

Fluidity and Timelessness in the Letters of Nikolai Gretsch

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Summary

In 1839, Russian traveller Nikolai Gretsch published *Travel Letters from England, Germany and France* («Путевые Письма из Англии, Германии и Франции»), a series of letters in three volumes that details selected events from his 1837 voyage through these countries. Gretsch was a shrewd observer of the cultures he experienced, and he sent many of his observations home for publication in the newspaper he edited called *The Northern Bee* («Северная пчела»). These articles became the basis for the *Travel Letters* volumes. The letters constitute a valuable resource for historians and literary scholars interested in an outsider's view of post-Napoleonic Western Europe. Additionally, they offer the unique perspective of a writer from a country that still used the Julian calendar when England, France, and Germany used the Gregorian calendar. This disjunction between calendars was frequently on Gretsch's mind as he made notes of his travels, and the resulting narrative provides a unique awareness of the passage of time and of the arbitrary nature of time measurement, which we examine through the theoretical framework established by Stephen Kern. Throughout the narrative, Gretsch conflates past and present to produce a sort of *historical present* that creates a sense of immediacy and liveliness for readers.

Opsomming

Die Rus Nikolai Gretsch het in 1839 'n reeks briewe in drie bande uitgegee. *Travel Letters from England, Germany and France* («Путевые Письма из Англии, Германии и Франции») is 'n beskrywing van sekere gebeure tydens 'n reis wat Gretsch in 1837 deur Europa onderneem het. Hy was 'n fyn waarnemer van die kulture waarmee hy kennis gemaak het. Hy het sy reisbeskrywings huis toe gepos om in *Die Noordelike By* («Северная пчела»), die koerant waarvan hy redakteur was, geplaas te word. *Travel Letters* is op hierdie koerantartikels gebaseer. Vir historici en letterkundiges wat in 'n vreemdeling se siening van Wes-Europa ná die Napoleontiese era belangstel, is Gretsch se briewe van groot waarde. Afgesien hiervan is sy reisbeskrywings uit die oogpunt van iemand in wie se vaderland die Juliaanse kalender gevolg is. Die Gregoriaanse kalender was toe reeds in Engeland, Frankryk en Duitsland ingestel. Terwyl hy sy reisbriewe geskryf het, het Gretsch deurentyd met die verskil tussen die twee kalenders rekening gehou. Sy narratief gee blyke van 'n eiesoortige bewustheid van die verloop van tyd en die wille-keurigheid van tydsmeting. Ons het dit aan die hand van die teoretiese raam-werk van Stephen Kern ondersoek. Die hede en die

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verlede smelt dwarsdeur Gretsch se narratief saam en vorm 'n *historiese presens* wat by die leser die indruk van onmiddellikheid en lewendigheid wek.

In the year 1837, a Russian traveller named Nikolai Grets¹ embarked upon a lengthy voyage of about six months from the imperial capital of St. Petersburg. Working in the service of the Tsar's government, Grets¹ had the task to travel into Western Europe to examine the structure and organisation of trade schools, and on his return, he was to compile an official report of his findings. However, Grets¹ was a well-educated man who possessed a sharp mind and strong sense of curiosity, so his official purpose for travel became almost a secondary concern as he pursued his course through England, Germany, and France. Grets¹ was fascinated by the cultures in which he immersed himself, and he made extensive written observations of his experiences – his visits to famous landmarks like Westminster Abbey, his brushes with other famous people like Victor Hugo, and his encounters with local peasants.

As Grets¹ compiled notes about his travels, he shaped many of them into entertaining narrative letters that he sent back to Russia to be published in the newspaper he edited called *The Northern Bee* («Северная пчела»). These narratives gave Russians quick glimpses into the details of daily life in Western Europe while also collectively serving as a sort of travel guide for those readers who might be interested in pursuing similar voyages. On his return to St. Petersburg, Grets¹ organised these letters and added enough material to them to create a three-volume travelogue entitled *Travel Letters from England, Germany and France* («Путевые Письма из Англии, Германии и Франции»)². Published in 1839, this collection offers a fascinating body of observations of post-Napoleonic Western Europe through the eyes of an outsider. Grets¹'s travel narrative is a valuable source of contemporary cultural material for present-day historians and literary scholars alike.

One of the most important features of Grets¹'s collection of letters is the author's attention to the recording of time. Again and again, Grets¹'s narrative shows that the author was acutely aware of the constructed nature of human measurements of time. Furthermore, Grets¹'s narrative indicates an

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1. Grets¹'s name (Николай Греч) has been Romanised a number of ways. His given name is variously spelled *Nikolai*, *Nikolay*, *Nikolaj*, *Nicolai*, *Nicolaus*, and *Nikolaus*, while his family name has been rendered as *Grets¹*, *Grech*, *Gretch*, and even *Greč*. We have chosen to maintain the Germanic *Grets¹* since the author's family was originally German and since contemporary non-Russian sources used this form most commonly. Most contemporary sources also used *Nikolai*.
 2. All citations of this work refer to the original Russian version, with translations provided by Ekaterina Kobeleva and Ben P. Robertson.

awareness of the fluidity and, paradoxically, the timelessness of the perception of time, two concepts discussed at length by Stephen Kern in a book entitled *Time and Space, 1880-1918* (2003). Perhaps prompted by differences between the calendars of Russia and of Western Europe, Gretsich brought with him a cultural memory that transcended traditional conceptions of time and obliterated the boundaries that separate past and present. Essentially, Gretsich conflates the past and the present to create a sort of *historical present*, to borrow a term from rhetoric and linguistics, which gives his narrative a lively sensibility and sense of immediacy that would have appealed to his readers then and that still appeals to those who peruse his letters.³

In the 21st century, Gretsich is not especially well known outside the borders of Russia, but during his lifetime, which spanned from 1787 to 1867, he became an important and very visible member of the literary elite. He was a novelist, a journalist, and a grammarian (Gleason 1979: 122). In fact, his work was so respected that some of his books on Russian grammar remained in use in Russia for many decades.⁴ Gretsich was especially known abroad for his journalistic talents. He published a periodical called *Son of the Fatherland* («СЫН ОТЕЧЕСТВА») that endured for nearly three decades, but he was perhaps most famous outside Russia for the periodical to which he contributed some of his travel letters – which also endured for nearly thirty years – called *The Northern Bee* (Sobel 1999: 179-180; Gleason 1979: 123). This newspaper garnered considerable respect both in Russia and beyond the imperial borders, where it was sometimes referred to as the “official court organ” of the government.⁵ Newspapers across Western Europe routinely quoted news items from *The Northern Bee* during the 19th century, and it was similarly quoted beyond the Atlantic in both the United States and Mexico.⁶

Gretsich’s narrative is fascinating because of the personal observations he makes about the people and places he visits, but the letters also offer especially interesting insights in regard to time. Imperial Russia still used the Julian calendar in 1837, so during his travels, Gretsich had to switch to the Gregorian calendar for interactions with the local populations, adding twelve days to the then-current Russian date (Kallenbach 1987; Fredregill 1970;

3. See “historical present” 1993.

4. *ITAR-TASS Daily*, for example, reports that Gretsich’s Russian language lessons were sent to flood-stricken schools as recently as 2013 (“Presidential Library ...” 2013).

5. See, for example, “The Italian Riddle” 16 August 1862.

6. See, for example, “Foreign Intelligence” 26 December 1806; “Foreign Intelligence” 31 March 1855; “Foreign Intelligence” 8 April 1856; *Daily Advertiser* 15 July 1818; and *El Universal* 14 May 1854.

Duncan 1998). The Julian calendar had been in use since the time of the Roman Empire, and its longevity perhaps is part of the reason the governments of some countries resisted adopting it. Of course, the disruption caused by the switch between the two systems was one of the most important arguments against changing. It is no surprise that many people resisted the idea of going to bed one night, on June 1, for example, and waking the next morning on June 14 (twelve days plus one for the night). Switching from the Julian to the Gregorian paradigm simply deleted nearly two weeks from the calendar, a change that offended the sensibilities of many contemporary thinkers despite the fact that the Gregorian calendar was more accurate. As a result, not all countries switched to the new system at the same time, and in some cases, not all parts of the same country switched simultaneously. Parts of Germany and France variously adopted the Gregorian calendar during the 16th and 17th centuries.⁷ The British, however, waited until 1752 – less than a century before Gretsches voyage – and in Russia, the Julian calendar remained in effect until 1918.⁸

It is perhaps for this reason that Gretsches shows a special awareness of the passage of time in his letters. Denizens of the 21st century sometimes marvel at the seeming arbitrariness of time zones. A flight from the United States to the United Kingdom, for example, will take two days to accomplish, but the return takes only one day according to the time-zone-adjusted calendar (keeping in mind, of course, that departure times also affect the official arrival and departure times). And a domestic United States flight from Atlanta to Montgomery usually arrives a few minutes before it departed, according to a time-zone-adjusted clock (a ten o'clock Eastern-Time departure from Atlanta might arrive in Montgomery at nine fifty-five Central Time). Voyages that cross the International Date Line can complicate the issue even more since the line constitutes an imaginary – and arbitrary – line that separates one day from another. Gretsches situation, however, involved more than a simple time displacement of a few hours. Instead, Gretsches had to deal with a disjunction of nearly two weeks.

From the beginning of the *Travel Letters*, Gretsches demonstrates an acute awareness of the passage of time. Partly this preoccupation had to do with Gretsches status as a traveller. Anyone on an especially long trip, especially one that crosses time zones, will tend to emphasise the duration of the trip rather than providing specific dates and times of arrival and departure. To say that the flight from Atlanta to Johannesburg departed the evening of one day and arrived the following afternoon is meaningless to anyone who does not know the time difference between the two locations. To say that the flight was

7. See Duncan 1998 for more information about the differences between these calendar systems.

8. For further information, see Hawkins J., 1752, 1753, Burnaby 1901, and Duncan 1998.

fifteen and a half hours in length, however, is far more meaningful and needs less explanation. Gretsches accounting of time would have been even more complicated given the difference between the Julian calendar of Russia and the Gregorian calendar of the countries he visited.

Knowing the complications that time presented for Gretsches, readers of the *Travel Letters* will do well to pay close attention to Gretsches timekeeping record. One of Gretsches first comments that indicates a special awareness of the passage of time occurs in Chapter 1. He reports that his ship left the port of Kronstadt on 2 May 1837 and arrived at Travemünde three and a half days later (Gretsches 1839: 1: 2-3). Rather than recording the date of the end of the trip, he indicates that the ship arrived eighty-three hours after departure (Gretsches 1839: 1: 9). He thus avoids the trouble of specifying which day he arrived. The transit time is more meaningful than the specific date, and it has the dual felicity of allowing Gretsches and his readers to avoid any confusion over which calendar he was using. Interestingly enough, this first letter is dated 8 May 1837 from Hamburg, where Gretsches had travelled by carriage from Travemünde (Gretsches 1839: 1: 1, 10). The date of this letter apparently is from the Julian calendar, assuming the departure date was Julian.

Gretsches second letter is not dated (Gretsches 1839: 1: 15). Perhaps he despaired of having to come to terms so suddenly with the Gregorian calendar. He does indicate that he stayed in Hamburg for three days, and within the text of the letter, he notes that the last day of his stay was 11 May – still apparently a Julian date (Gretsches 1839: 1: 20, 28). This letter records Gretsches sense of homesickness in the early mornings when he writes letters to his family and friends at home. Any lengthy voyage has the potential to create such a lonely sensation, but changing the calendar so radically – and so suddenly – certainly would have added to any sense of alienation Gretsches may have felt.

Gretsches third letter, dated 15 May from London, further focuses on time (Gretsches 1839: 1: 31). He indicates his ships arrival at Gravesend three days after the 12 May departure from Travemünde, again emphasising the passage of time within the narrative rather than using the label of a particular date. He offers his readers the number of hours (fifty-one) that passed during the sea crossing (Gretsches 1839: 1: 33-34).

Throughout the first few letters, Gretsches offers no indication whether he is using the Julian or the Gregorian calendar. His decision not to mention the complications of the calendar could indicate that he was still operating within the Julian model. They could indicate that he had decided not to switch to the Gregorian paradigm for the duration of his trip since, after all, he would be returning to Russia and its Julian system before the end of the year. Whether this decision is the case can be only a matter of speculation, but it would have been difficult for Gretsches to avoid using the Gregorian calendar since everyone around him was using it. Indeed, in the sixth letter, he finally directly takes note of the newer calendar when he mentions attending a service at St. Pauls Cathedral (Gretsches 1839: 1: 67-73). Here, he specifically mentions the

date of 1 June, referring to it with an abbreviation as the *new style* (Gretsch 1839: 1: 71).

The dates mentioned in subsequent letters suggest a certain level of ambivalence towards the specificity of the date. In fact, the following letters are undated until the eleventh letter, which Gretsch marks “2nd of June” (Gretsch 1839: 1: 127). Then the thirteenth letter mentions a 4th-of-June invitation to dinner with the Count Pozzo di Borgo (1: 159). Two letters later, Gretsch records leaving London for Paris on the 27th of May after a stay in England of less than two weeks (1: 184).

The discrepancy here is significant. Gretsch could not have had dinner with the count in June before leaving in May of the same year. Unless either Gretsch made a mistake in recording the dates, or the typesetter of the volumes made a mistake, then the logical conclusion here is that Gretsch was using the Julian and Gregorian systems in tandem, reporting both old-style and new-style dates without always distinguishing one from the other.

Knowing that he would return to Russia and to the Julian calendar in a matter of months, Gretsch almost certainly remained aware of the Julian date throughout his voyage despite the fact that the local people used the Gregorian system. Doing so would have avoided considerable confusion, especially after his return home. Indeed, it is not inconceivable that he kept a parallel calendar during the voyage that indicated Russian dates alongside the dates used in England, Germany, and France. The 4th of June invitation from the count is directly quoted in Gretsch’s narrative in English (1: 159). Although the count was serving as the Russian ambassador in London at the time, he was Corsican by birth and had been living in England for three years at this point. He certainly was accustomed to using the Gregorian calendar in his daily activities, and the invitation – extended in English and in England – is most likely to have used the local system. If so, then the situation opens some interesting possibilities in terms of Gretsch’s record of time.

Given that the *Travel Letters* volumes were published in St. Petersburg in Russian, it would have been understandable had Gretsch used the Julian system exclusively to record his dates. This decision might have avoided confusion for his Russian readers. However, if the records of Count Pozzo di Borgo’s dinner date and of the visit to St. Paul’s are correct – and there is no apparent reason to doubt their accuracy – then Gretsch was using the local Gregorian calendar at least part of the time without always indicating that the dates were *new style*.

Other dates within the narrative remain consistent with a Julian reckoning of Gretsch’s activities. Cutting his London stay short after a stay of, in his words, “not more than eight or nine days” which he extended “for another day or two,” would be consistent with an arrival date of 15 May and a departure date of around 27 May (Gretsch 1839: 1: 184). Furthermore, the sixteenth letter is dated 13 June from Paris, and it indicates that Gretsch had been there

for about two weeks after arriving on the 29th of May (1: 197). All these dates remain consistent.

An important source of information about the issue of dates includes the pages of *The Northern Bee*, to which Gretsche was sending his letters for publication two years before they appeared in book form. Issue 114 offers Gretsche's first letter sent to the newspaper, and in it he indicates the date is 8 May 1837 in Hamburg (Gretsche 1837a: 455). This date corresponds with the date presented in the book version and therefore clarifies nothing. However, the next date Gretsche mentions in *The Northern Bee* appears in Issue 127, in which he notes that the Spitalfields Ball he attended occurred on 21 May or 2 June 1837 (Gretsche 1837b: 508). This section printed in the newspaper corresponds with part of letter eleven in the book version, which is dated 2 June (Gretsche 1839: 1: 127). This letter suggests, then, that Gretsche was using the Gregorian calendar at this point in the book version of his travelogue, a conclusion supported by the fact that letter fifteen is dated both 30 May and 12 June in Issues 141 and 142 of the newspaper but begins with the date 13 June in the book version (Gretsche 26 June 1837c: 563; Gretsche 28 June 1837d: 567; Gretsche 1839: 1: 197).

Gretsche was clearly aware of the sharp divide between the two calendars, and, consequently, of the contrived nature of both calendars. This awareness may be a large part of the reason some of the dates he mentions appear inconsistent. While he sometimes attempts to be especially accurate with respect to dates, at other times, he seems to evince a somewhat cavalier attitude toward the dating system. His letter from Paris in Issue 154 of *The Northern Bee*, for example, is careful to note both the 14th and the 26th of June as the date of composition, presenting them one over the other as if in fraction form (Gretsche 13 July 1837e: 614). When he transferred the letter into the book version of his travelogue, he decided to omit the date of that letter altogether, but when an especially important event occurred – the death of Britain's William IV – he included both Julian and Gregorian dates (8 and 20 June 1837) in the book (Gretsche 1839: 1: 235). Perhaps he felt that accuracy was especially important in recording the death of a sovereign, whereas the specific date mattered little in daily activities. Not long afterward, however, he offers another dual date in Issue 158 of *The Northern Bee*, reversing the usual order by noting the day as “29/17” June (Gretsche 17 July 1837f: 632).

One should keep in mind, also, that the imperial Russian court of Gretsche's time was strongly influenced by the courts of other countries. The fact that most of the Russian nobility spoke French daily rather than Russian suggests more than a passing infatuation with foreign ideas, and if the nobility were apt to imitate the French in language, they might also entertain a propensity to imitate them in other ways as well. They would have been aware constantly that their calendar did not coincide with that of the rest of Europe.

Finally, the fact that Gretsches voyage took him into France is especially relevant in relation to the marking of time, for this part of his itinerary may have made him even more sensitive to time's passage and the changes that movement through time could make as well as to the arbitrariness of human measurement of time. In 1837, the French were governed by a monarchical system that had been established after the latest revolution a mere seven years earlier. The previous Bourbon monarchy had been established following Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815, the year Gretsches turned twenty-eight years of age. Gretsches certainly was very much aware of Napoleon's depredations, especially with the disastrous French invasion of Russia in 1812 when Gretsches was twenty-five. Indeed, Gretsches had studied in Paris in 1817 and 1818, and one of his earliest literary efforts had involved translating anti-Napoleonic propaganda about a decade earlier (Sobel 1999: 178-179). He undoubtedly was aware that Napoleon's rise to power had been brought about, in part, by the revolution that had started in France in the 1780s when Gretsches was a child – a revolution that was so radical that its adherents restarted the calendar at the year one and renamed all the months of the year (Renouard 1805: vii-ix). To further subvert the Christian origins of the Gregorian calendar, the French even abolished weeks and instead introduced ten-day *décades*, the last day of which would be a day of rest. Gretsches's sixteenth letter specifically mentions the violence of the revolution (Gretsches 1839: 1: 200). He was aware of the history that had transpired in the places he visited in Paris, and he certainly knew about the French revolutionary calendar, which had remained in use until the end of 1805 (Renouard 1805: 203).

Gretsches was aware of the contrived nature of human timekeeping, of the fluidity of dating specific events, and of the influence of the passage of time. This awareness is especially present in his letters from France and Germany, in which he compares what he sees in the present with what he saw during his first visit to those countries years earlier. The first letter begins, "So *again* I am in Germany; *again* I hear the sound of huge wagons on the road" (Gretsches 1839: 1: 1, emphasis added). He is struck by the sameness of what he sees. He even declines to describe the sea voyage from Kronstadt to Travemünde in detail, claiming that to do so would be "to repeat the same things I said in the past" (Gretsches 1839: 1: 1). He contents himself to "note only some differences".

Gretsches's tone changes, however, when he visits historically significant locales. For example, in Volume 2, he visits the castle of Fontainebleau, where he experiences a sense of rapturous wonder at being in the same rooms that Napoleon had inhabited. He practically gushes with excitement to note: "Involuntary trembling ran through my veins when I remembered where I was standing. In these very rooms the man, gifted by God with the highest powers [...] in these very rooms, he descended from his throne, saw the futility of his efforts, the vanity of his plans, and the holiness of Providence in not allowing his destructive predestinations to be carried out" (2: 53). Gretsches claims to be

physiologically affected by his own knowledge of past events that took place in the rooms he visits. In a sense, then, the past is intruding into the present in Gretsch's mind – one might even say in his body as well – and he experiences what might be termed a sense of the *historical present* – a sense that is heightened by Gretsch's cultural memory, by the historical and cultural associations he brings to the situation at hand.

In linguistics and rhetoric, the term *historical present* refers to the use of present tense to describe events from the past (“historical present” 1993: 644). A long-deceased author *writes* a statement in a novel, for example, or from earlier within this very paper, “Gretsch *shows* a special awareness of the passage of time” (emphasis added). The historical present creates a sense of immediacy that metaphorically places the reader within the action being described. In so doing, it conflates the past and the present. Gretsch does this blending verbally – as any historian would do – but he also does it metaphorically in juxtaposing the past and present in the same physical space – physical space populated by his imagination. For example, he continues his visit to Fontainebleau and comments at one point,

You won't believe what a strange feeling pervades the soul of a traveler while visiting the places marked by the presence of extraordinary people or by the events that took place in them. All objects that are seen in the present merge into one obscure whole. Splendor, wealth, brilliance, grandeur of arts disappear at the thought that here Francis I talked with his great rival, Charles V; that here Henry IV conversed with Sully and carried his little Dauphine on his back; that here [Queen] Christina suffered in torments of jealousy and revenge; that here the strong soul of Napoleon was throbbing with the most contradictory passions.

(2: 53)

Gretsch's statement that he sees “the present merge into one obscure whole” is telling, for that whole includes the past that he is reconstructing mentally.

On one hand, Gretsch is saddened by the literal disappearance of so much history from the European landscape, and he emphasises the destructiveness of time and the extent to which it can change old friends and physical places. On the other hand, he is able to populate the landscape in idealistic terms so that the history never truly disappears. On visiting a battlefield near Reims, he describes the beautiful landscape as just that – a beautiful landscape. It is only in his mind that the field takes significance as the site of a battle that left Russian forces in possession of the city (1: 165).⁹

Gretsch's experiences with time make more sense when examined through the theoretical lens established in Stephen Kern's *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918*. Kern's discussion focuses on the turn of the century – the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. However, much of his

9. The Battle of Gué-à-Tresmes.

argument resonates well with Gretsich's early 19th century account, mainly because, as Kern (2003) contends, time and space are universal features of the human experience. He calls them "the essential foundations of experience" (Kern 2003: 5) and points out that Henri Bergson described time as having an "essentially fluid nature" (Kern 2003: 3). Kern (2003) further discusses advances in technology as having profound effects on human perception of time, arguing that time might more accurately be described in terms of plurality. Additionally, he argues, "Instantaneous electronic communication, which made simultaneity a reality, affected the sense of the present, speed, form, and distance. I concluded that its most distinctive effect was on the sense of the present" (Kern 2003: 6). Although early versions of the telegraph appeared in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Gretsich lived in a time before electronic communication of this sort had become widespread, and inventions like the telephone would not appear until much later. Nevertheless, Gretsich's experiences do reflect a sense of simultaneity – or timelessness – and fluidity. In so doing, they merge the past and the present in ways that bleed into sociological understandings of time and memory and that work to preserve the past. For Gretsich, the past and the present exist together, and 21st century readers of his narrative will find much to learn from his letters while also adding to their own conceptions of the meaning of time.

The simultaneous use of the Gregorian and Julian calendars in Russia and Western Europe brought Gretsich a special awareness of the passage of time, and Gretsich's experiences visiting historic places metaphorically brought the present and the past into parallel existence. Thus, the *historical present* – a term usually applied to grammatical convention – may be applied accurately to Gretsich's travel experience. As the aforementioned examples illustrate, Gretsich was a careful observer of his surroundings, and he possessed a keen sense of the passage of time and of the ways in which time can be measured and even stopped, so to speak, to be recreated in the mind. His narrative exhibits a sophisticated awareness of history and the way memories of historical events can populate the present to create a sort of historical present.

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