

PERFORMANCE AS POWER AND POWER AS PERFORMANCE IN “BELSHAZZAR’S FEASTS” BY FAZIL ISKANDER*

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*This article is dedicated to Fazil Iskander,
who is to turn 87
on March 6, 2016.*

1

The story “Belshazzar’s Feasts” (“Piry Valtazara,” BF), chapter five of the three-volume saga *Sandro of Chegem* (*Sandro iz Chegema*),¹ first saw light in the United States (1979). Not until ten years later was it published in Russia (1988); it was not included in the *Novyi mir* publication of 1973 passed by the censors, or the separate publication in book form in 1977. Iskander’s brilliant portrayal of Stalin puts BF on the same level as *The First Circle* (*V krughe pervom*) by Solzhenitsyn.² BF, whose plot revolves around the two main protagonists’ attempts at solving a thirty-year-old puzzle, has intrigued me for perhaps as long a time, and this article is not my first attempt at penetrating its secrets.³

The uniqueness of Iskander’s plot construction is found in its theatricality.

* Translated from the Russian by Laurel Schmuck in collaboration with the author.

1. English quotations are taken from Iskander “Feasts”. For more on Iskander and on BF, see Ivanova 252–4; Beraha 11, 113–15, 121, 155–56, 160, 217, 265, 277, 281–82, 285 and an ample bibliography, 347–83; Ryan 147–55.

2. On the history of depictions of Stalin in Russian literature, see, for example, Nivat and Ryan.

3. In Zholkovskii “Pantomimic Narratives,” I identified a characteristic invariant of Iskander’s narrative—the predilection of his characters for all kinds of *pantomime*. In Zholkovskii “Ochnye,” I tried to interpret BF as a new variation on the Walter Scottian, Pushkinian and Tolstoyan topos of the *face-to-face encounter* of a protagonist with a historical figure of power. The visual component of this topos is richly developed in BF with the help of motifs like the exchange of glances, the expression of the eyes, the covering of the face with the *bashlyk* (hood), transforming the plot into a series of semiotic games. In Zholkovskii “Fazil'-amerikanets,” I placed BF in the context of a group of American narratives (from Hawthorne to Bradbury) whose chronotope combines powerful ruptures in time with encounters on a dangerous forest path; in this article, this particular cluster will receive further illumination. Finally, in Zholkovskii “Letnim,” I drew attention to the saturation of Iskander’s storytelling (in “One Day in Summer”) with autoreflexive motifs; these offer vital keys for understanding BF also.

His characters do not so much communicate verbally as *perform* before each other. Often they keep silent, but strike telling postures and assume marked facial expressions. When they do speak, rather than stating what they mean, they say something else, expecting the other to infer their message from the silent language of mime. The text abounds in such phrases as: *zhelaia pokazat'* (wishing to show), *delaiia vid* (pretending), *kak by* (as if), *slovno* (like), *kazalos'* (it seemed), as well as the vocabulary of comprehension: *sledil* (observed), *zamechal* (noticed), *dogadka* (a guess), *ponial* (he understood). Reading Iskander, one is immersed in intense semiotic interaction. His “theatrical scenes” are often power plays—“symbolic duels” at times, and at other times combat between an underdog and an authority figure bent on crushing resistance, or even the personality of the opponent.

This kind of theatrical motif in BF appears in many variations and literally permeates the text, playing the most important role in the embodiment of the theme of power, which is central to the story. To begin with a concrete example, let us examine an episode from Uncle Sandro’s life prior to the story’s events. Thanks to the protection of Nestor Lakoba, the Party leader of Abkhazia, Sandro had an administrative position at the time and was even allowed to use Lakoba’s car when his benefactor did not need it. There is as yet no mention of Stalin, but the theme of power and theater is announced in the very first phrase of the text. A connection is immediately set up between Sandro’s creative—theatrical—self and the local Soviet authorities.

Life was good for Uncle Sandro after Nestor Apollonovich **Lakoba** brought him to the city, made him superintendent at the Central Executive Committee, and got him appointed to the **celebrated Abkhaz Song and Dance Ensemble** under the **direction** of Platon Pantsulaya.(335)⁴

A few paragraphs later the theme of power merges with the theatrical narrative and its many characteristic variations:

Of course **Lakoba’s personal Buick** was at his disposal when Lakoba was away [...]

At such times [...] **powerful officials** used to ask Uncle Sandro for the Buick so that they could **go** to their village for some **relative’s funeral**, **celebrate a birth** or a **wedding** [...]

Barreling into one’s native village in **Lakoba’s personal motor car** [...] was [...] **politically pleasant**. Everyone **understood** that if a man **arrived** in Nestor Apollonovich’s car **it meant** he was **on his way up**; **maybe** Nestor Apollonovich had **let him into the inner circle** and was always **slapping him on the back**, maybe he had **even given him a bear hug** and personally **seated him** in the car [...]. (335)

Loaning the Buick to people lacking in good judgment has its risks however. Unpleasantness arose when Uncle Sandro once lent the Buick to a “highly placed comrade” who went to a wedding feast in it and who, when asked how come he owned a Buick, “gave a **craftily evasive answer** to the

4. All English quotations from the BF text are from the Susan Brownsberger and Carl Proffer translation. The relevant details and wording of the quoted fragments are indicated in bold-face type.

effect that though he had not yet been **given Lakoba's job**, the matter was being decided **at the very top**, and one thing he could **say for sure** was that **the car had already been transferred to him.**"

Unfortunately for the comrade he:

"did not have time to get away from this **festive table**," where he had announced his being awarded Lakoba's job, before "a party of three, Lakoba's nephews or namesakes, I think, had time to ride over from the neighboring village. **Circumspectly**, [...] **they dragged him away from the table, and [...] pounded the stuffings** out of him, as he deserved." They even planned to strap him across the trunk and drive him through the village: "By his **stupid remarks** he had **insulted** not only **Nestor Lakoba**, but his entire **clan**. In those days an insult to a clan was **something that rarely went unpunished.**" (336)

The theme of power is represented by:

- the lexicon of the nomenclature (*was at his disposal, powerful officials, political, highly placed, on his way up, decided at the very top, Lakoba's*);
- a status symbol (the personal car of the Leader of the Abkhazian Republic);
- the prestige of being a high-placed politician's acquaintance and allowed to use his car.

As for the theatrical implementation of this theme, it consists in developing series of symbolically notable actions, called upon to demonstrate the ascent of the *highly placed comrade* (arrival in the Buick, hints at taking over the car and Lakoba's post) and his fall (being dragged away from the table, and beaten); and "spectator reactions" culminating in the beating of the presumptuous mid-level official.

Worth noting is the crafty evasiveness of the *highly placed comrade's* vain-glorious speech, provoking his listeners' guesses as to the scope of his success. There follows a chain of suppositions of varying levels of definiteness (*the matter was being decided [...] and [...] for sure the car [...] already [...]*). This kind of ambiguity of statement and the corresponding hypothetical nature of their interpretation is an essential trait of Iskander's art of theatrical directing. Note how the imagined gestures in the excerpt above—*slapping him on the back; maybe he had even given him a bear hug and personally seated him in the car*—enrich, if only virtually, the pantomimic repertoire of the episode. These imagined gestures are marked by semantic uncertainty, emphasized by various modal signals such as: parenthetical words, concessive clauses (like "Everyone understood that if a man arrived in Nestor Apollonovich's car it meant he was on his way up ...," quoted above) and the twice-repeated parenthetical *mol* (meaning) and words and phrases like *maybe, even, though not yet*.

Another characteristic device of Iskander's theatricality is the diversity of scenes: the symbolic action involves not only the more or less central characters (Sandro, Lakoba), but also secondary characters, down to nameless ones (like the *powerful comrade*) and even "crowd shots" (like *the whole town* and Lakoba's relatives). This diversity is accompanied by shifts in narrative per-

spective—the point of view is given to one person, then another, then to an entire impersonal group.

The use of group characters, a sort of ancient chorus, is prompted by the depiction of traditional social events (funerals, weddings, celebrations). Particularly important is the presence at the *festive table* (which subtly foreshadows the titular *mise-en-scène* of the story). This, in turn, implants the characters' intense symbolic activity into the strictly codified system of national ethnic customs (*should have known better [...] he insulted not only [...] Lakoba, but his entire clan. In those days an insult to a clan [...] rarely went unpunished*).⁵ Thereby the symbolism is both emphasized and naturalized.

The structure of the story is also theatrical. It consists of five episodes, or 'theatrical acts':

1. Sandro's efforts, notwithstanding obstacles, to demonstrate his art in front of Stalin and his arrival at the banquet;
2. the ensemble's performance of songs and dances, climaxing in Sandro's risky number, where he flies on his knees up to the very feet of the leader with his hood pulled over his eyes; Stalin's resulting attempts to remember or find out from Sandro where they could have previously seen each other;
3. Lakoba's shooting, à la Wilhelm Tell, at the egg on the head of the sanitarium cook, and its effects;
4. Stalin's dream-vision, induced by the sound of his favorite Georgian song, of his alternative life as a wise peasant who has refused to become the cruel ruler of Russia;
5. Sandro's reminiscence about a meeting, as a child, with a scary man (Stalin) on a mountain path, and his father's reconstruction of the recent murders committed by this man.

The first episode opens the compositional frame and brings Sandro out of his usual town life to a government banquet with Stalin. The following three are organically inscribed into the *mise-en-scène* at the table, whose participants include:

- Stalin and other party leaders, their hierarchy accentuated: first Stalin and his inner circle (Beria, Voroshilov, Kalinin); then less significant leaders, not known to Sandro by their portraits;⁶ finally an unnamed mass of minor secretaries of various Abkhazian regional party committees;
- the members of the Song and Dance Ensemble, under the direction of Platon Pantsulaya, whose leading dancer Pata Pataraya Uncle Sandro is seeking to replace by maneuvering himself into his position; Uncle Sandro's friend Makhaz; unnamed dancers;

5. On the moral-ethical Abkhazian codex, *Apsuara*, see *Abkhazy*. In this unwritten codex there are especially numerous rules regarding respect for elders, which stipulate restraint and courtesy, both in lexicon and gesticulation. The rite of *akhatsgylara*—respectfully *standing*—is important. When an outsider enters a house, all the members of the family stand. Standing up out of respect is a custom observed even in public spaces, where one must *rise halfway* even at the appearance of unpleasant faces. See also Haber 79–104.

6. The motif of fame/notoriety, or lack thereof, carried by the reference to portraits is a subtle combination of the themes of art and power, central to BF.

- the Leader of Abkhazia, Nestor Lakoba, Stalin's favorite and patron of the ensemble; the wives of Beria and Lakoba; the director of the sanitarium; the cook and a few other characters all occupying intermediate positions between the leadership and the artists.

Sandro's audacious dance number is an integral part of the ensemble's performance. It is also the realization of the hero's ambitious striving to get close to Stalin in a literal, spatial way, as well as to improve his general career. The success of the act brings together the two main heroes, ruler and artist ("Tsar" and "Poet"), but also alerts Stalin to troublesome memories. This becomes the main complication (*zaviazka*) of the narrative, to be resolved only in the last episode, beyond the scene of the feast itself.

The third "act," Lakoba's Wilhelm Tell scene, is not directly connected to the previous one, but it is prepared by a series of less significant scenes between Stalin and his brothers-in-arms, which he stages to enjoy their mutual rivalries. Thematically, this act interplays with the second: for the cook who has to "stand fire," this is the same sort of step upward as Sandro's successful number.

The transition to Stalin's dream-vision is motivated by one more artistic component of the feast—the performance of songs. This element of the story helps to develop BF's meditative stratum (focused on reflections about life, reminiscences, etc.), thus taking the narrative beyond the spatial, temporal and philosophical boundaries of the feast.

In the morning, the ensemble sets off back to town, closing the mirror-like frame of the story, which opened with Sandro's preparations and trip to the banquet. Here the shouts of a shepherd boy prompt Sandro to remember his own childhood and his first meeting with Stalin.

Such are the most general contours of BF's composition. In what follows, we will focus on the theatrical motifs at play in the five basic episodes. They will be described in the already familiar terms of our parameters (symbolic actions, spectator reactions, ambiguities, chains of hypothetical interpretations, multiplicity of perspectives, reliance on accepted codes of behavior, etc.); where necessary, I will introduce new parameters; the relevant details of the quoted fragments will continue to be highlighted in bold face.

2

Belonging to the ensemble promised Uncle Sandro a further take-off in his career:

After a performance [...] the members of the ensemble would be invited to a **banquet**, where they did more singing and dancing **in close proximity** to the banquet table and **the higher-ranking comrades**. (338)

But this plot move begins with a "recoil" effect—a certain setback for Sandro.

The previous day, the better part of the ensemble [...] had left for Gagra. The ensemble was to perform at one of the largest sanatoria, where a conference of the Secretaries of the District

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Committees of Western Georgia was currently taking place. **Rumor had it** that the meeting was being conducted by **Stalin himself** [...]

Apparently the district committee secretaries of eastern Georgia had **committed some offence**, or **maybe** he wanted to **make them feel** that they were **not yet worthy** of such a **high-level** conference [...]

Or so **thought** Uncle Sandro, **exerting his inquisitive mind** [...]

So the **better part** of the ensemble had left, while Uncle Sandro stayed behind. (339–40)

Sounded to their utmost are themes of power and attempts to decipher its secrets, showcasing Sandro's interpretive capabilities, or fine 'feel' for subtle shifts in the power game. But the main emphasis is of course on his exclusion from the alluring project.

The reason for this is the sickness of his daughter, whom, according to Abkhazian customs, he absolutely must not abandon in such a difficult moment. The duality of his interests is developed into a theatrical scene.

Sandro had asked Pantsulaya to leave him behind, in view of his daughter's illness. He **was sure** that Pantsulaya [...] would **beg** him to go with the group, and then, **after being obstinate for a while**, Uncle Sandro would **sadly accede**.

Quite suddenly, the director of the ensemble agreed right away, and there was nothing for Uncle Sandro to do but **turn around and leave**. (340)

Sandro's defeat highlights the conflict between his career goals and his ethical, in this case family, values. At the same time, the power motifs continue to interweave with the interpretive ones and the uncertainties that invite them.

A cool draft touching his face **seemed** to him **a breath of disgrace** [...] [accentuating the]⁷ **insulting ease** with which Platon Pantsulaya had acceded to his request.

It was particularly **regrettable** because **everyone presumed** that **Comrade Stalin himself** would be at the banquet. (340)

The next scene marks a turn of the plot, promising Sandro career success, but revealing his moral instability, especially in comparison with his wife's integrity.

Sandro sat [...] **dully watching** his wife **change the wet towel on [the girl's] head from time to time** [...]

Today, Uncle Sandro thought, our troupe may be going **to dance for Stalin himself** [...]

Suddenly the door burst open, and in came the manager [...]

The manager **greeted everyone, went over to the sick girl's bed, and said a few sympathetic words before getting down to business** [...]

"[T]here's a telegram for you [...]. From Lakoba," the manager said **with respectful wonder**.

COME IF YOU CAN NESTOR, Uncle Sandro read, so happy that the words swam before his eyes.

"If you can?" Uncle Sandro cried and **kissed the telegram with a smack** [...] "Where's the *bik*?" he added, **turning imperiously** to the manager [...] and he **snapped** at his wife, "Get my cherkeska ready" [...]

7. The translation has been altered here for interpretive clarity.

[S]tanding at the door **with his professional case in his hand**, Uncle Sandro **turned** to those who were staying behind and said **with prophetic certainty**, “I swear by Nestor, the girl will get better” [...]

His wife [...] just **watched her husband contemptuously** as she **continued to fan** the child. **“I can feel it,”** Uncle Sandro said, and he closed the door behind him.

Incidentally, to jump ahead of my story, I can say that Uncle Sandro’s prophecy—although based on nothing but shame for his hurried departure—did come true. (342)

Let us note the shocking success of Sandro’s “prophecy”: his egotism and hypocrisy go unpunished. This introduces the ethical theme of people with questionable moral values garnering worldly triumphs. It is a theme that extends all the way from Stalin and his henchmen down to Uncle Sandro and other ambitious conformists.

The grotesque culmination of the first act features Uncle Sandro passing through passport control and inspection upon his arrival at the government sanitarium. Throughout the whole scene, the tone of comical pantomime is sustained: Sandro diligently plays the role of the innocent, all the while calculating the odds of terrible failure against the scale of hoped-for success.

The woman **looked** at his passport, **checked** it against some sort of list, then **glanced critically at Uncle Sandro several times, trying to detect alien features in his face**.

Every time she **looked** at him Uncle Sandro **froze, trying not to let any alien features materialize, setting his face in an expression of nonchalant likeness to himself** [...]

Uncle Sandro [...] **grew more and more agitated, sensing** that this **strict check-in** process implied **the nerve-wracking exhilaration of an encounter with the Leader**. (343)

Entry is gained, but the cycle of verifications goes on, this time with the inspection of Sandro’s belongings.

When [the policeman] got down to the belt and **dagger**, Uncle Sandro smiled and **slid it out of the scabbard a little, as if distantly suggesting its utter uselessness for regicide**. (343)

The regicide motif is further emphasized when we are told that Uncle Sandro and his friend walked away with the “noiseless steps of conspirators” (346) and it is played out in a starkly fantastic key, displaying its interpretive facets, intensifying the sensation of danger/responsibility and foreshadowing the subsequent realizations of the theme of violence.

The cycle of verification returns for the third time, this time in a lighter, purely verbal key (in the style of Tynianov’s “Lieutenant Kizhe”):

The problem was that the woman [...] had first mistakenly written “Chegen” instead of “Chegem” and then corrected the letter [...]. Now [...the policeman] convinced himself that she and she alone had corrected it [...].

Sensing that the strict precautions **promised** a grand Encounter, Uncle Sandro asked: “Will he be here?”

“Why ‘will be,’ when he **already is?**” Makhaz said confidently. (344–45)

Sandro’s dream comes true. He is allowed in to where he will meet Stalin and be able to dazzle him with his dance number.

3

This performance has already been rehearsed by Sandro, but the secret of its novelty is still not revealed to the reader.

[Makhaz] said [...] that if the dancer performing this number were to pull his hood down over his face, there was **no way you could tell** who it was sliding across the stage—the celebrated Pata Pataraya or the new star, Sandro Chegemyky [...] Makhaz's chance remark gave Uncle Sandro the idea for a great improvement on an already rather elaborate number. (339)⁸

The vagueness of this clue, stirring the reader's interest, as well as the invisibility of the dancer's face beneath his hood, are further orchestrated by the interpretive vacillations on the part of the narrator, who is weighing the probabilities of identification. All this subtly foreshadows the future effect of the performance.

The sequential performances of Pata Pataraya and Sandro are presented against the background of the "actor-like" reactions of Stalin and other leaders, who interpret them correctly:

"They're competing!" Lakoba shouted to Stalin [...] Stalin **nodded and smiled his approval** [...]

"Well, I think it's great!" Kalinin exclaimed, **peering over Comrade Stalin's shoulder**. (351)

Sandro's number itself is, indisputably, a creative—theatrical, and wordless, that is, pantomimic—act; as for its message, it is pointedly loyalist, seeking the leader's approbation. Stalin's approval develops into a small theatrical scene, with initial negative impressions giving way to positive ones. Detailed descriptions of gestures, facial expressions and other reactions of the central actors of the episode, as well as of the other guests, permeate the scene:

Uncle Sandro flew crackling across the dance floor on his knees and came to a halt at Comrade Stalin's feet. Stalin frowned in surprise. The pipe he gripped in one hand **jerked slightly**. But Uncle Sandro's **pose, which expressed an audacious devotion**—the poignant defenselessness of the **outflung arms**, the blindness of the **proudly thrown-back head** [...] made him smile [...].

Still smiling, indeed, he **laid his pipe on the table**, and **with the expression of curiosity that one has at a masquerade**, he started **to untie the [hood]** on Uncle Sandro's head. When [...] everyone saw [that face] illumined with the blessing of the Leader, a hurricane of unprecedented applause broke out [...].

Still **holding Uncle Sandro's hood in one hand**, Stalin **displayed it to everyone with a smile, as if to let them see for themselves that the number had been done honestly** [...] With **a gesture** he invited Uncle Sandro to **stand up**. Uncle Sandro **stood up**, and Kalinin **took the hood from Stalin's hands and started examining it**. All of a sudden Voroshilov **leaned across the table and deftly snatched the hood out of Kalinin's hands**. To the laughter of those around him, he **held the hood to his eyes, showing** that he really could not see through it [...]. (352)

The obvious point of the blinded dance consists in the utmost complexity of the task and the emphasis on complete—blind and defenseless—allegiance to the addressee. But this blindness has another important function, which is played out more explicitly in two later episodes.

8. In this passage I have replaced the 'turban' of the 1982 translation with 'hood.'

Sandro's close contact with Stalin takes on an ominous tinge when Stalin begins trying to find out where he may have seen the "Abrek," of whom he clearly has unpleasant memories. Semiotically speaking, here is a typical situation of attempts, mutual ones at that, to read one's partner. For Stalin, despite his obvious suspicion, the attempt is not successful, while Sandro does succeed, if only in part. He senses the danger hanging over him and manages to react quickly. Thus, he makes the transition from interpretation to active responsive manipulation (he says that Stalin may have seen him in a film about the ensemble's performance). Having allayed his suspicion in this way, namely by theatrical-cinematic means, Sandro mentally congratulates himself on his victory in the power game.

He could not deny that Stalin had **seen** him, and at the same time it was still more terrifying to agree that he had [...] because Stalin was inviting him to be a part of some **disagreeable memory**.

A **mighty engine of self-preservation** [...] turned over all the possible answers in a second or two and cast up to the surface the **least dangerous** one.

"They made a movie about us [...] You might have seen me in it, Comrade Stalin."

"Ah-h, a movie," the Leader said slowly [...] **He handed him the chicken leg** [...] Uncle Sandro **took a bite of the chicken leg** and **made a slight movement with his neck, feeling** that it had gone numb, **recognizing by the numbness that a weight** had fallen from him [...] Hi-ho, Sandro, thought Uncle Sandro, **intoxicated with joy and pride** [...]. (355)

Here, besides Sandro's very triumph, worth noting is the introspective character of his reaction: interpretation focuses now on the internal state of the hero (the degree of his neck's mortification). In BF, the interpretive energy is directed not only at the performance played out before spectators, but also at the "innocent" behavior of the bystanders, their personal mental and physical reactions, and even the condition of inanimate objects.

The play with "blindness" continues in this scene: according to Sandro's improvised script, Stalin could have seen Sandro on the screen, but he, Sandro, could not have seen Stalin from the screen. To be sure, it will eventually turn out that Sandro once did see Stalin, and Sandro will recall that, which means that his blindness is in part feigned, in part temporary, and in actuality, so to speak, Homeric: with all his blindness, he surpasses Stalin in his capacity to see, to understand and to remember what he has seen.⁹

Such a capability—an exceptionally developed sense for the hidden meaning of occurrences—naturally undergirds the interpretive chains that pervade the text of BF and the portrayal, in the first place, of the two main protagonists, Stalin and Sandro. Indeed, most episodes are presented either through the eyes of these characters or through those of the disembodied first-person "authorial" narrator.

9. On the peculiarities of the Iskanderian text, see Haber 75–89. Beraha 113–15 is also relevant to BF.

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Sandro's flair comes up more than once and at one point it is emphasized explicitly:

Only now did Uncle Sandro **turn his attention** to the fact that those sitting at the table had had a great deal to drink. Now he **trained his experienced eye on them and determined** that they had already consumed twelve to thirteen glasses apiece.

Uncle Sandro used **to say that from the appearance** of men at table he **could determine** to within one glass how much they had drunk. (353)

The motif of Stalin's flair, which is a *sine qua non* of his success as a leader, is also demonstrated and developed into a small scene:

Stalin liked [Kalinin's] toast and reached over to kiss him. Kalinin **unexpectedly ducked** the kiss.

Stalin **frowned.** Uncle Sandro **was again amazed** at how quickly his mood changed [...] Beria's **pince-nez flashed animatedly**, and the district committee secretaries stared at Kalinin, **eyebrows raised in surprise.**

That means he's with them, not with me, **Stalin thought in fright**, how could I have **missed it.** He was **frightened**—[...] by the fact that **his own sensitivity to danger** [...] **had betrayed him** [...].

"Who wants **to kiss** a pockmarked fellow like you?" Kalinin said, looking at Stalin **with an impertinent grin.** "Now if you were a sixteen-year-old girl (**he carefully cupped his right hand and gave it a slight shake, as if hearkening to the sweet bell of youth**), that would be another matter..."

Stalin's **face lit up**, and a sigh of relief whispered through the hall. **No, my sensitivity didn't betray me**, Stalin thought.

"Oh you—my All-Union goat," he said **hugging and kissing** Kalinin, in reality **hugging and kissing his own sensitivity.**

"Ha, ha, ha, ha!" **laughed the district committee secretaries** [...] Lakoba **joined** in a little belatedly after Uncle Sandro [...] **explained the joke, which he had not quite heard.** (357–58)

This scene (a *pas-de-deux* between Stalin and Kalinin) minutely portrays the participants' actor and spectator reactions. It shows once more how heavily power-saturated every sent signal is. In this connection, Lakoba's deafness is also notable; it prompts his rushing to Sandro for interpretive aid, a detail intimating that his 'flaw' will contribute to his later downfall as he has to rely on others for catching innuendos.¹⁰ The narrative perspective of the episode is characteristic of BF as a whole: the narrator describes the pantomiming of all the characters from the outside, and the reactions of Stalin and Sandro from the inside. After describing some gestures objectively, he then engages in fanciful figurative interpretations of his own (*...as if hearkening to the sweet bell of tender youth; ...in reality hugging and kissing his own sensitivity*).

4

The shooting à la Wilhelm Tell is ordered by Stalin with a view to humiliating Voroshilov, after whom the famous Voroshilov sharpshooters were

10. Deafness, similar to blindness and other narrative ambiguities, stimulates interpretations and explanations.

named, and at the same time Beria—a Caucasian rival and envier of Lakoba. This episode is ushered in by Voroshilov's pointless "shooting salute" to Sarya's (Lakoba's wife's) dance, but it is of course generated by Stalin's sadistic cruelty.

[T]hree pistol shots rang out [...] Voroshilov **returned a smoking pistol to his holster** [...]

Stalin [...] **shifted his gaze** to Voroshilov and said, "**You missed.**"

Voroshilov **flushed darkly and hung his head.**

"We have among us," Stalin said, "a genuine first-class sniper. Let's get him up here."

He **looked** at Lakoba, **laid his pipe on the table**, and began to **applaud**. **Everyone amiably took up the applause**, joining the Leader, although almost **nobody actually knew what was going on.**

[...]

"Maybe it's not worth it?" [Lakoba] said, **glancing at Stalin.** [...]

Stalin stopped **in the middle of lighting up** and **nodded at the cries as if to say**, the voice of the people [...] **Embarrassed at the pleasure that lay ahead, Nestor Apollonovich gestured helplessly.** (359–60)

In addition to the overall theatricality, let us note Lakoba's feigned—play-acted—initial refusal and his real love for such entertainments. Lakoba (Beria's eventual victim) is presented with a certain amount of sympathy. This is because of Sandro's partiality for him—we often see Lakoba through his eyes. All the same, Lakoba acts as an accomplice in Stalin's power games, as does Sandro—voluntarily and with relish.

One of the few genuinely humane characters in BF is Lakoba's wife Sarya (along with Uncle Sandro's wife and Sandro's father, who appears in the last "act"). She time and again tries to support the weak (Nina, Beria's badly dancing wife;¹¹ the cook placed under fire), and she directly condemns cruelty:

"If you only knew how I hate this," Sarya whispered, turning to Nina [...] Sarya **did not once look in** the direction everyone else was looking." (362)

Some of Lakoba's apparently positive traits are accounted for by his observance of national traditions. We have already pointed to the importance of the established codifications of behavior in BF. They smoothly merge with other rules that are explicitly stated; here are some of the instructions that the ensemble leader gives to its members:

Uncle Sandro [...] **started to change, listening** to the director's final **instructions.**

"The main thing is," Pantsulaya said, "when you're invited **don't jump at the food and wine.** Behave **modestly, but you don't have to play hard-to-get either. If one of the leaders invites you to have a drink, drink it, and then go back** to your comrades. **Do not**—especially if you are **chewing—stand beside** the Leader as if you'd stormed the Winter Palace with him." (345)

Incidentally, changing clothes as a kind of donning the proper costume for the given role is later proposed to the cook who acts as Lakoba's target.

11. Stalin forces her to dance—another of his sadistic staged scenes—in order to humiliate Beria and in this way pit him against Lakoba, whose wife happens to dance well.

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Lakoba declines that idea, but a stage effect is nonetheless added to the scene.¹² Props are also of vital importance, such as the eggs the director of the sanitarium brings and nervously arranges on the cook's head with his help. Lakoba sets up the entire *mise-en-scène*; and Sandro changes seats to make sure he can watch better.

"I think **that corner** would be **better**," Lakoba said, **examining** the chandelier and **nodding** toward the corner opposite [...]. **In the same way, a photographer tries to choose the best lighting effect before he starts shooting.**

Lakoba [...] **looked back** at Stalin and Kalinin, **trying to stand in such a way that they could see everything.** (362–63)

A small performance surrounds the arrangement of the eggs, and finally, there comes an epiphany—the audience's comprehension of what is going on. At the same time, Beria's malice is demonstrated once again.

Only at this point did Uncle Sandro **guess** that Nestor Apollonovich was going to shoot at the eggs. [...]

"Turkey eggs?" Beria asked suddenly. He **reached over and took** an egg from the plate.

"Chicken," [...] the manager replied, **holding the plate close to him.** [...]

"I chose them myself," the manager **giggled, nodding** in the direction of the cook, trying to **direct Beria's attention to the secret humor** of the situation. [...]

Beria **collected himself** and hastily put the egg back on the plate. [...]

"**He's jealous** of the Deaf One," Stalin **whispered** to Kalinin, and **laughed soundlessly into his mustache.** [...]

By now everyone clearly saw the meaning of all this. (361–62)

After Lakoba's two shots there follows the episode of his wife's caring attention to the cook. But the cook's reactions are the most interesting. Having only just trembled for his life, he promptly crosses over to the careerist camp reaping the fruits of his involuntary heroism.

Smiling a pale, happy smile, Lakoba **put away** the pistol. [...]

"**Seat him** at the table," Lakoba **snapped** to his wife in Abkhazian. [...]

The manager **followed** [Sarya], and the cook **angrily pushed the plate** of eggs at him. Sarya **stood in front of him, wiping off his face** [...]. The cook **nodded with dignity** [...]

[H]e suddenly stopped to **take off his apron and flung it** at the manager. **Evidently,** what had happened gave him such rights for a little while, and he was **showing the audience** that he was not one to risk his life just for nothing, but had quite a bit to gain [...]

Sandro **thought** [...] that the cook and the manager might well have traded places, because much in this life is decided by chance [...]

Sarya seated the cook **between the last of the secondary leaders** [...] **and first of the district committee secretaries.**

[...] Now, **looking around the table,** he was **nodding importantly** to whatever it was that Sarya was saying to him.

Poor Sarya, Uncle Sandro **thought,** she's trying **to atone for the sin of this shooting,** which she so disliked. (363–64)

12. Sandro's dance number of course also includes 'costume'—not only the warrior uniform but also the lowered hood.

Uncle Sandro's interpretations of the actions of the cook and Sarya are as usual very perceptive. The first one (*Uncle Sandro thought with amazement that the cook and the manager might well have traded places*) is related by the narrator not without irony. The fact is, that thanks to his victory over Pataraya (from whom Sandro was hard to distinguish beneath his hood), Sandro has also, like the cook, been moving up the ladder of power.

The first such step upward he takes immediately, and in the characteristic "pantomimic" key:

When they started singing the partisan song "*Keraz*," Uncle Sandro just **pretended to sing, opening and closing his mouth slightly in time with the melody**. This was a first **small reward for his feat**. (353)

Another, more telling parallel to seating the cook between the last of the second-tier leaders and the first of the district committee secretaries occurs later, when the ensemble returns home from the banquet:

When they got into the cars [...] Platon Pantsulaya, the **director of the ensemble**, got in next to the chauffeur of the **first** car. Pata Pataraya, as usual, **was supposed to sit** next to the chauffeur of the **second** car. He was about to **stick his head** in the open door but then **pulled it out** and offered his place to Uncle Sandro, who **happened (let us suppose) to be right beside him**.

Uncle Sandro tried **to refuse**, but after some **polite wrangling** he was **forced to yield** to Pata Pataraya's urging and sit next to the chauffeur in the **second** car. (373)

The similarity between the reactions of Sandro and the cook to their upward movement is also written into an earlier passage, where montage-like splicing of the exchanges between various characters is presented. Among them are the conversations of Sandro and the cook with their table companions:

"Now you're off and away," Makhaz shouted from the other end of the table, his **eyes meeting** Uncle Sandro's [...]

"My hair is curly [...]" the cook was telling one of the district committee secretaries, **letting him feel his hair**. "The egg lies there like it's in a little nest. [...] There's a lot of fear, but little risk" [...]

"Lucky stiff! [...]" Makhaz shouted drunkenly [...] "Now you've got all Abkhazia in your pocket!"

Uncle Sandro **shook his head reproachfully, intimating** that such shouts were indecent [...]

"What's he shouting?" Even Lakoba had noticed Makhaz.

"Just **nonsense**," Uncle Sandro said, and he **thought** to himself, "It's a good thing he's shouting in Abkhazian, not Russian." (372)

Sandro is, of course, smarter and subtler than the cook, but he, too, is a willing participant in cruel power games.

The shooting episode closes, just as it started, with the humiliation of Voroshilov, only enacted even more starkly:

...When Nestor [...] **put away his pistol and turned** toward the table, Stalin **was on his feet with open arms**. [...]. Stalin **embraced him and kissed his forehead**.

"My [Wilhelm] Tell," he said. [...] [H]e **turned** to Voroshilov: "And who are you?" [...] "I ask you, which of you is a Voroshilov Medalist in marksmanship?" [...]

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“He’s the better shot, of course,” Voroshilov said in a conciliatory manner.

“Then why do you **go showing off** like a Voroshilov Marksman?” Stalin asked. He sat down, **anticipating the pleasure** of a long string of casuistical taunts [...]. (364–5)

The situation is again saved by Sarya, who:

quietly got up and went to the middle of the table, where Makhaz was sitting. Lakoba knew that this was one way **to abort the Leader’s sudden gloomy caprices**.

Makhaz struck up the ancient Georgian drinking song, “Gaprindi shavo meriskhalo”—“Fly, Black Swallow.” [... Stalin] suddenly **raised his hand in an imploring gesture, as if to say**, Leave me alone, let me listen to the song. (365)

Thus the next episode is introduced—with Stalin’s dream of an alternative life scenario.

5

The song that evokes Stalin’s idyllic dream not only pushes to the limit the meditative component of the narrative, but it is also maintained completely in the introspective key: the whole episode is designed as Stalin’s listening in to his own repressed other—better—self. Consequently, his manipulative strategies give way to interpretive ones. The idyllic nature of the episode holds at bay—for the time being, at least—the motifs of danger and violence. In his reveries, Stalin overhears or guesses the words and thoughts of the simple folk as they rapturously contemplate the greatness of his personality. Thus, albeit on the sly—as though in a purely positive tenor—the theme of his self-love continues to sound, ironically.

[T]his song, as always, liberated his soul from the burden of being eternally on his guard [...]

On the village street a horseman has stopped by a wattle fence. He **has never seen** the man before but **for some reason recognizes him as a visitor from Kakhelia** [...]

As he passes the horseman and his fellow villager, **he nods cordially** to them, **smiles fleetingly** at the horseman, who peers at him and, though he looks like a modest winegrower, correctly **guesses his essential greatness**. His **fleeting smile is a response to the horseman’s guess, to show** the horseman that he himself does not attach much significance to his own essential greatness.

He [...] **senses** that the horseman from Kakhelia is still **looking after him**. He **even hears the conversation** [...]

“Listen, who’s that man?” the horseman says [...]

“That’s Dzhugashvili himself,” the owner says **happily** [...] “who did not want to become the sovereign of Russia under the name of Stalin.” (366)

In the answers of the peasant, ominous notes can be heard, but they drown in the nobility and, once again, the superhuman flair of the dreamer:

“[H]e says **he’d have to spill a lot of blood**.”

“What a man!” [...] “He passed up a whole country [...] because he’s sorry for the peasants [...].”

[...] But **how does he know** what would happen to the peasants?”

“**He’s that kind of man, foresees everything**” [...]

Iosif Dzhugashvili, who did not want to become Stalin, just sits on his cart [...] **he listens with a quiet smile** to his neighbor’s naïve but essentially **true** story.

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And now he drives through the open gate of his yard [...] his mother [...] **glances out of the kitchen and smiles** at her son. His kind, old mother [...]. (366–7)

On this note, the idyll ends and harsh reality returns—genuine memories, related in the same provincial setting and in the same mode of the overheard speech of surrounding people, which helps intensify the contrast.

His kind...damn her to hell! [...]

The **blood** of an old insult rushed to his head [...] There was no forgiving her, none. How stricken he had once been [...] when, **playing** with the other boys on a green meadow, he had suddenly heard [...] two grown men, **chortling obscenely**, start to talk about her.

[...] And then one of them suddenly **stopped and nodded** in his direction, told the other to **lower his voice**, because they thought it was her boy playing over there.

[...] Crushed with humiliation, he had to **carry on with his game, so that his comrades would notice nothing**. (367)

The remark about *lowering the voice* echoes the constant play in BF with ambiguous speech and gestures, requiring interpretation and giving one interpreter dominance over others.

Then Stalin's thoughts turn to the inevitability of the brutal choice he once made, and he resumes his sadistic games with his dinner companions:

Continuing to listen to the song, he [...] **silently drank** [...] He **took** his [...] **pipe** [...] and **made several unsuccessful attempts to pull on it**. Noticing that the pipe had gone out, he now **pulled on it purposefully, as if he were still deep in reverie** [...] **Would someone think to give him a light, or not?**

So there—you could be dying and **they wouldn't give you a drink of water**, he thought pitying himself but at this point Kalinin **lit a match and held it to the pipe**. Deep in his reverie, **he waited until the match flame burned down to Kalinin's fingers, and only then bent for a light** [...] **He inhaled with pleasure and leaned back in his chair**. (368)

After this follows Stalin's unexpected pity for Voroshilov whose slavish devotion gives him a vengeful certainty in his own powers. All of this is played out once again in a theatrical key.

How could I be angry at him, Voroshilov **thought, cheering up and looking discreetly around at the leaders to be sure they had heard Stalin elevate him just now**. (368–9)

Stalin's smug self-satisfaction is undermined slightly later on by a difficult problem, posed by Beria, but quickly reestablishes itself as he finds a blood-thirsty solution.

"Comrade Stalin, what should we do with this Tsulukidze?" [...]

"He blabs too much," Beria said, **trying to guess what Stalin thought** [...]

"Lavrenty," Stalin said, **growing gloomy because he could not hit on the right answer**, "I came here to take my rightful vacation. Why must you hand me a question like that?"

[...]

"He had a brother, I believe," Stalin said [...] "Let this blabbermouth"—**Stalin jabbed his pipe at the unseen blabbermouth**—"regret all his life that he **destroyed** his brother."

[...]

"Live and learn," Beria said, **spreading his hands**. (370)

Stalin's both cynical and playful allusions to local customs (a critique of "too close" family ties) are emphasized by Lakoba's serious reflections about the "tactlessness" of Beria's violation of table etiquette.

All manifestations of violence in the story are remarkably muted. Introduced in the cursory mention of *the highly placed comrade* punished by Lakoba's relatives, it reemerged in the light masquerade-like scene with the dagger unfit for regicide. Then the atmosphere of danger begins to thicken around Sandro, and he feels it in his stiffening neck. The shooting at the eggs on the head of the cook risks ending fatally, and Stalin, prompted by Beria, condemns to death the brother of an old Party member. In all these cases, violence either remains imagined or occurs somewhere behind the scenes, in the realm of reminiscence or some other chronotope. Iskander ironically observes the rules of the celebratory table, and in a broader sense, the rules of humorous storytelling. By this playful ambiguity, he makes the reader "accept" the horrors lurking behind the curtains, while keeping the proscenium occupied by artistic beauty: dance, song, pantomime, theater, ethnography, gastronomy.

Or so it seems. In fact, Iskander uses even the very conviviality of the feast to better demonstrate Stalin's bloodthirsty nature. He describes his power-hungry physical cruelty in his treatment of his table companions and even of the refreshments themselves:

At the table everyone ate what he pleased [...] but **God forbid** he should cheat and **omit the required glass. This the Leader did not like.** [...] [T]he democracy of food was balanced by the **despotism of drink** [...]

Stalin [...] **himself poured** a full horn of wine and **served** it to Makhaz.

Makhaz **put one hand on his heart, accepted the horn with the other and carefully raised it to his lips** [...]. "Drink, drink, drink..." he said methodically, **chopping the air with his small puffy hand** [...]

Makhaz **drained** the horn, **turned it upside down to show his honesty** [...]. Stalin [...] **with both hands** [...] **took the chicken by the legs and—with enjoyment, Uncle Sandro noted—ripped it in half.** [...] **The fat dripped down his fingers** [...]

Uncle Sandro drank, smoothly **tilting the horn with the nonchalant** artistry of the true *tamada*—not drinking but pouring the precious liquid from vessel to vessel.

"**You drink the way you dance,**" Stalin said. (354)

Uncle Sandro once again passes the test—and again does so artistically.

6

The fifth episode closes the spatial frame of the composition: Sandro together with the ensemble returns to the city. True, in terms of chronology, a dramatic opening of the frame takes place—a transfer of the action to a time three decades previously. This opening up, foreshadowed by the troubling mystery of the first meeting of the two central protagonists, leads to closure, as it is resolved thanks to Sandro's recollections.

This episode has much in common with Stalin's dream-vision. In neither

do we have the situation of the feast. An altogether different picture takes its place: at first a virtual one, and then a real, but very distant, one. The gap in time radically changes not only the scenery, but also the faces—one is tempted to say, the make-up—of the actors: Sandro is featured as a timid little shepherd, and Stalin as a frightening young bandit.

The theatrical aspects of both parts of the episode are obvious: the mute scene of a chance encounter in the mountains is followed by Sandro's father's reconstruction of the series of murders that preceded the meeting.

An impressive pantomime dominates the first part, with the bandit's scary gaze unambiguously translating into words.

[A]t the very last moment [...] **he hitched up the carbine that had slipped off his sloping shoulder again, turned around, and caught the boy's eyes.** The boy thought he heard a distinct whisper, right in his ear:

"You tell and I'll come back and kill you..." (374)

This pantomime is framed by the even more striking method of Stalin's communication with the horses, narrated in two installments: at first it leaves Sandro puzzled, and only after a while is it successfully interpreted by him.

There was **neither a stick nor a whip** in the man's hands, and it struck the boy as strange that the horses moved so fast **without any kind of goading** [...].

Even from here [...], it was noticeable that the horses and the man were walking very fast. And now the boy surmised that **this man needed no stick or whip**, he was one of those whom horses feared even without any kind of goading. (374)

The total absence of pantomimic signals is perfectly comprehensible to the animals. Impressed by the sight, Sandro is so terror-stricken that he can't bring himself to tell the police about the meeting.

He will speak about it considerably later—too late—to his father, who will react not emotionally, but analytically. Reconstructing Stalin's actions and guiding logic à la Sherlock Holmes, the father will rely on the knowledge of cultural stereotypes:

"**How do you know all this?**" the boy asked [...]

"I know **their infidel ways**," his father said. "They'd just as soon not work." (376)

Both parts of the concluding episode have been analyzed in detail earlier.¹³ Here I will add another subtext, one actually mentioned in BF, if only in passing. Lakoba's shooting clearly is a conscious remake of the well-known feat of Wilhelm Tell. This allusion is laid bare by Stalin in a remark which is tinged—the only time in the entire narrative—with his accent: embracing Lakoba, Stalin says: "*Мой Вилгелм Телл*" ("*My Vilgelm Tell*," with the thick Georgian 'l,' marked by the absence of the soft sign).

The line may be seen just as an offhand detail—one more illustration of

13. See Zholkovskii "Ochnye" 135–36 and "Fazil'-amerikanets" 438–40, 447–48, where I point out a few intertexts and archetypes involved.

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Stalin's intellectual vanity and his tendency toward sadistic cat-and-mouse games. However, in light of the long-ago encounter in the mountains, it is fraught with meaning. Especially given that the classic pre-text about the Swiss marksman is a play (!): Friedrich Schiller's drama *Wilhelm Tell* (1804). BF's interplay with this work involves both similarities and differences.

The list of similarities includes, in addition to the flawless shooting of an object off a person's head, the unexpectedness of the moment the shot is fired. In Schiller's drama:

Stauffacher. [shouts] The apple has fallen!
 Rosselman. The boy is alive!
 Many voices. The apple has been hit! (76–77)

In BF:

Lakoba **extended his arm with the pistol raised** [...] The arm **remained steady**, and suddenly Uncle Sandro saw Lakoba's pale face turn to a slab of stone [...] Suddenly **Uncle Sandro saw something yellow splatter on the cook's face, and only afterward did he hear the shot.**

[...]

[The manager] **looked back** at Lakoba, **the way a firing-range attendant looks back** [...] to inquire **whether the target is to be readied** for the next shot.

[...]

And **again** [...] **Uncle Sandro saw the yellow fountain of egg splash up first, and only afterward heard the shot.** (363)

In Schiller's drama, *Wilhelm Tell* has three meetings with the cruel bailiff Gessler and he eventually—after demonstrating his marksmanship in the scene of shooting the apple off his son's head—kills his foe. Unlike Tell, Lakoba has no meetings in the mountains with his Gessler—Stalin. It is the dancer Sandro who has such an encounter with Stalin, followed by a second one at the banquet.

These parallels are backed up by several other common motifs. Sandro's fear and the menacing notes in Stalin's questions, as he is struggling to recall where they had seen one another, are anticipated in the fear of Tell's wife Hedwig, who is sure that Gessler will never forgive Tell their first encounter in the mountains. Parallels are likewise found in Lakoba's two shots and Tell's two shots; and in a few other details, in particular the women's conduct—just as Hedwig fears the encounter of Tell with Gessler, Sarya feels guilt for Lakoba's shooting.

Against the background of these similarities, the differences are obvious enough. To begin with, Tell shoots as one coerced by Gessler and at the risk of killing his son, while Lakoba only hesitates for show, and in fact both times enjoys his shooting. Furthermore, Tell reserves the second arrow for Gessler and in the end releases it, killing the tyrannical bailiff, while Lakoba, also shooting twice, does not even mentally take on the role of a tyrant-killer. Consequently Stalin is right calling him *my* Wilhelm Tell and thereby cyni-

cally appropriating and controlling the figure of the legendary freedom fighter. Nor is a hand raised against Stalin by the other “double” of Tell in BF—Sandro, who, after meeting young Stalin on a mountain path, fails to finger him to the police at a time when it was still possible to render Stalin harmless.

These are the answers, skillfully hidden in the plot of BF, to the painful bafflement of several generations of Soviet people: why didn’t anyone ever put a stop to Stalin? With all of their likeability (and Abkhazianness, close to the author’s heart), even Sandro and Lakoba are career-hungry conformists and devoted fulfillers of Stalin’s will, henchmen hardly ever resisting him (unless for self-preservation, as in Sandro’s case¹⁴).

7

Let us now turn to the meta-narrative layer of BF, the meta-artistic problematics at its core. This is already implicit in the choice of the central conflict—“King vs. Poet.” In BF, the historical Great (of the Scottian-Pushkinian topos) collides not with a mere everyman (of the Petrusha Grinev type), but with a dancer, that is an artist, a “Poet,” a virtual alter ego of the author. Moreover, the “Poet’s” antagonist is not merely a major political figure or even an omnipotent tyrant, but a sort of “Artist on the throne.” Indeed, Stalin started out at one time as a poet and is by the time of the events described in BF a cunning double-faced manipulator, a maestro, a script-writer, director and enactor of scenarios of power.

Such a narrative congruence of the two central heroes (both being artists of sorts) serves perfectly the purposes of Iskanderian “theatricality”: Sandro not only performs a dance number, but he also demonstrates rare interpretive capabilities; Stalin, too, not only acts out sadistic scenes and dreams up an alternative scenario for his life, but is also shown exercising his interpretive flair. Essentially, the plot of BF is designed as a duel between two protagonists competing for mutual recognition, with Sandro, i. e., not a King, but a Poet, ending up the victor. Incidentally, his triumphal line spoken internally, “Hi-ho Sandro, thought Uncle Sandro” (“Ai-da Sandro, dumal diadia Sandro”), is an allusion to the famous words of Pushkin’s: “attaboy, Pushkin, attaboy, you son of a bitch!” (“[A]ji-da Pushkin, ai-da sukin syn!!”). This allusion is reinforced by both the title hero Sandro himself, and, in some sense his author, Iskander, bearing the name of Alexander, the latter’s surname being the Arabic version of the name Alexander. Pushkin wrote this self-congratulatory sentence in the same letter in which he boasted of the completion of *Boris Godunov*, while also expressing doubts that the censorship would pass it and the Tsar forgive

14. The shrewd and cautious Sandro sometimes allows himself disrespectful *thoughts* about Stalin, as when he notices his withered arm (BF 354). Despite his perspicacity, Sandro never seriously opposes Stalin—not as a child, not at the banquet and not after Stalin’s death.

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him, since he had not been able to “hide [his] ears completely under the pointed cap of the holy fool”!¹⁵

As a result, the pronounced theatricality of the story—permeated by intense directorial-authorial-spectatorial, and thereby authorial-readerly interactions—does not just function in BF as an old and reliable narrative technique, but finds itself thematized. The work focuses on the very nature of creativity—seen from an ethical angle. This problematic is directly touched upon in the text of BF, under the narrative pretext of discussing one of Stalin’s creative finds.

The motif of Stalin’s artistic inclinations comes up in BF more than once: in his approval of the dance numbers of Pataraya and Sandro, and also in his keen—existentially troubled—reaction to the performance of his favorite song:

Nothing else—neither power, nor the blood of an enemy, nor wine—**gave him such enjoyment**. With an all-dissolving tenderness [...] that he had never in his life experienced, this **song**, as always, **liberated his soul** from the burden of being eternally on his guard [...] It **colored his whole life with the fantastical light** of Fate [...], where there were neither hangmen nor victims, but there was the movement of Fate, History, and the funereal necessity for him to take his place in this procession.¹⁶ (365)

This is Stalin the listener, an addressee of art; but there is also Stalin the author. After Lakoba’s skillful toast in honor of the leader, who had meticulously reimbursed *out of his own pocket* the mandarins sent to him, Stalin immerses himself in reflection about his own literary gift and the art of manipulating people through writing:

[L]ooking deeper within himself, he found [...] another source [...] of a more subtle joy [...] **[E]ven when he was writing that note**, he knew that sooner or later it would crop up and play its little historical role [...]

“It wasn’t you and I who put the mandarins in, my dear Nestor.” Stalin **jabbed his pipe** in his direction, “The people put them in [*Narod sazhal*],” “The people put them in,” **buzzed through the ranks**.

The people put them in, Stalin repeated to himself, still **dimly groping after the explosive play on words** imprisoned in this innocent expression. Later on, when **his magnificent formula “Enemy of the People”** [whom he put in jail—*sazhal*] was worked out and issued [...] but *he* knew that **he had nursed it to life himself**. (360–61)

At this point, Iskander the narrator, not confining himself to mere hints at Stalin’s authorial ambitions, takes the floor with his own meta-aesthetic disquisition on the subject:

15. Letter to P. A. Vyazemsky, circa November 7, 1825 (Pushkin 146; *Letters* 161).

16. The centrality of art, here—songs—in BF’s plot is demonstrated by the humanizing effect it has even on farcical background characters such as the secretaries of the district committee: “With every wave of melody, the song was washing from their faces those pathetic raised-eyebrow masks of surprise, and under the masks, ever more distinctly, more independently, were revealed (never mind, it’s all right so long as they’re singing) the faces of winegrowers, hunters, shepherds” (BF 367–8).

Like a poet, for whom a **sudden combination of words is a flare illuminating the contours of a future poem**, he found in these **chance words the embryo of a future formula**.

It is terrifying to think that the mechanism for crystallizing an idea is **the same for a hangman and a poet**, just as the stomachs of a cannibal and a normal man accept food with the same good conscience [...]

Man is given the choice of becoming a hangman, just as he is given the choice of not becoming one [...]. And if the cannibal's stomach simply would not accept human flesh, this would be an oversimplified and dangerous way of humanizing the cannibal [...]. There is no humanity without triumph over baseness [...] the choice has already been made. (361)

The narrative of BF as a whole is conducted by a more or less omniscient objective narrator. From time to time, directly or indirectly, he shares the point of view of Uncle Sandro or Stalin (and occasionally of some other characters); he speaks up as himself only rarely. However, this does happen in the just-cited fragment. We might say that the authorial narrator here openly mediates between the positions of the two central "creative" protagonists, but this time poses the troubling question about the morality of his own personal choice. BF is one more text about text—about making sense of what is narrated.

The most important direct passage of this kind is found at the end. It follows Sandro's recollection of his first encounter with Stalin and focuses on the fundamental duplicity of his moral stance. This duplicity echoes those recurrent ambiguities that underlie the development of BF's plot, especially the manifold interpretive chains:

Uncle Sandro, remembering it once in a while, **questioned whether it had all really happened** or whether he, the little boy, had **imagined** it after people started talking about the steamboat robbery [...]

[He] often told his friends—and even, after the Twentieth Congress, people who were merely acquaintances—about this festive night, appending to the story his own youthful **imaginings or recollections** [...]

So saying, Uncle Sandro would gaze at his companion, his big **eyes tinged with mysticism**. **His gaze made it plain** that had he told his father soon enough about the man who passed on the Lower Chegem road, the whole of world history would have taken a different path [...]

All the same, **it was not exactly clear whether he regretted** his long-ago silence or expected a reward from the none-too-grateful younger generation. Most likely **his gaze meant that while he regretted he had not told, he was not averse to receiving** a reward. (376–77)

After this, the authorial narrator chimes in with a somewhat opaque concluding line. Yet, through the note of objective-narrative correctness, we glimpse his distancing himself from the narratively winning cynicism of his hero:

The very fact that [Stalin] died a natural death—if, of course, **he did die a natural death**—prompts me personally to the religious thought that God requisitioned the dossier on his deeds in order that He Himself might judge him in the highest court and Himself punish him with the highest punishment. (377)

The author's moral stance is clear, conveyed as it is once again in the hedging spirit of interpretive indecision. Stated straightforwardly, the message would sound approximately as follows: a Soviet artist, who is an adaptive

conformist, a master of survival, remains a conformist even after the dismantling of Stalin's cult of personality, and thus the moralist's only hope is the court of God's justice.

Now that God's name has been invoked, one cannot help wondering about the ultimate meaning of the story's title, which is taken from chapter five of the Bible's Book of the prophet Daniel.¹⁷ The major plot parallel to BF is, of course, the motif of the brazenly sinful feast of the last Babylonian king, Belshazzar. What especially connects Iskander's story with the biblical one is the consistent semiotic focus on the interpretation of the events. The biblical story features Daniel as a successful interpreter of the portentous carpal gesture and the resulting inscription on the wall:

In the same hour came forth **fingers of a man's hand, and wrote** [...] **upon the plaster of the wall** [...] And the king [...] said [...] **Whosoever shall read this writing, and shew me the interpretation thereof**, shall be [...] the third ruler in the kingdom. Then came in all the king's wise men: **but they could not read the writing** [...] "And I have heard of thee [Daniel], that thou canst **make interpretations**" [...] Then Daniel answered [...] "I will **read the writing** unto the king, and **make known to him the interpretation** [...] thou [...] hast lifted up thyself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of his house before thee, and thou, and thy lords [...] have drunk wine in them; and thou hast praised the gods of silver, and gold [...] and the God **in whose hand thy breath is**, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified: **Then was the part of the hand sent from him**; and this writing was written. And this is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. **This is the interpretation** of the thing: MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting. PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians [...]" In that night was Belshazzar [...] slain. And Darius [...] took the kingdom (Daniel 5: 5–8, 16–31; KJV).

With God's help, Daniel successfully acquits himself in this and other previous cases. In all of these we note: the protagonist's direct interaction, practically on an equal footing, with the omnipotent ruler, who is forced to recognize his wisdom; the striking interpretive capabilities of the protagonist; the object of interpretation—dreams, mysterious visions; their meaning—the questionability of higher power, in particular the possibility of removal from it.

The similarities with the situation in BF are self-evident: Uncle Sandro engages in unmediated communication with Stalin; he exhibits an exceptional interpretive flair and defeats Stalin in this game; in his dream, Stalin in part similarly to Nebuchadnezzar, gives up his power.

And yet, Uncle Sandro fails to fill the shoes of Daniel, just as neither he nor Lakoba can fill those of Wilhelm Tell. That lofty role is kept by the narrator, however unobtrusively, for himself. One is also tempted to entertain the possibility that what drew Iskander's attention to this particular chapter of the Book of Daniel was the identity of the person delivering God's retribution

17. On the commonalities between BF and the book of Daniel and other biblical and archetypal intertexts, see Ryan 148–55.

unto the unjust ruler: the Persian king Darius. Fazil' Iskander was by origin (through his father, who was permanently expelled from the USSR when the future writer was an eight-year-old boy) Persian.

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Тезисы

Александр Жолковский
 СЕМИОТИКА ВЛАСТИ И ВЛАСТЬ СЕМИОТИКИ. «Пирь Валтасара»
 Фазиля Искандера

Рассказ «Пирь Валтасара» из трехтомной саги *Сандро из Чегема* не вошел в состав подцензурной новомирской публикации (1973) и отдельного книжного издания (1977), впервые увидел свет в США (1979), а на родине был напечатан только во время перестройки (1988). Это вымышленная история выступления, в

1935 г., дяди Сандро, члена абхазского танцевального ансамбля, перед Сталиным. Сталин восхищен его эффектным номером: он подлетает к ногам вождя вслепую, с башлыком опущенным на глаза. Но Сталин подозревает, что он уже где-то видел этого «абрека». Потрясающей разгадки их первой встречи читателю приходится ждать до конца рассказа, а тем временем глазами Сандро даются картины пира в абхазском санатории, устроенного вождем Абхазии Нестором Лакобой в честь Сталина. Среди гостей—Берия, Ворошилов, Калинин...

Характерная черта искандеровского письма—пристрастие его персонажей ко всякого рода «пантомимам», превращающее сюжет в серию своего рода семиотических игр. Перед нами своеобразный театр мимики и жеста. Персонажи не столько общаются напрямую, сколько разыгрывают друг перед другом сценические этюды. Часто они делают это молча, а говорят не столько то, что думают сколько то, что заставит собеседника прийти к желанному для говорящего выводу. Со своей стороны, собеседник напряженно вчитывается в разыгрываемые перед ним пантомимы. Читая Искандера, мы погружаемся в мир напряженного семиотического взаимодействия. Эти театральные сценки иногда носят характер символических поединков, соперничества равных или борьбы между отстаивающим себя подчиненным и пытающейся подавить его властной фигурой. В «Пирах Валтасара» этот театральный мотив предстает во множестве разновидностей, пронизывает текст и работает на центральную в нем тему власти.

В статье учитывается богатый интертекстуальный фон рассказа, включающий, среди прочего, «Капитанскую дочку» Александра Пушкина (и стоящий за ней вальтер-скоттовский топос очной ставки рядового героя с властителем), драму «Вильгельм Телль» Фридриха Шиллера и библейскую книгу пророка Даниила.