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### This Land Is Your Land: Andrei Bitov Travels Through the Caucasus

José Vergara  
jvergara@brynmawr.edu

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*Full Article Title:* This Land is Your Land: Andrei Bitov Travels through the Caucasus

*Short Article Title:* Andrei Bitov Travels through the Caucasus

*Abstract:* The present article examines Andrei Bitov's *Lessons of Armenia* and *A Georgian Album* as examples of subversive late-Soviet travel writing. While some scholars have noted imperialist tendencies in the two travelogues, I argue that Bitov effectively challenges the colonial perspective. Besides considering the Soviet state's push for travel writing and tourism while Bitov was writing his texts, the article uses Mary Louise Pratt's deconstruction of colonialist travel writing as a theoretical framework. Adapting and extending her work, I examine how Bitov consistently deploys and subverts three key devices: mastery of the seen/scene, cultural-translational ability, and narratorial agency. Written under the guise of *komandirovka* travelogues, Bitov's *Lessons* and *Album* reveal the artifice of their construction. First, they run counter to the primary objective of travelogues of the era, when authors were tasked with documenting the satellite republics and fortifying the state's hold over them through their narratives and propaganda. By exposing his own insecurities about wielding agency over his story, Bitov suggests a systemic problem in the Soviet attitude. Second, in yielding to his hosts and his literary predecessors in the Caucasus, Bitov acknowledges the bounds of his efforts to assert control over a foreign or colonial space.

Главное - отдать свое и, что отдашь, того самому не есть...

(The main thing is to give away what's yours and not to eat any of what you'll give away...)

Andrei Bitov, *Lessons of Armenia*

In her magisterial study, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt deconstructs the colonialist and imperialist attitudes characteristic of western travelogues from the last several centuries. Part "study in genre" and part "critique of ideology," Pratt's work demonstrates how these accounts and their narrative techniques "gave European reading publics a sense of ownership, entitlement and familiarity with respect to the distant parts of the world that were being explored, invaded, invested in, and colonized" (2008: 3). The immense popularity of such texts, Pratt suggests, led to a constriction of the imagination and a fossilization of knowledge regarding the Other among various readerships (2008: xiii). For readers acquainted with Russian-Soviet excursions into the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Siberia, such practices and their effects ring familiar.

Indeed, Pratt culled her subjects from Western European sources who documented visits to South America, Africa, and Asia, but her insights apply quite well to works by Russian-Soviet authors. Susan Layton, for instance, maintains that such texts as Alexander Pushkin's '*Puteshestvie v Arzrum*' ('Journey to Arzrum', 1829/1836) both affirmed and challenged imperialist notions at a time when Russia was deep in the midst of its conquest of the Caucasus, a mission that ran from approximately 1800 to 1864 but whose consequences—both political and cultural—were even more far reaching (1994: 9–10). The notion of the untamed Transcaucasia would grip authors' imaginations for decades. Some fell into exoticizing traps, encouraging Russia's imperialist dreams in the process, while others condemned Russia's brutal ambitions, as in Lev Tolstoy's *Hadji Murat* (1896–1904).

Sanna Turoma, however, notes that the contexts of nineteenth-century writers who wrote about the Caucasus differ in important ways from the world of late Soviet authors such as Bitov, as well as authors from a Europe that was awakening to its nightmare of colonial history: "in the Leningrad counterculture [...] a Euroimperial past was the object of aesthetic nostalgia, whereas in 1970s Western cultural practices that past was becoming a focus of vigorous critique" (2010: 107). In other words, whereas the West was reevaluating its colonialist past, the situation was much different in Bitov's circle, in which young artists of his ilk (Joseph Brodsky, among others) sought a connection to that cosmopolitan, expansive West. This comparison helps explain Turoma's pointed criticism of the imperialist stance she sees in Andrei Bitov's travelogue-diptych *Kavkazskii plennik* (*Captive of the Caucasus*), which consists of two travelogues frequently published together: *Uroki Armenii* (*Lessons of Armenia*, 1967–69) and *Gruzinskii al'bom* (*A Georgian Album*, 1970–3, 1980–3). Turoma's comments serve as the point of departure for the present article.

In particular, Turoma proposes that Bitov's Caucasian texts are replete with "examples of the 'gentleman-colonizer's' authoritative gaze, of which the author is painfully aware, but does not want to, or makes the appearance of not being able to, rid himself of" (2010: 249).<sup>1</sup> While Turoma's diagnosis is convincing, I see greater nuance in what Bitov is doing and wish to propose another layer to his travelogues. As opposed to her, I read Bitov's texts as subtle expressions of the author's textual inversion of the tropes of the cliché imperial narrative. They demonstrate how Bitov's autobiographical narrator experiences a coming to terms with himself and his society along the course of his travels through the Caucasus.<sup>2</sup> It is gradual, it is painful, but the narrating subject exposes his own faults and limitations with candor. In other words, the presence of the imperial gaze does not automatically imply Bitov's wholesale affirmation of this point of view. Neither is it what Pratt calls an anti-conquest, for Bitov does not shy away from his complicity in the attempted Soviet domination of its satellites through literature (2008: 9). Rather, the text reads as much more contradictory than may seem at first glance; Bitov himself challenges any privileged stance he may claim to possess by probing the limits of his vision, knowledge, agency, and identity while visiting the Caucasus and then while writing back in Leningrad.

### *Tropes and Techniques*

Bitov's approach is rooted in his broader project of recognizing the Other in all its multifarious manifestations. In 'Ptitsy' ('Birds', 1975) and 'Chelovek v peizazhe' ('Man in the Landscape', 1983), he considers humanity's place among the natural world, giving voice to bonds that transcend language. In the stories about his hero Alexei Monakhov and in parts of his last novel *Prepodavatel' simmetrii* (*The Teacher of Symmetry*, 2008), he explores romantic relationships

and the problems associated with projecting one's hopes on a partner. His restless novel *Pushkinskii dom* (*Pushkin House*, 1964–71) takes up, among other subjects, anti-Semitism, historical-cultural lineages, and Russian-Western relations. These are admittedly disparate topics, but what unites them is Bitov's recurring investigation of what it means to coexist with other breathing, thinking, creating entities. Such interconnectedness is central to his poetics and finds resonance in his travelogues.<sup>3</sup>

In *Captive of the Caucasus*, the writer turns to the nature of Soviet Russia's dominion over its neighbors and his own undesired collusion. Rather than harmonize and domesticize, *Lessons of Armenia* and *A Georgian Album* emphatically deny the author's control and, through metonymy as a subject of the imperial power, his sense of sovereignty. Instead, these texts appreciate difference for its own sake and the uniqueness of the cultures they survey. Bitov thus polemicizes with the imperialist project, and his texts exhibit the unknowability of a foreign way of life, which, he maintains, cannot be mastered through travel writing alone.

This process operates on several levels. According to Pratt, the rhetoric of the “monarch-of-all-I-survey”-style travelogues involves three primary techniques: first, aestheticization of nature through descriptions of the world as an art object that can be contained; second, density of meaning by focusing on the text's material substance and using sundry adjectival modifiers; and third, mastery of the seen/scene with the author cast as both elite judge and sharer (2008: 200–201). All three of these concepts feature to some extent in Bitov's texts, but I wish to modify Pratt's list in order to elucidate better how this author from Soviet Russia inverts the expected perspective derived from the imperial center and how the Russian-Soviet context affects this phenomenon. I therefore keep “mastery of the seen/scene” but add what I call “cultural-translational ability” and “narratorial agency.”

While each of these techniques will be explained below, it is worth defining them here. To begin with the term I carry over from Pratt, “mastery of the seen/scene” refers to the process by which authors portray themselves as the sole interpreters of a landscape, a city block, a famous attraction. The scene, whatever it may be, is thus rendered static, as if it were a painting, limited to how the author describes it for the reader’s passive consumption. Writing from this perspective suggests that there is no way to see the scene (say, the Armenian landscape) other than from the vantage point the author assumed when encountering it. In short, mastery of the seen/scene is a textual domination over how a foreign land is understood and shared. Cultural-translational ability is to mastery of the seen/scene what language and culture are to sight. It consists of the travelling author’s—imperialist or otherwise—ability to translate the alien. Just as practitioners of the master of the scene trope might portray themselves through descriptions as the controller of how things are seen, the cultural-translator will claim, through diction and rhetoric if not explicitly, to be the arbiter of understanding between the home country and the distant realm. This trope is a means to domesticize and, in turn, conquer. It was particularly important in the case of Soviet writers who were tasked with representing the “near abroad” for Russia. In Bitov’s subversive travelogues, though, translation can be a literal or figureative struggle, as difficulties with false cognates lead to miscommunication and a humbling of the narrator or the attempt to piece together experiences in a cohesive form only result in further narrative fragmentation. Finally, narratorial agency speaks to the sense of control that the authorial figure wields over the tale before the reader’s eyes. It functions on a higher level than mastery of the seen/scene or cultural-translational ability, as it deals with the space the narrator inhabits within the text and, then, the potential to control movement through the narrated setting. The narrator controls not only what we see, but the path that they carve for us as well. In the late

Soviet era, when travel even to other republics was still relatively limited, this emphasis on free movement naturally elevated the narrator's position and signified a great deal. Here, the question is not only the actual travel itinerary that the author drafts but also the literary precedents that they are writing against. Bitov follows in the steps of writers such as Pushkin, Andrei Bely, and Osip Mandelstam, who had all crossed the Caucasus before him; the narrator's attempt to dictate where he journeys are mirrored by a tandem one to say something new about this space and experience in his own writing. In sum, Bitov's three tropes focus on sight, culture, and space/movement.

Bitov, however, deploys these devices only to upend them. They demonstrate that his capacity to maintain control over his experience with a foreign land remains more tenuous than he initially thinks. In crafting such a narrative, he reveals the spoliation of the imperialist mindset. Indeed, written at a time when travel was beginning to be more permissible in the Soviet Union, his *Lessons* and *Album* run counter to the demands placed upon travel writing of the era, as will be considered presently. If the travelogue genre was to be harnessed like so much else in the symbolic battle for control over satellite republics, then Bitov's travel writing operates in the opposite direction. These are texts—complex, richly contradictory, subjective in nature, experimental in quality—that defy the call to arms issued at this point in Soviet history. In his Caucasian diptych, he collects lessons and snapshots for his album to paint a picture that is, if not more authentic, then at least more nuanced, respectful of the differences that might otherwise be obscured by totalizing Soviet ideology or by tourism's tendency toward shallow and scripted encounters with the alien. Ultimately, the mask worn by someone who wishes to domesticize Armenia and Georgia gives way to the self-deprecating narrator who shrewdly undermines any such conquests, literary or otherwise.

*The Soviet Tourist's Gaze and the Colonialism Debate*

Bitov belonged to a generation that was born under Stalin, experienced the Thaw, and yet witnessed the many contradictions of the era. He idolized the West and saw Soviet Russia's encroachment on its Caucasian neighbors and the move toward a universal "Soviet" mindset as emblematic of the backwardness that he railed against in his works. Fiercely individualistic, Bitov would argue against the point of committing oneself to a cause like the USSR—and its imperialist agenda—when the world is much richer, more nuanced and complex than the Soviet worldview would suggest. Although the party supported the development of individual national cultural traditions, the goal ultimately remained "Soviet Man." This is, after all, one of Bitov's main concerns. *Pushkin House*, for instance, chronicles its protagonist's attempts to extricate himself from this outlook. If in this novel, all the references to classic and Silver Age works serve in part to show how the Soviet Union has co-opted the past, something similar is at play in Bitov's Armenian and Georgian travelogues. He wishes to break free from the baggage of the past, and Russia's involvement in the Caucasus, in both its tsarist and Soviet manifestations, strike him as of a kind.

The very title of Bitov's collected travelogues, *A Prisoner of the Caucasus*, of course, refers to Pushkin's poem and Tolstoy's *povest'*. Here, we see an example of what Grant calls "the gift of empire" (2009: xv). By giving themselves up to the Caucasus as self-sacrificial gifts, these writers and their stand-ins rhetorically participate in the colonizing mission. Traces of this tendency persist in the *Lessons* and *Album*, to be sure, but they are often summarily upset by the author. A writer of deeply intertextual works, Bitov is well aware of the literary tradition from which he springs.<sup>4</sup> He uses its main features in his travelogues to weaken the imperialist



foundations it stands on.<sup>5</sup>

Along with this complex heritage, Bitov was grappling with the development of three significant interrelated phenomena in post-Stalinist Russia: tourism, travel writing, and the question of (de)colonization. After decades of severe travel restrictions, mass and sport tourism grew exponentially in and beyond the USSR after Stalin's death. According to official records, in 1956, 561,000 Soviet tourists were sent abroad. By 1965, that figure had more than doubled to 1.2 million. It doubled yet again by 1975, and in 1985 around 4.5 million tourists spent time beyond the Soviet walls (Popov 2009: n. pag.).<sup>6</sup> The world's borders shifted dramatically, as citizens either experienced new sights or reconnected with past experiences abroad.<sup>7</sup> As Anne Gorsuch and Diane Koenker write, Soviet tourism was doubly active: it often demanded a level of physicality from the traveler not necessarily associated with Western tourism, and it sought to shape a worldview by showing how good things were "back home" (Gorsuch and Koenker 2006: 2, 5). Bitov's texts are perfect examples of how some travelogues challenged this dominant (imperial) strain with their own brand of "activism." Bitov travels, climbs, explores, but he goes out of his way to diminish the narrator's role as a great Soviet unifier; the texts challenge the narrator's authority, leaving any sort of control from the center over the periphery diluted, in effect writing against the Soviet power that he saw as inherently flawed and restrictive. Although Georgia and Armenia were part of the Soviet Union, Bitov treats them as functionally distinct places with their own separate cultures and histories, rather than as Russified Soviet republics or even brotherly socialist countries.

Much has been written about the so-called tourist gaze and its ideologies. The Soviet tourist project, embodied in the state-run travel agency Intourist, sought to shape how citizens would both experience *and* bring home foreign spaces, including those of the near abroad.<sup>8</sup> In

fact, Bitov joins a long line of tourist-writers seeking purported authenticity while abroad. Elements of this phenomenon can be discerned in his Caucasian travelogues, where the narrator carries along preconceived notions in his suitcase. Authenticity, it turns out, does not necessarily mean clarity, but rather an openness to difference.<sup>9</sup> It is in respecting their differences, neither exoticizing nor masking them completely, that he finds inspiration, offering a third path. He feels a tension between wanting to see the “real” Armenia and working through all the baggage he has absorbed as a late-Soviet writer to not impose anything on the scene before him.<sup>10</sup>

The tourist gaze, of course, had to be somehow conveyed to the Russian readership, and as restrictions were lifted there was a simultaneous boom in Soviet travel literature. After Nikita Khrushchev emphasized the need to explore lands beyond Russia, writers were tasked with documenting trips, showing how much better life at home was, and bringing a sense of unity to the multiethnic Soviet Union. In practice, however, things were less clear cut. Writers could heed the call for propaganda in travel writing, but some turned inward. Describing the state of tourism after Stalin’s reign, Gorsuch frames this pressure in terms particularly relevant to Bitov’s aesthetics: “The author of the typical Soviet travel account was like a camera, focused outwards to bring back images for armchair tourists and authorities at home rather than inwards in a risky exploration of the personal encounter with the other” (2011: 21). Bitov’s travelogues to Armenia and Georgia fit the second half of this statement perfectly. His narrative lens is quite visual, even photographic, in nature, but the author does not limit himself to reporting facts.<sup>11</sup> These texts are explorations of his inner self just as much as they are accounts of an external reality; they afford him an opportunity to consider such weighty topics as the state’s relationship with its satellites, the author’s role in imperial construction, and the differences between his way of life and that of the Other that tended to reach beyond the Soviet framework imposed by his chosen genre.

Unsurprisingly, the *Lessons* initially underwent censorship, and the *Album* could not be published until *glasnost*'. While the cracks in Soviet ideology continued to reveal themselves through the 60s and 70s, even more so after the fresh air that Khrushchev's Thaw provided, works like *Lessons* and *Album* refuse to provide a pacifying glue.

In this regard, Bitov's texts should also be read in the context of the debate over the status of the Soviet republics as colonial.<sup>12</sup> His *Lessons* and *Album* speak to fundamental issues in this debate: center vs. periphery; the definition of "empire"; Russia's complex relationships with the satellite states; the extent to which Russia exerted control (political, cultural, and so on) over the other republics; and legacies of expansion, among others. As has been pointed out numerous times, often by those in favor of the internal colonization model, Russia's position in traditional schema of colonialism is complicated, to say the least.<sup>13</sup> Ol'ga Breininger describes the situation well: "Neither the Russian Empire nor Soviet Union were colonial powers in the classical sense of this word, but they undoubtedly represented a model of statehood where the division into center and periphery and the power imbalance between them were significant and intentional and often coincided with ethnic borders" (2015: n. pag.). This friction is central to Bitov's travelogue poetics, particularly as a second initiative to Russify the non-Russian parts of the Soviet Union began in the late 1960s: What separates *him*, the would-be literary Russian conqueror, from the peoples whom he encounters in the Caucasus? Can his pen bring unity, or, rather, should it highlight meaningful dissimilarities between Russia and the near abroad?<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps most important for Bitov was the concurrent "cultural looting," to borrow Tomar Koplatazde's formulation, that brought the periphery's wealth to the center (2019: 480). A response to this exploitation manifests in Bitov's travelogues, as demonstrated below, when the narrator considers how the two republics' rich cultural—and natural—heritages may be co-opted

to serve the imperial emissary's literary and touristic account. It is simply rhetorical, rather than physical. Even if Bitov hails from the center and does not represent the colonized voice itself, his narratives subversively work to diminish the chauvinistic colonizing perspective by exposing its faults, leaving room for alternative perspectives and voices, at least as a distant possibility.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, Bitov's travelogues are not historical documents but instead deeply personal accounts, and through their genre they also illuminate aspects of the clash between the personal and national levels. Neil Larsen and Ericka A. Hoagland have analyzed how postcolonial literature evinces what the former calls a "structural tendency" by which such works as a whole and, in particular, African *Bildungsromane* allegorize the experience of a so-called nation through an account of/by an individual subject (2000: 38). Both scholars are careful to circumscribe such a framework, but they ably demonstrate the potential for a personal postcolonial narrative to function as a statement on a country's historical and political experiences. A similar process, if from the opposite end, is developed in Bitov's Caucasian tales. In other words, if in the *Bildungsromane* that Hoagland analyzes, we see "the ongoing remediation of colonialism's traumatic legacy throughout the maturation process" of the narrator and a parallel lack of closure for the book, then the Russian author's works perform something analogous: Bitov's awakening to his role as imperial subject (2018: 219). His splintering of self from the Other embodies Soviet Russia's own coming to terms with its tense relationship with the republics that it has subsumed. The formal and structural elements of *Lessons of Armenia* and *A Georgian Album*, which are told as vignettes, demonstrate this point well; they remain fragmented, moments caught as the narrator reflects on his travels and without clear resolution, as in *A Georgian Album* when the narrator, with a string of ellipses, pleads with himself to finish the book in time (1996: 334). The imperial, colonial, and Soviet travelogue would dictate an

authoritative, knowledgeable, monologic authorial voice, not one that doubts and questions its own volition, abilities, and positionality. By refusing to engage in the propagandistic travel literature that was actively fomented at the time, Bitov mounts his own anti-colonial maneuver.

### *Unlearning the Empire*

Like many of their predecessors, Bitov's accounts of the Caucasus may as well have been written by a roaming sentient eye. Their pages brim with references to looking, glancing, peering, peeping, spying, watching, spotting, recognizing, discerning, inspecting, observing, noticing, taking in, perceiving. At times the narrator implies that his vision endows him with a secret knowledge. In the opening pages of *Lessons*, he writes that “Армения ничем [...] не отличалась от других республик в глазах непосвященного [...] Страна потрясала меня как другая, не Россия” (1996: 9; “nothing [...] distinguished Armenia from the other republics to the uninitiated eye [...] The country struck me as different, not Russia”). Then, “Глаз покоился на библейско-медитеранском пейзаже. [...] Я ничего не ждал, и все было подарком” (1996: 11; “the eye found repose in the biblical-Mediterranean landscape. [...] I expected nothing, and everything was a gift”). In both cases, Bitov's stand-in reveals how he feels a sense of superiority over his host country, as well as anyone else who may witness its expanses. He alone possesses the clarity, the organ necessary to pierce through what seems so familiar and unexceptional within the Soviet space. Everything is meant for him as a special witness — clear signs of the monarch-of-all-I-survey point of view.

Even just a page later in the foreword, however, the narrator contradicts himself.

Recalling a conversation with a friend concerning a musical performance, Bitov writes, “Я был влюблен в полноту своего чувства к чужой родине. Она мне принадлежала куда точнее и

глубже, чем им. [...] – Почему ты думаешь, что ты один это чувствуешь? – с негостеприимной неприязнью сказал мне сосед. [...] Сейчас я понимаю его. Восторг – тоже агрессия. Своего рода танк” (1996: 11-12; “I was in love with the fullness of my own emotion for an alien people’s homeland. It belonged to me far more precisely and deeply than to them. [...] ‘Why do you think you’re the only one who feels this?’ my neighbor said to me with inhospitable animosity. [...] Now I understand him. Rapture, too, is aggression. A kind of tank”). Here, the author implicitly compares his attitude to the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, an event roughly concurrent with the *Lessons*’ composition. This comparison is apposite given Bitov’s generation and the psychic trauma inflicted by the tanks’ appearance on Prague’s streets. It marks a burgeoning cognizance of his complicity in the imperial project through his writing. In general, this delayed self-awareness becomes emblematic of the two books. His vision and subsequent writing do not grant him any superior perspective but instead run the risk of transforming into a domineering force. When this occurs, the master of the seen/scene buys into the system of oppression by mistaking his point of view for absolute truth, something that can speak for Armenia as a whole. These moments make up the points of contact between the Russian eye and the Armenian space that generate Bitov’s so-called authoritative gaze. On the other hand, the fact that Bitov constantly subverts this gaze indicates a subtly different dynamic at work in the pieces.

From the moment he arrives in Armenia, the narrator is endlessly told that he must see Mount Ararat, the country’s most famous sight. To his immense embarrassment, he cannot make out its contours for some time: “Я должен был [...] увидеть Арарат прямо на аэродроме. Просто первое, что я должен был увидеть. Но его там не было. И в Ереване я тоже должен был видеть его, но не видел” (1996: 56; “I was supposed [...] to see Ararat right at the airport.

It should be the very first thing I saw. But it wasn't there. In Erevan, too, I was supposed to see it but didn't"). The traveler understands what *should* be there, what he *should* experience having entered Armenia, but his expectations are frustrated by reality and the gloomy, overcast weather. Perhaps it is this frustration-cum-resentment that colors his vision when he finally does encounter Ararat a few days into his trip: "Он оказался не таким лучезарным, как на этикетках или фресках московского ресторана «Арарат»" (1996: 57; "It turned out to be not as radiant as it is on [packaging] labels or the frescoes of the Ararat Restaurant in Moscow"). If the mountain has hidden itself from his view for longer than he desired, then the narrator will attempt to domesticize it in response. It is no longer a foreign treasure but rather a weak imitation of what can be found on advertisements and decorations at home. This iconic simulation becomes more real than the actual object through this lens. Simon Coleman and Mike Crang have argued that such encounters are typical of tourism's search for the authentic, when "the authentic [seems] rather dowdy" (2002: 4). But, in Bitov's case, this critique of the mountain through a comparison to labels sets up his real point.

The Russian traveler's petty conquest is rewarded in turn by a dramatic shift: "И потом — гора смотрела. Я на нее, она на меня. И я чувствовал себя неловко. [...] мне было непонятно, как она сюда попала" (1996: 57; "And then—the mountain stared. I at it, it at me. And I felt uncomfortable. [...] I couldn't understand how the mountain had appeared here"). He loses his superior position over nature, as he realizes that he cannot actually make sense of the entire situation. If the prototypical master of the seen/scene's power lies in his ability to recreate through words what he witnesses in a foreign context and thereby inscribe his perspective into a confident authoritative account, then Bitov here underscores that some borders cannot be crossed. His talents notwithstanding, Bitov cannot overcome Ararat, and as he recognizes he

wields no power over it, the mountain turns the table on the master of the seen/scene who is unexpectedly now simply seen. His narrative technique fails him. This alteration becomes a recurring concern in Bitov's prose, in which he champions the individual who comprehends that there is still much left to learn.

The same dynamic plays out in Georgian settings. For example, near the beginning of the *Album*, Bitov visits a church. He remarks:

Надо же было так именно обо мне позаботиться!.. Чтобы я долго шел вверх искусно подобранным путем, чтобы взгляд мой все укорачивался, успокаивался и все меньше видел, чтобы я достиг цели именно там, где перспектива сократилась окончательно, чтобы все постройки не раздражили и не восхитили мой глаз, а продолжали заслонять мне даль, чтобы нигде, оглянувшись, не мог я увидеть более того, что только что видел [...]. (1996: 197-198)

(Such good care had been taken just for me! So that I walked uphill for a long time along an artfully selected path, so that my view gradually shortened, settled, and saw less and less, so that I reached my goal precisely at the point where the vista was totally cut off, so that all the buildings didn't bother and didn't captivate my eye, but continued to hide the distance from me, so that nowhere, with a glance back, was I able to see more than I had just seen [...].)

As in Armenia, he presents this scene as something specially crafted just for him. Vision remains his primary tool, and he underscores that things are not *too* remarkable, *too* special. At the same time, they are made for him alone. His eyes therefore rejoice, as he is able to consume the vision and craft its representation in words: “Здесь надо было заново учиться языку, зародить его,



разлепить с трудом губы, тем же исполненным бесстрашия усилием, каким осмелился распахнуть глаза, и произнести первое слово, одно, чтобы назвать то, что мы видим: *мир*. [...] Ворота в мир. Врата мира. Я стою на пороге. Это я стою. Это – я” (1996: 198; “Here we had to learn language anew, to create it, to open our lips with difficulty, with the same fearless effort that I had dared to open my eyes and to pronounce the first word, one to name what we saw: *world*. [...] The gates to the world. The world’s portal. I stand on the threshold. It is I who stands. It is I”). Both of these passages suggest that no one else, neither local, nor foreign, has witnessed these sights; they ignore the native perspective, the local language. Granted this view, as if from God, he is the chosen one who can name what he sees — a Soviet Adam. He takes what he sees and turns it into a description to be consumed. It is through his language, not the native Georgian, that they will be remembered, according to this logic.

Having felt enthralled and totally at-one with a city, Bitov eventually comes to a series of quick revelations. First, he sees that it is rather “чьё-то” (“someone else’s affair”) and that he is motivated by “зависть” (“envy”) (1996: 211). Pulled by the desire to claim the foreign for himself, he subsequently adjusts his attitude. It is in this new cognitive space that he sees himself in a different light and recognizes his effusive love for the dangerous influence it can be:

Вы так сумеете восхититься и полюбить все чужое, что не покажетесь себе захватчиком. Вы же не требуете такой же любви к своей родине, какую источаете к чужой [...] Тиражированный агент Империи выступает как мирносец, совершенно не чувствуя себя хозяином; он все приемлет по незадумчивости, по праву. Про него знают, что он собирает подать [...].

(1996: 211-212)

(You will be so able to admire and to love everything foreign that you won’t see

yourself as an invader. You don't even demand the same love of your homeland that you exude for someone else's [...] The endlessly replicated agent of the Empire presents himself as myrrh-bearer, not at all feeling like a master; and he accepts everything without thinking, by right. What they know about him is that he's collecting a tax [...].)

It is as if the narrator constantly sets himself up for these insights, which may in and of itself be a somewhat problematic dynamic, but it is clear that he is challenging the ingrained point of view from the imperial center. He names himself—a Russian writer touring Georgia—an “agent of the Empire” and notes that even a passion for someone else's land can be oppressive, since it imposes certain expectations upon the object of one's praise. In doing so, he exposes the ulterior motives common to such trips and their subsequent recountings. Under the cover of myrrh and Soviet identity, the emissary perpetuates the empire's literary expansion—that is, until this powerful moment of self-recognition. In playing at this would-be domination and then exposing its fallacies, Bitov grants the reader greater insights into the Soviet travel writing project; he effectively pokes the cycloptic master of the seen/scene in the eye.

The second trope—cultural-translational ability—continues this pattern of self-interrogation. Here, the narrator's confidence is challenged when he faces a gap in his knowledge. In general, the imperialist voice seeks to speak for, if not silence, the foreign subject in what Alex Drace-Francis cleverly calls the “*veni, vidi, scripsi* model of travel writing” (2007: 2). Just as the center's envoy controls how a location is seen, they may also co-opt its voice through the act of translation. Again, it is a matter of domestication, of rendering the alien local and consumable. Bitov instead dwells on his linguistic failures and the impossibility of making sense of a host country because of his own faults. His dual travelogues often frame this struggle

in terms of cultural-linguistic translation, hence my modification to Pratt's typology of travel literature devices.

As *Lessons of Armenia* opens, for instance, Bitov's narrator paints his ignorance of the Armenian language in a positive light. Without the ability to comprehend the alphabet, he claims to possess a "truth" in his "perception," that is, his lack of understanding purportedly allows him to access some higher meaning in the words expressed in a script that remains incomprehensible to him (1996: 17).<sup>16</sup> It is as if his lack of familiarity grants him the ability to see things as they really are — a specious claim, to say the least. Soon after, however, he acknowledges his mistake: "Только на родном языке можно петь, писать стихи, признаваться в любви... На чужом языке, даже при отличном его знании, можно лишь преподавать язык, разговаривать о политике и заказывать котлету. Один язык у человека" (1996: 20; "Only in your mother tongue can you sing, write poems, declare your love... In an alien tongue, even with great fluency, you can only teach a language, discuss politics, and order a cutlet. A person has one tongue"). Here, Bitov undercuts his previous statement to emphasize the true limits of his reality within Armenia's borders, whether geographical or linguistic. His world is circumscribed by his native Russian, and he cannot claim refuge, let alone primacy, in his ignorance as he initially believes. He will not be able to share any meaningful insights as originally portrayed.

Indeed, Bitov repeatedly calls himself out for his shortsightedness. After practicing new vocabulary with a friend's brother in Armenia, he realizes, "Да, когда я писал о созвучиях, я пропустил одно: уш. «Уш» — это не «уши». Но близко. «Уш» — это «внимательный». Зато «апуш» — это не просто «невнимательный», что было бы логично. «Апуш» — это идиот" (1996: 25; "Yes, when I wrote about consonances, I missed one: *ush*. *Ush* is not *ushi* [ears]. But it's close. *Ush* is 'attentive.' But *apush* isn't 'inattentive,' which would have been

logical. *Apush* is ‘idiot’”). This moment of self-flagellation would read as cloying were it not for the other patterns of self-deprecation that Bitov has established. He uses the concept of false cognates to underscore how, despite his sincere interest, he cannot adequately make sense of (that is, translate) a foreign culture into his own if he holds himself in too high esteem or maintains an arrogant attitude about his ignorance. That attitude, he proposes, serves no one. Such a moment of intense self-reflection is repeated much later when he recognizes that a different chapter of his own book is made up of a “ряд[] путаных и непереваренных впечатлений” (1996: 81; “a series of incoherent and undigested impressions”).<sup>17</sup> Again, the lessons Armenia provides do not constitute the problem, for they are perfectly realized and available for interpretation. The issue lies within Bitov’s narrator; he cannot impartially process the world around him, neither for himself, nor for his domestic readership. Instead, he fears he must offer disappointing half-translated versions of what he has learned.<sup>18</sup> Experience becomes digestion becomes translation becomes indigestion.

This process is repeated in the Georgian travelogue, where the narrator blames the disorder of his book on having lost his original materials: “Оправдывать случайность этих замет можно не только тем, что они были утрачены (впрочем, вместе с чемоданом...), не только тем, что они к тому же еще и не написаны, но и тем, что они не могли быть написаны. Вот эти воспоминания...” (1996: 189–190; “The randomness of these notes can be justified not only by the fact that they were lost (along with my suitcase, incidentally), not only by the fact that they weren’t written, but also by the fact that they couldn’t have been written. Here are these recollections...”). From the very start, then, the book reveals its shaky foundations. The narrator aims to provide a coherent account of what he witnessed, to translate the culture of his host country, but the result is a scattered set of recollections that do not

necessarily cohere. In effect, this admission disrupts the totalizing Soviet project with its willingness to expose very human limitations. Bitov must rely on his memory even as he says that these notes on Georgia could not even have been written. They could not exist as true, authentic renderings since it would all be subjective anyway, in direct contradiction to what the Soviet state expected from such documentary texts. It is a translation project performed by an amateur and a skeptic.

Bitov also recalls an exchange that underscores literal miscommunication between cultures. As he and his Russian friends attempt to locate a mill, they encounter difficulties getting directions from some locals: “раздумчиво вставляли они в свою речь непонятное мне слово. - Завод?» Они обсуждали это: «Заоди?.. Ах, заоди?..» И нам указали дорогу [...] «Надо было это слово по-грузински сказать, — смеялись мои друзья, — по-русски они его не понимают». Но мне «заоди» тоже нравилось больше” (1996: 235; “pensively they inserted a word they didn’t understand into their speech. ‘*Zavod?* ... Ah, *zaodi!*’ And they pointed to the road [...] ‘We should have said the word in Georgian,’ my friends laughed. ‘They don’t understand it in Russian.’ But I also liked *zaodi* more”). There is the initial chauvinist expectation that the Russian word will be comprehensible to the Georgians. “*Zavod*” (mill or factory), an object-word, is passed between the two groups in this moment of confusion, and only when it is transferred into a near-cognate in Georgian does everything click into place. The moment on the road represents Bitov’s struggle to work through the center-periphery question. He may “like” the Georgian *zaodi* more, but he speaks the language of the empire, and he self-consciously reckons with this awareness throughout his travel/ogues.

This relatively simple exchange speaks to bigger concerns in Bitov’s text. “[О]чень хочется,” he writes about his time in Georgia, “чтобы ее было видно сразу, но это - не в

возможности слова, да к тому же так оно и было: сначала я видел то, потом это, разбираясь в постигшем меня с порога” (1996: 236; “I really want [to describe it] so that it would be entirely visible all at once, but that’s not possible in words. Besides, that’s how it was: at first I saw this, then that, trying to make sense of what befell me from the threshold”). Try as he might, the narrator feels incapable of fully giving voice to what he has witnessed, of translating those experiences into a comprehensible, encapsulated fragment that his Russian audience can comprehend. He returns to the image of the threshold-gate-portal to signify the impenetrability of this translation. Elsewhere, Bitov makes explicit the translation metaphor by comparing his journeys abroad to those of Peter the Great. He notes that the powerful tsar once impressed the Dutch with “размерами, представлявшими, в масштабе, саму империю” (1996: 256; “with his size, which represented, to scale, the empire itself”). He continues, “Чем-то схоже то, что он завернул в России по возвращении, и с моими воспоминаниями [...] с тем отличием, что у меня не появятся возможности и желание впечатление это воплотить и воспоминание сделать явью” (*ibid.*; “There’s something similar about what he stirred up in Russia after his return and my recollections [...] with the difference that I won’t have the opportunity or desire to embody this impression and to make a recollection into reality”). This unwillingness and/or inability to render his Georgian encounters differentiates Bitov from all the other travel writers (and Peter himself!) who sought to tame the “colonies” through words. In this convoluted maneuver, Bitov suggests here, as elsewhere in the diptych, that he lacks the skill required to enact any real change, whether it be in the host country or his readers, through language or action. The Soviet translation project of rationalizing its imperial goals, in a word, fails. Differences, it turns out, cannot be fully translated and are thus more significant than equivalences. Bitov deploys his text as an emblem for the collapse of this power.

Finally, the way Armenia's Mount Ararat stares back menacingly at Bitov in a kind of role reversal of subject and object likewise points to the third means by which the author inverts the genre: narratorial agency. There may be challenges over the course of a trip, to be sure, and yet the standard traveler's account boasts a formidable mastery in this sense, too, not only over what is seen but over the literal path and how it takes shape as a rhetorical narrative. Bitov instead emphasizes how he is either led by others or stripped of his agency as a narrating figure. In effect, he thus functions not as a regulator of his environs but as someone who responds to what takes place around him.

Numerous examples beyond anthropomorphized mountains can be found in *Lessons of Armenia*. For instance, late in the book, he compares himself to a prisoner, admittedly not without some element of exoticizing: “Я заперт, я в клетке. Каждый день меня переводят из камеры в камеру. [...] Меня посадили в яму времени” (1996: 84-85; “I'm locked up, I'm in a cage. Every day they transfer me from cell to cell. [...] They put me in a pit of time”). As described above, there are reasons to view this moment as yet another case of a “savvy” Russian spinning “a chronicle not of activity but of passivity, [...] not of glorified sovereignty but of storied submission,” as Grant has argued (2009: 95). On the other hand, this passage, which underscores Bitov's loss of agency even in its syntax, also echoes other moments when the narrator admits to being bused to wherever his friends care to take him.<sup>19</sup> He is not in control of his own story, as the narrative takes shape based on his hosts' whims. As the auctorial figure, he evinces an attitude far unlike that of the imperialist explorer who self-assuredly carves out his own path in life and on his journey.

Perhaps even more importantly, Bitov underscores his dependency on past models throughout the travelogues. He is not only a prisoner, but a captive (a *plennik*) in a long line of

male explorers and exiles in the region. When he writes that he finds himself “in a pit of time” and goes on to mention a little girl who brings him gifts, he makes the connection to Pushkin and Lermontov clear. If Bitov’s narrator must develop his narrative according only to where his friends guide him, then in a broader sense he recognizes that his literary precursors will inevitably shape the contours of his writings as well. His “pit” is in fact the tradition from which he wishes to extract himself. Thus, what agency he possesses is quite limited. As he puts it, he remains a “калека-глухонемой”: someone who cannot understand the local language, nor speak some entirely new word regarding his experience in the Caucasus (1996: 72; “crippled deaf-mute”). Directed by his hosts and by his forebears, Bitov’s narrator questions who in fact is writing his travelogue. He thereby probes both its authenticity and its authority.

The struggle to write one’s individual perspective abroad—a travelogue without the baggage of travel literature—has long been explored. Discussing Russian narratives composed between 1790 and 1840 (already!), Andreas Schönle writes in *Authenticity and Fiction in the Russian Literary Journey* that authors often “betray an awareness that the text arises in imitation of textual antecedents rather than from a straightforward intent to describe extratextual reality” (2000: 9). The palimpsestic layers pile up, and the imperialist becomes stuck in the mire of what has been said before — a serious problem for the would-be Soviet conqueror, as only repeating predecessors will weaken one’s chances to succeed and, moreover, diminish the novelty of one’s statements. Bitov admits as much when he writes, echoing his battle with Mount Ararat, “всегда-то мы себе что-то представляем, собираясь увидеть нечто в первый раз! Какой-то расплывчатый монстр из уже виденного и того, чего никогда не увидим, заслоняет взор” (1996: 303; “we always imagine something when we are preparing to see something for the first time! Some vague monster made of what we have already seen and what we will never see



obscures the view”). This process is (almost) inevitable. Ellen Strain maintains that “this continuity across the actual and the simulated, between the tourist and the armchair traveler, suggests a larger cultural source, a ‘tutoring’ of the tourist gaze that takes place in other cultural forms and may long precede any actual immersion within a foreign landscape” (2003: 15). Even if Bitov has not seen *this* Armenia and *this* Georgia before, he has imbibed others’ descriptions, including the frescoes in the Moscow restaurant. The aforementioned nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian authors, among others, served as Bitov’s “tutors” when it came to writing about the Caucasus. He was well aware of what had been said before him, and the references that are scattered throughout the pages of the travelogues speak both to his respect for Pushkin and others, and to the stress of writing after such luminaries. The cultural accumulation of images and words clouds Bitov’s vision (for he *is* a visual artist) and his narrative. In this way, the idea of the empire becomes a ruin upon which only copies can be built. Ultimately, he wonders who can claim authorial agency when these travelogues are so overdetermined. Consider, too, the *Georgian Album*’s final lines: “Какая же это когда-нибудь будет книга! Ах, надо торопиться... Может, еще не поздно?.. Может, еще не...” (1996: 334; “What a book this will be someday! Ah, I must hurry... Perhaps it’s not too late? ... Maybe it’s not yet...”). In the race to say something novel, Bitov is rendered mute, cut off mid-sentence with a sense of panic. These accounts therefore evade the authoritativeness that would be expected of a late Soviet travelogue. It is a device that Bitov turns to frequently: summoning his forebears seemingly to establish a tradition, but instead emphasizing his lack of control.

Bitov sets himself apart from the traditionally confident Soviet traveler-imperialist in many ways. Having composed the majority of the *Lessons of Armenia*, Bitov reflects from Russia on how he “слишком уж уверовал в метод” in writing about this other Soviet republic

(1996: 131; “had been too convinced of his method”). Time in Russia allows him to question things: “как поведешь в мимолетных картинках о том, что есть твоя земля, твой дом, твой язык — что есть ты? Тут и споткнешься, и замолчишь, и замычишь [...] Упрешься в забор. Родина. Немота” (*ibid.*; “how can you reveal what your land is, your home, your language— what you are—in ephemeral little scenes? Here you’ll falter, you’ll fall silent, and you’ll begin to stammer [...]. You’ll run up against a fence”). In trying to write about either one’s home or a foreign land, an author must sacrifice the boundless inexplicability and complexity of life for the neat comfort of prose. Bitov claims that he has faced this dilemma and failed. He recognizes that his words cannot fully encapsulate the experience of life elsewhere, in the Soviet periphery, without doing harm to the reality there. It will simplify matters too much. Nor can he transform it into domestic images and references. The result is a kind of muteness, a theme that appears more than once in the *Lessons* and *Album*. It is not a literal silence; Bitov has obviously produced hundreds of pages on his trips to the two Soviet republics. Instead, it is a muteness of spirit, an inability to express oneself fully or adequately. His narrator repeatedly proclaims some power over his host country, then swiftly negates the effect as lacking in vision, cultural understanding, or agency. By doing so, he acknowledges the limits of his craft. The best that he can offer is a glance from his side of the fence.

Bitov ultimately proposes that such efforts to claim a culture for one’s own (or for one’s imperial power) eventually flounder due to a foundational misunderstanding. In a moment of apparent clarity, he announces, “Культура не пустует; пустует только время вне ее. А она - ЕСТЬ. Но никогда не станет она зримой из одной ностальгии. Ностальгия [...] возведет развалины, как памятник единственному запечатленному в сознании образу. Нет, культура не возрождается; она — творится” (1996: 293; “Culture isn’t empty; only time

outside it is empty. And culture IS. But it will never be made visible by nostalgia alone. Nostalgia [...] will erect ruins as a monument to the only image imprinted in the mind. No, culture isn't being revived; it is being created.”). He makes the intriguing, unexpected link between nostalgia and an attempt to dominate a foreign culture. The implications, Bitov argues, are that both phenomena sacrifice the authentic, limit the object of fascination to a fixed, static form that discounts its development over time, and grant illusory power to the viewer.

### *Conclusions*

The three inverted tropes analyzed in the present article serve to emphasize these same broader lessons throughout Bitov's travelogues in their respective ways. A written account that renders foreign experiences into subjective signifiers will mold a foreign world built to fit the predetermined mold of the domestic ideology. The push for Soviet travel writing from the 1950s through 1970s aimed to do just that. In a kind of reverse nostalgia, these efforts sought to re-create a united world of satellite states—and beyond. These multiple layers and tropes of his anti-Soviet travelogues coalesce as Bitov, to borrow José Santiago Fernández Vázquez's words, ably “incorporate[s] the master codes of imperialism into the text, in order to sabotage them more effectively” (2002: 86).

Writing from the inside of the imperial project, Bitov offers a nuanced critique in the form of two Soviet travelogues gone awry. He views culture as a living, breathing phenomenon; it cannot be completely tamed or frozen in time. *Pushkin House*, as a prime example, comments powerfully on this attempt to liberate culture—a broad, never fully defined term in Bitov's oeuvre—from the grasp of Soviet power. Bitov's travelogues accomplish the same thing, though, of course, while taking place in settings beyond Russia. The traveler-writer may claim dominion,

but, Bitov counters, their words will be inadequate compared to the original.

Written under the guise of *komandirovka* travelogues, Bitov's *Lessons of Armenia* and *A Georgian Album* reveal the artifice of their construction on many levels. First, they run counter to the primary objective of travelogues of that era, when authors were tasked with documenting the republics and the satellites and fortifying the state's hold over them through their narratives and propaganda. In exposing his own insecurities about wielding control over his own narrative concerning Armenia and Georgia, Bitov suggests a thoroughly systemic problem in the Soviet attitude. Second, in yielding to his hosts and his literary predecessors in the Caucasus, Bitov acknowledges the bounds of his narratological efforts. Just as he cannot say anything that speaks to the heart of the people and sights of the two satellites, he struggles to say something *new*. Ultimately, Bitov doesn't aim to "secure his innocence," to borrow Pratt's formulation, as a traveler from the imperialist center; his narrative is even more subtle, as it continually subverts the image that Bitov putatively creates for himself. Armenia and Georgia serve as a prism through which the highly self-reflective and self-critical writer comes to deconstruct himself, his views, and his tradition. Sometimes, he intimates, an *apush* may become *ush*.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Grant proposes a similar reading (2009: 116).

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I refer to the narrator as Bitov and Bitov's stand-in interchangeably.

The travelogues are mostly autobiographical, and little in them suggests we should separate the first-person speaker from the author.

<sup>3</sup> See Chances on Bitov's "ecological" worldview.

<sup>4</sup> Bitov's metaliterary tendencies have been well documented. Consider Baker, Barta, Komaromi, Lipovetsky, Mondry, Pesonen, Savitskii, and von Hirsch.

<sup>5</sup> Various aspects of the history of Russian culture and the Caucasus have also been studied extensively. In addition to the previously cited scholars, see, for instance, Austin, Balina, Feldman, Gadzhiev, Greenleaf and Moeller-Sally, Hokanson, Mamedov, Ram, Reid, Scotto, Tamakhin et al., and Vinogradov.

<sup>6</sup> See also Putrik (2014: 180–205) and Usyskin. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>7</sup> The case of Sergei Obraztsov's visits to England in the 1950s and subsequent writings is instructive and, in some ways, mirrors how Bitov would later draw connections between the foreign, the near abroad, and the domestic. See Gilburd for details.

<sup>8</sup> See Bagdasarian et al. (2007: 133–163) for a history of Intourist during the era when Bitov wrote his travelogues.

<sup>9</sup> Chances writes that in Armenia Bitov learns that "authenticity rests in reducing everything to its simplest element" (1993: 125). Authenticity, of course, is a hotly contested term, but it does speak to what Bitov seems to be looking for on his travels: a sense of reality behind Soviet society's many simulations and lies about itself and the outside world.

<sup>10</sup> See Urry and Larsen (2011:1–30) for a summary of the main theories and trends in tourism studies, including its recent "performance turn," which aims to consider the tourist as fully

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embodied with multiple senses, not just sight, as well as to incorporate the perspective of the viewed, not just the viewer. See also Adler.

<sup>11</sup> On the photographic motif in Bitov's oeuvre, consider Rybal'chenko and Vergara.

<sup>12</sup> For important contributions to this longstanding debate, refer to Carey and Raciborski, Collier et al., Etkind, Koplataдзе, Moore, Sahni, Spivak et al., and Thompson.

<sup>13</sup> See Etkind and Chernetsky's subsequent critique.

<sup>14</sup> Consider Carey and Raciborski (2004: 221).

<sup>15</sup> As Ram and Koplataдзе argued in 2006 and 2019, respectively, a turn to the "local archive" remains overdue. The present analysis is not part of that project, yet Bitov's travelogues represent a tremulous step through their dissident layers and dismantling of the Soviet imperial perspective.

<sup>16</sup> Sven Spieker has examined how Bitov's narrator "reads" Armenia as a text (1990: 172–175).

<sup>17</sup> The link between translation and culture as a digestive theme recurs throughout the book, too.

Cf. the idea of one's foreign or native *tongue* in Bitov 1996: 19.

<sup>18</sup> See Chung on the idea of translation in Bitov's fiction with a focus on his last novel,

*Prepodavatel' simetrii* (*The Symmetry Teacher*, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Compare Bitov 1996: 46, 90, 115.