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Fazil Iskander's pantomimic narratives

In what follows I identify a recurrent pattern in Fazil Iskander's prose: his characters' obsessive recourse to elusive utterances, ambiguous gestures, and other deliberately conspicuous, yet covert messages, whose meaning is playfully decoded and commented upon by the narrator and other characters.

In an earlier study¹ I traced the changes in the functioning of the Walter-Scottian motif of „the protagonist's eye-contact with authority figures” in: *The Captain's Daughter* (Grinev's with Pugachev), *War and Peace* (Prince Andrew, Nicholas and others' with Napoleon, Alexander and others) — and in Iskander' „Belshazzar's Feasts” (Uncle Sandro's with Stalin). In Pushkin eyes happily meet, in Tolstoy they fail to, while in Iskander the point is to avoid the deadly gaze of the Leader.” That story is saturated with multiple variations of „visual contact,” and at the dramatic moment of the encounter with Stalin this „visualness” develops into fully-fledged „theatricality”:

Performing his solo act as a dancer, Sandro slides on his knees all the way up to Stalin, his eyes covered by a turban (башлык). Then, as Stalin removes the turban and looks into his eyes, wondering where he could have seen him, Sandro, sensing danger, ventures a guess: perhaps in a documentary about the ensemble. In fact, as he realizes later, they had met some thirty years ago, when the little boy Sandro was a witness to Stalin's murderous activity but scared by his withering gaze into not telling the police.

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¹ See Жолковский А. Очные ставки с властителем. Из истории одной „пушкинской” парадигмы// Пушкинская конференция в Стэнфорде. 1999. Материалы и исследования/ Ред. Д. Бетеа и др. (М.: ОГИ, 2001), с. 381—389 (<http://rcf.usc.edu/~alikh/rus/ess/ochn.htm>).

At the time, I focused on the eye-contact motif only as part of the Walter-Scottian paradigm, but resuming recently my Iskander studies, I was struck by the pervasiveness of the theatrical layer in his narratives.

As a test case I'll examine his early piece „Rasskaz o more” („A Story about the Sea”; 1962),² in which the „theater” is placed in the service of the tale's master theme of initiation. The short story is for and about children — and a safely „Soviet” one. But the future master and his invariants are already there.

The narrator starts by recalling how as a seven-year old he learned to swim — by himself.

«Я не помню, когда научился ходить, зато помню, когда научился плавать. **Плавать я научился сам (Swimming — that I learned by myself)**... а кто учил меня ходить, неизвестно. Воспитывали коллективно».

The plot boils down to the following:

First the protagonist recounts how he and a friend would dive to retrieve ancient coins. One day he picked up from the bottom something glittering, which turned out to be the metallic lids of modern bottles. He comments: «Море подшутило над нами» (The sea had a joke at our expense.)

Then he goes back into earlier childhood. One day he for the first time „felt that the sea held [him]. It was a completely new feeling. As if the sea and I understood each other... And I learned it **myself**. Enriched myself without robbing anybody.” He was exhausted but continued trying to swim, at one point started drowning and at the last moment was rescued by a young man lounging at the beach with his date. Once he came to, the man encouraged him to go back into the water to solidify his new skill.

It becomes clear that the protagonist did not learn all by himself but had actually relied on the help of the „collective” — the guidance of, to couch this in Soviet terms, an older comrade. Soviet ideolo-

² «Рассказ о море» (1962; «The Story about the Sea») // Искандер, Фазиль. Собр. соч. в 4 тт. (М.: Молодая гвардия, 1991—1992), т. 1, с. 40—45 (http://lib.ru/FISKANDER/isk_rassk5.txt).

games can also be recognized in the words about „not robbing anybody,” as opposed, obviously, to the capitalistic enterprise of retrieving sunken treasures.

From my brief paraphrase I have deliberately omitted everything that distinguishes Iskander’s very special treatment of the plot — its theatrical layer. The fact is that, as I said, his characters do not so much interact openly and directly, as perform in front of one another elaborate scenes. Often they keep silent, striking instead telling postures and assuming various facial expressions. When they do speak, rather than stating what they mean, they say something else, expecting the other to infer their intended message. This invites the interlocutor to decode the pantomimes and parse the indirections. The text abounds in such phrases as: «желая показать» (wishing to show), «делая вид» (pretending), «как бы» (as if), «словно» (like), «казалось» (it seemed), as well the vocabulary of comprehension: «следил» (observed), «замечал» (noticed), «догадка» (a guess), «понял» (understood)... Reading Iskander, one is immersed in the world of intense semiotic interaction. Or, to put it another way, the narrator and his characters join the writer in coauthoring the narrative, thus producing a doubly artistic text, with their own stories and scenes inside the overall story.

To an extent, this technique is a borrowing from Tolstoy, see similar passages in *War and Peace*:

«Князь Андрей наклонил голову в знак того, что понял с первых слов не только то, что было сказано, но и то, что желал бы сказать ему Кутузов» (т. I, ч. 2, гл. 3). «Prince Andrew bowed his head in token of having understood from the first not only what had been said but also what Kutuzov would have liked to tell him» (Bk. II, ch. 2; p. 130).

«Невольно хозяйка остановила дольше свой взгляд на тоненькой Наташе. Она посмотрела на нее и ей одной особенно улыбнулась в придачу к своей хозяйской улыбке» (т. II, ч. 3, гл. 15). «... the hostess’ eye involuntarily rested longer on the slim Natasha. She looked at her and gave her alone a special smile in addition to her usual smile as hostess» (Bk. 6, ch. 9; p. 500).

«Другой камердинер, придерживая пальцем склянку, брызгал одеколоном на выхоленное лицо императора [Наполеона] с таким выражением, которое говорило, что он один мог знать, сколько и куда надо брызнуть одеколону» (т. III, ч 2, гл. 26). «Another valet, with his finger over the mouth of a bottle, was sprinkling Eau de Cologne on the Emperor's pampered body with an expression which seemed to say that he alone knew where and how much Eau de Cologne should be sprinkled» (Bk. X, ch. 2; p.867).³

This common motif functions differently in the two authors. In Tolstoy, it is part and parcel of his sweeping unmasking of the artificiality — in extreme cases, theatricality (as in Murat and Napoleon), — of his negative, un-natural characters. With Iskander, the point is rather a playful and enjoyable display of the inevitable ambiguity of human behavior. In his prose, the ongoing spectacle of artful pretense, signaling and decoding occupies a central place. It is rooted in traditional Abkhazian culture (reproduced with loving irony), which is based on omens, customs (ethnic and Muslim), clan mentality of tacit mutual understanding, concepts of honor, shame, impervious male self-discipline and the like. Iskander's „theatrical scenes” are oftentimes power plays — symbolic duels, sometimes bouts of rivalry among equals, other times combats between an underdog and an authority figure seeking to subjugate the resisting opponent. The *couleur locale* typically involved in such scenes is often combined with the aura of dissident allusiveness, — Thaw-style Aesopian subversion of official clichés, including sexual taboos.

Systematic classification of Iskander's pantomimes is a separate project. Here I will just illustrate their pervasive presence in what appears to be a simple children's tale.

³ These pantomimes commented upon by the narrator were first discussed in: Н. Прянишников. *Проза Пушкина и Л. Толстого. Поэтика «Капитанской дочки» Пушкина. О некоторых особенностях писательской манеры Л. Толстого* (Чкалов: Областное изд-во, 1939), с. 45—46. On Iskander's Tolstoyan connections see: Karen Ryan-Hayes, Iskander and Tolstoj: The Parodical Implications of the Beast Narrator' // *Slavic and East European Journal*, 32.2 (1988): 225—36; on his roundabout narrative, see Marina Kanevskaya, The Shortest Path to the Truth: Indirection in Fazil' Iskander // *The Modern Language Review*, 99. 1 (Jan, 2004): 131—149.

As I said, it is an initiation story, and it comes with its characteristic features: a dangerous physical test — a symbolic death of the initiate — and his return to life in the new capacity of a mature member of the community. The rite of passage involves not only mastering the practical skill of swimming but also assimilating certain social and existential values. And there is a sexual dimension to it.

To begin with, acquiring a new understanding of things, in particular, of nature. If early on, «the sea had a joke at our expense», the main episode opens with the words «the sea and I understood each other». Which launches the entire spectacle of pantomime, pretense and second guessing. Let us tune into this performance, as it runs in counterpoint to the swimming lesson proper. (In what follows, Iskander's text is in Russian, with the relevant phrases highlighted and translated, and my italicized and bracketed annotations in English.)

«Отдыхающих легко было **узнать** (recognize) по неестественно белым телам или искусственно темному загару [*interpretation of relevant features*]. На вершине каменной глыбы... девушка... читала книгу — вернее, **делала вид** (made it look like), что читает, точнее, **притворялась** (pretended), что пытается читать [*statement of pretense*]. Рядом с ней... сидел парень... Он ей **что-то говорил** (was saying something) [*importance of pragmatics not semantics of his speech*]. Девушка... смеялась и шурилась **не то от** (perhaps because of) солнца, **не то оттого** (or perhaps because of the fact), что парень слишком близко и слишком прямо смотрел на нее [*alternative interpretations of her ambiguous behavior*]. Отсмеявшись, она **решительно** (determinately) опускала голову, чтобы читать [*attempts to shed ambiguity and look unyielding*], но парень опять **что-то говорил** (kept saying something) [*irrelevance of semantics*], и она опять **смеялась** (laughed) [*less ambiguously — yielding*]... Он ей все время **приятно мешал читать** (pleasantly prevented her from reading) [*mutual ambiguity to the point of oxymoron*]. Я **следил** (observed closely) за ними... и, хоть ничего **не понимал** (understood nothing) в таких делах, **понимал** (understood), что им хорошо [*intuitive ability to «read» adult behavior, in particular, love code*]. Парень иногда... мельком **глядел** (glanced) в сторону моря, **как бы призывая его в свидетели** (as if invoking it as a witness) [*mime; the phrase оборот «как бы» (as if); personification of the sea as a universal*

mediator]. Он **глядел** (looked) весело и уверенно, **как подобает** (as befits) человеку, у которого все хорошо [*mime*].

...И вдруг я **понял** (realized), что тону [*merging of physical and intellectual initiation*]. **Не знаю почему** (I don't know why), выныривая, **я не кричал** (I didn't scream) [*attempt at understanding one's own unnaturally disciplined behavior*]. **Возможно** (Perhaps), не успевал, **возможно** (perhaps), язык отнимался от страха [*alternative interpretations*]... Но вдруг у меня... мелькнула **неприятная догадка** (unpleasant guess), что он не прыгнет в море... в такой белоснежной рубашке... С этой **грустной мыслью** (with this sad thought) [*attempts to figure out intentions of potential rescuer*] я опять погрузился в воду, она **казалась** (seemed) мутной и **равнодушной** (indifferent) [*interpretation of personified inanimate element; see above the «joke that the sea had on us»*]... И тем **обидней** (more humiliating) было тонуть у самого берега... [*moral interpretation of danger*].

В последний раз погружаясь в воду, я вдруг заметил (noticed), что **лицо парня повернулось в мою сторону** (the guy's face turned in my direction) и **что-то такое мелькнуло на нем, как будто** (and something showed passingly on it, as if) он с трудом **припоминает** (remembering) меня [*mutual attempts at interpretation; pantomime; the phrase «как будто» (as if)*]. «Это я, я! — **хотелось крикнуть** (I wanted to shout) мне... вы должны меня **вспомнить** (remember me)!» [*bravely repressed desire to communicate verbally life-and-death information*]. Я даже **постарался сделать постное лицо** (tried to make an indifferent face) [*attempted facial gesture — theater at the price of life!*]; я боялся, что волнение и страх так **исказили** (distorted) его, что парень меня **не узнает** (wouldn't recognize) [*discussion of (in)adequacy of one's own facial gesture*]. Но он меня **узнал** (recognized) [*successful signaling*], и тонуть стало как-то спокойней, и я уже не сопротивлялся воде, которая сомкнулась надо мной.

Что-то схватило меня и швырнуло на берег <...Я> **очнулся и понял** (came to and realized), что парень **меня все-таки спас** (rescued me, after all) [*merging of physical and intellectual initiation*]... От радости... **хотелось тихо и благодарно** (gratefully) скулить. Но я не только **не благодарил** (did not thank him), но **молча и неподвижно лежал с закрытыми глазами** (lay silent and unmoving) [*deliberate „zero“ pantomime*]. Я был **уверен** (sure), что мое спасение **не стоит** (isn't worth) его намокшей одежды [*interpretation*], и **старался оправдаться серьезностью своего положения** (sought justification in the seriousness of my condition) [*explanation of zero signal as pretense*]. — **Надо сделать искусственное дыхание** (artificial respiration is needed), — раздался голос девушки... [*grave interpretation of the*

protagonist's condition]. — **Сам очухается** (will cope), — ответил парень... [*positive interpretation*].

Что такое искусственное дыхание, я **знал** (I knew) [*adequate interpretation of the words*] и **поэтому** (as a result) сейчас же **затаил дыхание** (held my breath) [*intensification of pretense for gaining expected gesture of intimacy — the kiss of life*]. Но тут... **изо рта у меня полилась вода** (water poured out of my mouth). Я **поневоле открыл глаза** (couldn't help opening my eyes) [*involuntary — symptomatic — gesture refuting previous pretense*]... Девушка **положила руку мне на лоб** (put her hand on my forehead) [*successful, if modest, intimate communication*]... Я **старался не шевелиться, чтобы не спугнуть ее ладонь** (I tried not to move so as not to scare off her hand) [*continuation of pretended zero signalization for the sake of maintaining extant communication*].

— **Трави, трави,** — **сказал** (throw up, throw up, — said) парень [*first case of direct verbal communication*]... Когда он **заговорил** (started speaking), я **понял** (realized), что расплаты за причиненный ущерб не будет [*pragmatic interpretation of words*]. Я сосредоточился и «сравнил» [*interpretation and implementation of direct verbal signals*]: было приятно, что у меня в животе столько воды. Ведь это **означало** (meant), что я **все-таки по-настоящему тонул** (that, after all, I had been actually drowning) [*interpretation of symptomatic gesture as proof of veracity of previous playacting*].

— Будешь теперь заплывать? — **спросил** (asked) у меня парень... [*direct verbal communication*]. — Не буду, — охотно **ответил** я (I answered). Мне **хотелось** (wanted) ему **угодить** (please him) [*feigned verbal communication*]. — Напрасно, — **сказал** (said) парень... [*direct verbal communication*]. Я **решил** (realized), что это необычный взрослый и **действовать надо необычно** (unusual action was called for) [*successful interpretation of previously misunderstood speech; completion of intellectual initiation*]. Я встал и, шатаясь, пошел к морю, **легко доплыл** (easily swam to) до своего островка и **легко поплыл** (easily swam) обратно. Море **возвращало силу, отнятую страхом** (gave back the strength taken away by fear) [*success of physical initiation*].

Парень... **улыбался мне, и я плыл на улыбку** (smiled to me and I swam towards his smile), как на **спасательный круг** (life-saving balloon). Девушка тоже **улыбалась** (was smiling)... Они медленно шли **вдоль берега** (along the coast)... Я лег на горячую **гальку** (pebbles), стараясь плотнее **прижиматься** (cling to them) к ней, и **чувствовал, как в меня входит крепкое, сухое тепло разогретых камней** (and felt the warmth of the pebbles enter my body). Так он и ушел навсегда **со своей девушкой** (with his girlfriend)... мимоходом вернув мне **жизнь**

(life)» [*pebbles are one more mediator, along with the sea; this finale re-confirms the boy's bonding with his seniors, loving intimacy between adults and general union with nature and life itself*].

As we can see, the pantomimic thread of the narrative intertwines consistently with the athletic one. Especially spectacular are the pivotal combinations: the pointedly indifferent (*постное*, literally „lenten, pious“) face of the drowning narrator and later his feigned breath-lessness. Exaggerated as they are, these pantomimes are in tune with the nature of the rite of passage: a symbolic behavior addressing the relevant social group. The protagonist learns not „by himself,“ but under the guidance of „tribal elders.“

The specific choice of the „elder“ characters is determined by yet another archetypal aspect of initiation: sexual. As „adults,“ Iskander casts a young man and his love interest, whose courtship parallels the protagonist's initiation, offering him a subject for intellectual testing. But the boy doesn't achieve mere understanding: he experiences a „mimetic desire“⁴ to become like them, that is, to somehow participate in their nascent sexual intimacy, which, he realizes vaguely, awaits him in his future as a male. In the plot, this takes the form of mutual visual contacts, a sense of bonding and even a sort of physical intimacy with the girl. Remarkably, an early manifestation of this motif was cut from a children's edition.

Incidentally, I myself have omitted, almost completely, one characteristic component of the sexual subplot. It is quite conspicuous in the narrative, but I saved it for its moment of glory. On the brink of death, the protagonist keeps doubting — mistakenly — whether the young man would sacrifice, for the sake of rescuing him, his fancy clothes. Psychologically, this represents the boy's low self-esteem, which, in the course of initiation and precisely at the moment of symbolic death, will be proven wrong, as the older man authoritatively confirms the boy's value. Plot-wise, this is implemented through the use of the archetypal motif of „royal garments“ to be donned by the initiate once he has passed the test. In the story, the initiate doesn't put on the garments but rather has them symbolically thrown at his feet (with the additional Soviet connotation of discarding false, material values).

⁴ In the sense of Rene Girard, see his *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1966).

Combining the „clothes” motif, also quite theatrical, with those of sexual initiation and bonding with adults breeds a panoply of overt and covert details. A major narrative „find” is the way rescuing the boy while ditching the expensive clothes lets the young man show himself to the girl in the best possible light — and thus pass a sort of wedding test, both symbolically and physically, by parading in front of her semi-naked. This cluster of motifs reaffirms the mutual identification and bonding between the initiate and the „elder.”

To demonstrate the most salient moments of this combined — sex-and-clothes — subplot, let us restore and highlight the omitted passages:

«Девушка в синем купальнике (blue swimsuit)... Парень в белоснежной рубашке и в новеньких туфлях, блестящих и черных, как дельфинья спина (young guy in a snow-white shirt and brand new shoes, glistening and black, like a dolphin's back) Он глядел (looked) весело и уверенно, как подобает (as befits) человеку, у которого все хорошо (good) [*mime*] и еще долго будет все хорошо (good). Мне было приятно (pleasant) их видеть, и я вздрагивал от смутного и сладкого сознания (I shook with the vague/obscure and sweet awareness), что когда-нибудь и у меня будет такое (me, too, would have something like that)...

Но вдруг у меня в голове мелькнула неприятная (unpleasant) догадка, что он не прыгнет в море в таких отутюженных брюках, в такой белоснежной рубашке, что я вообще не стою порчи таких прекрасных вещей (in such well-pressed pants, such a snow-white shirt, that I absolutely am not worth the wasting of such beautiful things)...

Второй раз я вынырнул немного ближе (closer)... и теперь совсем близко увидел туфлю парня, черную, лоснящуюся, крепко затянутую шнурком. Я даже разглядел металлический наконечник на шнурке. Я вспомнил, что такие наконечники на моих ботинках часто почему-то терялись, и концы шнурков делались пушистыми, как кисточки, и их трудно было продеть в дырочки на ботинках, и я ходил с развязанными шнурками, и меня за это ругали. Вспоминная об этом, я еще больше пожалел себя (and quite close up I saw the guy's shoe, black, glistening, tightly laced. I could even see the metallic tip of the lace. I recalled that such tips on my shoes for some reason often got lost, so that the lace-ends became fluffy like brushes, and I had trouble threading them through the holes

on the shoes, and I would walk around with unlaced shoes and be scolded for that. Recalling that, I pitied myself even more)...

Я был уверен, что мое спасение **не стоит его намочшей одежды** (wasn't worth his wetted clothes)... — Сам очухается, — ответил парень, и я услышал, как **хлюпнула вода в его туфле** (and I heard water make a bubbling sound inside his shoe)...

Я... увидел **лицо девушки, склоненное надо мной** (the girl's face over mine). Она **стояла на коленях** (was kneeling) и, хлопая жесткими, выгоревшими ресницами, **глядела на меня жалостливо и нежно** (looking at me with tender pity). Потом она **положила руку мне на лоб, рука была теплой и приятной** (put her hand on my face, her palm warm and pleasant). Я старался не шевелиться, **чтобы не спугнуть ее ладонь** (so as not to scare her palm away)...

Рубашка потемнела, но у самого ворота была белой, как и раньше: туда вода не доставала (The shirt went dark, but at the collar was still white as before: the water hadn't gotten there)... Я понял, что **расплаты за причиненный ущерб не будет** (no repayment for the damage was due). Я... «стравил»: **было приятно** (it felt pleasant)...

Он теперь разделся и стоял в трусах. Ладный и крепкий, он и раздетый казался нарядным» (Now he undressed and was standing in his shorts). Well-built and strong, even without clothes he looked dressed up).

The quoted passages speak for themselves. Perhaps I whetted the reader's curiosity regarding the sentence once banned by Soviet editors. It's the second of these two:

«Он глядел весело и уверенно, как подобает человеку, у которого все хорошо и еще долго будет все хорошо. **Мне было приятно их видеть, и я вздрагивал от смутного и сладкого сознания, что когда-нибудь и у меня будет такое».**

What was so *risqué* about it? In fact, a lot. *Хорошо*, a well-mannered 1960s teenager's reference to orgasm; the recurrent *приятно*, also fraught with erotic overtones, especially in the context of the girl's climactic touch; the suspicious *смутное, сладкое* and *вздрагивал*; and the elusive but suggestive «такое». Remember, the boy is only seven. For Sigmund Freud, small wonder. But for a Soviet author of the 60s — and his editors, a big deal. In an ironic editorial slip, however, even that pious version still kept the passage about the unmistakably phallic metallic lace-tips for threading through vaginal lacing

holes, so envied by the little owner of the pathetically unmanly fluffy laces.

The „Story about the Sea“ appeared in the *Iunost'* magazine in 1962 (vol. 10: 69—73) as one of Iskander's very first two short stories (until then he had only published poetry). In a sense, it was his initiation as a prosaist.