How Tatiana's voice rang across the steppe: Russian literature in the life and legend of Abai

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ABSTRACT

The Kazakh poet Abai Qunanbaiuly (1845–1904) today enjoys a dual legacy as the father of modern Kazakh literature (as distinct from its oral tradition) and also as an enlightener who translated the Russian classics into Kazakh and acted as a vital bridge between the two cultures. Much of Abai’s reputation owes its existence to the twentieth-century author, critic, and scholar Mukhtar Auezov (1897–1961), whose biographical writings on the poet formed the standard narrative of his life and work. Initiated in 1937, the year of the Pushkin centennial celebrations in the Soviet Union, Auezov’s literary canonization of Abai hinges on the poet’s acquisition of the Russian language and his transformative encounters with Russian-language texts – most notably among them, Pushkin’s Dubrovskii and Evgenii Onegin. In Auezov’s account, Abai’s efforts lead to the discovery of an authentically Kazakh literary voice, heralded by his successful adaptation of Pushkin’s Evgenii Onegin into traditional Kazakh song form. In analyzing this prominent episode of the Abai legend, I argue that Russian literature’s “conquest” in Central Asia was in fact a multifaceted dialogue in which writers laid the foundation for distinct national literary traditions by appropriating the literature of the colonizer – and in particular by reading, translating, displacing, domesticating, and “disorienting” the figure of Pushkin.

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1. Introduction: The unknown Kazakh

In the spring of 2012, in the wake of Vladimir Putin’s controversial re-election to a third term as President of the Russian Federation, the swelling anti-government protest movement in Moscow galvanized around a most unusual focal point: a statue of the nineteenth-century Kazakh poet Abai Qunanbaiuly (1845–1904) on the central boulevard of Chistye Prudy. Most Moscow protesters were initially oblivious to the man’s identity – opposition leader Aleksei Navalnyi urged people via Twitter to gather at the “monument to that unknown Kazakh” (неизвестному казаку)– but the poet’s visage soon went viral on social media, and the hashtag #оккупайабай (“Occupy Abai”) came into use by participants in mass demonstrations. Before long, editions of Abai’s work in Russian translation appeared once again on Moscow bookshelves and the Kazakh poet came to be known, in the words of one Twitter user, as “the Grandfather of the New Russian Revolution” (dedushka novoi russkoi revolutsii). Yet this contemporary episode is merely the latest in a series of formative encounters between Kazakh and Russian readers and writers that have taken place since the Russian Empire’s colonization of the Central Asian steppe. In this article I examine the process of mythmaking by which Abai came to occupy...
a unique space in the interface between Russian and Kazakh cultures. In doing so, I will showcase the instrumental role of another nineteenth-century writer, one who is similarly memorialized with an iconic statue in central Moscow: the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin.

Abai, who, in the true fashion of a cultural icon, is known by his first name alone, enjoys a dual legacy in Kazakh culture. First, he is known as the father of modern Kazakh literature, as well as a vital bridge from the Kazakh oral tradition to the national, written one. He is also known as an enlightener, who translated the classics of Russian literature into Kazakh and provided an important point of contact between the two cultures during the Russian conquest in the late nineteenth century. In a collected works volume commemorating the 150th anniversary of Abai’s birth, a mere three years after Kazakhstan gained its independence, the country’s newly elected president Nursultan Nazarbayev neatly summarized Abai’s significance in Kazakh culture. He lauded the poet’s works as “a true reflection of the Kazakh people’s mentality and existence,” characterizing Abai as the epitome of the Kazakh nation’s “bitter struggle for freedom, independence, and the preservation of national pride” (Akmetov, 1994: 2). In the same volume, the critic Z. A. Akhmetov pointed out that although Abai “reviled” Russian colonization, he viewed Russian culture as a “window” to the world. Akhmetov then drew a familiar analogy to describe Abai’s legacy: “just as Pushkin was Russia’s spiritual father, so too did Abai become the founder of Kazakh culture” (Akmetov, 1994: 23). Yet evaluations of Abai’s life and work were not nearly as laudatory in the pre-Stalin era. Providing a blunt contrast to the worshipful words of the Kazakhstani president, a Soviet scholar remarked in 1923 that, “the Russian book awakened [Abai’s] poetic soul,” and “if not for the powerful [moshchmina] Russian culture […] Abai would have been just another well-known bureaucrat” (Zhirechin, 1949: 9). These contrasting views of Abai raise the central question to be addressed in this study: How did Abai come to be known as Kazakhstan’s equivalent to Pushkin, and how did contemporary hagiographies come to link Abai’s genius to the Russian book? The answer lies in the work of another intercessor: the Stalin-prize-winning Kazakh writer Mukhtar Auezov (1897–1961).

2. The path of Abai leads through Pushkin

Abai was born into an aristocratic Kazakh family in 1845 in a rural area outside the Russian colonial outpost of Semipalatinsk, where Fedor Dostoevskii would go on to spend several life-changing years in exile in the 1850s. He received a customary Islamic education, first from a village mullah, then at the medrese of Akhmet Riza in Semipalatinsk, before enrolling for a brief period at the city’s Russian school. Here, according to his Soviet biographers, he had his first taste of the Russian classics – though he only attained fluency later in life, after many years of self-directed study. Like his father before him, Abai spent much of his adult life as an administrator for the Tsarist government of the Semipalatinsk uezd, ascending to the ranks of volost chief and then governor. Soviet biographers stress his involvement in the Russian cultural life of Semipalatinsk, particularly his acquaintance with the exiled Russian intellectuals Evgenii Petrovich Mikhailis (1841–1893) and Nifont Ivanovich Dolgopolov (1857–1925), who purportedly encouraged Abai in his studies and creative efforts (Zhirechin, 1949). In middle age he embarked on a parallel career as a writer and agyn (bard), and he came to be known for his contributions to the Kazakh oral song tradition (Dubuisson, 2009). Yet Abai published only a handful of works during his own lifetime, in the bilingual Russian-Turkic bulletin of the Tsarist administration, The Kirgiz Steppes Gazette (Kirgizskaya Stepnaia Gazeta/Dala Uailayetining Gazeti). Only after his death did the pre-revolutionary Kazakh intelligentsia, and, later, Soviet folklorists and literary scholars, take on the task of transcribing, editing, and, publishing his best-known works, including his philosophical tract Words of Edification (Qara sozder), his lyric verses and long poems, his compositions in the oral song tradition, and his translations and adaptations of Goethe, Schiller, Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoi, and Krylov. Beginning with his contemporaries in the Kazakh intelligentsia and continuing until today, scholars have credited Abai’s works as landmark innovations of modern, written Kazakh literature, with their introduction of Russian subject matter and verse forms, philosophical preponderances on the meaning

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1 The area around Semey (formerly Semipalatinsk) is significant in Kazakh history— it is not only the home of Abai and his Soviet biographer Mukhtar Auezov, but it was also the epicenter of the Kazakh intelligentsia in the early twentieth century as well as the headquarters of the separatist party Alash Orda and the short-lived Alash Autonomy (whose history was repressed in Soviet times), and finally as the site of the Soviet government’s secret nuclear testing facility, the Semipalatinsk “Polygon.” After years of environmental devastation, the Polygon became an important site of the Kazakh fight for self-determination, as the center of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk anti-nuclear movement.

2 This is a common narrative in Soviet multinational literature, in which a young 19th century writer at the periphery of the Russian Empire is exposed to progressive ideas through the mentorship of exiled Russian intellectuals, and is then inspired to become the founder of a national tradition. One well-known example in the Azeri context is Fatalny Fatali (1863), Chingiz Guseinov’s biography of the 19th century intellectual Mirza Fatali Akhunzade.

3 In Abai’s lifetime, the Kazakh literary language was only beginning to be formed. Beginning in the 1860s, the first Kazakh materials were printed in the Tatar intellectual center of Kazan—the location of the nearest Arabic-script printing press. See Isabelle Kreindler, “Ibrahim Altynsarin, Nikolai Il’minskii and the Kazakh National Awakening,” Central Asian Survey 2, no. 3 (September 1983), 99. See also Steven Sabel, Russian Colonization and the Genesis of Kazak National Consciousness (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 59–60.

4 The first published assessment of Abai’s work appeared in the journal Semipalatsinskii listok in 1905. It was an obituary written by A. N. Bokeykhanov, an intellectual and education reformer who went on to become a member of the Alash party, as well as the president of the Alash Autonomy during its brief (and unrecognized) existence as an independent state from 1917–1920. Abai’s obituary was re-printed in 1907 in the proceedings of the Semipalatinsk branch of the West-Siberian division of the Russian Geographical Society. Then in 1909 Bokeykhanov prepared and published the first collection of Abai’s poetry in St. Petersburg (this text was in Kazakh using Arabic script), which was then reprinted in Kazan and Tashkent in 1922. In 1918 the young Mukhtar Auezov founded an entire journal, Abai, dedicated to propagating the agyn’s works. A good overview of the complex publishing history of Abai’s works can be found on the site of the Abai Eastern Kazakhstan Regional Library in Semipalatinsk: http://semeyleb.kz/?page_id=965&lang=ru.
of the Russian language in Kazakh society, and above all the spread of Russian and Western “progressive” ideas to the steppe.5

The Abai legend – and with it, the basis for the Kazakh literary tradition as we know it today – was carefully cultivated in the early Soviet period by the Kazakh writer and literary scholar Mukhtar Auezov, who was a younger distant relative hailing from the same region. The major episodes of Abai’s life story, as well as most published editions of his work, were the result of Auezov’s exhaustive efforts to document, preserve, and propagate his forebearers’ legacy. Auezov began this project in the prerevolutionary era, but it was not until the late 1930s, after returning home from a stint in the Gulag on charges of “bourgeois nationalism,” that Auezov’s work gained widespread renown. In 1937, at the height of the Stalinist purges as well as the union-wide Pushkin jubilee celebration, Auezov brought his renewed efforts to the Soviet reading public with an article strikingly titled “How Tatiana Sang in the Steppe,” which featured Abai’s translations of excerpts from Pushkin’s Evgenii Onegin into Kazakh song form. Auezov portrayed these translations as the awakening of Kazakh culture to the majestic potential and universal appeal of Russian literature, as well as a watershed moment in the development of the Kazakh literary tradition.6 “How Tatiana Sang in the Steppe” also formed the basis of Auezov’s most enduring contribution to the Abai legend: a semi-fictionalized multivolume biographical novel entitled The Path of Abai (Abai Zholy). Installments were published in both Kazakh and in Russian translation between 1942 and 1959, winning the Stalin Prize in 1948. Described by Auezov himself as a “novel-epopee” (roman-epopeia) the work elevates Abai’s life story to mythic proportions, leading the reader through a dramatic account of the triumphs and tribulations of the emergent Kazakh nation from the perspective of its best-known native son. The work is likewise lauded as a repository of Kazakh cultural information, as Auezov’s prose is interwoven with fragments from traditional songs, poetry, and stories, all resplendent with geographic and ethnographic detail. Owing to these factors, not only did the work become the template for most subsequent accounts of Abai’s life, but it also came to be seen as a definitive portrait of Kazakh life during a period of great transition in the late nineteenth century, when Russian colonization escalated and set into motion irreversible cultural, social, and economic changes (Sabol, 2003).

The success of Abai Zholy in Kazakh and Russian languages, both from within the Kazakh SSR and at the all-union level, elevated Auezov to the status of a national spokesperson – in the words of Michael Rouland, he came to be the “chief interpreter of Kazakh culture” (Rouland, 2012: 297). Rouland also notes that Abai Zholy was more than a mere biography, since Auezov “saw his own life through the experience of his predecessor” (301). Thus the epic novel also functions simultaneously as a Soviet rewriting of Kazakhstan’s recent cultural history and a self-portrait of its author. In this study, I will focus on Auezov’s portrayal of one key moment that links together all of the novel’s disparate functions: Abai’s discovery of the Russian language and literature through the works of Alexander Pushkin.

Several passages of Abai Zholy are dedicated to Abai’s budding enchantment with Russian culture, in stark contrast to the conservative and reactionary perspectives of his family and friends. In one early exchange, a friend jokingly suggests that Abai’s acquisition of Russian isemasculating: “So, can it be that by immersing yourself in Russian books, you’ve become a Russian yourself? They aren’t allowed to have two wives, you know” (Auezov, 2004 vol.1: 9). But the greater implication of this conflict is staged in another memorable passage detailing a conflict between Abai and his conservative father, who warns him that “clinging to the Russians” will result in his rejection from the Muslim community: “If your soul goes over to them, [...] every Muslim will be alien to you” (343). In an impassioned reply, Abai defends his decision to learn Russian in terms of his overarching desire for enlightenment and learning. He describes enlightenment as a “treasure,” which, crucially, only the Russians can bestow upon him:

“The most valuable thing to me, and to our people, is knowledge and enlightenment … And these things are in the hands of the Russians. And if the Russians give me that treasure, which I sought my whole life in vain, how could they be distant from me, how can they be alien?” (Auezov, 2004 vol. 1: 364–365)7

By rendering the alien familiar and the distant close, the “treasure” of enlightenment triggers a personal transformation in Abai. As the medium of enlightenment, it is the Russian language that makes this transformation possible. Auezov spends several chapters detailing Abai’s process of teaching himself Russian, and the momentous change in consciousness that takes place as a result of his contact with the Russian book. While books in Chagatay, Persian, and Arabic invite Abai into the “flowering gardens, medrese, mosques, fairy-tale palaces, and libraries” at the historic centers of the Islamic world, Russian books are described as offering him a new, contemporary perspective on these areas. Russian books strike Abai as a source greater objectivity and contemporary relevance, as they “uncover the

5 Gulnar Kendirbaeva discusses Abai’s reception as a “poet of a new type” among the Kazakh intelligensia during his lifetime and immediately following his death in “We Are Children of Alash…” The Kazakh Intelligensia at the Beginning of the 20th Century in Search of National Identity and Prospects of the Cultural Survival of the Kazakh People,” Central Asian Survey 18, no. 1 (1999), 20–22.
6 Mukhtar Auezov, “Kak zapela Tat’iana v stepi,” trans. M. Vorontsov, Literatury Kazakhstan (1937). 50–65. Auezov’s Kazakh-language piece was concurrently published in Kazakh adebiat and Adebiat muidany. For an analysis of the legacy of Auezov himself in Kazakh/Soviet literature, see Michael Rouland “Mukhtar Auezov,” in Russia’s People of Empire: Life Stories from Eurasia, 1500 to the Present, eds. Stephen M. Norris and Willard Sunderland (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 297–308.
7 Osy үш айтқандысының үшінісі де дан айтам, жеке өмірді дүркө деп айтам. […] Халық үшін де өзім үшін де дүниең ең асылы – әлім-әмір. Сол әлім өмірет. Мен бірлікті құрметті алға алатын әскеде сондай алатын болсам, оңай жерде болма ма? Жатырқап, қашықтауым надандық болса болар, бірақ қашқы болмыс. Жатырқап, қашықтауым надандық болса болар, бірақ қашқы болмыс.
8 Soviet historians of Central Asia re-cast Chagatay, the pan-Turkic literary language of Central Asia, as “Old Uzbek.” Notably, the language appears as “Chagatay” in the Kazakh version, but as “Old Uzbek” in the Russian translation. See Auezov trans. Sobolev 1950: 293.
secrets” of Central Asia and offer practical information about the region:

Along with Chagatay, which Abai read freely, there lay Arabic and Persian books, which were more difficult for him, and Russian books, which were harder still. [...] Russian books uncovered before his eyes the secrets of the waters, sands, and deserts of Central Asia, Iran, Arabia, and the life of their large, commercial cities. What interested Abai most of all was the contemporary life of these countries. As he read, he made detailed notes on the caravan routes and waterways, about big cities and bazaars. All of this knowledge was indispensable for a traveler setting out to these far-off regions today. (Auezov, 2004 vol. 2: 3–4)

Although Abai laments that he missed the chance to learn Russian as a child, Russian books soon become his “inseparable friends” and he begins to collect them with great care in spite of his fellow villagers, who react to the strange, impenetrable Russian writing with superstitious fear:

When they noticed that the book opened from the left and that its pages were illustrated, and when they looked closer and saw the level, steady flow of Russian lines instead of intricate Arabic letters – they recoiled from the book in shock, and fell silent on the spot. (Auezov, 2004 vol. 2: 396)

Here Auezov’s description of the “level, steady flow of Russian lines” takes on additional significance in light of the novel’s historical context – at the time the first volume was published in the early 1940s, the Stalinist campaign to institute the Cyrillic alphabet for the languages of Central Asia was well underway, supplanting the Latinization campaigns of the 1920s and 30s. This is but one component of what David Brandenberger calls a “major ideological about-face” in the Stalin era, in which Russocentric notions of Soviet power came to replace earlier internationalist principles (Brandenberger, 1999: 68). Michael Smith points out that in the years following the Second World War the Russian language was upheld as “the object of popular veneration, a sacred relic of the war against fascism and a living symbol in the years following the Second World War the Russian power came to replace earlier internationalist principles [...]. All winter Abai surrounded himself with aides, texts and dictionaries, sitting just above the Russian books. In the spring, when it seemed that the light of a new world was revealed to him, he took hold of Pushkin. He began with prose and, reading it with delight, he felt that he understood absolutely everything. It was Dubrovskii. Pushkin opened the riches of the Russian language to Abai – and now he was able to appreciate the richness and thoughts of this book.

The deep spiritual satisfaction and particularly acute sense of life around him, which Abai now possessed, were caused by the encounter with this book: the book turned out to be like a fellow traveler you happen to meet on the road, and who suddenly becomes unexpectedly close friend. Abai had never experienced such joy. Today was his jubilee celebrations (Platt, 2016: 1, 101; Dobrenko, 2001: 67). Thus it comes as no surprise to see the work featured in Auezov’s novel as a gateway to Russian literature.

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in an attempt to reach the other shore, and he finally crossed over. (Auezov, 2004 vol. 2: 117–118)\textsuperscript{11}

This triumphant encounter with Pushkin marks two psychological changes: first, Abai’s recognition of the familiar in the foreign; but also his recognition of the inevitable “becoming-other” in the process of seeking out and understanding the foreign. The metaphor of motion, in which the Russian language enables the subject to “cross over” to the other shore, illustrates this momentous change in perspective. This process echoes Pushkin’s own statement, quoted by Katerina Clark in her study of the Soviet period, that translators are “the post-horses of civilization” (2000: 52).

However, with this breakthrough of “crossing over” and recognizing one’s self in the other, Abai’s problems of identification are just beginning. Despite finding and recognizing Pushkin as a fellow traveler, he still longs to convince his own people to cross over with him. For this endeavor, he appeals to one of the most iconic Russian characters of all: Tatiana, the heroine of Pushkin’s novel in verse Evgenii Onegin. In the process of translating Tatiana’s famous letter to Onegin from Chapter III, Abai experiences a strong emotional reaction to Tatiana’s agonized and heartfelt expression of unrequited love, which brings up memories of the long-lost loves of his youth, Saltanat and Togzhan. The emotional content of Tatiana’s letter is what enables Abai to transcend the linguistic and culturally specific aspects of the Russian original and adapt the work for Kazakh audiences (Auezov, 2004 vol. 2: 397).\textsuperscript{12} In the end, Abai’s translation is no solitary effort – after struggling to arrive at the appropriate combination of linguistic and formal elements, he finally succeeds only through collaboration with his fellow aqyns, who set the verses to original musical accompaniment on the traditional Kazakh dombra. As the aqyns begin rewriting and performing their own versions, Tatiana’s song finally spreads like wildfire through the steppe: “Initially, the listeners could not understand – what were they listening to, a Kazakh song or a Russian one?” Word of Abai’s feat even spreads to the Russian community, where Mikhailis, Abai’s Russian mentor, is astonished to hear that Abai “made Tatiana speak in the Kazakh language.” (Auezov, 2004 vol. 2: 415).

In this way the image of Pushkin, the ostensible father of all Russian literature and a symbol of Russian imperial prowess, is twice displaced and “disoriented”: first, within the narrative frame of Auezov’s novel; second, on the level of the novel’s Russian and Kazakh readings in the Stalin era. On both levels, Abai’s encounter with Pushkin triggers the entextualization of Kazakh literature as described by Dubuisson (2009). Yet, crucially, this encounter echoes Russian literature’s own entextualization a century earlier, emblazoned by the work of Evgenii Onegin in general and by the character of Tatiana in particular.

Tatiana, the young aristocratic woman who loves, loses, and famously rejects the eponymous hero of Evgenii Onegin, occupies her own mythic status in Russian culture. Situated at the crossroads of girlhood and womanhood, the primordial Russian countryside and Europeanized aristocratic life, and the traditions of Russian, French, and English literature, Tatiana is “infused with a rich polyvalence that grants her a stimulating, inexhaustible complexity both within her text and beyond it […] her uniqueness lies not in any particular feature, but rather in the meaning that she makes possible” (Hasty 1999: 3). Long considered to embody the qualities of authentic Russian-ness and ideal womanhood, Tatiana served as the prototype for many other heroines of Russian literature’s nineteenth-century Golden Age (Emerson, 1995; Hasty, 1999). Caryl Emerson points out that Tatiana, more so than any of the novel’s other characters, transfixed Pushkin during the writing process, and as a result, he imbued his portrayal of Tatiana with elements of his own personality and worldview (1999: 3). Nowhere is this more evident than in Tatiana’s relationship to the written word, which drives the novel’s plot forward and enables a parallel commentary on the relationship of Russian and Western European literary traditions, as well as on the act of reading and writing itself. “That Tatiana is an ideal heroine is reflected in the fact that she is also an ideal reader,” notes Olga Hasty, adding: “[she] brings her own experiences into the novels she is reading and actively integrates what she reads into her own life” (Hasty, 1999, 3, 24). A naïve girl from the Russian countryside, Tatiana is enchanted by the sentimental novels of Richardson, Rousseau, and Goethe, and she initially views Onegin in the mold of a West European Romantic hero. A decisive moment in novel’s plot occurs when, fueled by passion and inspired by the conventions of epistolary romance novels, Tatiana writes a letter to Onegin confessing her love. The positioning of Tatiana’s letter within the text of Evgenii Onegin, as well as Pushkin’s authorial interventions into the text of the letter, shed light on Auezov’s own reimagination of Tatiana on the steppe.

Foreshadowing the struggles over national identity formation in the Soviet era, one of the central issues surrounding Tatiana’s letter is language. French was the preferred language of communication for educated members of the Russian upper classes in the early nineteenth century, and although Pushkin was no exception in this regard, he was an advocate for the development of a uniquely Russian literary language and a corresponding literary tradition that would rival any in Europe. Throughout Evgenii Onegin, in
several asides to the reader, Pushkin’s narrator ironically comments on the perceived inferiority of the Russian vernacular for literary purposes: “As of yet, a lady’s love has not been expressed in Russian, / Our fine language does not yet lend itself to epistolary form.” For the aristocratic Russian women of Pushkin’s novel, the Russian language is an “alien tongue [chuzhoi izyk],” which they wield “weakly and with difficulty,” yet “in such a lovely way” [tak milo]. Because Tatiana “knew Russian badly […] and expressed herself with great difficulty in her native tongue,” she composes her original letter to Onegin in French (Pushkin, 1960, 64–65).

This creates an opportunity for Pushkin’s narrator to insert his own commentary into the story, taking the liberty of making an “insufficient, weak translation,” of Tatiana’s letter into Russian for the benefit of the reader (Pushkin, 1960, 64–65). In this way Tatiana’s own words, which signal the depth of her passion and the sincerity of expression, are only rendered intelligible to the reader through extensive mediation—“a pale copy,” as Pushkin’s narrator phrases it (with a wink and a nod).

That the “pale copy” of Tatiana’s letter would go on to become one of Russian literature’s most memorable texts is a testament to the generative power of the interrelated acts of reading, writing, translating, and interpreting, as well as their dynamic role in the process of nation building. By asserting himself in the text as curator, translator, mediator, editor, and commentator, Pushkin’s narrator lays bare the calculated deployment of mediation that is necessary in order to create the appearance of seemingly spontaneous and authentic emotional expression, as well as to embed that expression in meaningful cultural context. The resulting extentionalization of Tatiana, in both a literal and metaphorical sense, paved the way for the development of Russian national idea throughout the literature of the nineteenth century. This process culminated in the Pushkin jubilee of 1880, in which the best-known luminaries of Russian literature gathered to assess the poet’s legacy, to take stock of how far their tradition had come, and to speculate about its future (Clayton, 1985).

Fedor Dostoevskii used the event as a platform to advocate a messianic view of Russian identity and destiny, with a controversial speech that proclaimed Tatiana to be “the apotheosis of a Russian woman,” possessing a “strong character, strongly standing on her own ground” as well as a rare instinct for “where and what is truth.” Thus, “in Onegin, that immortal and unequalled poem, Pushkin was revealed as a great national writer, unlike any before him” (Dostoevskii, 1984, 132).

Over fifty years later, in the wake of the next great Pushkin jubilee of 1937, Auezov positioned Tatiana’s letter as the catalyst of Abai’s transformation into a great national writer and, in doing so, upheld linguistic and cultural complexity, as well as the hybrid, dissonant, and fraught origins of national literary traditions, as the fundamental components of national identity and its articulation through written language.

With this historical legacy and myth-making function in mind, the text of Evgenii Onegin can be read as a self-aware dialogue with West European literary conventions—not a “pale copy” but a critique, which led to the growth of an organic literary tradition in Russia that, in turn, was repurposed as a model for the development of Soviet national literary traditions in the Stalin era. This process is exemplified by Auezov’s role as narrator, editor, compiler, and latent autobiographical subject in The Way of Abai. In memorializing Abai’s life, Auezov also inscribed himself into a Kazakh literary tradition that was at once self-sufficient and in dialogue with Russian and Western literature. As with the original text of Evgenii Onegin, which the Russian critic Vissarion Belinskii declared an “encyclopedia of Russian life” (Hosington, 1988), Auezov’s epic auto/biography constructs the world of a nation by rendering disparate messages from disparate sources into an intelligible and compelling whole.

The alchemical nature of this coalescence of the universal, the national, and the fragmentary did not escape Pushkin’s immediate literary heirs in the 19th century, as can be seen in Dostoevskii’s 1880 commemoration speech. Declaring that “there has never been a poet with such universal sympathy as Pushkin,” Dostoevskii identifies the “nearly perfect” and “miraculous” ability of the poet’s spirit to reincarnate “into the spirit of foreign nations.” Yet at the same time, Pushkin’s miraculous connection with the universal enables the expression of “national Russian power” and “the national quality [narodnost’]” of Pushkin’s poetry, which prophetically points the way toward Russia’s future (1984: 134).

At this point Homi Bhabha’s allegory of the “fortuitous discovery of the English book,” which he uses to foreground a theoretical discussion of British cultural imperialism, lends insight into the exceptional and possibly “miraculous” textual relationship between Auezov, Abai, Pushkin, Tatiana, and their respective literary traditions.

13 Chapter 3, stanzas 26 and 27: Еще предвижу затрудненья/ Родной земли спасиць честь./ Я должен буду, без сомненья./ Письмо Татьяны переять./ Она по–русски плохо знала./ Журналов наших не читала./ И выражалась с трудом,/ На языке своем родном./ Итак, писала по–французски./ Как дело? повторю я, / Донесёт дамская любовь?// Не взвилисься по–русски./ Донесёт городской язык/ К почтовой прозе не привык./ […] // Не все ли, русским языком/ Владея слабо и с трудом,/ Его так мило искажал./ И в их устах язык чужой/ Не обратился ли в родной?

14 Chapter 3, stanza 31: Письмо Татьяны предво мною./ Его в сиян бегут./ Читать с тайною тоскою/ И не начнешь быть./ Кто ей вишу и эту нежность,/ И слов любезную небрежность./ Кто ей вишу умный вздох./ Безумной сердца разговор,/ И увлекательный и вредный?/ Я не могу понять. Вот нот/ Непонятный, слабый перевод./ С живой картины список бледный./ Или разыгранный Фрейшиз./ Перстами робки учениц.
Bhabha situates the allegory as a ubiquitous tale among the colonizers of the British Empire, in which an English book – usually the Bible – appears in the “wild and wordless wastes of colonial India, Africa, and the Caribbean” and “installs the sign of appropriate representation: the word of God, truth, art, creates the conditions for beginning, a practice of history and narrative.” In this way the English book becomes “an insignia of colonial authority and a signifier of colonial desire and discipline.” But even as its signifying power is accepted, the book is also refashioned in the hands of the colonized, as Bhabha demonstrates with an 1817 account from British India, in which a small community outside of Delhi discovers the Bible and accepts it as the word of God, but only after translating it, recopying it, and subsuming it entirely into their own local religious practice. Thus, “the institution of the word in the wilds is also an Enstellung, a process of displacement, distortion, dislocation.” Moreover, the extent to which the colonizers’ book is “repeated, translated, misread, and displaced” is exactly what “makes the presence of the book wondrous.” In Mukhtar Auezov’s The Way of Abai, the Russian book is portrayed as similarly emblematic – not only of the authority of the Russian Empire, but also of the revolutionary potential of Russian culture. Like Pushkin’s Tatiana, and Pushkin himself in the century-long mythmaking process following his death, Abai is transformed through his miraculous encounter with foreign books. This transformation occurs in Auezov’s novel in a most unexpected way: instead of becoming Russified and rejecting his traditional culture, Abai transforms into a Kazakh icon – a more authentic Kazakh, in fact, than his conservative, reactionary peers. In turn, Abai’s translation of Tatiana’s letter, both in Auezov’s novel and in the Kazakh oral song tradition, has a reciprocal effect on the Russian heroine: freed from the mediation of Pushkin’s narrator, Tatiana escapes her epistolary confines and her own voice freely rings across the steppe in the idiom of the Kazakhs.

3. Conclusion: Re-reading Russian literature’s “conquest” of the steppe

In his 2011 study Internal Colonization: Russia’s Imperial Experience, Alexander Etkind remarked that Russian literature is “an extremely successful instrument of cultural hegemony” that “conquered more Russians, non-Russians, and Russian enemies than any other imperial endeavor” (Etkind, 2011, 250). In this study I have sought to illuminate – and complicate – this notion of Russian literature’s “conquest” by examining the mythic legacy of Abai Qunanbaiuly in Kazakhstan, and outlining the ways in which his Stalin-era biographer laid the foundation for a distinct national literary tradition in part by appropriating the literature of the colonizer – especially by rereading, translating, domesticating, and disorienting the figure of Pushkin.

Above all, the historical and ideological context of Auezov’s biography, along with his deliberate implementation of Pushkin’s commentary on the Russian vernacular and Russian national identity, becomes crucial to understanding Abai’s encounter with the Russian colonizer’s book. As one of the few members of the Kazakh intelligentsia to survive the purges of the 1930s (but only after serving two years in prison for his affiliation with “bourgeois nationalists”), Auezov found himself in a position of unprecedented responsibility – and authority – over the fate of Kazakh literature’s nineteenth-century progenitors (Dzhunushbekov, 2007, 4–5). “How Tatiana Sang in the Steppe” and The Way of Abai came to light at pivotal moment in the Soviet nationalities policy, as the original ideals of nativization and radical national self-determination were forcibly replaced with a vision of a union dominated politically and culturally by the Russians (Martin, 2001, 394–431). With this ideological shift in mind, it is possible to view Auezov’s translations, transcriptions, critical studies, and literary representations of Abai as acts of “displacement, distortion, and dislocation” in their own right, specifically in order to emphasize the importance of Russia to the Kazakhs while also salvaging, preserving, and carefully curating the pre-Soviet Kazakh cultural heritage.

The twenty-first century finds Abai undergoing yet another wave of makeovers, this time cast in the pantheon of national founding fathers for the independent republic of Kazakhstan. This process is manifested through film, stage, and television adaptations of his biography and literary works, new state-subsidized publications and translations of his works, educational materials, and the appropriation of his name and visage to mark spaces of state power: postage stamps, currency, place names, names of educational institutions, federal holidays celebrated in his honor, and even on public memorials in central Moscow. In fact, the mass commemoration of Abai has elevated him to the status of a near-religious figure in contemporary Kazakhstan (Dubuisson, 2009, 38). Thus, taken as a whole, the Abai legend corresponds to Bhabha’s characterization of the miraculous encounter with, and appropriation of, the English book in colonial India: “at once, a moment of originality and authority.” Yet the question remains: at what cost? The “originality and authority” employed by Auezov in forging the Abai legend – the foundation of the Kazakh literary canon – was also necessarily an act of erasure, exclusion, and revisionism. If we view the formation of the modern Kazakh canon as a story in its own right, a narrative, driven by institutions and power under Stalin, the “miracle” of the Russian book easily gives way to disenchantment. Who is left out, rendered subaltern, in the wake the Abai legend? What other voices were drowned out by Tatiana’s voice as it rang across the steppe?

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17 For a study on the larger process of signification involved in elevating historical figures to national symbols in Central Asia, see Diane Kudaibergenova, “Imagining Community” in Soviet Kazakhstan. An Historical Analysis of Narrative on Nationalism in Kazakh-Soviet Literature,” Nationalities Papers: The Journal on Nationalism and Ethnicity (April 25, 2013): 1–16.
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Conflict of interest

None.

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