

RUSSIAN ANTI-LITERATURE

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The term *anti-literature* has a distinctly modern cachet. It was coined in 1935 by the English poet David Gascoyne, who used it to describe the maximalist avant-garde *épatage* of Dada and the Surrealists.¹ A subtype, the *anti-novel*, comes to the fore in the latter half of the century with the appearance of the French *nouveau roman* in the 1950s and 60s. A search for literary analogues in twentieth-century Russia may fail to come up with any native Robbe-Grillet – yet the period over which Russians have been trying to write the novel to end all novel-writing has extended at least from Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869) to Andrei Bitov's *Pushkin House* (1978) and Sasha Sokolov's *Palisandria* (1985). No less than their Western counterparts from Cervantes to Joyce and beyond, these authors aim to exhaust the novel and/or create its ultimate representative by taking to an extreme its pre-existing tendencies: these include intertextuality and parody, fiction's encroachment upon non-fiction and upon historiography in particular, the sense of the novel as a genre minimally bound by literary conventions, and finally, the impression of exhaustiveness that comes from sheer length alone.

To describe *War and Peace* as a work of anti-literature in the same breath as the postmodernist production of Bitov and Sokolov (not to mention Robbe-Grillet) may seem

anachronistic. Recall, though, Tolstoy's own comments on his book. Defending himself against anticipated criticism of his formal idiosyncrasies, the author of what is often considered the greatest novel ever written declares

What is *War and Peace*? It is not a novel. . . *War and Peace* is what the author wanted to and could express, in the form in which it was expressed. Such a declaration of the author's disdain for the conventional forms of artistic works of prose might seem a presumption, if . . . it did not have precedents. The history of Russian literature since Pushkin's time not only provides many examples of such a departure from European form, but does not give even one example of the contrary. From Gogol's *Dead Souls* to Dostoevsky's *House of the Dead*, there is in the recent period of Russian literature not a single artistic prose work even slightly above the mediocre that could completely fit the form of a novel, narrative poem [*poema*] or tale [*povest'*].²

Tolstoy justifies his anti-literary stance by claiming his place in a national literary tradition that is at the same time an anti-tradition, unified by its "disdain for the conventional forms" of European prose. He is not implying, however, that nineteenth-century Russian literature only exists to negate what has gone before – any more than the practitioners of the *nouveau roman*, for example, only sought to make a *tabula rasa* of the literary past.³ The anti-literary emphasis of Russian writing since Pushkin is not on subverting art, but rather rescuing what it sees as its sacred, soteriological mission from the tyranny of inauthentic forms. While Europe is seen as the source of this cultural tyranny, the entire debate on the authenticity of genres is itself a Western import; and some preliminary discussion of its origins will help contextualise the subsequent analysis of examples of the Russian anti-literary strategy.

Romantic Genre Theory and The Redemptive Mission of Nineteenth-century Russian Literature

What David Duff calls a “special kind of self-consciousness about genre”⁴ is evident in the German theory and British practice of Romanticism. Thinkers such as Friedrich Schlegel and poets like Coleridge and Wordsworth destabilise the obsolescent formal hierarchy of the neoclassical era, including, in particular, the aesthetic and extra-aesthetic functions assigned to traditional literary genres. They take their cue from the aesthetic theory of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790), which breaks the link between the beautiful and the good underlying the neoclassical genre system, via the derivation of aesthetic pleasure from a formal perfection unrelated to any practical function.⁵ Unrelated, and perhaps even antagonistic – as Schiller, writing five years after Kant in his essay *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry* (1795-6), fears when he declares that the “didactic poem in which the thought is itself poetic and remains so has yet to be seen.”⁶ Riven by didactic and anti-didactic impulses, Romantic thought still dreams of recovering the harmony of the useful and the beautiful, as Schiller does when he promotes the concept of an art that will somehow combine Kant’s disinterested pleasure with a programme of radical political emancipation, insisting that “it is only through beauty that man makes his way to freedom.”⁷

These sentiments were certainly shared by Schiller’s greatest supporter in Russia. This is not Dostoevsky, with his salvation of the world through beauty, but an even more influential admirer: the national critic Vissarion Belinsky, who labels the German poet his “highest and most noble ideal of a human being.”⁸ For Belinsky, as for his idol Schiller, there is no place in literature for naked didacticism, which clashes with his definition of art as “thinking in images”⁹ – an essentially aesthetic process, but also, the critic assures us, the wellspring of a beauty that is the “sister of truth and morality.”¹⁰

Of course in practice Belinsky found it no easier than did Schiller to reconcile the principle of the aesthetic autonomy of art with his demand that it serve a social cause. In nineteenth-century Russia this demand tended to be expressed in maximalistic terms. Unsurprisingly, some progressive successors of Belinsky claimed they could do without his old-school respect for beauty as a value unto itself. Yet despite the influence of critics such as Chernyshevsky, Dobroliubov, and Pisarev, the overall tension in nineteenth-century Russian literary culture between aesthetic and social functions remains unresolved in either direction. This is because both radicals and conservatives, utilitarians and aesthetes, share a conception of literature's social function – of its redemptive mission – so grandiose that it must remain a mythic potential, something that can only be alluded to in metaphoric – i.e., poetic – terms. As the philosopher Evgeny Trubetzkoy sums up at the end of the century:

Educated Russians have always expected the transfiguration of life from ideas and from artistic creations. In this spirit such antipodes as Pisarev, with his utilitarian view of art, and Dostoevsky, with his slogan, 'beauty will save the world,' come together.¹¹

Note that this also reflects the sort of social function favoured by the Romantics. Again, it is not that the latter rejected any tendency whatsoever, despite the impression instilled by Keats' dismissal of poetry that "has a palpable design on us".¹² It is just that they were oversensitised to eighteenth-century sententiousness of the type we see, for example, in Pope's "Essay on Criticism" ("fools rush in where angels fear to tread," etc.) Appeals to the heart and soul, rather than to the head, were the Romantic preference.

The general tendency in nineteenth-century Russia was, following the Romantic example, to subvert conventional expressions of the harmony of aesthetic and extra-aesthetic functions in literature, while seeking a new way in which they might be reconciled. Both these aims are reflected in the treatment of literary genre by Russian writers and critics. Generic subversion and reinvention in Romanticism is exemplified by Schlegel's promotion

of the *Mischgattung* (mixed genre); correspondingly, the Russian classics offer us a litany of subtitles to confound generic expectations – from Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* (a “novel in verse”) and *Bronze Horseman* (a versified “Petersburg *povest*”) through Gogol’s *Dead Souls* (a “*poema*” in prose), to the “Petersburg *poema*” of Dostoevsky’s short novel *The Double*.

Such provocative, combinatorial genre labels are not themselves the invention of the Romantics: in English literature consider, for example, Fielding’s Cervantean novel *Joseph Andrews* (1742). In his preface the author reveals his intention to create a genre “which I do not remember to have been hitherto attempted in our language” – the “comic epic-poem in prose”.¹³ Yet it is only with Schlegel that the breaking of classical genre boundaries is awarded the status of a revolutionary act;¹⁴ and it retains much of this status in realism. In Russia, as Victor Terras notes, both critics such as Belinsky and writers such as Gogol are “in favor of a democratization of art in every possible way” – including “overcoming the last vestiges of the theory of genres”.¹⁵

As already suggested, the straightest way of announcing one’s democratising intentions in this regard is via the subtitled remix. And the tendency is not merely to combine unrelated genres, but ones conventionally placed in opposition – in particular, those of poetry *vs.* prose, as we see in the aforementioned examples from Pushkin, Gogol, and Dostoevsky, not to speak of the prose poems of Turgenev. Critics themselves got into the act, as is evident from the title of Belinsky’s debut article, the 1834 “Literary Reveries – An Elegy in Prose.” This trend was sufficiently widespread to become the target of parody, as in the 1833 *Koshchei Bessmertnyi* by popular Romantic prose writer Aleksandr Vel’tman, who subtitles his novel *A Heroic Tale [bylina] of the Old Times*, but also refers in his text to “my long speech, discourse, lay, tale, legend, history, true story, fantasy, epic poem, kernel, novel.”¹⁶

Again, the obvious motivation for such genre mixing is to cock a snook at neoclassical prescriptions (though by the time of Turgenev's prose poems we are talking less about provocation than about following the latest Baudelairean fashion). No less important, though, is the positive motivation: the Romantic quest for a new, higher genre, as the organic or dialectical resolution of its opposing constituents. Thus Gogol's *Dead Souls* offers us the most prosaic reality, magically transformed into a "pearl of creation" when viewed through the epic lens of the *poema*.¹⁷ Everyday life (the Russian *byt*) becomes both a thing of beauty, and the vehicle for a serious examination of national identity and destiny, thus reuniting the sundered aesthetic and didactic dimensions of literary art.

This, at least, is Gogol's intention. We recall that the typical Romantic approach did no more than invoke "a genre that had not yet come into being, or of which a full performance was not yet possible."¹⁸ Thus the fragment, as the Romantic genre *par excellence*, and thus the quintessential unfinishedness of all those works by Gogol and Dostoevsky (among others) – those novels with a *virtual sequel* such as *Dead Souls*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*, that indefinitely defer the revelation of their deepest truths.¹⁹ For example, there is Dostoevsky's insistence in the preface to *The Brothers Karamazov* that his main work is the one he has yet to write, in comparison with which the present text is "hardly even a novel."²⁰ Compare this to Wordsworth's unwritten magnum opus *The Recluse*, to which the intended relation of his posthumously published masterpiece *The Prelude* is signalled by its title. Both authors conform to Schlegel's proto-Bakhtinian declaration that "the romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected."²¹

For the Russians it is primarily this impossible search for a new ideal form that motivates the subversion of genre. And to the extent that their genre-mixing functions as a

provocation, the target is much broader than the eighteenth-century Neo-Classical hierarchies that preoccupy the European Romantics. As Andreas Schönle observes,

In contrast to the situation in most Western European countries, literature in Russia was still poorly institutionalized. The organization of the field of writing into genres was only skin-deep, and it collapsed easily in the wake of the demise of Neo-Classicism.²²

Thus for nineteenth-century Russia it was not so important to reject the Neo-Classicism of Lomonosov and his ilk (odes on the utility of glass, or to the blessed memory of Her Majesty the Empress Anna Ivanovna) – it was enough to lump it together with everything else produced before Pushkin, and brand it “not literature,” as did Belinsky, among others. What was, however, crucial, was to answer the Romantic demand that a national literature reflect the originality of the national character. For English writers, to reject the Neo-Classical code was to reject the influence of France (and ultimately of Rome) in favour of original, pre-existing native tendencies. For the Russians, obsessed like the Germans with the belatedness of their literary endeavours, the anxiety of influence was more diffuse, and could only be negated by declaring independence from the whole establishment of European literature, including post-Neo-Classical developments.

Russian writers therefore do not stop at genre-mixing subtitles, but declare their allegiance to a broader subversion of conventional formal categories. Hence Tolstoy’s insistence that the “history of Russian literature since Pushkin’s time not only provides many examples of such a departure from European form, but does not give even one example of the contrary.” This view is echoed a century later by the scholar Dmitry Likhachev, who (obviously less concerned with the Belinskian dictum that Russian writing only begins with Pushkin) takes Tolstoy’s thesis even farther, concluding that over the past thousand years “the only basic feature of the development of Russian literature is its search for ever greater

freedom from formal constraints, despite occasional attempts to reverse the trend.”²³ It is hard to understand such a bold claim, except in the context of the historical need to bolster the national literature’s claim to uniqueness by presenting it as an anti-tradition, with “freedom from formal constraints” read as “freedom from foreign literary conventions” – whether they are those of Byzantium or the French Enlightenment. It is this need that motivates the anti-literary strategy of Russian literature, which, like the aforementioned strategy of the virtual sequel, compensates for the impossible burden of redemptive expectation placed on it by critics and writers alike, by means of deferring the final expression and perfection of both its form and content. We see similar compensatory strategies employed by the English and German Romantics in response to demands that poets become prophets – or even the “unacknowledged legislators of the world,” as Shelley puts it. Yet it is in nineteenth-century Russia that they are most fully manifested, in the field of genre as elsewhere, because of the general sense that “literature plays a more significant role in our intellectual advancement than French, German and English literature do in the advancement of their own nations; and it bears heavier responsibilities than does any other literature.”²⁴

Bad Writing

The above quote comes from the revolutionary journalist Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828-89), author of what is widely perceived as both the worst and the most influential novel in the Russian canon. Like the other nineteenth-century classics, Chernyshevsky mixes genres, exculpating the fissile prose of his notorious *What is To Be Done?* (1863) by means of the

subtitle “from stories about new people.” However, he is not content merely to oppose his work to the type of literature that knows the difference between a novel and a collection of stories. Chernyshevsky is worth dwelling on because he takes the anti-literary strategy farther than any other nineteenth-century Russian author, by insisting that his reader consider whether, leaving aside the question of genre conventions, his writing can be considered artistic in the first place. As his narrator bluntly explains in the opening pages of the novel:

I do not have the slightest hint of artistic talent. I do not even have a good command of the language. But this is nothing: read on, most kind public. Your reading will not be without benefit. Truth is a good thing: it compensates for the faults of the author who serves it.²⁵

This passage may recall an observation by the renowned Slavist Alicia Chudo, who writes in her *And Quiet Flows the Vodka*: “Since the time of Belinsky, critics had asserted that very bad novels were very good novels if they preached the right ideas, because only content mattered and good form was a bad thing.”²⁶ But what is happening in Chernyshevsky is a bit more complicated than this. On the surface, he sets his novel against what the establishment has canonised as “good” literature and even “good” Russian language. On a deeper level, he is suggesting that the comparison is really in *his* favour, since he has chosen to serve “truth” rather than waste time on aesthetic effects. The implication is that beauty and truth are mutually incompatible, according to the axiom that the degree of polish in a narrative is inversely proportional to its sincerity.

We must also consider the context within which this novel was first read, in which ostensibly “bad” writing could become a tool for sneaking truth past the censors. More fundamentally, in Chernyshevsky’s aesthetic we can detect vestiges of the pre-Enlightenment world-view that denigrates fiction as falsehood. (Another vestige is Dostoevsky’s habit of apologising to his readers for using unrealistic narrative viewpoints.) The persistence of this

view in Russia reflects the historical dominance of religious and other literature of an openly ideological nature, still in evidence when the genres of Western popular fiction were imported at the end of the eighteenth century. (In this connection, it is also significant that the Russian language never developed its own word for the literary category of *fiction*. In the sense of invented narratives produced for aesthetic ends, there is only *khudozhestvennaia literatura*, “artistic literature.” A telling post-Soviet development is the use of the English words “fiction” [Russ. *fikshn*] and “non-fiction” [*non-fikshn*] in literary journalism.)

Finally and most fundamentally, Chernyshevsky invokes the idea that language of any sort, polished or unpolished, is incapable of transmitting the most profound truths. (“A thought once uttered is a lie,” as the Russian poet Tiutchev famously put it.) All this his narrator reinforces by dividing the imagined readership of *What is To Be Done?* into two groups: the “most kind public” whose interpretive talents are mockingly flattered; and the select few capable of reading between the lines and discovering his revolutionary message.

Compare Chernyshevsky’s approach to that of Tolstoy. The latter initially worried about reconciling his grand ambitions for *War and Peace* with the “simple, vulgar literary language and literary devices of the novel”.²⁷ However, once he had decided that such reconciliation was impossible he vigorously defended his position, rather than advertising it as a failure, real or ostensible. Compare also the predominant attitude of twentieth century European anti-literature, and anti-art in general, which is one of knowing disdain rather than disingenuous incompetence. Marcel Duchamp does not give his reasons for adorning the Mona Lisa with a graffiti moustache; but we may be sure that he is not feigning frustration at being unable to paint like Leonardo. Nor is this a genre-breaking gesture towards art’s sacred mission, but merely exuberant anarchism, the expression, in Gascoyne’s words, of a generation’s aesthetic revolt “against the whole of the epoch in which they lived.”²⁸

Dostoevsky's Writerly Protagonists and Anti-Heroes

While it is Chernyshevsky who 'lays bare the device' (as Shklovsky puts it), there are many writers who seek to impress us with their closeness to truth or Reality with a capital 'r' whether by simply emphasising their generic uniqueness, as in the example of Tolstoy,²⁹ or by means of a strategy of 'bad' writing, as we see in a long line of writers from Gogol and Belinsky, through Dostoevsky, Kataev and beyond – or even going back as far as Avvakum, or perhaps Ilarion's eleventh-century *Sermon on Law and Grace*, which tells how the New Testament replaces the Old, superseding the rule of Law with that of a deeper, nomoclastic Truth, rather than merely its "shadow." (Recall Jesus' comment on his two new commandments of love for God and one's neighbour: "On this hang all the laws and the prophets."³⁰) Or, in a similar vein, one could mention the immeasurable influence of religious anti-literature – the Apocrypha – in Russian culture. Or the crucial linguistic opposition between Church Slavonic and the evolving native literary language in the post-Petrine era. Or the generic opposition between poetry and prose, which is relevant no matter what the century.

One nineteenth-century classic, in particular, provides a whole series of intricately drawn story-tellers whose ostensible literary failures are meant to have the reverse effect. Dostoevsky's third-person narrators, like Chernyshevsky's representative in *What is To Be Done?*, muse aloud about their inadequacies – most extravagantly in the case of *The Double*, which opens a pages-long paragraph with the exclamation "Oh, if only I were a poet!" Insisting that without the skills of at least a Homer or a Pushkin ("any less of a talent, and

there's no sense in sticking your nose in") he cannot possibly approach his chosen topic (which is nothing more than a banal party scene), Dostoevsky's narrator nevertheless launches into a mighty mock-epic (i.e., Gogolian) description, peppered liberally with the conditional particle *by* ["would"] ("I would depict..."), and ending with the dutiful "For all of this, as I have already had the honour of explaining to you, oh readers, my pen is inadequate, and therefore I am silent."³¹

Even more interesting are the author's protagonists. The typical Dostoevsky hero is first and foremost a reader and a writer. Given the prominence of his non-fictional ruminations about the nature of literature, about its relationship with reality and the individual, and about his own practice as a writer,³² it is not surprising to find Dostoevsky working out these same concerns via fictional characters who are themselves involved with literature. The interest of these characters is usually amateur: they may not be conscious of the full extent of their function as writers, readers, and critics. This function is less a choice than an instinct, answering what Dostoevsky in his essay on Dobroliubov calls "the need for beauty," an aesthetic demand that emerges most strongly "when a person is at odds with reality, in disharmony, in conflict – that is, when he is most alive."³³ This is not an unusual condition for Dostoevsky's protagonists to find themselves in.

Their author would no doubt subscribe to Lydia Ginzburg's premise that "aesthetic activity goes on unceasingly in the human mind; art is merely its ultimate, highest stage..."³⁴ The scholar's analysis of the phenomenon of *zhiznetvorchestvo* ["life-creation"] is germane to the present discussion. The term itself dates from the Symbolist era, but the underlying concept is Romantic, and is certainly operational in the work and life of the Romantic realist Dostoevsky. After all, every waking moment of a character like Raskolnikov (or, even more so, his predecessor the Underground Man) seems to be spent on the "deliberate construction

in life of artistic images and of aesthetically organized sequences of events”, as Ginzburg defines *zhiznetvorchestvo*.³⁵

Of course, the Underground Man is not the type of original Romantic life-creator we find lying in a vale in Dagestan, or striking a pose on Senate Square (as described by Lotman in his article on “The Decembrist in Everyday Life.”) Nor is he the Symbolist-era Andrei Belyi remake with unicorns and centaurs coming over for tea. He is no thaumaturge, confidently original and inspired, of his own or anybody else’s reality. Rather, his distrustful compulsion with acting out literary conventions recalls the main intertext of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*. It recalls the self-made revolutionaries populating Chernyshevsky’s *What Is to Be Done?*, as well as those readers who used his heroes as models for their own *zhiznetvorchestvo*. Even more so, it recalls Chernyshevsky himself, who writes so blusterously in his MA dissertation *On the Aesthetic Relations of Art and Reality*: “Let art content itself with its lofty, splendid calling: to be something of replacement for reality where it is lacking, and to serve for people as a textbook of life.”³⁶ But who, in his real life, as brilliantly portrayed by Irina Paperno in her *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism*, is a perfect Underground Man: an idealist *malgré soi* who insists that “fiction is more valid than generally accepted reality”; whose brand of realism demands the rejection of literary and social conventions; who nevertheless longs to master these same conventions that leave him, girlfriend-less, loitering at the edge of the salon circle, wondering what Tolstoy is saying about him in French. (Perhaps something about my dirty fingernails?)³⁷

Thus the life-creation of aristocratic Romanticism becomes for the parvenu *raznochinets* an uncertain balm against social exclusion. Whether or not they are technically *raznochintsy*, Dostoevsky’s heroes tend to share Chernyshevsky’s social anxieties. Attempting to narrate a life for themselves, or to critique the scripts imposed upon them by

others, they are beset by conflicting demands: the story must be true, realistic, natural; yet in a world where fiction – politically, morally – “is more valid than generally accepted reality”, such a story can only base itself on the artifices of literature. And what about the Romantic requirement of originality and individuality? What script best serves this demand?

If Dostoevsky’s characters are not published critics or belletrists, they nevertheless spend a fair amount of time discussing literature; and they are conscious to varying degrees (in the case of the Underground Man and his descendants – hyper-conscious) of the extent to which their own lives are shaped by what they have read. Similarly, they are self-conscious storytellers (mainly autobiographical), whose audiences themselves respond, in the manner of readers, with their own critical commentary. They often betray serious literary ambitions, half drowned by the weight of their belief in their artistic shortcomings.

Parallel to the development of Dostoevsky’s ideas on the relationship of fiction and reality, his characters tend to evolve towards greater sophistication in their literary awareness. Makar Devushkin, hero of Dostoevsky’s epistolary first novel *Poor People* (1846), stands on the first rung of the evolutionary ladder (one – huge – step above Gogol’s Akakii Akakievich). He is constantly discussing what he reads and how he writes; yet the self-improving seriousness of his commentary is more than matched by his naiveté. The novel’s epigraph from Odoevsky (“Oh, I’m fed up with these storytellers...”) foregrounds, at the outset of Dostoevsky’s career, the question of (bad) writing and its effect on readers.³⁸ Devushkin dwells on this issue at length. He is blown away by “The Stationmaster” from Pushkin’s *Tales of Belkin* (though he misses the reworking of Karamzin, with its ironic relevance for his own situation³⁹). Devushkin exclaims “it’s like real life!” and “it’s like I wrote it myself” (84-5) – unaware of the problematic nature of such declarations. For Dostoevsky (unlike Chernyshevsky), the equation of artistic worth with closeness to “real

life” is a tricky one; and for Devushkin, it becomes the basis for his subsequent rejection of Gogol’s “Overcoat”. Although he sputters that “it’s simply unrealistic, because it couldn’t be the case that such a clerk existed”, the pathetic vehemence of his reaction stems directly from his über-naive identification with the fictional protagonist. (91)

And “it’s like I wrote it myself”: with this comment Devushkin expresses his gratitude for the stylistic simplicity that allows an untutored reader easy access to Pushkin’s fictional world. Yet he berates himself for his own simplicity of style. He goes so far as to blame the lack thereof for his failed career (he is a copy clerk). What he means by proper literary style becomes clear from his descriptions of his friend Ratazyayev, in comparison with whom Devushkin is “nothing” as a writer. Ratazyayev has “tons of style,” in “pretty much every word,” even the “emptiest.” (75) The examples Devushkin gives of his friend’s writing do indeed confirm that he has “tons of style” ...that of overblown Romanticism, against which the famous clarity and concision of *The Tales of Belkin* was crafted as an anti-literary antidote.

One glance at Ratazyayev’s effusions is quite sufficient to warn us off Devushkin’s aesthetic judgment – which, despite the best intentions of this classic Dostoevskian outsider, has less to do with Truth and Beauty than with the crucial question of *propriety*. (Recall the *raznochinets* obsession with codes of behaviour.) As Devushkin writes to his beloved Varenka: “It should be noted, my dear, that Ratazyayev is of excellent conduct and is for that reason a superb writer, unlike other writers.” (78) He goes on to imagine (desire masked by self-deprecation) himself as a published author. With a hint at the etymology of the surname of his literary predecessor (Akakii Akakievich *Bashmachkin*), Dostoevsky has Devushkin reduce his fantasised identity to the question of footwear: “Well what would happen if

everyone were to find out that Devushkin the writer has patched boots!” (79) *Ergo*, Devushkin cannot be a writer.

Finally, we note that the highpoints in Devushkin’s narrative come precisely when he is most regretful about expressing himself “without any style”. These include the epiphany that Dostoevsky’s poor letter-writing clerk does *not* live in the nightmare world of Akakii Akakievich. Devushkin’s superior, having called him onto the carpet for a copying error, is suddenly – to the reader’s surprise no less than the clerk’s – moved to pity (to the tune of one hundred roubles) instead of annihilation. Devushkin has been symbolically *rewarded* for bad writing – i.e., the mistake he has made in rewriting an important document. And this key episode is prefaced by Devushkin’s apologetic “I’ll tell you without any style, but just as the Lord puts it into my heart.” (124)

Similarly, the novel’s most desperate, heartfelt utterance – its final five words – punctuates a verbal torrent:

Ah my dearest, what about style! I mean right now I don’t even know what I’m writing, I haven’t a clue, and I’m not rereading, I’m not fixing the style, I’m just writing for the sake of writing, just to write as much as I can to you... My dove, my dearest, my beloved! (146)

Even now, though, in his last letter, Devushkin’s lament is that he has to break off his correspondence with Varenka just as his “style is taking shape...”

Like Makar Devushkin in *Poor People*, the unnamed protagonist of *White Nights*, published two years later in 1848, apologises for his lack of style; and like Devushkin, he has not quite come to the realisation that this failure may be to his advantage. His naive exchanges with the heroine Nastenka show many parallels with the dialogue of Devushkin and Varvara. Both women react to the heroes as they would to the reading of a work of literature. Varvara writes: “Look out, you know I told you last time that your style is

extremely uneven.” (99) And prefiguring Liza’s critique in *Notes from Underground*, Nastenka asks “... could you not somehow tell the story less beautifully? You speak as if you were reading a book.” (In general, the critical acumen of these heroines far exceeds that of their male counterparts.) The hero of *White Nights* has mastered those literary niceties that were beyond Devushkin’s grasp: yet they are nothing but an obstacle to him. When Nastenka pleads for less ornamentation, he admits “I don’t know how to tell it any other way.”⁴⁰ So crippled is he by convention and artifice, that he cannot even keep from recounting his autobiography in the third person (because “in the first person it’s all horribly shameful”⁴¹).

Here we catch a glimpse of how the Petersburg dreamer type of Dostoevsky’s early work will evolve (devolve?) into the alienated autobiographer of *Notes from Underground*. The Underground Man has long since abandoned the question of whether he should narrate his life in a literary or non-literary manner. What worries him is how to *live* – whether he can stand a “head-on clash with real life,” or whether, inhabiting as he does the “most abstract and premeditated city in the whole world,” he will remain forever trapped within the “disgusting, romantic, and fantastic” illusions of his over-stimulated literary imagination.⁴² He gives little cause for optimism, concluding his notes by declaring on behalf of his generation, that

we have gone so far as to consider real “living life” as work, almost as a duty, and we all agree amongst ourselves that it’s better in books. ... After all, we don’t even know where what is alive can be found or what it is, what it’s called. Leave us alone without a book and we’ll immediately become lost ... We even find it hard to be people, people with our own real bodies and blood... Soon we’ll figure out how to be born somehow from an idea.⁴³

Thus the Underground Man does not concern himself directly with anti-literature, but rather with the “anti-hero,” as he explicitly brands himself and those like him. But this is only

because the threat posed by literary artifice to the expression of artistic truth has metastasised: now life itself is in danger of losing its capacity for truthfulness:

Why to tell, for example, long tales of how I wasted my life through moral degradation in my corner, through inadequate conditions, through becoming unused to what is alive and through arrogant spite in the underground – this would indeed be uninteresting; a novel needs a hero, and here all the traits of an anti-hero are purposely assembled, and the main thing is that all of this will create a most unpleasant impression, because we've all become unused to life, we're all lame, each one of us, more or less.⁴⁴

Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* provides the clearest illustration of a narrator whose ostensible literary failures are meant to have the reverse effect. In the above passage he explicitly presents himself as a teller of "long tales" about his own life, as a critic of these stories as uninteresting and unpleasant, and also as the chief *cause* for such unpleasantness – since he is, as he puts it, an "anti-hero." Thus anti-hero and anti-literature are directly related. The story is bad because its hero is bad: spiteful, full of "moral degradation," etc. More than that, it is bad because its hero has failed in his main task – which is simply to write about himself. This is admittedly not much of a heroic feat in the traditional sense, but nevertheless it one that is vital in the post-Romantic era, with its insistence on the primacy of the life-text and authorship of one's own identity.

The *Underground Man* does imagine himself a hero in the traditional sense as well:

There were moments of such positive rapture, such happiness, that I swear I did not feel even the slightest hint of mockery within me. There was faith, hope, love. That's just it: at the time I believed blindly that somehow miraculously, by the force of some external circumstance, everything would suddenly open up and expand, [...] and suddenly I would emerge into the wide world, almost as if on a white steed and wearing a laurel wreath. I couldn't conceive of taking on a secondary role, and for this very reason I calmly played the very lowest one in reality. Either a hero, or in the mud – there was nothing in between.⁴⁵

Here we see a crucial feature of the Dostoevskian anti-hero, whether in the person of the *Underground Man* or in his writerly descendants such as the *Raw Youth* or *Ivan Karamazov*.

He is not merely lacking in the traditional positive qualities, in the manner of the ‘little man’ of Gogol. His failure, baseness, even buffoonery are the paradoxical pledge of some sort of unrealized greatness, echoing, if ironically, the biblical “last shall be first,” the passion-suffering defeatism of Russia’s favourite saints Boris and Gleb, or Dostoevsky’s own insistence that we love the Russian *muzhik* for his potential, not his actual condition.

Throughout European literature, one of the great difficulties in updating the original Greek idea of the semi-divine hero has been the comparison with Jesus. Thus the Renaissance reevaluated the classical epic protagonists and found them wanting. The virtues of Achilles’ body or Odysseus’ mind were insufficient, and were to be fused with Christian piety into a new ideal of all-round perfection. Yet the key to any such *imitatio Christi* would have to be humility, the opposite of the sin of pride that was part and parcel of the *arete*, the virtue of the Greek heroes. And true humility demands that the new hero deny his perfection, deny that he is actually comparable to Christ. On the border between the pagan and Christian eras, we see the hubris of the classical heroes replayed in those Russian *byliny* that tell of the end of the *bogatyr*s, who, having defeated all their earthly enemies, challenge the world beyond (or, in at least one variant, Christ himself), leading to the inevitable conclusion: “Since those times the heroes have departed from Holy Rus.”⁴⁶ In the more recent literary context, the problem faced by Russian writers in attempting to portray a *good* character (recall Dostoevsky’s struggles with *The Idiot*) have led one Orthodox commentator to suggest that it is precisely the comparison with Christ, whether explicit or implicit, that explains the dearth of unambiguously positive protagonists: “There are so few ‘good’ heroes precisely because of the ever-present image in the author’s consciousness (or subconscious) of the best of all heroes.”⁴⁷

In the end, the only way to produce a hero comparable to Christ yet possessing the necessary humility is to forget about the active perfection of the Saviour's life and concentrate on the passive perfection of his death, in which the acceptance of defeat is the one essential requirement. This is not only the route chosen by the princely passion-sufferers, beginning with the medieval martyrs Boris and Gleb; it is also reflected, however perversely, in the fantasies of Dostoevsky's secular holy fool, the Underground Man. For him the polar opposites of riding a white horse or grovelling in the mud are the only possible choices because, on the deepest level, they are the same thing.

The main reason why the Underground Man calls himself an anti-hero, though, is not that he grovels in the mud, morally or otherwise, but that he has become "unused to what is alive." Paradoxically, this alienation is expressed primarily in his fantasies about living his life according to literary models. That is, he is an anti-hero because he is trying to be a hero, something which, as he so thoroughly convinces us, can in his day and age only be learned out of books. On a deeper level, though, Dostoevsky attempts to convince us that his protagonist *is* a real 'hero of his time,' a type commonly found in the actual world.⁴⁸ And the Underground Man sings the same refrain, insisting that his readers are just as divorced from life as he is – just as deserving of the title *anti-hero*, and at the same time only proving that he himself is not in fact divorced from real life, but perfectly representative of it. Then, of course, the problem is with reality, as it always is. The commentator cited above also points out that the imposition "in all its Orthodox completeness of the Christian ideal on real life in Russia has served to emphasise the ineluctable incompleteness of this life."⁴⁹

And, to add a final complication, if real life is indeed worthy of rejection, if it becomes necessary, as it were, to follow Christ rather than the truth, than it only remains to heed Chernyshevsky's example and embrace literature, without second thoughts, as a

guidebook to life. While our reading, like that of the Underground Man, may reveal literature's shortcomings, these are not the same as the shortcomings of real life, since through the work of our imagination anti-literature always holds the promise of a positive ideal, just as the portrayal of an anti-hero is never without the hint of its opposite.

Dostoevsky and Anti-Literature

Though all Dostoevsky's writer-protagonists have something of the Underground Man about them, they are generally able to take at least one step back from the brink of terminal solipsism. For example, the first-person, self-reflective, paradox-loving narrator of *The Raw Youth* immediately recalls his subterranean ancestor; yet he retains a (shaky) faith in his ability as a writer to express some untarnished truth and provide a positive model for real life – one that does not simply decay into a hyperconscious *mise-en-abîme* of literary clichés. And he understands that in attempting to express his truth, the key is to refrain “with all my strength from everything that is beside the point, and, above all – from literary niceties.” He proclaims that he is sacrificing “so-called artistic effect,” and boasts that “the reader will find no eloquence” in his writing.⁵⁰ He constantly teases and insults his readers in the Chernyshevskian manner, and complains that his thoughts are deeper than what can be put into words. In this the Raw Youth recalls the narrator of Dostoevsky's “Dream of a Ridiculous Man” – a sort of holy fool with a revolutionary secret that cannot be expressed in conventional language, and perhaps in no language whatsoever. The Ridiculous Man tries to put the images of his utopian dream down on paper, but complains that they are so supremely “truthful” that he can only convey them in a distorted form.⁵¹

One of the best, most explicit explanations of the anti-literary strategy is provided by the last in the line of the descendants of the Underground Man, in the conclusion of his programmatic “I accept God, but not the world he has created” speech:

“But why did you have to start off ‘as stupidly as possible,’ as you put it?,” asked Alesha, looking thoughtfully at him.

“Well, first of all of the sake of Russianness: Russian conversations on these themes are always conducted as stupidly as possible. And again, secondly, the stupider the conversation, the closer to the point. ... Stupidity is succinct and artless, whereas intelligence twists and conceals. ... I’ve taken my argument to the point of despair, and the more stupidly I have presented it, the more to my advantage it is.”⁵²

The speaker is, of course, Ivan Karamazov – who, no less than the narrator of *What is To Be Done?*, always “twists and conceals,” all the more so when he is trying to convince his listeners of his “succinct and artless” stupidity. All of Dostoevsky’s previous writer-protagonists have groped towards this understanding of the nexus of truth and literary artifice; none has quite achieved this degree of clarity. Of course, we may retain doubts about Ivan’s anti-literary *practice*: there is no need to take at face value his claim that he has indeed succeeded in telling his story “as stupidly as possible” and has therefore gotten closest “to the point.” After all, he is not one to come up with unpolished utterances. (About whom was Smerdyakov talking when he noted that “it’s true what people say – it’s always interesting to talk to an intelligent person”?⁵³) In fact, Ivan may be worse at this type of narration than his brother Alyosha, who is also described by the narrator as lacking in literary graces:

...it cannot be said that his narration was smooth or coherent, but it seems he got his point across clearly, including the key words and gestures, and vividly conveying his own feelings, often by means of one simple detail.⁵⁴

Note a key difference: Dostoevsky does not favour us with the actual text of Alyosha’s narrative. We might imagine, considering the author’s general attitude towards the two

brothers, that the younger sibling is capable of an inspired artlessness that goes beyond Dostoevsky's own ability to reproduce on the page.

Recalling certain aforementioned complaints of the Raw Youth and the Ridiculous Man, we might take this line of reasoning to its conclusion and award the medal for artless truthfulness to the one character in *The Brothers Karamazov* who says nothing at all. The kiss with which Christ answers the studied verbosity of the Grand Inquisitor may indeed represent the pinnacle of eloquence, "an overriding act of love and forgiveness so innate that it can only be expressed wordlessly," as one study guide to the novel puts it.⁵⁵ (Note that the act is repeated by Alyosha immediately after Ivan ends his tale, prompting the latter to charge him with "plagiarism;" Jesus' kiss is also prefigured by another Dostoevskian Truth-bearer, in the enigmatic bow of the Elder Zosima before Dmitry Karamazov.⁵⁶)

It is not difficult, however, to see the merit in D.H. Lawrence's contention that the kiss is nothing more than a sign of acquiescence, a mute admission of communicative failure on all levels.⁵⁷ A more direct attack on the idea of silence as the ultimate refinement of anti-literary technique is offered by the Raw Youth, when he puts his own penchant for the apophaticism of "a thought once uttered is a lie" under the microscope. His conclusion: even this approach, ostensibly the ultimate expression of anti-literature, is itself merely the most clichéd of artistic techniques: "By using this apophasis [*figuroiu molchaniia*] I, in my incompetence, have once again succumbed to those novelistic 'niceties' that I was mocking earlier."⁵⁸

Of course, if anything less than silence is inadequate for the expression of the deepest truth of reality – and if even silence can be made to look dodgy – then there is nothing left of the maximalist ambitions of nineteenth-century Russian writing. Yet Dostoevsky's contemplation of such extremes merely reflects that fact that, just as his deep religious faith

was accompanied by equally profound doubts, so his passionate belief in the power of the ‘ultimate word,’ as he liked to put it, was always undermined by his doubt in the capacity of art to reflect reality in the first place. Gary Saul Morson records Dostoevsky’s exasperated observation that art strives for coherence, while reality pushes in the opposite direction, toward fragmentation. Dostoevsky was “suspicious of art,” worried about the problem of untruth in writing. Morson sees the narrative failures of his protagonists as experiments by Dostoevsky to “delineate chaos.” The storyteller’s defeat is itself “the best index to a world beyond the reach of ordered vision.”⁵⁹ This is indisputable. Yet Dostoevsky’s literary practice is not only informed by his doubts; and the self-perceived literary shortcomings of his characters are always more than just failures of vision.

Anti-Literature and the Nineteenth-Century Russian Canon

As stated earlier, the anti-literary strategy relates directly to the mythic redemptive function of nineteenth-century Russian literature – which is, in short, the assumption of some God-given power on the part of writers to save the nation’s soul. In the efforts of Russia to realise its political and cultural ambitions the yardstick was always Western Europe. Yet these efforts could only be judged successful if grounded in a concept of the nation’s uniqueness. Therefore, the social function that was to mould Russia’s destiny could only come from a literature that measured itself against the West yet remained distinct – one that, ideally, could be seen as an antithesis to the Western cultural establishment, just as young Russia as a whole sought to see itself as old Europe’s opposite.

Thus Tolstoy's commentary on *War and Peace*. As categorical as it is insubstantial, his apology offers only a negative definition of the uniqueness of the Russian tradition. Freedom from Western convention rather than any positive indigenous trait forms the basis of most explications of "that peculiarly Russian realism" which Mirsky defines as an all-inclusive art form transcending the bounds of both poetical idealism and prosaic realism.⁶⁰ (The same approach is reflected in Bakhtin's negative definition of the novel, Russian or otherwise, in terms of its antagonistic relations with other literary forms.) For the most part, this freedom entails transcendence rather than rejection. It does not prevent the appropriation of Western forms – or even the Russianising of Western writers (see Lotman's comments on the creation of the Russian Byron⁶¹). At the same time, Russian literature's depiction of national issues (typically through the prism of the East/West duality) takes on an increasingly universal relevance.

Literary attitudes toward the West represented a crucial factor in the establishment of the Russian canon. Yoking the new movement to a vision of nascent nationality, the intelligentsia invoked the image of a highly-unified tradition that only needed to be supplemented by the creation of actual masterpieces. At the same time, they shared an equally inviolable belief in the concentration of all hitherto-existing literary value in an authoritative Western tradition. The usual conflicts of past *vs.* future and foreign *vs.* native were intensified by Russia's insistence on a clean break with its native heritage, and its identification of past artistic achievement with an exclusive foreignness. These factors yield the equations past = foreign, future = native.

This future held the promise of a unified literary tradition to express the nation's spirit. It seems curious, in a way, that the keystone of this tradition would turn out to be the novel. Not only, as scholars are happy to reiterate, has Russian novelistic realism always been

a “literature of opposition;”⁶² but this opposing movement (as Shklovsky has shown) points not only outward but inward, from one representative of the genre to another. Each case of Tolstoy’s “departures from European form” is no less a departure from the form of preceding members of the evolving native tradition. Yet for the makers of this tradition, only deviations from foreign models are deemed significant. In contrast, while the innovations that separate individual works in the Russian canon from one another would confound any efforts to establish the “common style” and “community of taste” demanded by T. S. Eliot’s conventional idea of a literary tradition,⁶³ their impact on its evolution is immaterial. This is because the unifying forces in this evolution are not formal and thematic similarities, but rather a common social function that exists fully-fledged only in the minds of readers – or rather in the minds of the writers and critics, who use the myth of this redemptive function to will the tradition into being. (Thus, as Ronald Hingley observes, Belinsky so keenly anticipated “a great period in his country’s literature that he was proclaiming its arrival while it was still little more than a distant potentiality.”⁶⁴)

In other words, the paradox of a unity of novelistic iconoclasts is resolved by assuming that literary history works in fundamentally different ways in Russia and in Western Europe. Membership in the native tradition is determined less by adherence to literary conventions than by the exigencies of a symbolic cultural narrative. Its innovations are perceived against the background of what has been mythologised into a single moribund tradition of Western literature based on a “community of taste,” one which, as stipulated by Eliot, “has a history behind it.”⁶⁵ The Russian canon, in contrast, has a history in front of it – one it was born to create.

Tolstoy implies there is something uniquely Russian in his book’s capacity to adopt the guise of a leading European literary form – and go on to beat the foreigners at their own

game – without partaking of the genre’s essence. So it is with the Russian people themselves: Belinsky (positively reevaluating contemporary grievances against the nobility for its cosmopolitan upbringing) describes the ability to adapt to any national milieu without losing one’s identity as a defining trait of the Russian character.⁶⁶ For Dostoevsky it is Pushkin who exemplifies this “universal sympathy,” in which the historical disadvantage of Russia’s otherness with respect to Western Europe is transformed into the myth of the broad Russian soul, reconciling the antinomies of East and West, ideal and real: “To become a real Russian, to become completely Russian, perhaps all this means ... is to become a brother to all people, a *universal man*, if you like.”⁶⁷

Positive revaluations of imposed otherness have held a special attraction for one segment of the Russian people: the intelligentsia. The world-view of the cultural elite is coloured by its self-definition in terms of a creative opposition to the political establishment. It is the intelligentsia who project this negative definition onto the nation as a whole, onto the art form designed to spark the ideals of this nation, onto the genre that plays the lead role in this literary thaumaturgy, and onto the poet who is its chief wonder-worker. Their oppositional essence is manifested in *dialogue*. Thus Bakhtin’s privileging of this category serves the historical function of a *raison d’être* for the Russian intelligentsia; it stresses the importance of otherness against the power and prestige of official opinion. Moreover, it justifies the ephemeral quality of intelligentsia life, made so by the exclusion of the fruits of its labour from the canon of official discourse.

In the literary labours of more radical members of the intelligentsia, dialogue with the moribund European tradition may become a polemic against literature in general. Establishment writers are castigated for having won their fame by devoting themselves to a fashionable aestheticism instead of the sacred redemptive function, understood in its more

utilitarian variant. (The most ardent proponent of this line of thinking is, as one might expect, Chernyshevsky.)

The Twentieth Century

The need for Russian writers to assert their independence from European tradition, moribund or otherwise, becomes less immediate by the end of the nineteenth century, with the consolidation of a national canon of literary works respected no less abroad than at home. However, the other major motivation for the anti-literary strategy – the demand that Russian writing fulfil its traditional redemptive function – is still in evidence among writers of a wide range of artistic and ideological orientations.

In the early twentieth century it is easy to find examples of Russian avant-gardists writing novels against the European mainstream. The situation is complicated, though, by the fact that the native nineteenth-century tradition now vies with that of Europe for the title of literary establishment, as it did not a hundred years earlier, when Pushkin's deviations from the literary techniques of Lomonosov and the Neo-Classicists mainly constituted a reaction against imported Western forms. On the other hand, precisely because it was so easy to see the nineteenth-century canon as made up of iconoclasts, it was no easy target. (Even Mayakovsky had to practise sleight-of-hand when he threw Pushkin from the steamship of modernity while still keeping him on board as a poetic fellow-mariner.)

The question of socialist realism's appropriation of the nineteenth-century tradition is especially interesting. Of course, socialist realism eventually became the mother of all literary establishments; at the same time, it *does* retain the features of an anti-literature, especially in

its early stages, when it has not yet shaken off the influence of the Proletkult demand for a radically new literature to correspond with the new proletarian ruling class. We can trace the link from, say, the late Tolstoy in *What is Art?* with his radical turn to the aesthetic ideal of peasant simplicity, through the work of proletarian poets such as Aleksei Gastev (who, in his most famous poem, makes the minimalist proclamation “Neither story, nor speech, but only one iron word I’ll shout”⁶⁸), to the straight-shooting protagonist of Gladkov’s socialist realist classic *Cement*, whose lives by the motto “it’s *doing* we need, not talking,” and who precedes his semi-coherent celebratory speech at the novel’s end with the thought “Why speak, when it was all clear without words?”⁶⁹ At the same time, we should not forget that Gladkov was forced to rewrite his hero’s final speech to be less fragmentary in later editions, and that in general, the plain-spoken protagonists of socialist realism are not to be confused with their authors, as we are so often encouraged to do with the protagonists of Russian modernism and postmodernism. And no socialist realist author would dare to play to fool in the manner of Chernyshevsky’s narrator or that of, say, Valentin Kataev (in the later, non-conformist stage of his career) in *The Holy Well*, who calls himself

the founder of the latest literary school: the Mauvists, from the French *mauvais* – bad – the essence of which is that, since everyone nowadays writes very well, you must write badly, as badly as possible, and then you will attract attention. Of course it’s not so easy to learn to write badly because there is such a devil of a lot of competition, but it’s well worth the effort and if you can really learn to write lousily, worse than anybody else, then world fame is guaranteed.⁷⁰

There is one important detail that separates the nineteenth-century anti-literature of Chernyshevsky & Co., of the early twentieth-century avant-gardists, and even of socialist realism, from the *mauvism* of Kataev and his descendants in the latter part of the century, among whom one might include such outré figures as Eduard Limonov and the Sokolov of *Palisandriia*. For the former, the anti-literary stance serves a belief in literature’s sacred

social function, however cleverly it is hidden. In contrast, the above quote from Kataev, with its exclusive if ironic focus on “world fame,” recalls the ethic of the Sex Pistols, with their Great Rock’n’Roll Swindle formula for translating bad playing into good press coverage.

But of course this is not all there is to Kataev: where else would we expect to find seriousness of purpose and literary depth, if not in a book entitled *The Holy Well* – which does in fact include the narrator’s dream of himself in the role of Pushkin’s Prophet. (“And tore out my sinful tongue”.⁷¹) And even among more recent Mauvists, this seriousness has not entirely evaporated – this sense of an opposition between the sinful tongue and the sting of the wise serpent, between a surface of “bad writing” and a depth of prophetic truth. The conceptualist Vladimir Sorokin provides a fairly extreme recent example of someone who does not play well with traditional conceptions of literature – and, in particular, with the idea of the prophetic mission of the Russian writer. He is almost too adamantly explicit about this:

I never felt anything like what a Russian writer feels; I don’t bear any responsibility neither for Russian spirituality, nor for the Russian people, nor for the future of Russia. [...] Over the past one hundred fifty years, Russian literature has been more than just literature. There were a whole series of poetic idiots who prided themselves on the fact that they were more than just poets. I have cut down Russian literature to normal dimensions. It isn’t a fetish, or a museum, or a church.⁷²

Supposedly Sorokin writes purely to subvert the representative function of language, purely to try and escape the various meta-narratives that control our reality, without offering any positive meaning with which the reader could engage emotionally or ideologically. His classic *Sots-art* pieces from 1979-84, published in the collection *Pervyi subbotnik*, dispense with any author-figure ruminating on the quality of his writing or his relation to truth. They merely depict the anti-literary collision of one type of bad writing with another.

Typically, as in the short story “The Competition,” the first text is a pastiche of socialist-realist clichés, suddenly interrupted by an anti-text that subverts every possible value

– moral, political, literary – of its target. We overhear the conversation of two members of a timber-felling brigade, discussing whether to engage in a *sotssorevnovanie*, [“socialist competition”] with their workmates. Then one takes his Druzhba chainsaw and decapitates his comrade. Then he, along with three new characters who appear out of nowhere, engage in a variety of absurd, seemingly unmotivated actions, breaking down narrative logic and featuring shocking examples of violence and pathology. These culminate in an anarchic semi-literate outburst (one unpunctuated multi-page utterance in the manner of Molly Bloom’s soliloquy) by one of the characters:

And dis when he’ll drive to the market will buy a fat piece of pork fat and at home from dat cut out a little pyramid and its innards cut out and will drive to the hospital and buy from the surgeon eight cut out pustulent appendixes and... [etc.]⁷³

As one participant in an on-line forum on Sorokin has asked, “and what’s the sense, one asks oneself, of that stupid monologue at the end?”⁷⁴ The sense is as follows: despite his insistence on going no farther than a postmodernist, universally ironising, degree zero of literature, Sorokin, at least in this story, is just as much a typical *Russian* postmodernist as say, Bitov in *Pushkin House*,⁷⁵ or, in the visual realm, his fellow *Sots-artists* Komar & Melamid. That is to say, the irony is not actually universal, though it may appear that way, especially to Western observers. There is at least a hint of meaning, of Mikhail Epstein’s post-postmodernist ‘proteism,’ which looks forward out of chaos to a rebirth of meaning, even of spirituality. Thus the ritual of pus and pork fat (the complete details of which present readers are spared) – a sculptural action which very much recalls those of the celebrated German conceptualist Joseph Beuys. Thus the central passage in the story’s concluding effusion, which one could fairly easily set out as three-stress *dol’nik* verse, and pass off as the ecstatic, deeply-deep incantations of some turn-of-the-century Decadent along the lines of Fyodor Sologub:

провест белокрых троков
по фиолетовому лабиринту смерти

говорить со серебряными старцами
о распаде вечности

[to lead the fair-haired adolescents
through the violet labyrinth of death

to speak with silver-visaged elders
of decomposing eternity]⁷⁶

Like Epshtein, Mark Lipovetsky notes the prominence of “ritual acts” in Sorokin (as in the writing of his postmodernist contemporary Viktor Pelevin). The symbolic function of these rituals is not only to erase “the work of Time,” but also, Lipovetsky argues, to “begin the cultural process anew.”⁷⁷ Thus, if eternity in Sorokin’s view is now well past its sell-by date, he does not dismiss the concept entirely; and even his extreme version of Russian anti-literature retains both the echo of the writer’s redemptive mission, and at least a hint at its future resurrection.

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NOTES

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- ¹ David Gascoyne, *A Short Survey of Surrealism* (London, 1970), 35.
- ² L. N. Tolstói, "Neskol'ko slov po povodu knigi *Voina i mir*," in his *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 16 (Moscow, 1955), 7. [All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.]
- ³ Robbe-Grillet insists that the New Novel is "is merely pursuing a constant evolution of the genre" in the face of those who hold that the "'true novel' was set once and for all in the Balzacian period, with strict and definitive rules." (Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston IL, 1989) 135-36.)
- ⁴ *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre* (Oxford, 2009), viii.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 103-4.
- ⁶ Friedrich Schiller, "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry," trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom, in Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom, eds., *Essays* (New York, 1993), 215.
- ⁷ Friedrich Schiller, "Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man," trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby, *Essays*, 90. See Duff, 115, and Martha Woodmansee, "'Art' as a Weapon in Cultural Politics: Rereading Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters*," in Paul Mattick, Jr., ed., *Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics and the Reconstruction of Art* (Cambridge, 1993), 178.
- ⁸ V. G. Belinskii, Letter to V. P. Botkin, 30 Dec. 1840, in N. F. Bel'chikov, ed., *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1956), vol. 12, 7.
- ⁹ Belinskii, "Ideia iskusstva," *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 4 (1954), 585.
- ¹⁰ Belinskii, "Rimskie elegii," *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 5 (1954), 238.
- ¹¹ "Svet Favorskii i preobrazhenie uma," cited in Irina Paperno, introduction to Irina Paperno and Joan Delaney Grossman, eds., *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism* (Stanford CA, 1994), 7.
- ¹² Cited in Duff, 21.
- ¹³ Henry Fielding, preface to *Joseph Andrews* (Toronto, 2001), ix.
- ¹⁴ Duff, 160-6.
- ¹⁵ Victor Terras, *Belinskij and Russian Literary Criticism: The Heritage of Organic Aesthetics* (Madison WI, 1974), 30.
- ¹⁶ "...moia dlinaia rech', slovo, pesn', povest', skazanie, istoriia, byl', vymysel, poema, iadro, roman." A. F. Vel'tman, *Koshchei Bessmertnyi*, in his *Romany* (Moscow, 1985), 87. See Dan Ungurianu, "Fact and Fiction in the Romantic Historical Novel" *Russian Review*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (Jul., 1998), 385.
- ¹⁷ N. V. Gogol, *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh* (Moscow, 2001) vol. 5, 136. On genre-mixing subtitles in Gogol, Pushkin, and Dostoevsky, see Gary Rosenshield "The Bronze Horseman and The Double: The Depoeticization of the Myth of Petersburg in the Young Dostoevskii," *Slavic Review*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (Summer, 1996), 413-15.
- ¹⁸ Duff, 149.
- ¹⁹ See Rolf Hellebust, "Bakhtin and the 'Virtual Sequel' in Russian Literature," *Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 44, no. 4 (Winter, 2000), 603-622.
- ²⁰ Dostoevskii, "Ot avtora," *Brat'ia Karamazovy*, in his *Sobranie sochinenii v piatnadtsati tomakh*, vol. 9 (1991), 6.
- ²¹ Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenaeum* fragment 116, in his *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis MN, 1991), 32.
- ²² *Authenticity and Fiction in the Russian Literary Journey, 1790-1840* (Cambridge MA, 2000), 13.
- ²³ Cited in Max Hayward, *Writers in Russia: 1917-1978* (San Diego, 1984), 170, n. 15.
- ²⁴ N. G. Chernyshevskii, "Ocherki gogolevskogo perioda," in his *Sobranie ochinenii v piati tomakh* (Moscow, 1974) vol. 3, 85.
- ²⁵ N. G. Chernyshevskii, *Chto delat'?*, in his *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, vol. 1, 2.
- ²⁶ Alicia Chudo [Gary Saul Morson] *And Quiet Flows the Vodka* (Evanston IL, 2000), 107.
- ²⁷ Tolstói, "Nabroski predisloviia k 'Voine i miru'," in his *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 13 (Moscow, 1949), 53.
- ²⁸ Gascoyne, 25.

- ²⁹ The author's wariness of literary and artistic conventions are not only evident in his comments on *War and Peace*; they evolve throughout his career, culminating in his radical aesthetic manifesto *What is Art?* (1897).
- ³⁰ Matthew 22:40.
- ³¹ Dostoevskii, *Dvoynik*, in his *Sobranie sochinenii v piatnadsati tomakh*, vol. 1 (1988), 170-73.
- ³² See Heinrich Stammler, "Dostoevsky's Aesthetics and Schelling's Philosophy of Art," *Comparative Literature*, vol. 7, no. 4 (Autumn, 1955), 313.
- ³³ Dostoevskii, "G-n –bov i vopros ob iskusstve," *Sobranie sochinenii v piatnadsati tomakh*, vol. 11 (1993), 76.
- ³⁴ *On Psychological Prose*, trans. Judson Rosengrant (Princeton, NJ, 1991), 4.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ³⁶ Chernyshevskii, "Esteticheskie otnosheniia iskusstva i deistvitel'nosti," in his *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, vol. 4, 29.
- ³⁷ *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism*. (Stanford, 1988), 47, 192, 85, 104.
- ³⁸ Dostoevskii, *Bednye liudi*, in his *Sobranie sochinenii v piatnadsati tomakh* (1988), vol. 1, 31. (Subsequent references will be given in the text.)
- ³⁹ This point is made by Hugh Alpin in the introduction to his translation. (Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Poor People* (London, 2002), xii.)
- ⁴⁰ Dostoevskii, *Belye nochi*, in his *Sobranie sochinenii v piatnadsati tomakh* (1988), vol. 2, 168.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 169.
- ⁴² Dostoevskii, *Zapiski iz podpol'ia*, in his *Sobranie sochinenii v piatnadsati tomakh* (1989), vol. 4, 512, 455, 513.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 549-50.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 549.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 492-3.
- ⁴⁶ "S kakikh por perevelis' vitiazi na sviatoi Rusi," in L. M. Leonov et al., eds., *Byliny* (Moscow, 1988), 315.
- ⁴⁷ I.e., Jesus. (I. A. Esaulov, "Paskhal'nost' i otechestvennaia slovesnost'," *Glagol*" No. 8 (2002), <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/press/glagol/08/02.htm> [accessed June 15, 2013])
- ⁴⁸ Dostoevskii, *Zapiski iz podpol'ia*, 452.
- ⁴⁹ Esaulov, *op. cit.*
- ⁵⁰ Dostoevskii, *Podrostok*, in his *Sobranie sochinenii v piatnadsati tomakh* (1990), vol. 8, 139, 528, 334.
- ⁵¹ Dostoevskii, "Son smeshnogo cheloveka," in his *Sobranie sochinenii v piatnadsati tomakh* (1995), vol. 14, 133.
- ⁵² Dostoevskii, *Brat'ia Karamazovy*, in his *Sobranie sochinenii v piatnadsati tomakh* (1991), vol. 9, 265.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 315.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 175.
- ⁵⁵ *SparkNotes: The Brothers Karamazov*, <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/brothersk/section7.rhtml> [accessed June 15, 2013]
- ⁵⁶ Dostoevskii, *Brat'ia Karamazovy*, 297, 85-6.
- ⁵⁷ D. H. Lawrence, "The Grand Inquisitor," in Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett, ed. Ralph Matlaw (New York, 1976) 830.
- ⁵⁸ Dostoevskii, *Podrostok*, 211.
- ⁵⁹ *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky's "Diary of a Writer" and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Austin TX, 1981), 9.
- ⁶⁰ D. S. Mirsky, *A History of Russian Literature*, ed. Francis J. Whitfield (New York, 1964), 88.
- ⁶¹ Yury Lotman, *Universe of the Mind*, trans. Ann Shukman (London, 1990), 137.
- ⁶² Edouard Maynial, cited in Donald Fanger, *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism: A Study of Dostoevsky in Relation to Balzac, Dickens, and Gogol* (Chicago, 1967), 8. As a tool for understanding realism this characterisation is of limited use, being equally applicable to romanticism, modernism, or literary modernity in general – and once one accepts de Man's extension of the term *modern* to the whole of literary art, then the phrase "literature of opposition" has no meaning at all. (Paul de Man, "Literary History and Literary Modernity," in his *Blindness and Insight*, 2nd ed., rev. (Minneapolis, 1983), 151.)
- ⁶³ T. S. Eliot, *What is a Classic?* (London, 1945), 13.
- ⁶⁴ Ronald Hingley, *Russian Writers and Society*, 2nd ed., rev. (London, 1977), 11.
- ⁶⁵ Eliot, 10-11.
- ⁶⁶ Belinskii, *Sochineniia Aleksandra Pushkina*, "Stat'ia vos'maia: Evgenii Onegin," in his *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1955), vol. 7, 438.
- ⁶⁷ Dostoevskii, "Pushkin (Ocherk)," in his *Sobranie sochinenii v piatnadsati tomakh* (1995), vol. 14, 439;

emphasis in original.

In their promotion of identity through otherness these ideas of Belinsky and Dostoevsky relate to what Bakhtin expresses in more general terms when he affirms that “It is only an intimate, organic axiological participation in the world of others that renders the biographical self-objectification of a life authoritative and productive . . .” (Mikhail Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” in his *Art and Answerability*, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin TX, 1990), 155.)

⁶⁸ A. K. Gastev, “My rastem iz zheleza,” in his *Poeziia rabochego udara* (Moscow, 1971), 12.

⁶⁹ F. V. Gladkov, *Tsement* (Moscow, 1967), 330.

⁷⁰ V. P. Kataev, *Sviatoi kolodets* (Moscow, 1969), 127. Cited in Richard C. Borden, *The Art of Writing Badly: Valentin Kataev's Mauvism and the Rebirth of Russian Modernism* (Evanston, IL, 1999), 19.

⁷¹ Kataev, 112.

⁷² V. G. Sorokin, “Avtoportret,” in his *Rasskazy* (Moscow, 1992), 12.

⁷³ Sorokin, “Sorevnovanie,” in his *Pervyi subbotnik* (Moscow, 2001), 24.

⁷⁴ http://lib.aldebaran.ru/author/sorokin_vladimir/sorokin_vladimir_pervyi_subbotnik/ [Accessed June 15, 2013]

⁷⁵ See Rolf Hellebust, “Fiction and Unreality in Bitov's *Pushkin House*,” *Style* vol. 25, no. 2 (Summer 1991), 265-79.

⁷⁶ Sorokin, “Sorevnovanie,” 25.

⁷⁷ M.N. Epshtein, *Slovo i molchanie* (Moscow, 2006), 189-90; M. N. Lipovetskii, “Goluboe salo pokoleniia, ili dva mifa ob odnom krizise,” <http://www.srkn.ru/criticism/lipovetskiy.shtml> [accessed June 15, 2013]