

# Russian Literature

Croatian and Serbian  
Czech and Slovak  
Polish

Volume XXVIII  
1990



NORTH-HOLLAND – AMSTERDAM

## AUTHENTICITY AS THE TIE THAT BINDS: ANDREJ BITOV'S "ARMENIA LESSONS"

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"...there is no new and old in the world because  
*everything* in it [the world – E.C.] *is now.*"  
("...v mire net novogo i starogo, potomu što v  
nem vse est' seičas.")

Andrej Bitov, "Armenia Lessons"<sup>1</sup>

Andrej Bitov's travelogue cum philosophical essay is one of the most powerful works that he has written. Written in 1967-1969, as he was working on his major novel *Pushkin House* (*Puškinskij dom*), "Armenia Lessons" ("Uroki Armenii") contains energetic statements about the necessity of respecting culture and values. In the course of "Armenia Lessons", Bitov utilizes a technique he had used before. In "Life in Windy Weather" ("Žizn' v vetrenuju pogodu"), he had interwoven images from the Book of Psalms and Pasternak's poetry into his own text and had thereby reinforced, on a stylistic level, the point he was making, thematically, about the similarity of the creative impulse in art, life, and spirituality.<sup>2</sup> In "Armenia Lessons", the technique becomes a part of the message he imparts.

Authenticity lasts, according to Bitov, and the eternal connects one age to another. Bitov writes, "The eternal has no history. History is only for the transient. Biology has a history, but life has none. The state has a history, but a people has none. Religion has a history, but God has none." ("U večnogo net istorii. Istorija est' liš' dlja prechodjaščego. Istorija est' u biologii, no ee net u žizni. Ona est' u gosudarstva, no ee net u naroda. Ona est' u religii, no ee net u boga.")<sup>3</sup> Particular human beings, particular governmental structures, particular religions are time-bound, but the fundamental, quintessential essence of life, of a people, and of God is eternal.

One way in which Bitov illustrates his point is to weave into his own text quotations, patterns, images and resonances from pieces of past culture that themselves are eternal. By the time he has finished his "Armenia Lessons", Bitov has referred to temples and books that are over one thousand years old; Ecclesiastes; the Armenian French chansonnier Charles Aznavour; the Armenian American writer William Saroyan; Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*; Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*; Osip Mandel'stam's "Journey to Armenia" and his poems about Armenia; Puškin's "Journey to Arzrum", "The Bronze Horseman", "The Prophet"; Turgenev's "Russian Language" ("Russkij jazyk");<sup>4</sup> Čechov's story, "The Student"; Soviet Michail Kol'cov's travelogues; science fiction writer Ray Bradbury; Armenian customs; the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, Mesrop Mashtots; the Armenian historian, Leo; the contemporary Armenian artist Martiros Saryan; contemporary Armenian writer Grant Matevosian; and Dutch Renaissance painting.

Puškin and Mandel'stam play important roles in this respect, and it is to the particular roles that they play in "Armenia Lessons" that we must now turn. Puškin's *Journey to Arzrum* plays a larger role in Bitov's journey than merely to serve as a source for the epigraph to "Armenia Lessons". Puškin begins his own 1829 journey to the same geographical location in which Bitov's travelogue takes place by explaining that the poet does not seek inspiration, but that inspiration seeks out the poet. This duplicates one of the major realizations to which Bitov comes during his sojourn in Erevan. It was only when he stopped searching for the essence of Armenia that the essence of Armenia found him.

Puškin explains that during his travels he found a copy of his "Captive of the Caucasus" ("Kavkazskij plennik"). One of the sections of Bitov's "Armenia Lessons" is entitled "Captive of the Caucasus" and the incident Bitov relates in "The Little Song" ("Pesenka"), one of its subsections, replicates, in general outline, the plot of Puškin's "Captive of the Caucasus". In both, a local woman is attracted to the "captive" Russian man. Near the end of his journey, Bitov will speak about living the experiences which he has described in his book. Here, he is living the experience which Puškin, who had written his own travelogue, had described in one of his works. Bitov, here, removes the boundaries between life and literature.

In *Journey to Arzrum* (*Putešestvie v Arzrum*), Puškin describes an incident in which poets and dervishes are deemed to be equal to political leaders, and it is the poets, he explains, to whom the political leaders bow. Bitov, like Puškin, emphasizes the exalted status of the poet. Puškin's poem, "The Prophet" ("Prorok"), provided the same theme of inspiration that Bitov had been discussing throughout so much of his travelogue. Another Puškin work, "The Bronze Horseman" ("Mednyj vsadnik") is

brought into the discussion to reveal Puškin's ambivalent attitude toward Peter the Great's city. Through his reference to Puškin and through the prominent place Puškin and Puškin's thoughts occupy in Bitov's epigraph and essay, the reader is made to see that nineteenth-century culture is still alive (we recall Bitov's words that "everything is now") in the present.

Mandel'stam's works play an equally important role in "Armenia Lessons" in this respect, although his "Journey to Armenia" ("Putešestvie v Armeniju") is not explicitly mentioned in "Armenia Lessons".<sup>5</sup> We must also remember, parenthetically, that Bitov's original title for his Armenian travelogue was "Journey from Russia" ("Putešestvie iz Rossii").<sup>6</sup> That title made it more obviously connected to Mandel'stam's "Journey to Armenia". Even without that title, Bitov's "Armenia Lessons" demonstrate that the past culture of Mandel'stam "lives" in the present work of Bitov's. Bitov's "Armenia Lessons" seem to be conversing with – most of the time, affirming and occasionally taking issue with – Mandel'stam's "Journey to Armenia".

As Bitov does in "Armenia Lessons", Mandel'stam begins his ruminations on Armenia with a tribute to the Armenian language. Mandel'stam serves as Bitov's model when he writes that he is impressed with the Armenians' "...magnificent familiarity with the world of real things..." ("...prekrasnaja famil'jarnost' s mirom real'nych veščej...").<sup>7</sup> Mandel'stam speaks of a "deafness" ("gluchota")<sup>8</sup> that he notices in speaking about Armenian culture. Bitov describes a "muteness" ("nemota").<sup>9</sup> At one point, early in his visit, Bitov speaks of Armenia as being like the convex planes of a beer bottle, a polyhedron. The shape, he says, reminds him of Armenian churches.<sup>10</sup> At one point, Mandel'stam writes about a scientist who had explained convexity and the polygon to him.<sup>11</sup> Mandel'stam remarks on the shapes and colors of Armenia; Bitov does the same. Mandel'stam had declared that there is no perspective – one cannot see the horizon – in Armenia. Bitov writes that there is perspective. Mandel'stam writes that he wants to live "...in the 'what ought to be'."<sup>12</sup> Bitov writes that instead of living in the world of ideals, he wants to live life as it is.

Mandel'stam describes several ancient Armenian cultural monuments, and so does Bitov. Both speak of the sensual nature of the country. Mandel'stam describes his "sensual encounter with an Armenian church" ("...stolknovenie v čuvstvennom obraze s materiej armjanskoj architektury").<sup>13</sup> Bitov asserts that the landscape he sees is feminine, and he wants to merge with it. Mandel'stam wrote that his desire was for Ovid, Puškin, and Catullus to live again. One of Bitov's major points is the existence of past culture in present life. Mandel'stam spoke about the hunger of the state and the responsibility of the writer to treat the state with compassion. Bitov speaks of the cultural person's capacity to respect the other and to understand those who feel uncomfortable in the presence of true culture.

Of course, one of the major themes of Mandel'stam's works was the importance of the writer as the force that preserves and transmits a culture's ethical values from one generation to the next. And of course, this is a major theme of Bitov's "Armenia Lessons".

Bitov himself preserves and transmits pieces of Mandel'stam's poetry about Armenia. Without attributing the quotations, he quotes lines from Mandel'stam's cycle of poems, "Armenia" ("Armenija"). The first line he quotes, "Armenian speech is a wild cat" ("dikaja koška – armjanskaja reč")<sup>14</sup> appears in Bitov's first "Language Lesson" and in two out of three final poems of Mandel'stam's Armenia poems.<sup>15</sup> Thus, for Bitov here, as in other works of his, beginnings are endings, and endings are beginnings. Moreover, in these poems, Mandel'stam is describing the way in which the Armenian language reflects the country's landscape and history, a point which Bitov emphatically makes in the "language lesson".<sup>16</sup> In addition, Mandel'stam refers to Armenia as a book, thus intertwining the concepts of culture and country, language and landscape. Bitov's longstanding theme, here and elsewhere, is the interrelationship of life's seemingly disparate dimensions.

Bitov has begun his journey by reducing the culture to its simplest elements – language and alphabet. He has brought into his discussion one of the eternal genuine masters about whom he later speaks with such admiration. At this incipient stage of his knowledge of Armenia, he does not yet understand or feel or experience the depth and breadth of authenticity and the effect it will have on the core of his being.

He does not yet see the real Armenia. This fact is bolstered by the next line of Mandel'stam's Armenia poems quoted in Bitov's text: "Oh, nothing do I see, and my poor ear has gone deaf..." ("Ach, ničego ja ne vižu, i bednoe ucho oglochlo...").<sup>17</sup> A few lines after this second Mandel'stam quotation, Bitov writes that he could not see Ararat when he first arrived in Erevan.<sup>18</sup>

The quotation of this line of poetry also ties in with another of Bitov's themes, that of "being attentive", which Bitov tells us, is "uš" in Armenian. "Uš" is not "uši", the Russian word for ears.<sup>19</sup> By using the line of poetry which includes the Russian word "ucho" ("ear"), Bitov is interweaving his words and Mandel'stam's, both in very direct and in more subtle ways. And we must note that Bitov's play on the word "uš" and "uši" in Armenian and Russian is found in the subsection entitled "Allusion" ("Namek"), an allusion, perhaps, to the discoveries of the many layers of culture that Bitov and the reader who "sees" and "is attentive" can learn from "Armenia Lessons".

Bitov's own explorations have led him from not seeing the essence, at the beginning of his journey, to seeing, by the end. The "Geography Lesson", in which this Mandel'stam line is quoted, contains instances of

Bitov's own seeing: "In no way can I believe that I *do not see* anything, ... My perception is forced, I want to see Armenia in everything – and I *do not see*." ("Ja nikak ne mogu poverit', čto ničego ne vižu, ... Vosprijatie moe natužno, ja vo vsem choču uvidet' Armeniju – *i ne vižu* [Italics mine - E.C.]")<sup>20</sup>

In addition, another of Mandel'stam's Armenia poems, not cited in Bitov's text, begins with a similar line: "I will never catch sight of you./ Near-sighted Armenian sky" ("Ja tebja nikogda ne uvižu,/ Blizorukoe armjanskoe nebo").<sup>21</sup> In this poem Mandel'stam refers to the land as a book which the ancient Armenian people studied. Bitov makes extensive use of this concept. His title includes the word "lessons". His book is divided into "lessons". He compares Erevan to a book from which he is learning. He writes that the city is his alphabet, his dictionary, his conversation book. He speaks of reading the country of Armenia. Bitov, following Mandel'stam's lead, learns the spiritual values which the sacred ancient culture of Armenia teaches those people who are attuned to the melody of eternal values.

By the end of Bitov's journey, he has learned what the books, real and metaphoric, old and new, have taught him. We must respect "the great textbook of harmony" ("velikij učebnik garmonii"), he writes, for if we rip out its pages, we will not be able to study from it. At this point, Bitov again quotes from Mandel'stam, from one of the same poems he has already cited: "Oh, Erevan, Erevan! Or did a bird draw you? / Or did a lion, like a child, paint you with a colored pencil case?" ("Ach, Erivan', Erivan! Il' ptica tebja risovala,/ Ili raskrašival/lev, kak ditja, iz cvetnogo penala?").<sup>22</sup> Significantly Bitov's next paragraph contains these words: "... I finally caught sight of this Erevan. The poet could not be inaccurate..." ("...ja uvidel nakonec takoj Erevan. Poët ne mog byt' netočen...").<sup>23</sup>

This passage, and an episode in which Bitov walks through the old quarters of Erevan where he finds life, occur in the subsection he calls "Traces on Stone" ("Sledy na kamne").<sup>24</sup> One of Mandel'stam's poetry collections was entitled "Stone" ("Kamen").<sup>25</sup> One of Mandel'stam's "Stone" poems speaks of "Carskoe Selo", a place identified with Puškin. Three of them, "The Lutheran" ("Ljuteranin"), "Hagia Sophia" ("Ajja-Sofija"), and "Notre Dame" ("Notre Dame"), intertwine architecture and spirituality. Many of them are written on cultural themes – on Bach, Beethoven, Dickens, Racine, and so forth.

The more we broaden our perspective, the more we are attentive to the lessons of geography, history, and life, the more we use the binoculars of history to extend our circles of vision, the more we will see the underlying interconnections of particular people and cultural monuments and places, the more we will understand the ways in which life can be a "textbook of harmony". As we, the readers, learn more and more of Bitov's lessons,

we, like Bitov, discover the ways in which Armenian culture, Russian culture, Soviet culture, and human culture, when the authentic people are creating it and seeing it, are all one and the same. They all, according to Bitov, contain the sacred harmony of life's most essential values.

For example, the linking of bird imagery, creativity, and divine inspiration occurs in Bitov's travel essay as his friend explains to him the definition of a master, which is the person who takes the clay into his hands and then allows it to flutter out of his hands. Mandel'stam, in one of the "Stone" poems, writes, "God's name, like a large bird, / Flew out of my breast." ("Bož'e imja, kak bol'saja ptica, / Vyletelo iz moej grudi.")<sup>26</sup> Puškin's poem, "The Prophet", quoted by Bitov in "Armenia Lessons", includes the image cluster of poet, bird and divinity. In addition, Puškin writes that the angel touched the poet's "ears" ("ušej")<sup>27</sup> and that God demanded that the prophet see and hear ("...vižd', i vnemli,")<sup>28</sup> Through the intertwining and repetition of images from Puškin, Mandel'stam and Bitov, we have returned to the theme of "being attentive". When we are attentive to the allusions in life, we begin to discover the world as it really is and with that discovery, we can come to know our true selves: the world is what it is, and I am what I am.

The eternal voices of Puškin and Mandel'stam, part of a past, continue to exist in Bitov's work. What is authentic, writes Bitov, will last, if man has respect for himself and for others, if there is no distortion in history or personality, if man does not distort himself. It is particularly significant that Bitov would choose Puškin and Mandel'stam, for the fate of each in contemporary life represents one of the major points Bitov is making. The reader knows that Puškin has continued to live until the present day. In the case of Mandel'stam, the reader knows that his fate represents part of the rupture brought about by Stalin's repressive policies. As we know, Mandel'stam himself fell victim to Stalin's paranoia, and his works did not begin to be published again until after Stalin's death. Since Mandel'stam's was an authentic voice, though, it continued to live. In *Pushkin House*, Bitov will speak more directly about the disjuncture in culture brought about by Stalin's policies toward intellectuals.

Bitov's call is for the authentic, the genuine, the honest, the truthful. He believes that the only way to get authenticity is to let people, things, and cities evolve naturally. If you do let things grow and flow freely and with continuity, you will, according to Bitov, get "the reflection of God's face in his own creation" ("otraženie lica boga v ego sobstvennom tvorenii").<sup>29</sup> In this he sees the only hope for the continuation of the genuine in the world. In the preservation of culture in its highest sense, he sees the only possibility for the preservation of mankind's eternal values.

At the beginning of Bitov's sojourn in Armenia, he had visited the Matenadaran Repository for ancient manuscripts. The manuscripts were

propped up on stands, all imparting eternal wisdom to those people who listen, who are attentive. One of the manuscripts was a biography of the divinely inspired creator of the Armenian alphabet, a representative of Bitov's eternal category of a people. A second manuscript, the thousand-year-old schoolboy's botany exercise book on which he had drawn a little flower, represents Bitov's eternal category of life. A third, an ancient sketch of the celestial spheres, is symbolic of Bitov's eternal category of God. The spiritual dimension in man, the life-force, and a people's values will endure, says Bitov, as long as there are people who respect what is and what has been, for that is the only way to guarantee that the genuine, the honest, the good, and the true will endure.

Most of the sparse criticism that exists on "Armenia Lessons" concurs that the work is one of Bitov's best, to date. One of the few dissenters from this view is Vsevolod Sacharov, who is troubled by what he sees as the inaccessibility of "Armenia Lessons" to the average reader. In claiming that one needs a "dictionary-commentary" ("slovar'-komentarij") to unravel obscure literary references, in claiming that Bitov can be understood only by an erudite audience,<sup>30</sup> Sacharov misses the entire point of Bitov's tour de force.

Igor' Zolotusskij is much more perceptive. It is easy to understand why he draws Dostoevskij into his discussion of Bitov. He is, I believe, right on target when he writes that Bitov is squarely in the tradition of Dostoevskij in constantly speaking about the big questions and about the eternal questions.<sup>31</sup>

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## NOTES

- 1 Andrej Bitov, *Uroki Armenii* (Erevan, 1978), 175.
- 2 See my article, "The Creative Process in Life and Literature: Andrei Bitov's 'Life in Windy Weather'", *Slavic Review*, forthcoming.
- 3 Bitov, *Uroki*, p. 35.
- 4 Bitov's citation of Turgenev does not include the source, "Russkij jazyk". In that short work, Turgenev is speaking about the Russian language as his support and as having been given to a great people. I.S. Turgenev, "Russkij jazyk", in I.S. Turgenev, *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij i pisem v dvadcati vos'mi tomach* (Moskva-Leningrad, 1967), vol. 13, p. 198.
- 5 Mandel'stam's "Putešestvie v Armeniju" first appeared in *Zvezda* in 1933. It came out, with material added to and omitted from the *Zvezda* version, in *Literaturnaja Armenija*, No.3, 1967, pp. 83-99. It is also important to mention Osip Mandel'stam, "Zapisnye knižki. Zаметki, *Voprosy literatury*, No.4, 1968, pp. 180-204, for much of the information contained here bears

directly upon Mandel'stam's Armenia travelogue. The publication history is written up in Jane Gary Harris' commentary to the English translation of "Putešestvie v Armeniju." Osip E. Mandel'stam, *The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*. Ed. Jane Gary Harris. Trans. Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1979), p. 669. Scholarly work on this Mandel'stam work includes Carol Avins, *Border Crossings. The West and Russian Identity in Soviet Literature 1917-1934* (Berkeley, California, 1983), Chapter 12, "Narrowed Borders. Osip Mandel'stam, 'Journey to Armenia' (1933)," pp. 148-156; Jane Gary Harris, "'The Latin Gerundive' as Autobiographical Imperative: A Reading of Mandel'stam's *Journey to Armenia*", *Slavic Review*, 45 (1986), Spring, pp. 1-19; Nancy Pollak, *The Obscure Way to Mandel'stam's Armenia*, PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1983; and Nancy Pollak, "Mandel'stam's Mandel'shtein (Initial Observations on the Cracking of a Slit-Eyed Nut OR a Couple of Chinks in the Shchell)", *Slavic Review*, 46 (1987), 450-470.

For Bitov scholars, it is essential to point out the dates of the publication of these Mandel'stam materials – 1967 and 1968 – for these were the years during which Bitov was working on "Armenia Lessons".

- 6 Stephen George Sidney Hagen, *The Stories of Andrei Bitov, 1958-1966. A Search for Individual Perception*, MA Dissertation, University of Durham, 1980, Appendix IV, p. 231. The first published version of "Uroki Armenii", in *Družba narodov*, No. 9, 1969 (pp. 161-227), bore the subtitle, "A Sentimental Journey" ("Sentimental'noe putešestvie"), p. 161. The *Sem' putešestvij* version [Andrej Bitov, "Uroki Armenii", in Andrej Bitov, *Sem' putešestvij* (Leningrad, 1976), pp. 261-398] was subtitled "Journey to a Small Country" ("Putešestvie v nebol'suju stranu"), p. 261.
- 7 Osip È. Mandel'stam, "Journey to Armenia", in Mandel'stam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, *op.cit.*, p. 349; O.Mandel'stam, "Putešestvie v Armeniju", *Literaturnaja Armenija*, p. 87.
- 8 Mandel'stam, "Journey", p. 350; Mandel'stam, "Putešestvie", p. 87.
- 9 Bitov, *Uroki*, pp. 119, 174.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p.52.
- 11 Mandel'stam, "Journey", p. 358; Mandel'stam, "Putešestvie", p. 90.
- 12 Mandel'stam, "Journey", p. 374; Mandel'stam, "Putešestvie", p. 97.
- 13 Mandel'stam, "Journey", p. 372; Mandel'stam, "Putešestvie", p. 96.
- 14 Bitov, *Uroki*, p. 7.
- 15 O. Mandel'stam, "Armenija", No. XIII, "Koljučaja reč' araratskoj doliny –," in Osip Mandel'stam, *Sobranie sočinenij*, vol. 1 (Washington: 1964), p. 142 and No. XV, "Dikaja koška – armjanskaja reč' –," pp. 142-143.
- 16 In this connection, it is interesting to note that French actor Jean-Louis Barrault, in *Le Langage du Corps*, writes, "Like the flower, human speech is part of the flesh of the human body. If the deep soul of a people is contained in speech, it is speech that is above all the most subtle emanation of its body..." I am thankful to Troup Mathews for bringing this passage to my attention.

- 17 Quoted in Bitov, *Uroki*, p.66. O. Mandel'stam, "Armenija", No. 111, "Ach, ničego ja ne vižu, i bednoe ucho oglochlo", in O. Mandel'stam, *Sobranie sočinenij*, vol. 1, pp. 137-138.
- 18 Bitov, *Uroki*, p.66.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p.19.
- 20 *Ibid.* p. 52.
- 21 O. Mandel'stam, "Armenija", No. XI, "Ja tebjja nikogda ne uvižu", in O. Mandel'stam, *Sobranie sočinenij*, vol. 1, p. 141.
- 22 Quoted in Bitov, *Uroki*, p. 154. O. Mandel'stam, "Armenija", No. 111, "Ach, ničego ja ne vižu, i bednoe ucho oglochlo", in Mandel'stam, *Sobranie sočinenij*, vol. 1, p. 138.
- 23 Bitov, *Uroki*, p. 154.
- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 143-154.
- 25 O. Mandel'stam, "Kamen'", in Mandel'stam, *Sobranie sočinenij*, vol. 1, pp. 1-51.
- 26 O. Mandel'stam, "Obraz tvoj, mučitel'nyj i zybki", in O. Mandel'stam, *Sobranie sočinenij*, vol. 1, p. 18.
- 27 A.S. Puškin, "Prorok", in A.S. Puškin, *Sobranie sočinenij v desjati tomach* (Moskva, 1959), vol. II, p. 149.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- 29 Bitov, *Uroki*, p. 182.
- 30 Vsevolod Sacharov, "Alchimija prozy", *Literaturnaja gazeta*, October 3, 1975, p.5.
- 31 Igor' Zolotusskij, "Poznanie nastojaščego", in *Voprosy literatury*, No. 10, 1975, p.24.