done better not to expect the same from their counterparts.

From its inception, the Russian Empire was encumbered by serfdom. The “estate” legislation subjected different populations to different laws. The extension of serfdom to the newly occupied territories was practiced with reserve and in the early nineteenth century was legally forbidden. While colonial subjects could not have become serfs, generations of Russian peasants were effectively enslaved. The Poles, Jews, Tatars, Chechens, and Finns suffered immensely, but they were not subject to any worse treatment than the empire inflicted on Russian serfs. Awkward and obsolete, in the middle of the nineteenth century Russian domestic institutions had far less of the characteristics of modern society than European empires had, in their colonies as well as at home. In fact, Russians were more heavily taxed and restricted in their rights than many non-Russians. It was an odd empire; many crucial relations were the obverse of what was seen in other empires.

Nowhere else was the interconnection between the internal and the external as visible as in Russian politics. The combination of imperialist politics and internal repressions made Russia unpopular in Europe. Often comparing Russia to America, Europeans saw in these countries two ascending and strange, not entirely civilized, powers that would, to their chagrin, run the world of the future. The Crimean War with major European powers produced internal changes in Russia. Under the impact of the external defeat, Russia emancipated millions of its serfs far more peacefully than was accomplished in the US. Ultimately manifesting in Vladimir Lenin, some politicians and historians believed that the massive internal violence was still ahead. Having escaped a civil war of the American type, Russia would not escape a revolution of the Russian type. When it happened, the Revolution transformed the internal structure of the state but did not diminish its imperial ambitions in respect to its neighbors and its own people.

The literary scholar Susan Layton tried to prove that high literature played crucial roles in Russian imperial endeavors. Relying on Edward Said’s seminal
formulations on the nature of Orientalism as an aggressive, omniscient amalgam of knowledge and power, Layton represented the Russian endeavor in the Caucasus as a standard Western conquest of the East. Layton’s sympathies belonged firmly to the peoples of the Caucasus, those who were oppressed and silenced and whose words we can now hear only through the distorted records of their enemies. Layton believed that the suffering of the Russian subjects was caused not only by the invading troops and colonial administrators, but also by the romantic writers who unfairly represented them. Along with Russia’s underdeveloped journalism but often forging ahead of it, novels and poetry created distorted images of the natives, which guided the rulers, informed the public, and, in the final account, blamed the victims.

In works which were published after Layton’s, Edward Said’s arguments were corrected in many respects, two of which are relevant here. Using British examples, David Cannadine showed that cultural traffic between the capital and the colonies was actually reciprocal. The British who mimicked Indians and other colonials in food or spirituality comprised the rule rather than the exception; even more importantly, Brits projected onto their subjects the presumption of affinity rather than difference, so that they would deal with habitual hierarchies rather than with exotic and dangerous disorder. Writing about German colonialism, Russell Berman showed that the cultural logic of Orientalism changed its patterns when it worked in Western empires other than the French and the British. In Berman’s account, German missionaries and scholars were more attentive to the natives and their informants were not deprived of human agency to the extent that was typical for their British and French colleagues. Orientalism was not a universal mechanism of domination but a specific cultural pattern, variable in different cultural situations.

Like Said’s, Layton’s claims were multidisciplinary, but her method and material were confined to literary scholarship. A scholar of Russian literature, she based her judgments on readings of a number of Russian authors who wrote prose and poetry about the Caucasian wars. Criticizing numerous authors for reducing the Caucasian tribes and their women to the status of silent objects, Layton failed to find a way to make them speak for themselves. This task would entail strenuous efforts to interpret the folklore and religion of these peoples in a way that is customary for, say, scholars of African-American traditions. However, literary texts also constitute historical sources. Many of the Russian authors who wrote about the Caucasus took part in wars there. Even when fictionalized, their accounts have the value of evidence. Some of these accounts became immensely

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2 Russell Berman, *Enlightenment or Empire: Colonial Discourse in German Culture* (Lincoln, 1998).
popular texts which many Russians and Russianists have read and taught until now. Looking at these texts from postcolonial and psychoanalytic perspectives, Layton gave them refreshing and sometimes stunning readings.

Lending gender metaphors to postcolonial readings, feminist criticism played the leading role in Layton’s venture. According to Layton, Russian male authors and their proxies, characters from their novels and poems, projected onto the Caucasian women, tribes, and natural setting the dynamics of seduction and rape. Equating political domination with masculine power, her method of choice consisted in revealing “the oriental machismo” in these characters and authors. Most of the narratives that she was concerned with she interpreted as variations of The Taming of the Shrew. However, the gendering of colonial relations is just a metaphor; it is not a theory of empire or a paradigm for its critical deconstruction. In some cases, such as in Layton’s reading of Pushkin’s “The Prisoner of the Caucasus,” her feminist alertness makes her less sensitive to other dimensions of the text. Pushkin’s white noble male so evidently abuses the Caucasian girl who saved his life by sacrificing her own, that the whole story reads like a moralistic cartoon, a condemnation of this man and his peers. Layton appears not to see that the exaggerated “machismo” of the Prisoner was depicted to send an anti-imperial message, even though this message contradicted some other parts of the same poem.

The actual history of the Russian “taming” of the Caucasus also demands a reading which would not organize events into a linear narrative, but rather would reveal their contradictions. Then, as now, Russian troops were notoriously ruthless and the interests of the locals seem to be the last thing that concerned them. However, cultural traffic in the Caucasus has consistently been reciprocal. The Russian officer and poet Mikhail Lermontov was the first to show it in his celebrated novel The Hero of Our Time (1840) and, in the concentrated form of a non-fictional essay, in “The Caucasian” (1841). With surprise and irony, Lermontov depicted Cossacks and Russian officers who mimed their “savage” enemies. Riding and military skills, everyday culture (including gender and marital relations), and even the language of the Chechens and other hostile tribes became subjects of permanent attention, discussion, and emulation among the Russians. These Russian Europeans did not believe in the superiority of their culture and did not try to transform, successfully or not, the local Muslims. If we believe Lermontov, the opposite was true. Russians were dissatisfied with their culture and disillusioned with their power, so much so that they identified with their enemies, who provided the only accessible alternative.

Reading Lermontov subverts the received wisdom about the vices of empire-building, such as the arrogance of the imperialists, their ignorance of native subjects, and the inevitable loss of these subjects’ culture. Reading literary texts, of course, does not supplant social history and cultural anthropology. We do
not know how typical these Lermontovian officers were who were going native while still performing their duties. The enormous popularity of Lermontov’s *Hero of Our Time*, however, testifies to the fact that his portraits were perceived as plausible and his criticism relevant. For centuries numerous Caucasian tribes fought, traded, and mixed among themselves as well as with Russians, Turks, Georgians, Persians, and others. The imperial façades of St Petersburg were far away from the Caucasus; in the mountains, the army which defeated Napoleon fought and lived not much differently from the “wild highlanders.” Following Lermontov but not necessarily acknowledging his priority, recent historians emphasize the instability of the borders and the mixed character of cultural products in the Caucasian mountains. Cultural hybridization took place on both sides of the Christian–Muslim contact, which resulted in a porous mosaic rather than a straight borderline. The peaks of military hostilities coincided with hostage-taking on both sides, intermarriages, trade, reciprocal learning and teaching.

Layton discusses Lermontov at length but does not do justice to the peculiarity of his picture of the Russian imperial endeavor. The reasons for this lacuna are ideological and methodological. Ideologically, the Saidian picture of a unidirectional manifestation of cultural power makes it a better story and harmonizes with feminist criticism more easily than a more complex account of reciprocal emulations and avoidances. Methodologically, cultural hybridization has made for a popular subject of postcolonial studies with the works of Homi Bhabha. His approach destabilized the opposition between the imperial masters and the colonial subjects and focused on paradoxically creative dimensions of colonialism. The earlier versions of the postcolonial approach did not do justice to the enormous “grey” zones that lay between the imperial capitals and the colonial frontiers. It was these hybridized zones, sometimes grey and sometimes blooming, which were actually “empires.”

The most peculiar feature of the Russian Empire was the permanent interchange between its internal and external colonies, which effectively blurred the very difference between them. The new capital of the empire, St Petersburg, was established in territory so recently conquered that it was still perceived as foreign. Unlike European empires which ostensibly continued the noble traditions of their past, the Russian Empire started from a self-proclaimed purpose to overcome its own patrimonial tradition. One foundational act invited foreigners to “colonize” the internal heartlands in order to give the local populations new models of enlightened work and life. Another foundational

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3 See particularly Thomas Barrett, *At the Edge of Empire: The Terek Cossacks and the North Caucasus Frontier, 1700–1860* (Boulder, 1999).

4 See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, 1994).
act forced the country’s elite to change their clothing and hair, so that the elite would not look like Russian commoners. The ruling elite of this empire was amazingly multiethnic. Tatars, Swedes, Poles, Germans, Georgians, Jews, and multiple others were integrated into the Russian aristocracy, bureaucracy, and high culture. No wonder that throughout the imperial period the Russian literati were increasingly conscious of the cultural gap which separated the elite from “the people.”

Nothing damages empires more than the feeling in their capitals that this is the time to think about one’s own kind rather than about distant lands. The Russian empire did not survive the process. Late by imperial standards, by the end of the nineteenth century, it began its painful transformation into a nation state. The Revolution of 1917 destroyed the former empire and created a new one, delaying Russia’s development as a nation state for almost a century. In political science, the theory of nationalism developed with no obvious connection to theories of postcolonialism and empire. Here again, the peculiar case of the Russian Empire provokes difficult questions. The classical empires of the West (British, French, and German) were built by these nations after they underwent their national revolutions. Nation-building preceded and then developed in parallel with empire-building. In contrast to these Western examples, the empires of the East (Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian) significantly preceded the development of nations, civil societies, and nationalist cultures on their core territories. There in the East, revolutions were needed to build nation states on the ruins of the empires. In Russia, throughout a large part of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth, the intelligentsia did not direct the empire, as one might expect from the Foucauldian and Saidian theories of “knowledge-power,” but confronted it. Beginning with Pushkin, the empire did not like its poets, and most of them did not like the empire. (Some of them served it well, but not by their pen.) Though the nineteenth-century governance was as dependent on knowledge in Russia as it was elsewhere, the actual situation would be better described as confrontation between power and knowledge rather than fusion between them.

The British historian Geoffrey Hosking asserted that nineteenth-century Russians were so focused on their utopian empire that they missed their opportunity to create a viable nation state. In fact, this observation is more relevant to the architecture of this empire than to its literature. A short tour through the imperial capital, St Petersburg, would illustrate this point. Built on territory which was barely populated by semi-Christian, semi-shamanistic

5 With reference to the Ottoman Empire, this thesis was developed by Michael Walzer, On Tolerance (New Haven, 1997).
6 See e.g. Geoffrey Hosking, Russia: People and Empire (London, 1998).
tribes, the new capital embodied the universalist imaginary of ancient Rome. Its formidable palaces, cathedrals, and military barracks were designed by Italian and French architects. Before the late nineteenth century, when nationalist historicism started to rule the day, no architectural motif or ornamental detail referred to local, Slavic or Nordic, cultural traditions. One feels a deep resemblance to Washington, DC in this project. Rooted in similar European traditions, both capitals promoted the supranational, transhistorical self-images of the aspiring masters of the world. These images effectively denied any reference to local particularities.

In literature, the tasks of the imperial imagery were more challenging. Literature needs language, which is condemned to be particular rather than universal. However, the Enlightenment had its universal language, which was French. It was also the language of Russian high society, and even a major war with the French did not change this fact. In the 1830s ladies and gentlemen in St Petersburg still preferred French to Russian in their business correspondence and even in private life. In Alexander Pushkin’s *Evgenii Onegin* the heroine writes a love letter in French to her male counterpart though they are both Russian. Pushkin apologized to the reader for translating it into Russian; later Lev Tolstoy, in *War and Peace*, depicting almost the same period, chose not to translate, and many pages of this Russian novel are written in French. In the same period, when edifices of St Petersburg were erected in the neoclassicist architectural manner which was properly called “the style of empire,” Russian nobles were learning to read and write Russian. With much hesitation and ambivalence, these “patriotic” efforts were supported by the imperial administration. The grand narrative of the empire became an asset of strategic significance. Like architecture, literature was supposed to supply the victorious empire with a sublime inspiration, one which does not alienate a person from his or her (usually his) civil duties but connects intimate feelings to the grand imperial story. As it happened, literature managed to express the new nationalist concerns well before and much better than architecture, academic history, or political activism. This turning point, from the creation of the imperial narrative to its subversion by a nationalist one, became the highest point of Russian literature.

The interests of Harsha Ram focus on the ascending part of this curve. His hero is the self-made eighteenth-century genius Gavriil Derzhavin, who wrote odes to Catherine II, became minister of justice, and remained the role model for Russian poets for two centuries. From Derzhavin, Ram goes all the way to the twentieth-century philosophers who, living in the post-revolutionary desolation or in European emigration, dreamed about the historical role of Russia as the spiritual and political center of “Eurasia” and about Bolshevism as the common denominator between Christianity and Islam. These thinkers were usually far from actual political power, but they envisioned their role as prophets and guides
of the Communist regime. Though Ram includes a chapter on those nineteenth-century poets who disagreed with the imperial narrative and suffered because of their dissent, his version of Russian literature is unusually complacent towards power. In contrast to the traditional courses of Russian literature, romantic rebels, superfluous men, and leaders of revolutions do not overcrowd Ram’s narrative.

Ram’s key concept is the sublime, an ancient category which was revived in pre-Revolutionary France and from there was imported to Russia. Sublime genres, such as the ode, the historical novel, and the heroic biography, were in demand in many empires. In Russia more than elsewhere, sublime aesthetics accompanied political terror, reifying the classical conjecture explicated by Edmund Burke. It is a pity, of course, that Burke’s definition of the sublime as “the concomitant of terror” did not make its way into Russian textbooks. However, it did not remain unnoticed. Following the itinerary of the concept of the sublime in Russian letters, Ram sadly overlooks Nikolai Nadezhdin, a Hegelian philosopher, a populist ethnographer, and, in his later years, an official in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In 1829 Nadezhdin published an article, “On the Sublime” (O wysokom) in a mainstream journal, the Messenger of Europe. Nadezhdin took issue with Edmund Burke, who, according to Nadezhdin, “reduced the sublime exclusively to fear and terror.” Burke did not satisfy Nadezhdin and he preferred to elaborate on Kant’s and Hegel’s ideas of the sublime. What Nadezhdin perceived as Burke’s “reduction” of the sublime to terror was actually a warning that the sublime, if left without criticism and irony, might lead to terror or bless it. However, Nadezhdin had no doubts about the sublime’s relation to power. The sublime, he wrote, “lifts us to foreshadow the eternal element of every greatness.” In other words, Nadezhdin’s sublime demonstrated the sacred aspect of any existing power.

There is a long and tricky way from this Hegelian formula to the belief of the contemporary theorist Paul Fry, who, according to Ram, argues that the sublime “covertly transfers power from the oppressor to the oppressed.” In his attempt to re-evaluate the Russian sublime, Ram relies on this statement. For practical as well as historical reasons, I would rather trust Burke, or even Nadezhdin. In Russia and elsewhere, the sublime was used to justify and sacralize power, to transfigure terror into beauty, to extend the current oppression into eternity. In the context of the Russian struggle between knowledge and power, the Hegelian aesthetics of the sublime found few practical adherents among the

7 Among the new Russian politicians and “political technologists” of the Putin era, often the former literati who are making quick money on politics, one can easily find devotees of these “Eurasianists.”
9 Quoted from Ram, The Imperial Sublime, 16.
Russian authors. They preferred to produce elegies, comedies, and, finally and most famously, psychological novels which had little to do with the sublime and effectively subverted the authoritative. The most widely read pieces of Russian literature depict little men and women in the underground of the empire. This dirty and stuffy space, surviving under many layers of social power, happened to appeal to readers in the twentieth century. On the other hand, those authors who did practice the sublime remained marginal in Russian letters. Whatever writers did, and they did pretty much everything, readers ignored the imperial sublime. There were Dostoevsky and Chekhov; there was no Russian Kipling or Conrad. Ram does well to recover the Russian sublime from oblivion; however, its relatively insignificant place in the cultural memory is an important fact that Ram does not subject to interpretation.

Beginning with Derzhavin, Ram demonstrates interconnections between the idea of sovereignty, the emerging poetic self, and the Russian kind of Orientalism. In one of Derzhavin’s odes to Catherine II, the poet identifies himself with a Tatar prince who voluntarily submits to Russian sovereignty. Presenting himself as a grateful Oriental subject who was uplifted to the Enlightenment by the omnipotent empress, Derzhavin praised her for nurturing Russia and himself. He clearly identified the Russian internal power with the colonizing hand of the West and was proud to exemplify this process (Derzhavin believed in his Tatar genealogy). In these and other cases, the Russian author found his freedom in the identification with those Oriental subjects who voluntarily surrendered to the Western power and affirmed its hegemony. Ram finds this type of self-orientalizing trope also in Pushkin’s and, particularly, Lermontov’s poetry. Describing Orientalism as an academic preoccupation and political practice, Edward Said overlooked the possibility of seeing it as a flexible perspective, mask, and self-presentation. With their borderline geography, ambivalent loyalties, and mixed ethnic origins, Russian poets deconstructed the Orientalist mind-set, reproducing it in their ironic practices. Ram does not use the concept of reverse Orientalism, but he shows in a series of scattered but eloquent examples that this mind-set was characteristic of Russian authors from Derzhavin to Lermontov to Blok. They constructed their cultural identities by contrasting themselves against the West and by suffusing these identities with domestic Orientalia.

Writing about the fascinating poet, diplomat, and colonial administrator Alexander Griboedov, Ram imagines Griboedov’s mind as a spatial edifice with an axis of “vertical poetic sublime” and a “prosaic horizontal axis dominated by the exigencies of politics”. In the rich context of Griboedov’s life and work, this

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10 Such precarious but important combinations were also unacknowledged in a recent book which compared the Russian Slavophiles with al-Qaida: Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, Occidentalismand: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).
structuralist model seems anachronistic. While serving in the Caucasus and Persia (where he was killed in 1829 in Tehran by a Muslim mob), Griboedov composed comedies about the Moscow gentry and wrote business plans for Russian commercial expansion into the colonies. Joining the tradition of Orientalist reversal, Griboedov composed a fascinating poem (“Predators on the Chegem,” 1825) which subverted his own imperialist role in the East and equalized two colonial regimes: Russian rule in the Caucasus and Russian rule over its own people. In the poem the narrator is a Chechen warrior who writes romantic verses about the Caucasus and then, quite suddenly, ends up by saying that, for Russians, captivity abroad is no worse than their chains at home. “And is the exchange between them so terrible?” asks this Caucasian narrator. Griboedov’s poem presents the clearest, though not the simplest, narrative of Russian colonialism ever written. There were two colonial adventures, internal colonialism at home and external colonialism abroad, and they were in permanent exchange. The Russian Empire was built by and through this exchange.

It is insufficient to apply Western concepts of external domination, such as imperialism, Orientalism, and knowledge-power, to the Russian case. Russian internal colonialism requires exploration in its own right.\textsuperscript{11} Beginning in the 1840s and extending through the nineteenth century and beyond, Russian authors were constructing their internal Other, the People. Intellectuals and bureaucrats ceaselessly talked about the commoners without letting them speak for themselves. Exotic and alien, but firmly situated on national territory, the peasantry was the Russian equivalent of the noble savage. Before the Emancipation of 1861, but also well after it, Russian peasants were treated as if they were members of a different race. Wise and virtuous or wild and unbridled, the common men and women were endowed with features which were radically different from those of the authors and the public. Having been reduced to commodities which were sold on the market, subjected to corporal punishment and feudal duties, peasants were ascribed fantastic features which justified their pain, such as natural kindness, a communitarian spirit, and, in the most extreme formulation of Dostoevsky, love of suffering. Access to the people could be

\textsuperscript{11} In the late nineteenth century, Russian historians used similar terms such as “Russian self-colonization” (Sergei Solov’ev) or “Russian colonization of itself” (Vasiliii Kliuchevskii). In Western scholarship, the sociologist Michael Hechter introduced the concept of internal colonization for his study of the British (see his \textit{Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development} [London, 1975]), and the historian Eugen Weber used it in French history (see his \textit{Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France} [Stanford, 1976], chap. 6), as did the anthropologist James C. Scott in his study of “high modernity” (see his \textit{Seeing Like a State} [New Haven, 1998]. In studies of Russian history and literature this concept was used by Boris Groys, Dragan Kuiundzich, and Alexander Etkind.
gained by special methods, which according to some thinkers were religious, according to others, scientific. In contrast to British cultural anthropology, which tended to be an imperialistic study of other peoples, usually distant Others from overseas, Russian ethnography was an imperialistic study of one’s own people perceived as the Other. Construing “immense gaps” and “oceanic distances” which separated them from the commoners who lived next door, intellectuals compared these distances to those which separated European powers from their overseas colonies.

Nikolai Gogol described St Petersburg as “something similar to a European colony in America: there are as few people of the native ethnicity and as many foreigners who have not yet been amalgamated into the solid mass.” Looking from this capital, one could only contemplate the foreign and exotic character of those Russians and non-Russians who lived in the immense spaces to the east. The Russian folk became an object of Orientalism and developed into a fantastic ideological construction. Simultaneously, the people were subjected to glorification and compassion. Launched by the early stories by Radishchev and Karamzin, this improbable combination of the sublime and the sentimental was projected onto the peasantry. Then, in interaction and comparison with the romantic savages of the Caucasus, Siberia, and America, it evolved into the populist characters of the late nineteenth century. The enigmatic characters of Lev Tolstoy’s and Maxim Gorky’s novels had their origins in these cultural hybrids. If Susan Layton and Harsha Ram had looked at this internal colony, where the sublime exaltation before the people met with sentimental compassion for their suffering, their special interests would have met. But both of them ignore this important development, hence reproducing nationalist (as opposed to imperial) stereotypes which segregated the “alien tribes” from the “Russian people,” the external colonies from the internal ones.

The most stimulating hypothesis of Ram’s book is the connection between the building of the empire and the development of syllabo-tonic Russian versification. A distinctive and unusually stable feature of Russian poetry, its rhythms and rhymes have attracted myriads of studies which treat them as if they were natural crystals, whose beauty is shaped by mathematical regularities and has nothing to do with human history. Ram notices that empire and poetry were established in Russia at practically the same time, that these institutions closely interacted

through two centuries, and that the evolution of Russian poetry was a response to the advent of the imperial state. (One could add that Russian poets tended to abandon regular meters synchronously with the end of the empire.) Drawing on this idea, Ram sees the cradle of Russian poetry not in folk songs, religious sermons, or vows of love, but in military parades and courtly odes. Politicizing the sacred beauty of the word, Ram’s idea will make many of poetry’s devotees unhappy. Hinted at, but not fully developed by Ram, this challenging hypothesis deserves further exploration. A much-observed parallel between Derzhavin and Mayakovski, two geniuses of poetry and amateurs of politics who, separated by a century, mark the beginning and end of the hegemony of Russian rhymes, makes full sense in line with this idea. The imagined rationality of the empire found its most accomplished manifestation in the utopian order which it imposed on a rare and special elaboration of human speech. While neighboring lands split off and the colonization of the people was never achieved, the empire triumphed in the sublime discipline of poetic language. After many revolutions, it is poetry which has survived.