MARK LIPOVETSKY AND ALEXANDER ETKIND

The Salamander’s Return

The Soviet Catastrophe and the Post-Soviet Novel

In conversation, two prominent scholars of Russian literature discuss the post-Soviet novel and trace its particular characteristics to the trauma created by the collapse of the USSR.

Mark Lipovetsky: You and I belong to the generation that still remembers the quasi-literary séances on the “ideological” or “political” novel, which provided a forum for the discussion of the abstruse creations that crammed the ideology of “late Stalinism” onto the templates of the Stalinist “panoramic novel.” At the time, in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, those exercises had no effect other than to make people queasy. How could we have imagined that thirty years later we, too, would be regarding ideological novels with fascination?

Alexander Etkind: Back then, in the 1980s, I was also, to be honest, in no doubt that literature exists to express the author’s feelings and to draw the reader along with it, nor do I doubt that today: I have never much cared for the idea of art for art’s sake. But if literature exists not for itself but for people, then what does it do for them? Really, what? Does it matter what? And if it does matter, then who is to judge? The reader, of course, and the critic, and historians like you and I (because we are historians of literature, after all, except that now we’re talking about its contemporary history). History is inseparable from value judgments, from ethics and politics. How many


Notes renumbered for this edition.—Ed.
times have we heard it said that “erudition” lies in avoiding such judgments and avoiding analysis of what is being done in the text and what the text is doing; that the business of the erudite, preoccupied with erudition, is only to tell how a text was made, as if a text were a toy that can be disassembled, as though the minutiae of “set” texts, disassembled and scattered among magazines and books, could teach even one scholarly reader the craft of authorship. We have seen so many ignoramuses rehashing the classics (remarkable people and fascinating to this day, except that they lived in service to other interests and struggled with other enemies) that the researcher is now interested only in what makes literature literature. But I think that the most interesting thing is the exact opposite—what makes literature not literature, what removes it into other spaces—political, religious, pedagogical, or therapeutic; what allows the text to live and to work; and why it is read. Russian and Soviet authors achieved a great deal, presenting the people as God-bearers and the tsar as the Antichrist, inventing “Christian socialism” (Sergei Bulgakov), and the “leap over capitalism,” putting in their time as “engineers of men’s souls,” and dubbing the Thaw the Thaw. Which it is still called by those who believe in its new incarnation and who have probably never read [Ilya] Ehrenburg.

M.L. I agree with your priorities. I am afraid, though—historians of literature as we are—we have to begin answering the question of what permits literature to pass beyond its own boundaries, using the principles of literary analysis as our starting point. In other words, the attention paid to deconstruction and intertexts need not run counter to a desire to avoid being overly specific [spetsifikatorstvo]. As I understand it, the interdisciplinary situation not only forces us to take more frequent trips beyond the frontiers of our field but also entitles us to broaden the application of methodologies that are near and dear to us, other than those of “literature per se.” Because if the culture really does admit other material than discourses and narratives, the literary studies approach to textual practices is therefore more professional than the historical, economic, psychological, and other approaches. No one forbids us from using the methods of other disciplines, but it makes sense to treat them as adjuncts to the tool kit that we by default handle better than anthropologists or sociologists.

Magical Historicism

A.E. Remember how [Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s] memorial to the Gulag began? With a salamander, a frozen and rapidly devoured monstrosity: “I have absorbed into myself my own eleven years there not as something shameful
nor as a nightmare to be cursed: I have come almost to love that monstrous world. . . . So perhaps I shall be able to give some account of the bones and flesh of that salamander—which, incidentally, is still alive.”* In a strange yet convincing way, Solzhenitsyn contrived to make that monster an all-encompassing symbol of terror. Now, a question: What was it to him? He had cartloads of material to hand, even without that grisly salamander. There is, of course, no doubt that without the historical material, without all those facts and memories, the salamander would have remained an empty gesture. To understand it, we refer to Freud, an author of whom Solzhenitsyn thought very little. In his work on the grisly, Freud asserted that whatever is repressed (read: whoever is repressed) returns in distorted and monstrous forms.** The historical memory always carries within itself elements of the grisly—the familiar and the forgotten, the restored and the unrecognized, the never-experienced and the well-masticated. When the salamander that is eaten by Gulag prisoners rises up before us from the text, alive, we are caught by surprise and we understand: “We understood instantly. We could picture the entire scene right down to the smallest details: how those present broke up the ice in frenzied haste; how, flouting the higher claims of ichthyology and elbowing each other to be first, they tore off chunks of the prehistoric flesh and hauled them over to the bonfire to thaw them out and bolt them down” [Gulag Archipelago, p. ix]. It is striking how this picture brings together discoveries from texts as far distant from each other as Totem and Taboo and The Gulag Archipelago. “Flouting the higher interests of ichthyology” and the other sciences, Solzhenitsyn’s salamander paves the way to the post-Soviet literary trauma.

To comprehend the post-Soviet experience, both literary and political, we have to make a close reading of another of Freud’s works, “Mourning and Melancholy,” the logic of which is that the work of mourning is a project that (like any project) can be complete and successful or, by contrast, incomplete and unsuccessful. Failure in the work of mourning leads to melancholy, which denotes an inability to separate oneself from one’s loss and an affirmation of oneself and one’s loss as the center of the universe. But a successful work of mourning does not involve repression of the object (which in this case would be derivative, the repression of the repressed and of their memory); simply

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**Etkind is referring to “Das Unheimliche,” an essay first published in 1919, generally translated as “The Uncanny.” See, for instance, the uncredited translation at www.rohan.sdsu.edu/~amtower/uncanny.html.—Trans.
put, the work of mourning is not the same as forgetting. Because where there is a repressive forgetting, whatever has been displaced will return as monsters and nightmares. Salvation from melancholy is found in the delicate balance between sorrowful memory and the capacity to forge new connections with life—the capacity, according to Freud, for love and for labor.

The post-Soviet period is, undoubtedly, a time of melancholy. The work of mourning is incomplete and unsuccessful; the loss has been incorporated into the subject, who cannot (meaning that he does not want to) free himself from it. That is the principal and general characteristic of the post-Soviet period, which wholly explains its minimal capabilities for love and labor.

But what is this loss? For some it is the unburied millions of Soviet victims; for others, by contrast, it is the grandeur of the Soviet empire. One person finds these two sorrows incompatible; another sees them reinforcing each other. By and large, the new problems present themselves as eternal reiterations of the old, which is exactly why people are talking about a new Thaw, as if they want it to be preceded by the old Terror.

The common ground of post-Soviet melancholy is the unprocessed memory of the Soviet catastrophe. Millions died in vain, but many remember them; surveys show that in Russia, one person in four remembers forebears who suffered in the purges. There are too few monuments to the victims, though. No museums commemorate the Soviet catastrophe; and the executioners, individuals and institutions alike, have not been and probably never will be brought to trial. Attempts to erect monuments in stone or bronze encounter resistance from the executioners and their heirs. All this being so, the work of mourning continues where it began, in literature—except that its current forms and genres differ greatly from those set down by Solzhenitsyn, Shalamov, Siniavsky, and Nadezhda Mandelstam.

On the global scale, the post-Soviet situation is significant but specific. I have my doubts that this Russian situation can be presented as a local variety of postmodernism, as you have been known to do.

M.L. I have many sins, but I honestly do not remember ever having reduced all of post-Soviet culture to postmodernism. On the contrary, to me the postmodernist is both broader and narrower than the post-Soviet. On the one hand, postmodernism patently arose long before the 1990s; I see its beginning in the trauma of the cultural catastrophe that was recognized by the modernists back in the 1920s and the 1930s (although certainly not every reflective examination of that trauma leads to postmodernism—we are talking here of only one vector). In post-Soviet culture, on the other hand, the postmodernist aesthetic constantly collides and crosses with neighboring (and no less active) discourses, often forming hybrids, as when
postmodernism combined with realism to beget what I and Naum Leiderman have called “postrealism” (Dovlatov, Makanin, Petrusheskaia, Mikhail Shishkin, etc.). The marriage of convenience between postmodernism and the socialist-realist mythology has produced the prolific progeny that is postsots—as represented, for example, by Prokhanov, Nikita Mikhalkov, Pavel Krusanov, Aleksei Balabanov, and many others.

It is, incidentally, remarkable that the “work of mourning”—whether real or fictive—inheres in both “pure” postmodernism and in postrealism (Makanin’s images of pit, tunnels, and “manhole”; Petrusheskaia and Shishkin’s narratives of violence) and even in postsots (although there the trauma is trivialized to such an extent that it is no longer perceived as a trauma).² We would, furthermore, do well not to forget the imprints of trauma that are so pronounced in texts with an entirely traditional aesthetic: memoirs and (quasi-)realist prose (Liudmila Ulitskaia, say, or Leonid Zorin, Aleksei Ivanov or Evgenii Grishkovets); contemporary playwriting (from Grishkovets, again, to the Presniakov brothers and Ivan Vyrypaev); and mass-market fiction. No one would ever call Solzhenitsyn a postmodernist (although Viacheslav Kuritsyn did try), but his body of work in the post-Soviet period not only keeps attention on the historical catastrophe but appears even more than before to be traumatic writing (bearing within it, that is, the unexamined imprint of trauma), a vivid example of which is his Two Hundred Years Together [Dvesti let vmeste].³

The key issue is the extent to which the traumatic experience has been effectively examined or, more precisely, problematized—how much of it has been manifested, voluntarily or otherwise, and how much suppressed (again, voluntarily or otherwise). From the experience of, say, late Soviet military literature (in which war seems to me to have often performed as a metonym for the broader historical catastrophe of Soviet times), we know well how easily trauma overflows into comfortable and completed forms, how quickly it hardens into a selection of stereotypes, and how conveniently that selection lends itself to political manipulation. Work with trauma must apparently retain the properties of an “improbable communication” (Niklas Luhmann), since otherwise it will become pseudocommunication.

That principle, in my opinion, extends to both the artistic analysis of the traumatic experience and the scholarly analysis of traumatic writing. In that context, I am very taken by your idea of magical historicism as a specific form of traumatic writing that took shape in post-Soviet culture.⁴ It is, in my opinion, one of the possible common denominators between existing (and frequently conflicting) aesthetic languages, something that shows through in postmodernism, in realism, in modernism, and in postsots, as well as in certain hybrids. Could you clarify what you mean by magical historicism, what other contemporary texts and authors, in your understanding, are being
drawn toward that “method,” how much that writing technique differs from modernist or postmodernist fantasy fiction, and how specific it is to the current cultural juncture?

A.E. The work of post-Soviet authors has engendered a host of strange beings, vampires, werewolves, subhumans, and superhumans: the eternal madam who slept with her son, Stalin, insect people and people who literally speak from the heart, a werewolf general and a prostitute werevixen, a breakaway sect of “Earth Fuckers” [zemleby], cloned monsters who write in the style of the Russian classics, and more. They all came out of the salamander.

I am seeking to understand post-Soviet texts as vehicles of memory. I view them otherwise than as an author—hero—reader triangle, adding a fourth angle that is somewhat of a prototype, as we would say of the prototype of a ghost or a monster or some other fabrication. The understanding of literary texts as vehicles of memory is far from new; the only remotely new thing about it is the historicization of such texts, although they are offered up as pure fabrication, extraneous to history and to politics. Our movie-buff colleagues, though, are entirely convincing when they interpret horror films, for example, as historical documentation of the periods in which they were imagined and made. That approach does not exhaust the understanding of how a text lives or of its relationships with history and politics; it is just one dimension of those relationships.

In speaking of magical historicism, we are dealing with the literary nephews (and probably great-nephews) of Solzhenitsyn. You, of course, remember Viktor Shklovsky’s enigmatic proposition that the rights of literary succession are passed on not from father to son but from uncle to nephew. Such post-Soviet authors as Pelevin, Sharov, Sorokin, and Dmitrii Bykov are indeed heirs to the “junior branch” of late Soviet and anti-Soviet literature (the Andrei Siniavsky branch).

Those authors’ greatest vested interest lies in two spheres of human experience, which they combine in strange and shocking permutations. The spheres are history and religion. They are, meanwhile, far less attracted to other spheres of experience in which literature has traditionally evinced an interest, such as psychology or the social analysis of everyday (meaning contemporary) life. The religion that interests these writers is sometimes Christian and sometimes not, but it is never an orthodox religion and is more often than not unaffiliated to any known faith. These texts are almost always replete with nontraditional magic, whereas the historical time frames in which the authors place their characters are less varied—almost always the Soviet period or its immediate sources or, by contrast, its aftermaths.
The historicism of post-Soviet prose is an impressive thing. In Sorokin, for instance, even the dystopias that are usually set in an undefined, placeless space are firmly rooted in Russian history. (It is, incidentally, clear to me that the beliefs and practices described in the Ice [Led] trilogy are structured on well-known texts about the Russian skoptsy, who performed wonderworking body modification and believed that the world would end just as soon as they had castrated a certain number of the faithful.)

Magical historicism presents the past not simply as “another country” but as an exotic and unexplored land gravid with unborn alternatives and mandatory wonders. Magical historicism differs substantially from the magical realism of postcolonial cultures. The distinctions are many, but principal among them is that the post-Soviet bestsellers have nothing whatsoever to do with realism: they enlist magic neither to reflect nor to imitate social reality but instead to perform intrusive historical experiments. Magical historicism is closer to the genre of alternative history (along the lines of Aksenov’s Island of Crimea [Ostrov Krym] or Nabokov’s Ada), about which Andrei Nemzer has written* and which Sergei Sobolev recently catalogued in an interesting overview. But the post-Soviet novel should not be thought of as a variety of the world’s science fiction, since that depoliticizes the genre and deprives it of its obvious specificity.

Beyond the broad bounds of magical historicism we see the unexpected rebirth of the historical novel. The most successful post-Soviet detective stories (Boris Akunin) and adventure novels (Aleksei Ivanov) are historical. All these texts, whether magical or not, are allegories, in the broad sense of that word, since they reveal the essence of one experience in the language of another. As Walter Benjamin wrote [in The Origin of German Tragic Drama—Trans.], “The only pleasure the melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory.”

M.L. In our preliminary discussions, we agreed to check your magical realism hypothesis against three relatively recent texts: Vladimir Sorokin’s Day of the Oprichnik [Den’ oprichnika], Viktor Pelevin’s Empire V, and Dmitrii Bykov’s ZhD.* Why those three? Most likely because they resonate unexpectedly with one another, forming a supratextual unity, engaging in interplay, or so it seems to me, with the general cultural situation and permitting a view of that situation from a slightly displaced, detached point of view, although still from within rather than from the outside.

*Published in an abridged translation by Cathy Porter with the title Living Souls, but as detailed below, “living souls” (zhivye dushi) is only one possible expansion of ZhD.—Trans.
Certainly we are not about to try to reduce all of contemporary literature to that threesome. Many artistic works evoke the connection of interest to us here, between historical trauma and a particular, monstrous magic. We need only mention Vladimir Sharov and Aleksei Ivanov, whom you referenced earlier, Mikhail Shishkin’s *Venus Hair* [Venerin volos], Mariia Stepanova’s long narrative poems *The Prose of Ivan Sidorov* [Proza Ivana Sidorova] and *The Second Prose* [Vtoraia proza], Elena Fanailova’s poetry, Mikhail Elizarov’s *Librarian* [Bibliotekar’] (and, for that matter, other texts of his), Denis Osokin’s experimental pseudofolkloric prose, and Ol’ga Slavnikova’s *2017*, among others. Mass-appeal literature, too, contains a good number of examples of the same trend—just think of Sergei Luk’ianenko’s *Watch* series or the folktale fantasies of Mikhail Uspenskii. In addition, Sorokin has already written a sequel to *Oprichnik, The Sugar Kremlin* [Sakharnyi Kreml’], although in my view, it adds little to its predecessor’s ideological construct.

Keeping up with Dmitrii Bykov’s creative superproductivity is too much even for the speed demons of Internet criticism, not to mention slow-witted academics like us. But the connections arising among *Oprichnik, Empire V*, and *ZhD* are much more interesting than the interplay among other texts of the same type. They have an intensity that distinctly manifests the “formula” of this kind of writing—which you, Sasha, call magical historicism. Although *ZhD* and *Oprichnik* have already been discussed in *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, the configuration of artistic and political strategies in which we are currently interested compels us to reread those novels from a different vantage point, as diverse facets of a single self-portrait of post-Soviet social awareness [*sotsial’nost’*].

In my opinion, an attempt to describe the invariable meaning of these texts (at times sacrificing the specific features of each) may allow us to document the cultural mechanism that hampers a complete “work of mourning” by interrupting the productive conceptualization of historical traumas.

A.E. I also note that comparable effects, experiments, and so forth are being employed by other authors whom we—you and I—do not necessarily like, one example being Aleksandr Prokhanov. In his *Political Scientist* [Politolog], political ideology is interminably experienced in fantastic conflicts that hark back to the Soviet past; in its quest for a bright tomorrow, that novel obtrusively reproduces the Stalinist tropes. But delight in the executioners is incompatible with sympathy for the victims and generally, I think, with history and literature as human occupations. Prokhanov’s boisterous fantasy is therefore left hanging in a void, and its most vivid moments (for example, the scene of group sex in the Politburo) obviously owe an unpayable debt to Sorokin.
The melancholy of Sorokin, Sharov, Pelevin, and Bykov is rooted in the recurrent grisliness of the unburied, unwept Soviet experience, which is more clearly to be seen in some of their earlier pieces than it is now—clearer in Bykov’s *Justification* [*Opravdanie*] than in his *ZhD*, clearer in Sorokin’s *Ice* than in his *Oprichnik*. And we know why: an author may be prepared to look at new, unprecedented problems with eyes open to the present, or those eyes may still be brimming with tears over the past and long remain so.

*M.L.* But you remember that, according to Benjamin, the allegory’s distinction is that “it means precisely the nonexistence of what it presents.”9 Maybe magical historicism embodies a political phantasm (or, even more narrowly, a phantasm of power) in the form of a devastating allegory? The use of phantasms as an allegory of a real historical catastrophe corresponds fully to the notion of trauma as a phenomenon that is resistant to the discursive formation and evades integrated narratives while engendering obtrusive reversions to painful fragments of experience.

In other words, phantasms are isomorphous to the traumatic consciousness. This permits the assumption that even the most banal allegories—those not only of Prokhanov but also of Aksenov, Krusanov, and Luk’ianenko—bear the imprint of historical trauma. This assumption, mind you, does not nullify the need to distinguish which imprints long ago hardened into stereotypes and therefore refer to nothing but other phantasms, and which lead us away into unknown levels of the imagined and the symbolic, thus becoming an efficient tool of sociocultural diagnostics.

When a “phantasmic ensemble” repeats in several texts—retaining, first, its political semantics and, second, the elements that allow one to call its historicism “magical”—one suspects that we are dealing with something bigger than the scattered shards of the traumatized consciousness. It occurs to me that those fragments (or ruins, as Benjamin would have said) come together into a quasi-mythological construct that does more to reveal than to conceal their traumatic nature.

*A.E.* To put it more simply, the memory of the Soviet catastrophe is a background that the authors are more apt to imply than to analyze. That unquiet memory intrudes into the text as if supplied with energy of its own, like the ghosts and the monsters, and possesses the performative power to alter the plot and, beyond that, the rhetoric of the text. Seldom does that memory become a subject of study in the text, a figure as opposed to a background. In his work on the memory of the Holocaust (the most useful parallel to the problem of the post-Soviet memory), the American historian Dominick LaCapra introduced a distinction between two types of post-traumatic memory, calling them “acting-out” and “working-through.”10
Acting-out transfers trauma into discourse, creating endless reenactment and reexperiencing. Working-through endows the loss with new meanings, permitting acknowledgment of guilt and responsibility, sufferance of the memory, and acceptance of the reality. Only working-through has the power to rupture the postcatastrophic circles and bubbles. The trauma of slavery in America, for instance, is well into its second century of engendering circles and ruptures; one stage in the working-through of that trauma unfolded during the presidential elections of 2008.

The novels of Sorokin, Bykov, and Pelevin do more to act out the catastrophe than to work through it. These are more texts of memory than texts about memory. It is, however, possible that at the present stage, the task of working-through may lead beyond the bounds of the text and of the discourse in general (although not, of course, outside the bounds of the culture) into monuments, memorials, and museums to the Soviet catastrophe, of which Russia has distressingly few. On the theoretical plane, I would like to interbreed LaCapra’s distinction with one of my own, between the soft (textual) and hard (monumental) forms of the cultural memory. But that is a conversation for another time.

The Overcarry Effect

M.L. Empire V is, in my view, the most inscrutable of the three novels we are slated to discuss, and it is so precisely from the ideological viewpoint. I surmise that no one could ever suspect Pelevin of sympathizing with the siloviki [heads of the defense and security agencies—Ed.]. But then, what is Empire V, if not an antiliberal satire? Is not the vampiric power of the liberal (Jewish) intelligentsia a shopworn cliché of “patriotic” commentators?

What we have here is a horizontal cosmopolitan corporation that grants its initiates a vast array of rights and founds itself on its knowledge less of the conscious than of the unconscious mechanisms of society. A drop of blood tells Pelevin’s vampires everything about a person; they use the blood they collect to transfer the cultural (and not only the cultural) memory of humanity. On the one hand, they picture themselves as a highly organized community, while on the other, they perform as a “secret engine” of capitalist development. Pelevin’s elegant and highly educated vampires are the spirits of the postindustrial society, postmodern capitalism, and the other temptations of a globalized world. Modernization (the development of individual freedoms and potentials) lies at the center of this Pelevin novel about the fostering of a “superman.”*

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*The novel’s subtitle is A Tale of a True Superman (Povest’ o nastoiashchem sverkhcheloveke).—Trans.
In Pelevin’s novel, the power of the vampires rests on expressly cultural foundations. Pelevin’s vampire is primarily the vehicle for a tongue that tests and transmits the power of the tongue. Pelevin’s materialization of the metaphor is Sorokin to the life: when the vampire bestows his “kiss,” the immortal tongue passes from one body to another, selects for itself a new mortal “vehicle,” while, needless to say, staying on top of things. Even duels between vampires are poetic tournaments, although with the bloodiest of consequences. It is no wonder that the vampire’s principal disciplines are named “discourse” and “glamour.” These two categories, which are repeatedly parsed in the novel, serve as the crucial mechanisms of control over the human herd, which constantly forces the members of society to go chasing after “swank” [ponty], to crave tokens of prestige and power (precisely tokens, because people have no genuine power), and since in contemporary society everything that is “swank” has a monetary expression, the result of that never-ending pursuit is that people produce a substance vital to vampires—“bablos,” an energy born of money. “Discourse” and “glamour” are mechanisms of the symbolic violence on which the vampire’s power is based. Not coincidentally, even a renegade vampire teaches the young vampire Rama, the novel’s protagonist, that “A vampire should lead the discourse, not fall victim to it.”

Strange as it may seem, however, that wholly glamorous—per Pelevin—mythology is translucent to the ideology of force. The novel’s title is a punning paraphrase of Prokhanov’s favorite mythical element, the [post-Soviet—Trans.] Fifth Empire (the letter V being the Roman numeral five). Rama’s teachers include the Scandinavian hotshots Loki and Baldr, god of spring, the latter paired with Jehovah. Speaking of the two of them, with their ancient German and Hebrew names, Pelevin writes: “They were like each other and not, both at the same time. When I saw them together, they had hardly anything in common. But when I encountered them separately, I often confused them, although they were of different heights and their faces weren’t particularly alike.” Even more remarkable is an explanation given by one of the supreme vampires to Rama and Hera, who have asked what vampires feed on in societies where people pursue “swank” that has no monetary value, such as the USSR: “Briefly, I could put it like this: livestock is raised for meat and for milk. When it stops being used for milk, it is used for meat. And when it stops being used for meat, it starts being used for milk. . . . There is a resource that people produce while they live and there is a resource that they produce at the time of their death. . . . Fortunately, those terrible technologies are things of the past, so we shall spend no more time on them.” The Soviet vampires who consume the energy of death and their more sophisticated descendants are not so very different from Bykov’s Varangians, who venerate death, or Sorokin’s oprichniks.
Another subversion of the vampire mythology comes from the “object of modernization.” Rama and Hera—two young people initiated as vampires who have taken the “course of the young warrior” and are then inducted into the higher spheres of vampirism—are the ones on whom the educative efforts are focused, the ones to whom freedom and superstrength are granted. Hera, furthermore, represents a new version of the archetype that you, Sasha, call the Russian Beauty. The vampires, however, have as little control over the modernization of these characters as they have over all of post-Soviet society. Their plan is for Rama to be an auxiliary, “disposable” participant in a ritual to transfer Ishtar’s consciousness into a new earthly body, to a new “owner,” Hera—a more interesting character than Rama, although also not fully “developed.” Rama escapes because he is too obtuse (even in comparison with his predecessor, Vavilen Tatarskii,* who, as a “creative,” at least gave birth to a never-ending round of commercials). But in the finale, Rama becomes a Friend of Ishtar and is invested with unprecedented authority.

In this way, the limited hero, by dint of his limitation, gets the upper hand over a highly educated community of refined and manipulative modernizers. Pelevin has always been engrossed by how dependent the architects of phantasms are on the products of their activity; in Generation P he even compared the impact of media phantasms on everyone (including on the ad-company “creators” themselves) with the explosion of a neutron bomb. In Empire, a new effect is seen emanating from the same paradox whereby the one who holds power over the modernizer camp is not only a simpleton but, more important, someone who has not been affected by modernization in any meaningful way and has only learned to “show some swank”—in this case, some vampire swank. Thus, modernization turns against itself. It is not difficult to imagine what consequences Rama’s elevation will ultimately have for the project of modernization—or, more accurately, already has had.

Yet that conflict is, in my view, once again inadequately spelled out in Pelevin’s novel. On the conceptual level, the reasons for the vampires’ miscalculation and the transformation of a banal nonentity into a Friend of Ishtar remain obscure. It may be supposed that Pelevin’s criticism of the liberal—or “vampiric”—strategy of modernization boils down to the cultural elite being insufficiently elitist, overly self-satisfied, and blind and failing to distinguish modernization’s successes from its failures and miscalculations. But one can only speculate that there is such criticism, because it is not actualized anywhere in the plot. A single ideology unites Pelevin’s vampires, there are

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*Vavilen Tatarskii is the protagonist of Pelevin’s Generation P, also mentioned in Empire V.—Trans.
no fundamental conflicts or contradictions between them, and in that I see manifested the weakness or inconsistency of Pelevin’s deconstruction of the post-Soviet situation.

A.E. I am not, of course, contending that the post-Soviet literary monsters feed exclusively on the Soviet memory: not exclusively, no, but predominantly. Western critics (Franco Moretti, for example, and Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx*) have repeatedly demonstrated that literary vampires are associated with the critique of capitalism and with Marx’s own favorite images. Pelevin’s *Empire*, which unmasks post-Soviet state capitalism as a society of victorious and well-organized vampires, is accessible to new topics more distanced from the Soviet catastrophe, such as the critique of liberalism. But recall how Roman-Rama compares the unusual events of his vampirization to his family’s experiences during the collapse of the USSR, when all the familiar relationships gave way, which is exactly what happened when he became a vampire. One may try to read Rama’s story as a parable à la Hannah Arendt on the banality of evil, a translation of Arendt’s interpretation of Eichmann’s story into the language of post-Soviet prose. But you will agree that Rama does not gravitate to such a role: the novel ends before he has had time to commit any evil (even though it is easy for the reader to believe that, as counselor to Ishtar, he surely will).

Of all that Pelevin has done, the most interesting work from my standpoint is *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* [the English title of *Sviashchennaiia kniga oborotnii*], in which a Federal Security Service (FSB) general named Sharikov falls in love with a Moscow prostitute. The general turns out to be a werewolf, which explains his surname.* His romantic interludes aside, the general has a job to do: he flies up north and there, turning into a wolf, he howls at the oil rigs set among the abandoned camps, begging them to give the country a little more oil. That is what a general is supposed to do, but the interests of the other shape-shifters are nowhere near as elevated. Whether Pelevin’s invention will help the country I do not know, but it does help the novel, because it plays up a contraposition that is key to postcatastrophic consciousness—between a familiar, maximally concrete present and a past of undetermined depth that seduces the present, draws it into a traumatic situation, and then goes further, carrying it too far and plunging ever deeper into the past.

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*Sharik is a common Russian name for a pet dog. The FSB man’s name is actually Aleksandr Seryi, but Seryi does become fascinated with Comrade Sharikov, a mysterious character who is spoken of but never seen and whom Pelevin explicitly connects with the canine protagonist of Bulgakov’s *Heart of a Dog* (Sobach’e serdce).—Trans.*
That overcarry effect [effekt perekhlesta] has, it seems to me, so far gone undiscussed in the copious literature on post-traumatic situations. After undergoing a trauma, a mind unable to accommodate the trauma retreats into the past, to the situation of the trauma, cycling through one iteration after another, but by reason of inertia (due to a misfire, in response to an unsatisfiable demand for explanation, or for some other reason) that mind “bypasses” the time of trauma and proceeds into the more distant past. This is one of the rationales for historicism in the postcatastrophic culture. The general/wolf in The Sacred Book has a human life span, whereas the girl he loves—the fox/prostitute—lives for millennia. Before sleeping with the general and his colleagues, she has slept with Chinese emperors and even with Dostoevsky. The general finds her company both sweet and uncomfortable; only gradually does he come to understand why this is so.

Sorokin also values the sense of the grisly engendered by the contrast between the detailed processing of the present juncture and the indeterminacy of the historical backdrop, which stretches backward for centuries and, perhaps, forward too. Blue Lard [Goluboe salo] uses a trite time machine, which delivers the elixir of immortality from the sectarian Earth-Fuckers to Stalin, who is Khrushchev’s lover. The blue lard is a kind of Phlogiston (think of the Phlogiston described in Bykov’s ZhD, which will supposedly replace oil at some time in the future) that is here excised from the bodies of clones who reprise Russian writers of the past—Platonov, for example. The Earth Fuckers are apparently a parody of Russian sectarians, but they live in the future; the immortal Stalin is alive in their time but prefers to serve the technologically mighty Chinese.

After punching through the cumbersome strata of history, at the novel’s end we find ourselves where (or, more precisely, when) we began. There seems to be a link between overcarrying (Sorokin’s topic) and going in circles (Bykov’s topic). To this we shall return, after completing our own circle. Day of the Oprichnik does the most detailed work on the overcarry effect: in it the recognizable traits of Putin’s Russia are transferred into the future to show how overdetermined they have been by the past, while the chosen past—the feudal order under Ivan the Terrible—is comically coupled with videophones and supercars (all, of course, manufactured in China). Sorokin demonstrates with doleful plausibility the possibility of post-Soviet contemporaneity regressing to a distant Russian medievality.

The oprichnina was no better and no worse than other historical periods to which post-Soviet Russia loves to revert—the Time of Troubles, for example, or Peter’s reforms (I remember one liberal party in Russia selecting the Bronze Horseman as its emblem—unlikely as it is that those people had ever read Pushkin’s poem, because if they had, they would never have asked Evgenii
to vote for Peter). In any event, providing historical explanations for politics absolves today’s decision makers and decision implementers of responsibility. But Komiaga, the twenty-first-century oprichnik, is not engaging in state-sponsored banditry because five hundred years ago someone engaged in the same thing in the same place. He robs, rapes, and kills because he has been ordered to by his superiors, and because he was taught to in his university history classes, and because he’s a bottom-feeder anyway. In that elementary sense, profound historical explanations only distract from directly political, ethical, and legal considerations.

It is not, of course, the life and times of Tsar Ivan IV that have Sorokin and his readers all worked up. We are eager to read about Komiaga because the oprichnina metaphor accurately demonstrates, despite overcarrying somewhat, the catastrophic nature of the society in which we have lived and are living. Our historical life is enclosed, as it were, in the small compass of a circulatory system, but to understand that life and give it meaning, we need to place that small compass within a larger one. If we accept this view, then we need only ask how large the compass should be, whether one size fits all, and how much historical overcarry a writer or scholar may permit himself.

Here, as in other issues, what is allowable in fiction is not allowable in nonfiction. Because in Russian, “nonfiction” means “truth.”

The Russian Beauty

M.L. Before continuing our conversation about Sorokin, I would like to return to another motif in Pelevin’s novel that seems to throw some of the more inconspicuous meanings of Oprichnik into high relief. In symbolic terms the Rama plot is less interesting to me than Hera’s story. Yes, she becomes the Great Goddess, the all-powerful Ishtar. But what price does she pay for that transformation? She is deprived of her body; all that remains of her is a head atop a “shaggy leg more than three feet long, which made her look like a superannuated shiitake.”16 This Russian Beauty, the name you gave to one of the key participants in the Russian plot of internal colonization, has not so much been offered up as a sacrifice as she has been turned into an absolute monster.

I have a good reason for mentioning your theory of internal colonization here.17 We shall come back to the discussion of internal colonization later, it being obvious that the modernizers in Pelevin’s novel are at the same time colonizers and that it is this position of theirs that invites the author’s sarcasm.

Hera’s transformation is astonishingly “assonant” with plots and motifs in the texts of other contemporary authors that pertain in one way or another to internal colonization. The Russian Beauty has been observed being made over
into a monster—in other words, into a direct manifestation of the grisly—with a rare consistency of late, particularly noticeably in texts on Russian beauties who are not metaphors but the real thing. So, for instance, in *The Prose of Ivan Sidorov*, Mariia Stepanova’s novella in verse, the Black Hen (say hi to Antonii Pogorel’skiii) is the headwoman of a band of bandit vampires (say hi to Pelevin), while also being the motherland and the hero’s deceased wife. Permeated with grisliness, or with trauma, the Russian Beauty swallows up the other participants in the triangular clash of internal colonization. Ol’ga Slavnikova’s 2017 similarly reproduces with extreme precision a triangle consisting of a man of culture (Professor Anfilogov), a man of the people (Krylov, the gem cutter and gem smuggler), and Tanya, Anfilogov’s wife, Krylov’s girlfriend, and Russian Beauty. But behind Tanya glimmers the image of the Mistress of the Copper Mountain, which is possibly the most impressive image of the grisly (*Unheimlich*) in Soviet culture. It is the force emanating from “Mistress” Tanya that destroys both Anfilogov and Krylov, creating the unstable, surreal atmosphere of the “Riphean” world, in which history repeats itself and the celebration of the revolution’s centennial unfolds into the Civil War revisited.

In Elena Fanailova’s poetry, the author’s very voice provides the setting for a showdown between the liberal-modernizing consciousness and the grisly motherland:

The nation, she salutes for me
Rides the metro and minibuses
Goes to plays and musicals,
She is blown up and poisoned with gas,
Every day hostages are taken,
But she seems not to feel it.

She plays and she works she boozes and smokes
She gorges and shits she brawls and she loves
She cries on beloved shoulders. . . .

What unites us?
Pushkin? He stands on the square
Where down below the nation was blown up.
Lermontov? He warred in the Caucasus
In punitive squads
As they war to this day.
Lenin? He lies in the Mausoleum
And has long heard nothing.
Gagarin? Oh, spare me:
That’s my parents in photographs
Wearing Bologna raincoats to a demonstration.
Nekrasov and Mayakovksy? The nation does not know them.
Try again: Kuzmin, Apukhtin, Vvedenskii, Kharms.
The Crimea in summer? I have been there twice.
Red Square? Venichka Erofeev
With his throat ripped open.
A love for our fathers’ tombs?
Memorials of the mob from the Gay Nineties.
The graves of loved ones? But those are my graves.
They are on Russian land
But even that does not equate me to
The nation. Who is she?
Putin on television? The G-8?
G is only one of the spots
For a woman’s orgasm.

So come on, nation—since you’re a broad, why the f—ck
Don’t you give birth to a national hero
And his sister the national idea
Of some chess-playing Jew
(“A Baltic Diary” [Baltiiskii dnevnik])

It is indicative that here, as in many of Fanailova’s other poems, the identification with the motherland toward which the entire history of women’s discourse in Russian culture is nudging us (or, more accurately, peremptorially demanding we go) is impossible precisely on the intellectual, ideological, and ethical levels. Hence the search for clamps that work on a bodily level—for corporeal metaphors and for a corporeal (not least a carnal) language. But here the connection is, more than anything, destructive; and there we get the image of Venichka Erofeev with his throat ripped open and the murdered “mob” and, of course, the graves of loved ones.

Death seems to be the only bodily state that permits the author in modern Russia to feel a connection with the motherland. In other instances, indicatively, the Russian Beauty also bears the imprint of death. Through death, Pelevin’s Hera is elevated. Stepanova’s Black Hen and the Mistress in 2017 are both homicidal (and, not coincidentally, another of that novel’s heroines—Tamara, Krylov’s ex-wife—is infatuated by the idea of building a hypercontemporary columbarium). Fanailova cannot tear her entranced gaze (in which horror mixes with admiration) away from today’s demons of death—the “black suits” of security agents and hit men: “They bore down / And passed like a mirage / Smiling / Like sunstroke” (from the poem “Black Suits” [Chernye kostiumy]).
How are we to interpret this mutation? As the collapse of internal colonization? As its latest blind alley? Or is it only through contact with death or, more precisely, through a knowledge of the death concealed within what is near and dear (which is precisely where the semantics of the Freudian grisliness lie) that the modernizing scenarios may make their return?

The work of mourning may allow the decoupling of modernization from internal colonization. At the same time, only the work of mourning, persistently pursued, may prevent the latest attempt at modernization from turning into a new round of internal colonization, with all the consequences ensuing therefrom. Or is this a far more gloomy symptom, and is the conversion of Russian Beauties into figures of grisliness and death evidence of the radical impossibility of modernization? Because there is no longer anything to modernize. The throngs that fell victim to previous attempts at modernization, primarily during the Soviet catastrophe, have suffused the very body of the motherland with grisliness, turning the Russian Beauty—a recognizable symbol of Russia—into a living death.

Is this also a manifestation of the overcarry effect? Or is it just another phantasm?

In that context, the thanatological meaning of Sorokin’s oprichnik dystopia becomes especially distinct. The frightful picture of torture, bribery, orgies, and “quenching” that Sorokin has written composes itself by and large into a series of rituals—“thus mote it be” “and thanks be to God”—that form a thanatological sacrality based mainly on an ecstasy of violence. Even the ringtone on Komiaga’s cell phone plays the sounds of torture: “A blow of the whip—a scream. Another blow—a groan. A third blow—a wheeze. . . . That music would even wake the dead.”

Characteristically, that oprichnik violence is directed not only against others, whoever they may be, but against the perpetrators of violence themselves. A novella that begins with pogrom and rape ends with a scene in which, at the height of an orgy, the oprichniks start drilling holes in each other’s legs, to see who will give out first. That scene, mind you, is also “assonant” with another, in which the oprichniks have anal “daisy-chain” sex, in a strict hierarchy and loudly egging each other on, although here it is not pain that bonds this collective body together but pleasure. The male homosocial family welded by the transformations of violence into pleasure and pleasure into violence is not a new portrait of the Russian elite, though. This complex of motifs dates back to part 2 of Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible* [Ivan Groznyi] and is presented in Bykov’s ZhD, where Gurov, the Varangian teacher alias Khazar spy, has plans for inducting Ploskorylov into the highest “stage of the [occult] initiation” through rape. To this, Sorokin adds a collective phantasm fueled by narcotics, since, during their orgies, the oprichniks are plunged
into a group hallucination, a fantasy recounted in the style of an ancient verse epic that presents the oprichniki as Gorynych the Seven-Headed Serpent attacking America and incinerating everyone and everything in its path. This flight of imagination ends with another scene of rape: “I fill her trembling inards with my fiery turnspit she howls with an inhuman cry and I take her on my fiery turnspit and slowly start in with the fikkenfikkenfikkenfikkenfikkenfikkenfikkenfikkenfikkenfikkenfikkenfikkenfikkenfikkenfikkenfikkenfikkenfikkenfikken.”

The most obvious thing here, perhaps, is the freakishness of the nontraditional psychoideology: the seven-headed Gorynych is a symbol on a par with Pelevin’s vampires and many things dreamed up by Prokhanov. What do you think, Sasha—is this another hallmark of magical historicism? If so, the trauma manifested by this image in Sorokin is obvious as the trauma of a liberal horrified by modernization’s most recent detour under slogans of stability, under the banners of neotraditionalism. Is that it?

A.E. I, on the contrary, see little here that is new. Think back to Viktor Erofeev’s Russian Beauty [Russkaia krasavitsa], with its girlish running in circles around a Russian field to rouse the passions of a monster in the sky and conceive a child that will be an omen of salvation.

Erofeev, incidentally, stayed far closer to the intertexts of the Russian classics than the writers of today, for whom the pre-Soviet tradition is useful more as stage dressing than anything else. In Sorokin’s caricature, the oprichniki see themselves as Erofeev’s snake, except that they now want to “fikken” America itself, and they could care less about Russian beauties and Kulikovo Field, because there they’ve already screwed everything that moves. Hera’s transformation into Ishtar, which you mentioned, is also interesting (though I have to admit that all those portentous names do not work so well when applied to vampires): that Russian Beauty not only lost her body but transformed into a mushroom. This is, I think, an amusing allusion to the story of Lenin-as-mushroom told by Sergei Kurekhin in the early 1990s (which Alexei Yurchak recently brought up again). Amusing but no more than that.

In the classical triangle of internal colonization, the Russian Beauty (read: the motherland) played an exclusively passive role, an idea that I illustrated using the image of Nastasia Filippovna in The Idiot, being sacrificed to an unknown god by two other participants in the plot who have united in a sinister alliance. Although these days beauties play entirely other roles—and for that, as Komiaga said, thanks be to God—the linkage that is key to literary presentations of internal colonization, between motherland (nation—fame—power) and woman continues to operate. It is that linkage that engenders such strange figures as the vampire Hera and the shamaness Asha. Look at what Fanailova does in the poem you quoted: she examines,
discredits, and rejects all manifestations of that linkage but leaves the linkage itself untouched. Everything is destroyed, but the nation-motherland is still female at the end, as at the start. This approach is no more radical than that taken by Lermontov, whom Fanailova cites. Do you remember, Mark? “I love my fathers’ land but with such strange affection! Not . . . nor . . . nor . . . not . . . but . . . the talk of drunken peasant men.” In Lermontov’s interpretation, the motherland [rodina] is, to my way of thinking, given as masculine. It is my fathers’ land [otchizna], and hence peasant men [muzhiki] and much else. Fanailova restores the correct grammatical gender to the rodina and forces her to share the aggrieved, childless, and apparently frigid femininity of many of her fellow countrywomen. The next step, probably, would be to say that the motherland is an abstraction that has no gender. Only I don’t know if you can write poems about that.

M.L. In Sorokin, the image of the Russian Beauty disintegrates into a whole series of female images. On the one hand, there is Anastasia the servant girl who, as Komiaga is to find out, is pregnant by him (as in Bykov, the future belongs to an alliance between a silovik and the “natives”); on the other hand, there are the regime’s victims—the ballerina Ul’ianova Kozlova, “best of all the Odiles and Giselles,” who ransoms from Komiaga “members of the family of an enemy of the people,” and Anastasia Petrovna Stein-Sotskaia, the daughter of a government clerk whose machinations (“to saw into planks and sell”) provided the premise for the patriotic film The Great Wall of Russia [Velikaia russkaia stena]. Those two subvarieties of the Russian Beauty position Komiaga in the space between the “natives” and the harassed intelligentsia, the “victims of the Russian state.” Two other heroines, however, separate and detach themselves from that simple scheme. First there is Praskov’ia Mamontovna, the “official fortuneteller,” whom Komiaga flies to see in Siberia, bringing her a secret assignment, and whom he catches doing something entirely “subversive”—stoking her stove with a sacralized Russian classic text. Asked “What will happen to Russia?” she responds in a wholly conceptualist—or, if you like, Zen Buddhist—vein, “Nothing will happen.” Second, there is none other than “Our Sovereign Lady.” “Our Sovereign Lord most wise had decided to solve, definitively and irreversibly, the Jewish question in Russia” (by forcing all the Jews to adopt names typical of their ethnicity) and himself had gone and married a “Jewess” (although not full-blooded). The Sovereign Lady is, furthermore, far-famed for her love for young guardsmen, on which subject the people—comparing her with a vixen (say a friendly hi to Pelevin?)—sing “scurrilous songs.” Komiaga himself, developing a sudden similarity to d’Artagnan, has feelings for the Sovereign Lady that reveal an
identical inclination to transgress “law and good order”: “I hate our mamma for shaming the Sovereign Lord and undermining the people’s faith in Authority. But I love her for her character, for her strength and wholeness, for her inflexibility. And for . . . her white, tender, incomparable, dimensionless, abundant bosom that may sometimes, thanks be to God, be seen out of the corner of the eye.”

Many details force one to suspect Sorokin’s siloviki of being covert postmodernists, with their undermining of canons, prohibitions, and fundamentals. Although, of course, good order at the court of an absolutist state is frequently based on transgression, the more or less demonstrative performance of that which is forbidden to “all the rest.”

A.E. As dystopias of all times and peoples have always done, the latest Russian novels are reacting to the political situation in which their authors and readers live. In Day of the Oprichnik, Russia has become a Chinese protectorate, with a regime that combines the political technologies of the Putin era with the corporal punishments and executions of the sixteenth century. Foreign intervention has put an end to civil strife, but the horrors of the new oprichnina are analogous to the terror of the Gulag. Isolated from the world by a Great Wall, the country is being systematically settled by the Chinese.

Sorokin’s futurological model differs somewhat from that adopted by Bykov in his ZhD. They both describe a future civil war in Russia, but Bykov portrays the cyclicity of that war whereas Sorokin opts for the juncture of postwar stabilization. They both talk about foreign involvement in the war, but Bykov predicts an insidious Israeli intervention and Sorokin an “enforcement of peace” by the Chinese. They select the same social type—an intellectual turned silovik—for their central characters. These strategies in many ways run contrary to the approach taken by Pelevin, who, in Empire V, instead settled on the classical figure of a “simpleton at court” and for symbolic violence. Pelevin is less interested in physical violence and the life of the body than is Sorokin: even his vampires are not so much bloodletters as they are collectors of information. Pelevin’s analysis of symbolic violence is closer to the contemporary post-Marxist political theory that, following Antonio Gramsci, gives most of its attention to hegemony (the mechanisms for achieving power without direct violence). That said, Sorokin—and Bykov too, for that matter—may well be closer to the cutting-edge reality of the twenty-first century.

The regime in Russia, prompted by the happenstance of nature and history, forms a dual monopoly over natural resources and power politics, which inexorably subordinates contemporary life in all its variety. Everything in the country, everything the country needs, everything the country knows is squeezed into the vice of that dual monopoly. This is not postindustrial development
but its opposite. Everything that resembled contemporaneity in Russia has disintegrated and retreated; Russia is now living not in a “post-” world but in a “de-” world, of deindustrialization, de-democratization, demodernization. What is happening in Russia has no place in the postmodern; it is an antimodern, aggressive, and (today) conscious resistance to contemporaneity.

There is one articulate justification for such a development, and that involves threats to Russia’s sovereignty. Bykov and Sorokin agree that if things continue along today’s lines, Russia will lose its independence. Pelevin (like Galkovskii, among others) tells us that Russia has always been a colony. Bykov conducts his own experiment with Varangians and Phlogiston; Sorokin, with siloviki and the oprichnina; and Pelevin with vampires and bablos. But all three situ­ate their warnings in the dystopian milieu of Russia’s external colonization. Yet they are all actually preoccupied with internal affairs, with the tendency of the oprichniki (Varangians, vampires) to treat their own people as alien. Another answer to the same situation was Solzhenitsyn’s call, shortly before his death, to “cherish the people.”

M.L. We should add to the above that Day of the Oprichnik contains an analysis not only of (anti)modernizing tendencies and traumas but also of ways of escaping a “state of trauma” [travmatizm] that are rooted in everyday life and essentially serve to prolong the historical catastrophe. So, for example, the vision of Gorynych, who rapes by fire, is assonant with other scenes—not only the rape of a disgraced noble’s wife (when, immediately after handing the woman around, the oprichniki let loose the “red rooster” [commit arson—Trans.]) but also the unmasking of the felonious Count Ursov—“our Sovereign Lord’s brother-in-law, a professor of law, a full member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, respected chairman of the Chamber of Sages,” and so on—who has a predilection for rape in burning buildings, at least one of which he has set alight himself, and for this he is killed by the oprichniki at the end of the novella. The narcotics that the oprichniki take several times a day are also forbidden “by the law and good order,” although in other matters of “morality and ethical conduct,” the oprichniki are an example to all: profane language earns them a fist to the mouth from their commander.

The authoritative religiosity that gives these “faithful curs” so much license demands and assumes transgression, regarded as freedom (in the modernist and postmodernist understanding of that category, at least). This would be an appropriate time to recall Slavoj Žižek and his category of jouissance: the tacitly permitted transgressions that are embedded into any authoritarian system and enable the “subaltern” to enjoy the illusion of superiority over an all-powerful
and all-seeing power structure, while the power structure continually widens the sphere of its authority, knowing that everyone is culpable and everyone has something to fear. That said, the wholly self-satisfied Komiaga, who distances himself from neither the collective body nor the collective unconscious, is still the same “cunning slave” he has always been—the object and subject of Soviet internal colonization but most of all its product, “whose every act of thought is aimed at surviving in whatever situation, including those where nothing depends on him at all.” So the principle of self-colonization remains in effect here, even where there is no modernizing project and the chosen path leads to a neotraditionalist retreat into a medieval time that, admittedly, rests on oilfields and trade with China?

The neotraditionalist “law and good order” acquires in *Oprichnik* the traits of a legitimized and ritualized transgression with constantly expanding borders—although one that, admittedly, lacks a single modernizing project, lacks the cult of individual freedom, and in general is extraneous to a personal ideology. *It is a transgression that has been taken from the individual and handed off to collective bodies and collective identities.* Here, Sorokin is writing a recognizably precise hybrid of the “heavy-handed” and “liberal” strategies of modernization, with “law and good order” on the surface and, in the depths, a postmodernist transgression played out at the level of the collective body.

Hence my doubts about the nature of the trauma that Sorokin is highlighting here. This doubt is confirmed by the vein of transparent allusions to contemporaneity that runs through *Oprichnik*. There are, on the one hand, Sorokin’s caustic names for those who are orchestrating the present turn to neotraditionalism. There is a movie director, the “great . . . Fedor Lysyi [the Bald], nicknamed Fedia-Ate-the-Bear [Fedia-S’’el-Medvedia],” and “Shka Ivanov, the famous executioner of the Russian intelligentsia,” with his subordinate “Mishania Kavychka” [Parenthesis], who deal out a good flogging to the “underclerk Danilkov of the Chamber of the Literary Arts, for ‘criminal negligence.’” Danilkov’s prototype is known to wax ardently enthusiastic over the works and person of Aleksandr Prokhanov, but the “criminal negligence” here likely consists in the fact that this critic’s sympathies extend to Sorokin himself. Rummaging through the wares at a bookstall, Komiaga finds *Nizhni Novgorod Acres* [Nizhegorodskie desiatiny] by Pavel Olegov, *Days and Ways on the Western Wall* [Budni zapadnoi steny] by Savvatii Sharkunov, *Friend of My Heart* [Drug moi serdechnyi] by Irodiada Deniuzhkina, and *Mores of the Children of the New Chinese* [Navy detei novykh kитаизev] by Oksana Podrobskaia, adding: “They are known, and deservedly so. And lavished with the people’s and the Sovereign’s love.” The list—a readily decipherable cover for certain writers of today—is priceless: the “leftward turn” of the editor of *Ad*
Marginem [Aleksandr Ivanov], the “new realism” of Oleg Pavlov and Sergei Shargunov, the glitzy prose of Oksana Robski, and the pseudoseditious works of Irina Denezhkina bear equal responsibility for molding the neotraditionalist vector in early twenty-first-century Russian culture.

Sorokin, however, lays into his former friends and colleagues, the ideologues and practitioners of postmodernist transgression, with no less sarcasm, if not more: “Ry kunina,” “Vipperstein and Onufrienko,” “Igor Pavlovich Tikhii,” “Boris Gross,” the “whelps of the dogman,” and “Vsevolod Nekros.” I don’t care to cite the passages that contain the comical titles of those characters’ works, but I must note that Sorokin’s attacks are too crude (too traumatic) to be considered just the little jokes of a writer settling scores with “his own crowd.”

Sorokin is evidently endeavoring to distance himself equally from the siloviki and the “liberals.” Possibly, and by analogy with the famous book by “Borukh Gross” (Boris Groys) that viewed Stalinism as a statized avant-garde, he is inclined to see in “modern medievality” a continuation, or, more accurately, a “collectivization” of postmodernism. Unlike Bykov, though, Sorokin is here making no attempt to devise an alternative ideology, thereby protecting his own position against the temptations and traps of ideology. At the same time, unlike Pelevin, he offers a more capacious and profound analysis of his chosen subject. To my taste, Oprichnik is artistically stronger than both ZhD and Empire V, which attests to the greater precision of Sorokin’s conception, to his closer focus on the traumatic material.

Over your objections, though, I will emphasize that Sorokin offers a commentary perhaps even more incisive than Bykov’s and Pelevin’s on the trauma inflicted by modernization—in his case by the avant-garde and postmodernism, those being the radical discourses of modernization into which he has compressed himself as a person and an artist. That is why Sorokin’s attempt to stand above both of the strategies of power seems to me deceptive. Reading this novella, it is impossible to shake the impression that he is secretly in love with his oprichniks and the culture of eroticized terror that surrounds them and that he loves them exactly for the reasons for which he is seemingly censuring them—for the transgressions that are elevated to a religious ecstasy. Sorokin himself and Sorokin’s writing in this tale are a superlatively vivid document of trauma that serves in the final analysis as a rationale and justification for the turn to neotraditionalism.

A.E. There you have it—authors are supposed to love their heroes, even if they are villains or, as in the case we have here, monsters. As for a collectivized (kolkhoz-style) transgression, feel free to take an interest in it, especially if you’re young and dumb, but there’s not much to love here.
The oprichnina was the oprichnina: it was structured on collective faith, collective hatred, and collective pleasure. For those and other reasons, group sex scenes are an almost mandatory accoutrement of the antiutopia (remember the Solidarity Services in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*?); all that Sorokin has added is the homosexual element. But I agree with you that a good novel must always leave its characters with inner freedom and that this freedom is somehow associated with their contagious pleasures. “The pleasure of the text” [Roland Barthes—Trans.] is, however, not the sole function of a literary work. Furthermore, the understanding of a text as a vehicle of memory and as a way of working with trauma has little if anything to do with the idea of pleasure.

In essence, Komiaga is entirely worthy of sympathy and empathy, as are the Kremlin’s political technologists who are his prototypes. The new oprichnik is a canny lad and quite the historian into the bargain. But there is no doubt that he and his household will soon be overtaken by the fate of his victims (which is exactly the ending we find in *The Sugar Kremlin*). The oprichnik’s typical day ends as it began, with violence; and in the historical perspective, who cares whether it is our hero’s victim who is left hanging on his gates to die or he himself? Whether he rapes or is raped? Until the trauma is worked through, its subjects and objects can change places around the circle, forfeiting their tokens of individuality and even of mortality, like wave-tossed pebbles on the shore. That does not, of course, mean that each of them has not had his moment of pleasure. A novel, to be a novel, must necessarily concern itself with that personal, even touching, moment.

**Historical Trauma and Internal Colonization**

*A.E.* But I will never tire of repeating that Pelevin’s vampire executioners and Sorokin’s oprichnik executioners, like the victimized “Joes” [vas’ki] in Bykov’s *ZhD*, are figurative answers not to an abstract “trauma of modernization” but to the post-Soviet situation of recent catastrophe and present obliviousness. Millions have gone unburied, which is why their shades are still flitting about.

The law discovered by Freud states that whatever is repressed returns in grisly form. Now reread those familiar words à la Khrushchev, as I suggested above: whoever was repressed has returned. The historian Slava Rogov, hero of Bykov’s *Justification*, knew only too well how strongly the shade of his beloved grandfather was drawing him to the grave. Not even to the grave, since Slava also went unburied. Just see, Mark, how grisly post-Soviet films can be, from Aleksei German Sr.’s *Khrustalev, My Car!* [Khrustalev, ma-shinu!] to II’ia Khrzhanovskii’s *4* and on, to Aleksandr Veledinskii’s *Living
[Zhivoi] and Timur Bekmambetov’s Night Watch and Day Watch [Nochnyi dozor, Dnevnyi dozor].

Sometimes the Soviet roots of post-Soviet impurity are obvious, but sometimes they are not, and you and I are needed to interpret them. I agree with Dina Khapaeva’s labeling, in a recent book, of post-Soviet society as “Gothic,” although our theoretical views differ and that’s a good thing. I think that Dina would be more likely to agree with you, Mark, that the new Russian “Gothic society” needs to be understood as the national version of a global crisis. She explains this in her own way; you explain it as an “answer to modernization,” which invites the question: to which modernization, in the order of their appearance? Because there have been so many, beginning at least with the Petrine modernization, and they have all been different. So in this approach I see, on the one hand, an excessive universalization of the contemporary “global” crisis and, on the other, an underestimation of the specifics of the post-Soviet situation as a reaction to the Soviet catastrophe itself.

You are correct when you say in your recent book, Mark, that postmodernist Russian literature is replete with tragicality. But then you confront a problem that is, in my view, artificial: insofar as postmodernism, according to some Franco-American theories, is alien to tragedy, therefore (so say you) post-Soviet postmodernism is unique, hybrid (in having been crossed with modernism), or even “immature.” In my view, the theory of Western postmodernism as alien to tragedy is obsolete. Postmodernist literature’s dependency on colonial traumas and revolutions has always been a commonplace in critical theory, but a recently published book contrasts that thesis with a new one, which holds that the roots of the postmodernist philosophy, from Adorno to Derrida, are to be found in reaction to the Holocaust.

Both of these approaches are important to an understanding of the Russian situation: post-Soviet literature is a vehicle for both the memory of the Soviet terror and for the reaction to Russian, Soviet, and global imperialism. But the problem of “immaturity” is rendered altogether moot by the rejection of the universal model according to which Russian literature will traverse the stages that Western literature has traversed or is traversing, but belatedly. Really, Mark, to take the thesis that post-Soviet culture is postmodernist seriously, it is necessary not only to define the key concepts, which in this instance is difficult, but also to prove that Soviet culture was modernist—or contemporary—or rather than one of several protests against contemporaneity, a quest for an antimodernist alternative, for a “different” contemporaneity which proves without fail to be noncontemporary. Then one starts to wonder what contemporaneity has returned us to. The historians of Nazi Germany spent many years arguing comparable problems; it is now time for a similar argument to be initiated by historians of the Soviet period, who on some
issues are still working with concepts from the theories of modernization and convergence that were created in the 1970s. My version of the solution you already know: to the thesis of belated modernization that emphasizes backwardness in time and imitation in essence, finding no explanation for the independent, creative solutions in which Russian history abounds (like a student who is scolded by the teacher for being late to class while the lesson goes on), I contrast the theory of internal colonization that illuminates Russian culture’s inner multiplicity of layers and discontinuity and its autonomous and uncommonly complex functionality.

M.L. Sasha, I have already said that I bear no responsibility for the identification of the post-Soviet with the postmodernist, although my references to the trauma caused by modernization are evidently conducive to such suspicions. And I would be hurt if Dina Khapaeva agreed with me, since what does not sit well with me in her book is exactly that universalization of the contemporary crisis that you are laying at my door. I will try to explain myself and at the same time refine my position.

No matter how irritating we may find the idea of the cyclicality of Russian history, to which many, in particular Dmitrii Bykov (see, for example, his “Philosophical Letter” [Filosoficheskoe pis’mo]), pay tribute, one cannot fail to see in the trajectories of the Russian state typological models that do repeat unpredictably. Stalin’s archaizing (also known as conservative) modernization is still only one, if the most traumatic, example of Russian modernization, standing in lieu of a desirable modernity that yields the catastrophe of self-abstraction from history. The revolution and the post-Soviet period are, not coincidentally, assonant with that catastrophe; what we have here is the same protracted and self-reproducing trauma. All the authors we are discussing agree with astonishing unanimity that Russian modernization traumatizes not by achieving its goals but by monstrously distorting them. It seems to me that your theory of internal colonization could serve well here, since the likely reason for the repetition of both singular and superimposed historical traumas is that modernization in Russia does not know (and is not looking for) any path to effective implementation other than that of internal colonization.

Unless I am distorting your logic, you are saying that in Russian cultural history, the power structure and intelligentsia set about modernizing their own populace with the same aloofness and cruelty as the European empires brought to the “civilizing” of their colonies. Hence, evidently, comes the mythology of the “people” as an entity confrontational in equal part toward the power structure and the intelligentsia, which is especially noticeable in Bykov’s ZhD. In Russian culture, the actors in the internal colonization plot have always
been the “man of power and culture,” the “representative of the people,” and the “Russian Beauty” who is the symbolic personification of Russia, with the outcome of the plot hanging on the sacrifice of one of these characters. In your articles you have illustrated these processes using cultural plot lines taken from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but in the twentieth century, in my view, the “man of power and culture” manifestly splits into two antagonistic characters, one a vehicle of power and the other a vehicle of culture. This is demonstrated by many Soviet texts: Iurii Olesha’s *Envy* [Zavist’], Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Heart of a Dog*, Vasilii Grossman’s *Life and Fate* [Zhizn’ i sud’ba], Iurii Dombrovskii’s *Faculty of Useless Knowledge* [the English title of Fakul’tet nenuzhnykh veshchei], if one keeps only to the best known. But there the “man of power” is as apt to merge with the “man of the people” (an assumption on which not only socialist realism but also the prose of Zoshchenko is based) as to confront him (the logic of Solzhenitsyn and Grossman). As for the portrayal of the “simple man” as a vehicle of irrational power and simultaneously as a tragic scapegoat, in the twentieth century that portrayal brings to mind not only *The Captain’s Daughter* [Kapitanskaia dochka] but also, and to a far greater extent, *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* [Odin den’ Ivana Denisovicha], *Matren’s Home* [Matrenin dvor], and all the village prose that emerged from that home. Let us also acknowledge that in the Soviet tradition *internal colonization* often presents as *external colonization* and is demonized thereby. Such techniques are familiar from socialist realism, where the “liberal intelligentsia,” for example, is presented as an agent of imperialism (see Vsevolod Kochetov’s *What Is It You Want?* [Chego zhe ty khoches’?], Ivan Shevtsov’s *Aphis* [Tlia], and, again, Prokhanov’s novels). Similarly, in late Soviet and post-Soviet nationalist rhetoric, the revolution is attributed to the machinations of Jews, the ethnic aliens (for further detail on this, see the second volume of Solzhenitsyn’s *Two Hundred Years Together*).

These reservations do not, to be sure, alter the essence of a conflict imprinted with the internal colonization plot: invariably at issue here are the strategies of modernization, the methods for “setting Russia to rights,”* and therefore the cultural logic to which the fearsome and incomprehensible “people” is to be subordinated. The post-Soviet experience also corresponds with your idea, obviously. The struggle between liberal and silovik/nationalist scenarios of modernization/colonization has been going on since the 1970s and overflowed during perestroika into the acrimonious “war of the periodicals.” Then, in the 1990s, liberal colonization seemed to prevail, only to be defeated and give way to the neoconservative and almost religious statism of the Putin period.

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*A reference to an essay by Solzhenitsyn, “How Are We to Set Russia to Rights?” (Kak nam obustroit’ Rossiiu?).—Trans.*
The outcome of that confrontation is not, mind you, entirely obvious even today.

So there is evidently nothing unique in that demodernization of which you spoke earlier and to which Sorokin reacted so sensitively. Internal colonization engenders the profoundly archaic forms of culture, founded on terror and repression, that hinder the latest in a round of attempts to achieve the modernization that gave rise to them. When Bykov writes, in his first “Philosophical Letter” and later in ZhD, about a single cycle of political reforms that repeats in Russian history—repressions, thaw, revolution, stagnation, dementia, thaw—he is, of course, simplifying, but not overly so, because that is exactly how the interaction between modernization and colonization has unfolded in Russian history (in its twentieth-century history, at least). Each time, however, modernization and colonization take on new forms, since every cycle of modernization leaves behind it a trace that is traumatic, but not only traumatic. I propose the following formula: Modernization acquires a cyclical and monstrous nature at the point when it is engulfed by internal colonization. It is the repeatability of that transformation that guarantees the continuity of the catastrophic experience.

That is why I both agree and disagree with you that contemporary magical historicism embodies nothing but the unprocessed memory of the Soviet terror. Yes, it does embody that meaning, since it is, to be sure, Russian society’s most important and most fearsome trauma, a kind of concentrate of the trauma caused by modernization/colonization that I’m talking about here. But the traumatic experience that our authors are working with is invariably as multilayered as a pastry: in it, one catastrophe is translucent to another, and they merge together into phantasms and grisly hybrids. It is there, in my view, that the cause of the overcarry effect of which you spoke earlier lurks. In my view, this effect characterizes the Russian traumatic discourse rather than post-traumatic writing in general. So, for instance, the two most distinct layers in Bykov’s ZhD are the post-Soviet and the revolutionary. In Sorokin, Putin’s neotraditionalism is superimposed on a layer of Stalinist associations and displays an assonance (albeit an assonance that is also borrowed from Stalinist culture) with the attempt at a Russian Renaissance, which ended, as we know, in the oprichnina and the Time of Troubles. But Pelevin’s Empire V, has—strange as this may sound—only one layer: that text is patently working only with the post-Soviet experience.

Yet the reading of Pelevin’s novel as an articulation of the repressed memory of the Soviet terror is in no way an artificial one. Even a single layer of this “pastry” conceals within itself perhaps not fully evolved but entirely intelligible references to deeper (in historical terms) levels of traumatic experience.
A.E. Even so, in my view, we are dealing here not with a generic trauma resulting from modernization—with a broad explanatory category, that is, that our colleagues in various parts of the world (in Latin America, say, or the Middle East, and in England, once again, and in France even more so) are at liberty to employ and often do. Modernization is a painful and traumatic process; some lose, others gain, and almost everyone both loses and gains at the same time. People respond to traumas with fantasies, nostalgic or otherwise, that must be understood and cannot be condemned. Thus, we acquire the post-traumatic version of postmodernism. In that cozy and large (global) narrative, the differences between the feelings of an intellectual in Russia—whose father was killed in the Gulag, whose children turned into drunks during the era of stagnation, whose savings disappeared under perestroika, and, finally, whose culture, which had given meaning and sense to many of those events, has been destroyed during the past decade—and the feelings of an Indian peasant, a French burgher, and (right now) an American homeowner, none of whom can withstand global competition, who are losing their familiar sources of income, and who are each finding a way out in a postmodern of his own—religious for some, literary for others, and yet others are going to business school to retrain—are lost. It’s bad for everyone (though when was it ever good?), but the bad is different for everyone. I don’t believe in a global postmodernism. The economy is globalizing irreversibly, whereas the culture responds with particularisms; hence the problems differ from one location to the next.

The uniqueness of the post-Soviet juncture lies in its Soviet past; also unique is what political analysts have been calling the oil curse, which also differs in different countries. Here unearned petrodollars are restoring institutions of state that have never acknowledged any model other than the Soviet and render uncompetitive any way of organizing life other than those devised by the state (or, as Bykov would put it, by Varangians). Does the blame here lie with the well-connected big shots that Bykov mistakenly identifies with the Jews? Some big shots probably are to blame, except that they have long been working for the siloviki, and if an oligarch should find himself overwhelmed by circumstances that have been thrust on him, those circumstances suddenly become nonexistent or are made to go far, far away. But neither they nor anyone else has ever come up with Phlogiston.

Waiting for Phlogiston

A.E. Contrary to the critics who pan post-Soviet literature wholesale for its frivolity and primitivism, I see in it a huge, scary, enticing abyss between “serious” and “light” genres. Never before has serious literature been so
heavy; never before has light literature been so primitive. In saying “never,” I am thinking less of Soviet literature, where the differences between high and low genres were purposefully erased, than of the Russian literature of the nineteenth century.

In Bykov’s ZhD, I see a highly promising but not entirely satisfactory attempt to write a “great novel”—a novel that, using tragic material drawn from late modern Russian history, interacts, and seeks to compete, with War and Peace and Life and Fate. Oil, power, and Russian history are the crucial contexts in ZhD, as they are in The Sacred Book of the Werewolf or Day of the Oprichnik. The new Russian novels study these three topics intently, inventively, and invariably together, as a tripartite totality.

The cover blurb for ZhD is correct in saying that this book is not politically correct—although, of course, the advertising slogan the “most politically incorrect book of the new millennium” should be taken with a pinch of salt. Bykov wanted to irritate various people, and he did. For my own part, I will also say that this is an uneven book. Chunks that are meaningful and astute and will be read as a monument to the age that gave birth to this book (as chunks of Quiet Flows the Don [Tikhii Don] are read) sit right next to botched chapters.

The entire book is an exercise in Russian historical scholarship. Bykov untiringly crosses Chaadaev with Kozhinov, Solzhenitsyn with Koestler, and “Dudugin” with “Lotsman.”* What actually interests Bykov, though, is a deconstruction of the resultant hybrids that does less to reveal the obvious contradictions in them than to lay bare the vicious cycles in which what Bykov calls “Varangian–Khazar”** history (in plain words, East European history) is going. That image of a historical cycle is reproduced persistently throughout the novel, in various forms: the Varangians are building a senseless railroad encircling the country to isolate its population from the world with magnetic fields; the natives walk and speak in circles, which is called Vasilenko Syndrome; Volokhov, the positive hero, has established a Heat-Bearing Brigade, an elite military group that he leads around the country to reeducate its members, trying hard not to go in circles, although he never does anything else; finally, Russian history always has developed and continues to develop in circles. In

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*Aleksandr Dugin, a right-wing political analyst, and Iurii Lotman, the prominent semiotician and scholar of culture.—Trans.

**The Varangians were the Swedish Vikings credited with establishing the first Russian state in 862. The Khazars, a Turkic people, established an empire north of the Caspian Sea; their elite eventually converted to Judaism, but the Russians subjugated their empire in the tenth century. The terms translated as railroad, Heat-Bearing Brigade (Iron Unit in Living Souls), and “awaiting the day,” a phrase that does not appear in Living Souls, can all be abbreviated zhd in Russian.—Ed.
this metahistory, only the Khazars—who are “awaiting the day” when their Mission will end—stand against the nightmare of circularity, but that was, as they say, bad for business. The self-designations of all the protagonist groups share the same abbreviation, thus forming yet another circle.

I know of no other contemporary author for whom the metahistorical imagination is so very, so intently, significant as it is for Bykov. I often do not agree with him, but his preoccupation with these problems and the creative imagination he engages in rendering them does command my respect.

The novel’s methodology is labeled alternative history (al’ternativka for short). Bykov explains, “According to the Alternative Guidebook, any idea could take hold, however far-fetched, and would soon become the only one possible.” This is an alternative history situation because of the invention, in Europe, of Phlogiston, a new source of energy that has brought the oil market crashing down and has made Russia’s territory a wasteland in which the “natives” are dying out and a war—a typical civil war with foreign involvement—has been going on for several years. The twenty-eight-year-old Volokhov, a “native,” is an alternative historian. He heads up a sector of the Moscow Institute of Alternative History. His opposite number, Everstein, also a historian, works in the Israeli Museum of the History of Catastrophe. Mark, have you noticed how many historians there are in post-Soviet prose? That profession—which is rare for a literary hero (can you remember even one historian in the Russian classics? The only one I can think of is [Dostoevsky’s] “The Landlady” [Khoziaika])—probably came from Bitov’s censorship-skirting and, in that sense, pre-post-Soviet Pushkin House [Pushkinskii dom], whose protagonist, Lyova Odoevtsev, studies intertextualism in literature and is, accordingly, a historian. So now there is a sense that historians have transitioned from life to novels, just as happened with the peasants in Soviet times.

But let us return to ZhD. Volokhov is involved in a ramified plot that is in its entirety an improvisation on the theme of The Silver Dove [Serebrianyi golub’]. In that Andrei Belyi novella, a Symbolist poet goes to the people and draws close to members of a mystical sect that believes in the miraculous power of intercaste hybridization. Specifically, the sect holds that the savior of the world, who will bring the world to an end, will be born of the love between a poet and a peasant girl from the sect. The story ends badly for the poet, who is sacrificed to an unknown god, and whether or not he managed first to beget a child, we do not know. Bykov’s plot is driven by the same belief in the mystical power of crossbreeding between castes, except that here there are several couples, representing various sociocultural opposites, which complicates the action. In and of itself, this idea is quite strange, especially in a Russian novel, where (unlike in American novels) problems of race have not been subject to discussion because there are no races. The love between a
lord and a peasant is a classical theme, but since they are both white, the fate of their offspring has been of less interest to novelists than how they feel toward each other. This is the point at which Bykov begins his alternative history. In this fabrication, the “unstructured” Russians are split into two opposing culturopsychological poles and are designated as Varangians and Khazars—titles from historical mythology that resonate as the names of distinct races. Under Varangian authority, the rest of the “natives”—the Joes and the Mashkas—are subjected to colonization, sterilization, and even genocide. (The Varangians maintain that the Joes would fare no better under the Khazars, but that is just alternative history raised to the second power.) Bykov mythologizes the natives in amusing ways reminiscent of nineteenth-century populist folklore and in particular of the romantic linguistics of the 1800s–1850s. The natives’ language is a miracle-working one, the sounds of which correspond unconditionally to their meanings. In consequence of successive Varangian and Khazar colonizations, the Joes have forgotten that language, but they hear it in their sleep and have retained certain poetic catchphrases incomprehensible to outsiders, so that especially gifted Joes (some of whom are psychologists) are able to identify each other through these folksy shibboleths. As the populist mythology would lead one to expect, Bykov’s alternative history is full of sympathy for the natives: their extrasemiotic language aside, the Joes are credited with another particularly unrealistic trait, that of being skilled farmers. The only thing needed for their land to bear abundant fruit is for them to be left in peace.

The Varangians (siloviki and statists) war with the Khazars (traders and liberals), and both are parasites on the natives. The Varangians worship ice and Wagner, hold Christianity to be a Khazar invention, and are obsessed with a death wish. The Khazar ideology is the opposite, but less well-developed. The Khazars are “liberals” (a word that Bykov understands, alas, in no greater depth than supporters of the Nashi youth movement do); their capital and base are in Israel, which is here called the Kaganate; they are, by and large, Jews. In the talks they have together and later, on the field of battle, the historians Volokhov and Everstein translate all of Russian, and particularly Soviet, history into the idiom of Varangian–Khazar relations.

M.L. But whatever we call the forces that Bykov names “Khazar” and “Varangian,” they actually do play a huge role in the contemporary cultural consciousness, or, more precisely, in the political ideal. It is evident in the perspective of ZhD that not only Day of the Oprichnik but also Sorokin’s previous novels (his Bro’s Way [Put’ Bro], Ice, and 23000 trilogy) work with the “Varangian” ideology and mythology, whereas Pelevin’s Empire V, its “Varangian” (“imperial”) title notwithstanding, is a rather wicked satire on the “Khazar” mythoideology, although it is understood more broadly there
than in Bykov’s ZhD, which is ultimately able to “accommodate” both Pelevin’s vampires and Sorokin’s oprichniki. There you have the phantasmic ensemble that is today front and center.

The historico-philosophical aspect of Bykov’s conception is obviously not new: some of the fresher examples would be Yuri Slezkine’s Jewish Century (The Age of Mercury [Vek Merkuriia] in Russian translation), in which the Jews are understood primarily as vehicles of modern consciousness and the fate of modernity, and, in a completely different vein, a book by the journalist Aleksandr Panarin titled The Temptation of Globalism [Iskushenie globalizmom]. Let us also not forget that the struggle of “Nordic” forces against the “Khazars” and the attribution of the corresponding ideologies to national “jurisdictions” are among the best-known conspiracy theories.42

Then why does Bykov occasionally slip into anti-Semitic pamphleteering and turn his dystopia into an unmasking of Jewish domination? Take, for example, “the Kaganate’s scenario for a colonization policy,” which takes for granted that schools will be closed and “the Russian intelligentsia” persecuted. Or the fiery arguments offered by Volokhov, Bykov’s favorite character (whose surname deliberately echoes his author’s), to the effect that the Khazars’ “wonderful ideology has to go underground to survive, and you’ll gradually try to exterminate all others, but no one’s allowed to say so. . . . The best that the Kaganate has produced was in alien milieus, but left to its own devices it rapidly transformed into devil knows what.”43 Volokhov contends that there has not yet been any real anti-Semitism, but he dreams that there will be: “if someone had written intelligently about your acquisitiveness and double standards, the way you divide the world into Yours and not Yours, your absolute solidarity beyond all criteria.”44 This is the same sweet-souled ideologue who compares the Jews with a cancerous tumor:

Volokhov began to see Nilus, John of Kronstadt, the idiot Krushevan, and the rest of the early-century crowd as a team of grubby, drunken, talentless doctors duking it out with a cancerous tumor by defective means—but due to the doctors’ grubbiness and stupidity, due to their loathsome tactics, the cancer will keep on being malignant and will never gravitate toward a symbol of goodness and freedom. All the goodness, all the freedom would have to wait for the time being, until the final victory. After that, it would be possible to discard all the humane trappings . . . as soon as the tumor had devoured the enemy and spread everywhere, it would set up a regime that would make any pogrom look like child’s play.45

And the novel holds plenty more of the same, which the author, I emphasize, conveys with every sympathy (because when Bykov disagrees with his hero, he has means enough to express his sarcasm, even in internal monologue).
A.E. ZhD does indeed have some pages that read like a caricature less of the mythological Khazar than of the real Russian (or Israeli) Jew. But I would not label Bykov an anti-Semite on that basis. Whatever he may say about Everstein and the other Khazars, he has a lot more to say, and more knowledgeably, too, about Ploskokrylov, Paukov, and other Varangians. The Jews have always been a theme for Russian nationalism, which normally ascribes invariable and globally historical qualities to them. I am assuming Slezkine’s influence on Bykov—in fact, the difference between Slezkine’s Mercurians and Apollonians, on the one hand, and Bykov’s Khazars and Varangians, on the other, is strictly linguistic, in that Bykov prefers terms that date back to Mikhail Pogodin and Vasilii Grigor’ev, historians of the mid-nineteenth century, over terms of Nietszchean vintage. But the more substantial difference is ideological. In his narrative, Slezkine usually (although not always) stands on the side of Mercurian modernization, whereas Bykov is typically Russian in his ambivalence and seeks instead to concentrate on the victims among the “natives.” There is hyperbole in Slezkine’s theory of mercuriality, too, though. I have written about this previously. For now let me just note that in the Russian context, the views of that renowned West Coast historian fall on a field that has already been marked out by quite different thinkers on Jewish themes, such as Solzhenitsyn, Dugin, and Galkovskii. Each has a different position to express; the similarity among them, and between Bykov and Slezkine, I see in an operation common to all of them, which I have dubbed ethnic reductionism, in which vivid and recognizable but empirically questionable features of the national character are generalized to universal historical traits, along the lines of the modernistic and procapitalist essence of the Jews in Slezkine or, on a more primitive level, of the anti-Russian plot between the British and the Jews in Galkovskii. As for Bykov, with his Varangians and Khazars, the writer’s work we value for its creative fantasy, while the work of the scholar and even the journalist we appreciate in the light of other virtues altogether—virtues inherent in nonfiction. What is allowed to the bull [byk] is not allowed to Jupiter. I hope you’ll forgive the play on words, Mark.

M.L. But don’t you think, Sasha, that you, too, have influenced Bykov with your theory of internal colonization? There’s a reason why Everstein, the Khazar commissar (is it a coincidence that his surname begins with the same letter as yours?) does everything but quote you verbatim.

A.E. I did recognize some familiar formulas in some of Everstein’s monologues. That said, I profoundly disagree with some of his other arguments, so let’s leave the interpretation of the letter e to the next generation.
of intertextualists and trace instead the theory and practice of internal colonization in ZhD. The historian Everstein, speaking with the historian Volokhov, formulates a “simple and harmonious theory,” according to which the Russians had “never been native to Russia” but live there “as a nonnative population on land that is not theirs.” Volokhov returns repeatedly to that idea, taking issue with it, developing it, and in general agreeing with it. It is on those grounds that he formulates the definition of an alternative history that you deem delusional at first, until you realize that it is uniquely true.

The main issue in this “simple theory” is the definition of “natives.” If they are the people who occupied the territory in question before any others, then even Kliuchevskii would agree with Everstein, but the latter has developed his own subjective and more radical definition. Everstein understands the native population to be “those who hold that land to be their own.” In that sense, he describes Russia’s history as “the extermination and colonization of the people”—of those, that is, who held the land to be their own—and compares these processes with those that occurred during the colonization of North America (“fire-water and human bonfires” and the degradation of the local inhabitants). The next obvious question is who the colonizers were—who, that is, held (consciously? how else?) the land to belong to someone else. As a historian “capable of thinking slowly and deeply,” Everstein asserts that the Russians were colonized by Russians:

> The Russian power structure did everything possible to make the lives of the Russians themselves a nightmare. Because there was no other way to motivate them to die for someone else’s homeland. All your power structure’s strategy regarding its own people was to entirely devalue life, so that death would come as deliverance. . . . It was even worse for those who held that land to be their own: at every turn, they were being reminded that it is someone else’s. . . . The land bears no fruit because you don’t want to work it. Working someone else’s land is completely different from working your own. . . . So there is no movement, no history, as our commonsensical mutual friend Chaadaev argued.

The novel’s positive hero, the historian Volokhov, gradually comes to agree with Everstein, his not-so-upright colleague. As the novel progresses, Volokhov realizes: “he had lived his life in an occupied country. There was no other way to explain the attitude of the locals toward their own land, whose very abundance seemed to irritate its inhabitants. . . . No one felt that either street or homestead belonged to them. . . . All work done was done for the man—and that was the first hallmark of life in an occupied country.”

Volokhov agrees to the point at which Everstein concludes that if land is left to lie fallow and is of no use to its own population, then others—the
ZhD [“Yd”], the Khazars, or translated from the Bykovian idiom, the Israeli Jews—can take it over. So at the novel’s end, Commissar Everstein is leading their return to Russia. There is, however, no logical link between the ideas of (a) Russia’s self-colonization and (b) its renewed colonization from without; one can believe in (a) or (b) jointly or severally. The needs of the novel’s plot turn a historian of Russia’s internal colonization into an ideologue of its external colonization. Outside the novel, the two faces of Everstein are different and lead one away in different directions.

In his conversations, and his later tussles, with Everstein, Volokhov agrees with him as a historian and disagrees with him as a commissar. Me too. I think that internal colonization is morbidly cyclic and quasi-interminable: it seems interminable to its actors and its targets, who change places and become increasingly indistinguishable. It is here, in the crisis of distinction, that the way out—an autonomous and fortunate way out, let’s hope—will be found. I take particular exception to Everstein’s intolerable way of dividing the world into “yours” and “ours,” into Russians and Jews, denying the common good and seeing no common enemies. Bykov correctly shows how Everstein’s nationalism provokes Volokhov into nationalism of a reciprocal kind. The Varangians are still Varangians, but Volokhov, in love now with a Jewish girl, would not have become one of them had he not first encountered a fanatic Khazar in the world of ZhD. In this novel, the storied savior of the world is of mixed blood, born not of the wandering historian Volokhov and the cheerful journalist Zhenka, a sympathetic and recognizable pair, but of two most implausible heroes, the honest governor Borozdin and the wise shamaness Asha.

This entire intricate plot is interesting to me because I see in it a sincere and eloquent parable on internal colonization—an important aspect of Russian history whose sole effect is to render it comparable to other great cultures and empires. The thesis of internal colonization demands a quite radical, essentially unfamiliar, and now in addition unfashionable shift of the historical perspective. It demands that we stop thinking about the history of culture in ethnic terms. If properly handled, it is capable, I would surmise, of deconstructing the important historico-cultural dimensions of nationalism. But who handles anything properly these days? I am glad to find in Bykov a confirmation of my thoughts. At the same time, I see in his boisterous imagination the unpleasant development that any idea undergoes when uncritically applied. Where there is crisis, internal colonization is represented as an external colonization in which the internal processes of subjugation play out in the forms of external domination. Such is the law that the cultural representations of internal colonization must obey, especially in crisis situations and (which is almost the same thing) in critical representations. It is also a masquerade, some of
whose participants know (to varying degrees) what they are participating in and what they are creating, while others are gullible enough to participate in good earnest. They, naturally, suffer most of all.

*M.L. Bykov’s novel is also, it seems to me, indicative as a particular kind of seduction that is associated with the conceptualization of the paradoxes of internal colonization. I would designate Bykov’s strategy as the “excluded middle.” Because Bykov initially constructs his novel as a complex interaction among three forces (all equally formative for Russian history, as Bykov understands it), but ZhD then moves inexorably toward the “excluded middle,” which is the Khazars. Not only is Everstein killed (which Bykov additionally glosses as “the disappearance of Everstein and all other Eversteins”) but also the pregnant Commissar Zhenka leaves for Zhadrunovo, the home of “the Thirsting God,”* the mythological kingdom of death, a place out of time and beyond all hope, where there can be no talk of the future. At the end, though, there remain the Varangian Borozdin (persona non grata though he may be), and the Varangian Gromov, and Volokhov the native. Female Khazars (not males!) are allowed to pity and rescue both natives and Varangians, this role being accorded to the young Anka (although she is entirely ignorant of her Khazar origins), who sacrifices her own well-being for the Joe Vasily Ivanovich, and to Katya Stein, who saves Gromov, the honest Varangian (in this episode, Bykov stops just short of quoting Bulgakov’s *The White Guard* [Belaia gvardiia], evidently to increase the gravitas of the situation). Bykov is either following Rozanov’s theories of Jewish sacrifice or—as seems more likely to me—he is unconsciously configuring a patriarchal model of society in which the Khazars are left fulfilling female (empathetic and sacrificial but also successively truncated) functions. The future, though—as you have already noticed—belongs only to the child born to Asha and Borozdin, which means that the connections into which the Khazars are drawn, in one way or another, are doomed to sterility.

*A.E. In reality, the one and only positive project belongs to Volokhov, a native who manages to pass as a Varangian in order to effect a storybook transformation of his own kind. Like Moses, he leads them around their native land, which peregrinations are supposed to awaken memory and responsibility in the Joes. But what awakens is, rather, madness; and it begins from the top down. It is curious, incidentally, that the idea of castration, which

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*Zhazhd’-bog, in Bykov’s mythology the counterpoint of the ancient Slavic deity Dazhdbog, which sources render as the Giving, Granting, or Burning God. The pair are translated as Give and Take in *Living Souls.*—Trans.*
Bykov constantly associates with the natives, is embedded in Volokhov’s surname (which, as you have noticed, is linked with the author’s). His project is doomed; he hands over his woman without a fight to Gurov and to death. The novel’s sweet anti-Khazar finale is significantly weaker than its gallantly anti-Varangian beginning. Here, too, there is an unconvincing parable of a Volga monastery where Orthodox anchorites sit and impotently grieve over Russia. In the finale, and thanks to Asha the shamaness, they are able to go out into the world and do good deeds. (But who, one wonders, was stopping them from leaving sooner?) By and large when the world starts coming to an end in a novel, this usually means that the author wants to be done with a now-tiresome piece of work and just does not know how.

M.L. But let us go back to the internal colonization plot and to the problem of traumatic writing. Bykov’s novel, it seems to me, involuntarily reveals an important connection between those categories. That Bykov, in virtually all his novels, immerses himself in one way or another in historical trauma is, to me, self-evident. Although Justification is about Stalinism and Orthography [Ortografia] about the revolution, whereas ZhD extrapolates the traumas of perestroika and the post-Soviet years, the structural similarity among these novels—the fact that they all represent some version of alternative history—is evidence that we are talking here about a single trauma in various historical forms. Bykov demonstrates that modernization, which invariably devolves into colonization, leads to a paradoxical self-abstraction from history: that motif, strange as it may seem, is duplicated by the novelist himself, who dwells at length, both in his novels and in his journalism, on the cyclical arrangement of Russian quasi-history.

In his efforts to cope with that trauma, Bykov radically “simplifies” the internal colonization plot: he dispenses (or, rather, tries to dispense) with the Khazar—in your typology, the “man of culture”—proposing in return alliances between the “native” sages “from the people” (the Joes, in other words) and the Varangians, the “men of power.” The “excluded middle”—the ousting of a whole sociocultural category or ideology from the novel’s polylogue—is a gesture equivalent to political repression of the totalitarian or imperial model. That is, Bykov actualizes his authorial power by reproducing the same political strategy that unfolds into the historical trauma of expulsion from history. You correctly noted that Bykov abruptly wraps his novel up with scenes depicting the end of the world, but that is, in its own way, logical, since this is how the author himself is able to expel his plot and his characters from history. All Bykov’s inventiveness notwithstanding, his “natives” are never more than a maximally stylized, almost cartoonish, literary product. It is fundamentally important that the Joes’ subjectivity be limited to the utmost: there is a reason
why the wise Vasily Ivanovich is unable to protect a child from being raped but can only watch in helpless despair. Their resistance is almost always passive, gluey, ineffectual, except in the case of Asha. In telling us that the Joes are deft deserters from a senseless and endless colonial war that pits everyone against everyone else, Bykov is demonstrating with great clarity that they are effecting an exit into a folklorically mythological—or, more accurately, an antiseptically pristine—_extrahistorical_ condition that only exaggerates the trauma instead of overcoming it. In sum, Bykov’s Joes, and his natives in general, are set up as an _ideal target of colonization:_ the colonial “subalterns” have been described in all imperial discourses exactly as the “Joes” are here. And this is the collective hero on whom Bykov lays the role of providing an alternative to colonial ideologies!

I think that Bykov’s chosen strategy for surmounting the historical trauma is a dead end.

_A.E._ After passing through numerous rounds of intellectual development, Walter Benjamin foggily held forth in a late work on the “weak messianic power” with which cultural creativity is endowed. That power is associated with the memory of history’s victims: it is weak because it differs from the savior’s mystical power and it is messianic because it breaks the continuum of history (those circles and bubbles again, perhaps). To what extent does the new Russian prose possess that power? What do the texts of Sorokin, Pelevin, and Bykov add to the heroic, and simultaneously entirely literal, efforts of the Memorial Society? Furthermore, are we critics and historians entitled to ascribe specific cultural functions to living authors who, were we to ask them, would in all likelihood deny having any such intentions?

These are all legitimate questions. I suggest that there is a place in the highly complex post-Soviet memory, where there are so many losses and so few monuments, for various cultural forms and genres. Post-Soviet prose is contending with the accursed questions of the age, for which neither experts nor writers have any concerted response. These are questions for an overly unjust power structure and an overly swift (though also overly slow) history to answer, here and everywhere else in the world. Yet they also are expressly local questions, since they involve unburied millions of Soviet victims and unearned trillions of post-Soviet wealth. The oil curse is leading Russia in circles. Whence will the savior come? Not, in any event from a mixed marriage between exotic ethnic groups.

Whoever comes up with Phlogiston will be the savior. Until that happens, literature (overtaking political science for the umpteenth time, at least in Russia) will be focusing on understanding the origins and mechanism of the new Russian curse.
Notes


5. For examples of *skoptsy* statements to this effect, see A. Etkind, *Khlyst. Sekty, literatura i revoliutsiia* (Moscow: NLO, 1998), pp. 87, 90.


12. All quotations from Pelevin’s novel are from V. Pelevin, *Empire “V”/Amper “V”: Povest’ o nastoiashchem sverkhcheloveke* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2006). This quotation is from p. 363.

13. Ibid., pp. 56–57.


18. I have written in detail on Stepanova’s novella in [Mark Lipovetskii,] “Rodina-zhut’,” *NLO*, 2008, no. 91.


21. All quotations from Sorokin’s novella are from V. Sorokin, *Den’ oprichnika* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2006). This quotation is from p. 5.

22. Ibid., p. 98.


25. Ibid., p. 141.

26. Ibid., p. 172.

27. “[A]ll of this, which is vital to the life of every person, is decided in the capital—the minor things and the major things, as well as the government’s entire present and future path. But who and how many have access to a full-voiced discussion of that path or to attempts to influence its genesis and course? The voice of the people . . . where is it? and how is it to manifest?” (A. Solzhenitsyn, “Chto nam po silam,” *Argumenty i fakty*, no. 1422, January 30, 2008; http://gazeta.aif.ru/online/aif/1422/03_01/).


32. Ibid., p. 146.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid., p. 104.

35. Ibid., pp. 143–44.


40. All quotations from Bykov’s novel are from D. Bykov, *ZhD: Poema* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2006). This quotation is from p. 147. [The novel has been translated in an abridged form into English as *Living Souls*, by Cathy Porter (Richmond, UK: Alma Books, 2010), from which, unless otherwise noted, the English quotations from this book have been taken (in this case, from p. 96). In an untranslated introduction, Bykov admits that he has no hard-and-fast expansion of the abbreviation *ZhD* that he would wish to impose on the reader. For himself, he says, he prefers Zhivye dushi (Living Souls).—Trans.]

41. Bykov speaks knowledgeably about Belyi’s novella and, more broadly, about the topic of sectarianism in Russian literature in his review of an Aleksei Ivanov novel: ‘*The Rebellion’s Gold* [Zoloto bunta] is as much a sectarian epic as Andrei Belyi’s *Silver Dove*; the interplay between the gold and the silver is no coincidence.
Russian sects have traditionally been a fixed point of interest for Symbolists and fantasy writers, from Belyi to Pasternak, from Vsevolod Ivanov to Eremei Parnov” (D. Bykov, “Splatshchik dushu vynul, ili V lesakh inykh vozmozhnosti,” Novyi mir, 2006, no. 1).


43. Bykov, ZhD, p. 381 [Living Souls, p. 248. The second sentence in this quotation does not appear in the Porter translation—Trans.].

44. Bykov, ZhD, p. 382 [Living Souls, p. 249].

45. Bykov, ZhD, p. 171 [Living Souls, pp. 109–10, is a paraphrase of the passage quoted here and the surrounding text—Trans.].


47. Bykov, ZhD, p. 125 [this phrase and the two following quotations do not appear in Living Souls—Trans.].

48. Ibid., pp. 132–33.

49. Ibid., pp. 177–78.

50. Ibid., p. 634 [Living Souls, p. 400. The translation has “and all future Eversteins from the earth”—Trans.].

51. “The conception of happiness, in other words, resonates irremediably with that of resurrection [Erloesung: transfiguration, redemption]. It is just the same with the conception of the past, which makes history into its affair. The past carries a secret index with it, by which it is referred to its resurrection. Are we not touched by the same breath of air which was among that which came before? is there not an echo of those who have been silenced in the voices to which we lend our ears today? have not the women, who we court, sisters who they do not recognize anymore? If so, then there is a secret protocol [Verabredung: also appointment] between the generations of the past and that of our own. For we have been expected upon this earth. For it has been given us to know, just like every generation before us, a weak messianic power, on which the past has a claim. This claim is not to be settled lightly. The historical materialist knows why” (V. Ben’iamin [Walter Benjamin], “O poniatii istorii” [Uber den Begriff der Geschichte], trans. from German by S. Romashko, NLO, 2000, no. 46, p. 81 [quoted from Dennis Redmond’s translation into English at www.efn.org/~dredmond/Theses_on_History.PDF—Trans.].

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